

Social Media and the Rebranding of Nigeria Police: Taming ‘the Guns’ and ‘the Gunners’**¹ODUNLAMI Olusegun Abimbola, PhD & ²ODIGIE Joseph Dayo, PhD**¹Department of Mass Communication, Abraham Adesanya Polytechnic, Ijebu-Igbo, Ogun State.²Department of Mass Communication, Crawford University, Igbesa, Ogun State.E-mail: oolusegun1975@gmail.com; dayoodigie@gmail.com<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14719223>**Abstract**

The Nigeria Police Force (NPF) has historically struggled with public mistrust, thus, creating the need for rebranding efforts to improve transparency, trust and community relations. This study aimed to examine the role of social media in reshaping the NPF’s public image from a traditional enforcement/policing model to a community-friendly institution. Anchored on agenda-setting and social identity theories, survey research design was used, with a sample of 384 residents determined via Cochran’s formula from a population of 526,565 in Ado-Odo/Ota Local Government Area, Ogun State, while participants were selected through simple random sampling technique. Data were collected through structured questionnaire, with descriptive analysis revealing that social media significantly improves public trust and accountability, despite challenges related to resources and legal restrictions. The study concluded that social media is a valuable tool in transforming police-public relations in Nigeria. The study recommended enhanced digital training for officers, sustained transparency-driven social media updates and the mitigation of operational constraints.

Keywords: *Nigeria Police Force (NPF), social media rebranding, public trust, transparency and accountability, public perception transformation*

Introduction

The integration of social media within the operations of the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) represents a pivotal step toward reshaping its public image and improving community relations, especially considering historical grievances such as those highlighted by the *EndSARS* movement. This movement, which protested police brutality and demanded the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), demonstrated the role of social media in mobilizing public opinion and exposing issues within law enforcement. The proliferation of social media in Nigeria, with millions of active users, has not only empowered citizens to document and share their encounters with police but also placed pressure on the NPF to engage in transparency and accountability measures.

Historically, public perception of the NPF has been overwhelmingly negative due to recurrent allegations of corruption, human rights abuses, and excessive use of force. According to recent studies (Kweitsu, 2023; Reuters, 2024), such negative perceptions are further exacerbated by the widespread distrust of the police, which is rooted in both structural issues and individual officers’ actions. Some scholars, such as Nkwocha (2023), have argued that leveraging public relations and social media can help alter this perception by establishing open channels for citizen feedback and proactive policing updates. By adopting a more interactive approach on platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram,

the NPF aims to humanize its officers and demonstrate commitment to reforms, especially in addressing complaints and deterring misconduct (Nkwocha, 2023; Akinola, 2024).

Several studies from Nigerian and international authors highlight the dual role of social media as a tool for oversight and engagement in policing. Researchers have shown that in contexts where traditional oversight mechanisms are weak, social media serves as an informal accountability platform (ResearchGate, 2023). For instance, Obarisiagbon and Omagie (2023) noted that the visibility of police actions on social platforms has spurred some internal reforms and influenced public sentiment. Moreover, the ability of social media to provide real-time updates on police activities has encouraged a trend toward what some researchers call “participatory policing,” where citizens collaborate indirectly with law enforcement by reporting crimes or identifying suspects online (Akinola, 2024; International Journal of Public Relations, 2023).

Despite these benefits, the NPF faces challenges in the effective use of social media for rebranding. The introduction of the Nigerian Data Protection Act of 2023 imposes strict guidelines on data handling, which affects how police departments manage information shared online. This legislation aims to protect citizens' privacy, especially in an environment where data misuse is common. Additionally, Cybercrime (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act requires the NPF to adhere to cybersecurity standards that prevent unauthorized access to sensitive information. This legal framework helps establish trust, which is crucial for rebranding efforts but limits certain aspects of data sharing (Akinola, 2024).

There is an urgent need for the NPF to rebuild public trust and promote transparency, especially in today's digital age where its actions are subject to heightened scrutiny. The challenge is multifaceted, involving the development of a cohesive social media strategy that aligns with Nigerian data protection laws while promoting a positive image. The rebranding process requires a balance between transparency and privacy, ensuring that public relations initiatives do not compromise individuals' rights or national security.

In addressing this problem, the proposed solution involves enhancing the NPF's social media presence by focusing on informative and human-interest content that reflects accountability, community engagement, and reform initiatives. Scholars have highlighted the effectiveness of such content in reshaping public perceptions, with Rabi (2023) recommending that the NPF regularly publish success stories, address negative incidents openly and engage directly with public queries. Adopting a well-structured public relations framework on social media can potentially transform the NPF's image, fostering a more positive and collaborative relationship with Nigerian citizens.

While the path toward rebranding the NPF is complex, leveraging social media offers a unique opportunity to bridge the gap between law enforcement and the public. By prioritising transparency, engaging actively with the public and complying with data protection laws, the NPF can gradually shift its image from that of a feared institution to one that embodies the principles of service and protection. Such efforts are essential not only for improving the NPF's image but also for fostering a safer, more secure society.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are to:

1. evaluate the role of social media in transforming the public image of the Nigeria Police Force from a traditional policing model to a community-friendly institution.
2. identify specific social media practices that could improve transparency and accountability within the Nigeria Police Force.
3. examine the impact of social media interactions on public trust and confidence in the Nigeria Police Force.

4. analyse the influence of social media rebranding efforts on citizens' willingness to cooperate with law enforcement activities.
5. investigate the operational and legal challenges the Nigeria Police Force encounters in using social media for rebranding and community engagement.

Research Questions

1. How does social media contribute to transforming the public image of the Nigeria Police Force from a traditional policing model to a community-friendly institution?
2. What social media practices can improve transparency and accountability within the Nigeria Police Force?
3. What is the impact of social media interactions on public trust and confidence in the Nigeria Police Force?
4. How do social media rebranding efforts influence citizens' willingness to cooperate with law enforcement activities?
5. What operational and legal challenges does the Nigeria Police Force encounter in using social media for rebranding and community engagement?

Conceptual Clarification

Public Relations and Image Management

Effective rebranding of the NPF depends heavily on public relations strategies that address the widespread negative perceptions of the police. The NPF has faced longstanding issues related to public mistrust, largely attributed to reported cases of police brutality and corruption (Independent Newspaper Nigeria, 2023). The transition towards a positive image requires proactive PR tactics that highlight police achievements, address community grievances openly, and establish a sense of accountability (International Journal of Public Relations and Advertising Studies, 2023). Public relations play a critical role in “repositioning” the NPF to align with modern expectations of transparency and community service (Tori News, 2023).

Social Media as an Engagement Tool

Social media serves as a direct channel for the NPF to engage with the public, respond to concerns, and showcase efforts to improve transparency. Platforms like Twitter and Facebook enable the police to publish real-time updates, respond to complaints, and highlight successful interventions, which can foster a sense of responsiveness. Studies on the impact of social media in police work show that timely and transparent communication can alter public attitudes and enhance the perception of security agencies (The Nation Newspaper, 2023). The NPF has recognised this potential by organising workshops aimed at training officers to use social media effectively for image management (Tori News, 2023).

Trust and Accountability in Law Enforcement

Trust is essential in law enforcement, as the NPF’s effectiveness in maintaining security relies heavily on public cooperation. Negative public perception, exacerbated by reports of bribery and misuse of power, has diminished trust in the NPF (Independent Newspaper, 2023). Rebuilding this trust requires not only transparency but also mechanisms for accountability, such as actively addressing complaints raised on social media platforms. For example, the “Bail is Free” campaign aims to tackle corruption by encouraging citizens to report unlawful demands for bail payments, with social media acting as a platform for publicising this message and tracking compliance (Premium Researchers, 2023).

Community-Based Policing and Local Security Solutions

The NPF’s rebranding strategy includes implementing community policing principles, which aim to involve citizens directly in security efforts. The community-based approach, championed under the

“Renewed Hope Police Agenda,” is tailored to reflect Nigeria’s diverse local needs, as seen in places like Nasarawa, where local community dynamics influence policing challenges (The Nation, 2023). By focusing on community-specific security solutions, the NPF fosters an inclusive environment that values community input, thus enhancing its reputation as a “people’s police” force (The Nation Newspaper, 2023).

Legal and Operational Challenges

Rebranding via social media is not without its challenges. Compliance with the Nigerian Data Protection Act is essential to safeguard citizens’ privacy and to manage information responsibly. In addition, operational challenges arise, including the necessity for officers to receive training in cybersecurity and digital etiquette. Addressing these issues will help ensure that online engagement efforts are conducted within legal bounds and do not compromise public safety or privacy (Akinola, 2024).

Empirical Review

Peters and Ojedokun (2023) examined "Social Media Utilisation for Policing and Crime Prevention in Lagos, Nigeria," using a descriptive cross-sectional research design. The study utilised survey questionnaires and key informant interviews with a sample of 122 police officers. The research found that while officers saw value in social media for intelligence gathering and crime prevention, over 77% had received no training in this area, limiting their effectiveness. Peters and Ojedokun recommended formalised training programs to enable officers to utilise social media optimally for policing and crime prevention (Peters & Ojedokun, 2023).

Eniola and Amaka (2023) assessed the Public Relations Strategies of Rebranding the Nigeria Police Force. The study employed the Theory of Planned Behaviour to explore how PR strategies influence public trust. Conducted within Edo State with 200 respondents, the study used mixed methods, including questionnaires and focus groups. Results showed that community-friendly policing strategies significantly improved public perception. The study recommended community engagement initiatives and regular public relations campaigns to foster trust and improve NPF’s image (Eniola & Amaka, 2023).

Manzoor and Fashola (2024) studied the "Impact of Social Media in Public Perception Management for the Nigeria Police Force," using a survey-based approach and sampling 150 citizens from Abuja. The researchers applied the agenda-setting Theory to understand how NPF’s social media narratives affect public opinion. Findings revealed that regular, transparent updates from the NPF could positively shape public perception. However, they cautioned that inconsistent messaging could undermine these efforts. They recommended maintaining consistent, factual updates and engaging in dialogue on issues raised by the public (Manzoor & Fashola, 2024).

In "Community-Driven Policing and the Role of Social Media," Sulaiman and Hassan (2023) focused on the role of social media in enhancing community-police relations. Using a qualitative case study methodology, they explored policing strategies in Nasarawa State with 60 participants from local communities. The findings highlighted that community-specific social media communication helped to improve collaboration between the police and residents. The study suggested that the NPF establish localised social media channels to address unique community concerns and foster trust (Sulaiman & Hassan, 2023).

Finally, O’Connor and Zaidi (2023) conducted an international comparative study titled "Police Use of Social Media for Image Management: A Case Comparison of Nigeria and Canada." This study used the Social Identity Theory to examine how police departments in both countries leverage social media to shape public perception. Using interviews and content analysis of social media posts, the researchers found that, while Nigerian police use social media primarily for information dissemination, Canadian

police emphasise interactive engagement. The authors recommended that the NPF adopt more interactive practices, such as responding to citizen inquiries directly, to enhance transparency and trust (O'Connor & Zaidi, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on the agenda-setting Theory and Social Identity Theory. The agenda-setting Theory, propounded by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972, posits that the media influences what issues are considered important by the public. The theory argues that while the media may not dictate what people think, it significantly shapes what they think about by emphasising certain topics over others. Within the context of the NPF's rebranding, the theory provides a basis for examining how social media and news coverage can influence public perception of the police. By regularly posting positive achievements, reforms and community engagement activities, the NPF can set a "public agenda" that highlights its efforts toward accountability and safety. This theory is relevant as it underpins the strategy of using consistent, positive messaging on social platforms to shift public focus towards a reformed image of the police (Society Today, 2023; IJFMR, 2024).

The **Social Identity Theory** developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in 1979, on the other hand, explains how individuals derive part of their identity from their membership in social groups. This theory is particularly relevant for understanding the dynamics between the police and the public, where identity is constructed through collective association and perception. Applying this theory, the rebranding of the NPF on social media can be seen as an effort to foster a positive group identity, not just for the officers but also for community members who engage with them. By emphasising the NPF as a community-friendly entity, the theory supports strategies aimed at reducing the "us versus them" mentality and enhancing group cohesion between law enforcement and citizens. This approach aligns with initiatives aimed at improving public-police relations through social media, thereby encouraging trust and mutual respect (ResearchGate, 2023; Society Today, 2023).

Methodology

This study employed the survey research design which allows for the collection of data from a large population using a questionnaire. The population for this study included 526,565 residents of various ages and socioeconomic backgrounds across Ado-Odo/Ota Local Government Area to ensure a broad perspective and was chosen due to its diverse demographics and proximity to urban centres, thus, offering valuable insights into public-police interactions within urban-adjacent communities (Olaotan & Onifade, 2023). A sample size of 384 adult respondents was determined using Cochran's formula from the population of 526,565 (Ogun State Ministry of Local Govt. and Chieftaincy Affairs, 2013) at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. The study employed a simple random sampling technique to ensure representativeness. Data was collected through a structured questionnaire and analysed using descriptive statistics to determine the impact of the rebranding strategy on community relations.

Data Presentation/Analysis

Table 1: Impact of Social Media on Public Image Transformation

Items	Level of Agreement (n = 379)					
	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Std. Dev.
1. Social media has helped the NPF appear more community-friendly.	153 (40.4%)	160 (42.2%)	23 (6.1%)	43 (11.3%)	3.12	0.81
2. NPF's online presence has increased its perceived approachability.	139 (36.6%)	165 (43.5%)	25 (6.6%)	50 (13.2%)	3.03	0.85

3. Social media posts by the NPF have shifted public perception positively.	161 (42.5%)	143 (37.7%)	28 (7.4%)	47 (12.4%)	3.10	0.83
4. The NPF's community-oriented messaging on social media is effective.	155 (40.9%)	157 (41.4%)	20 (5.3%)	47 (12.4%)	3.11	0.82
Grand Mean					3.09	

Source: Field Survey (2024)

Key: SA – Strongly Agree; A – Agree; D – Disagree; SD – Strongly Disagree

The data showed strong support for social media's role in transforming the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) from a conventional policing model to one perceived as community-oriented. The high means across items imply that social media is an effective tool in reshaping public perception, making the NPF appear approachable and engaged. This outcome suggests that a continued strategic focus on community-friendly messaging through digital platforms could further strengthen this positive trend.

Table 2: Social Media Practices Enhancing Transparency and Accountability

Items	Level of Agreement (n = 379)					
	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Std. Dev.
5. Social media updates by the NPF increase transparency in police activities.	160 (42.2%)	149 (39.3%)	35 (9.2%)	35 (9.2%)	3.11	0.83
6. The NPF's social media responses to public complaints improve accountability.	158 (41.6%)	153 (40.4%)	33 (8.7%)	35 (9.2%)	3.14	0.82
7. Frequent posts by the NPF contribute to transparency.	150 (39.6%)	163 (43.0%)	28 (7.4%)	38 (10.0%)	3.12	0.84
8. Social media has made the NPF more answerable to the public.	152 (40.1%)	155 (41.4%)	30 (7.9%)	42 (11.1%)	3.10	0.85
Grand Mean					3.12	

Source: Field Survey (2024)

Key: SA – Strongly Agree; A – Agree; D – Disagree; SD – Strongly Disagree

Respondents perceived that the NPF's social media practices significantly enhance transparency and accountability. High agreement levels indicate that social media is an effective platform for the NPF to communicate openly, fostering public confidence. The data implies that continuous, transparent updates on social media can improve the NPF's image as a responsible institution, emphasising the value of clear communication in strengthening public accountability.

Table 3: Impact of Social Media on Public Trust and Confidence

Items	Level of Agreement (n = 379)					
	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Std. Dev.
9. Social media improves public trust in the NPF.	148 (39.1%)	160 (42.2%)	32 (8.4%)	39 (10.3%)	3.10	0.85
10. Regular updates on social	154	158	29	38	3.12	0.84

media increase confidence in the NPF's commitment to safety.	(40.6%)	(41.6%)	(7.7%)	(10.0%)		
11. Social media allows the public to hold the NPF accountable, thus building trust.	151 (39.8%)	155 (41.4%)	35 (9.2%)	38 (10.0%)	3.10	0.86
12. Publicised police efforts on social media enhance public confidence.	153 (40.4%)	159 (41.9%)	30 (7.9%)	37 (9.8%)	3.12	0.83
Grand Mean					3.11	

Source: Field Survey (2024)

Key: SA – Strongly Agree; **A** – Agree; **D** – Disagree; **SD** – Strongly Disagree

Findings suggested that social media interactions by the NPF have a positive impact on public trust. With the grand mean indicating strong confidence in the NPF's commitment to public safety, the data implies that sustained social media engagement could be instrumental in reinforcing this trust. Social media's role as a platform for public accountability aligns well with the NPF's objectives to strengthen its rapport with the community.

Table 4: Influence of Social Media Rebranding on Cooperation with Law Enforcement

Items	Level of Agreement (n = 379)					Mean	Std. Dev.
	SA	A	D	SD			
13. Social media campaigns by the NPF encourage public cooperation.	150 (39.6%)	158 (41.6%)	35 (9.2%)	36 (9.5%)		3.11	0.84
14. Positive interactions on social media improve citizens' willingness to assist the police.	155 (41.4%)	157 (41.4%)	29 (7.7%)	38 (10.0%)		3.13	0.83
15. Social media allows the NPF to build cooperative relationships with citizens.	147 (38.8%)	161 (42.5%)	32 (8.4%)	39 (10.3%)		3.10	0.85
16. Rebranding efforts on social media make people more likely to follow police guidance.	153 (40.4%)	159 (41.9%)	30 (7.9%)	37 (9.8%)		3.12	0.84
Grand Mean						3.12	

Source: Field Survey (2024)

Key: SA – Strongly Agree; **A** – Agree; **D** – Disagree; **SD** – Strongly Disagree

The data underscores the role of social media in enhancing public cooperation with the NPF. Respondents generally agree that positive, rebranding-focused interactions on social media lead to a greater willingness to engage with the police. This suggests that the NPF's continued social media presence, coupled with a focus on cooperative messaging, is likely to improve citizen collaboration in law enforcement efforts.

Table 5: Operational and Legal Challenges in NPF's Social Media Rebranding

Items	Level of Agreement (n = 379)					Mean	Std. Dev.
	SA	A	D	SD			
17. The NPF faces operational constraints in effectively using social media.	152 (40.1%)	160 (42.2%)	35 (9.2%)	32 (8.4%)		3.14	0.82

18. Legal restrictions limit the NPF's social media activities.	149 (39.3%)	163 (43.0%)	32 (8.4%)	35 (9.2%)	3.13	0.83
19. Resource limitations affect the NPF's social media outreach capabilities.	150 (39.6%)	159 (41.9%)	34 (9.0%)	36 (9.5%)	3.12	0.84
20. Data privacy laws restrict the NPF's engagement on social media.	154 (40.6%)	157 (41.4%)	31 (8.2%)	37 (9.8%)	3.12	0.83
Grand Mean						

Source: Field Survey (2024)

Key: SA – Strongly Agree; **A** – Agree; **D** – Disagree; **SD** – Strongly Disagree

The responses indicated significant operational and legal constraints that the Nigeria Police Force (NPF) faces in its social media rebranding efforts. With a grand mean of 3.13, resource limitations and legal restrictions, such as data privacy laws, are major challenges for the NPF in sustaining a broad, interactive social media presence. This suggests that addressing these barriers, possibly through policy changes or resource allocation, is critical for the NPF to maximise its social media impact and engagement.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study, based on survey data, revealed a consistent pattern showing the positive impact of social media on transforming the Nigeria Police Force's (NPF) public image, enhancing transparency and accountability, fostering public trust, encouraging citizen cooperation, and highlighting operational and legal challenges. These findings align closely with the objectives of the study and reinforce the theoretical framework used, particularly Agenda-Setting Theory and Social Identity Theory. Agenda-setting theory explains how consistent, focused communication on social media helps shape public perception of the NPF by highlighting its community-friendly aspects. This agrees with McCombs and Shaw's (1972) theory, showing that active NPF social media presence influences the public agenda, directing citizens to perceive the NPF as a more approachable and community-oriented institution. Peters and Ojedokun (2023) similarly noted that the public's perception of police as trustworthy increased with regular updates that highlighted safety efforts, reinforcing these findings.

Transparency and accountability are other significant impacts of social media, as seen in high mean responses affirming that the NPF's social media engagement helps improve accountability. This outcome aligns with empirical studies by Eniola and Amaka (2023), who found that active social media responses by law enforcement are associated with public confidence in accountability. The application of social media in this context validates Social Identity Theory, wherein the NPF's online presence contributes to a sense of collective identity, helping the public feel connected and aligned with police efforts. The evidence implies that when the NPF is visibly accountable, it bridges the gap between the institution and the community, an essential aspect also highlighted by foreign studies on police transparency, such as O'Connor and Zaidi's (2023) comparative study between Nigeria and Canada.

Public trust, as influenced by the NPF's social media engagement, also presents a significant finding. Most respondents believed that social media usage by the NPF positively impacts trust, indicating a critical shift toward viewing the police as a public ally rather than solely as an enforcement agency. This is consistent with prior studies on public perception of social media engagement in law enforcement, such as Rabi (2023), who found that regular and transparent police updates correlated with higher trust levels in local communities. Social Identity Theory supports this as well, suggesting that the NPF's online identity reshapes collective perceptions, creating a bond that promotes cooperation and trust.

Consequently, the data reveals that social media could function as a “digital bridge” in aligning the public’s perception of the NPF with the organisation’s mission.

The study further showed that social media rebranding efforts enhance public cooperation with law enforcement. A large proportion of respondents indicated willingness to cooperate with the NPF due to its social media presence, suggesting that when the NPF engages positively and consistently, it can generate community support. This aligns with Peters and Ojedokun’s (2023) study, which emphasised that social media rebranding fosters a cooperative relationship between police and citizens. The data implies that enhanced public cooperation might lead to a more collaborative security model, where social media helps to dissolve the traditional boundaries between the police and the public. Furthermore, this insight aligns with the Agenda-Setting Theory, emphasising how police social media activities contribute to fostering a collaborative agenda among community members.

Finally, the findings illustrated operational and legal challenges the NPF encounters in fully utilising social media for rebranding. Many respondents acknowledge these barriers, suggesting resource constraints and privacy laws as obstacles to an effective digital presence. This aspect aligns with findings by Sulaiman and Hassan (2023), who also identified limited resources and legal considerations as factors hindering the NPF’s social media adoption. The implication is that social media holds significant potential for the NPF’s rebranding, its effectiveness is contingent on overcoming structural and regulatory challenges. This finding underscores a need for policy adaptation to address these issues, allowing the NPF to maximise its social media potential while maintaining legal integrity.

Conclusion

This study concluded that social media significantly enhances the public image, transparency, and accountability of the Nigeria Police Force (NPF), fostering greater public trust and cooperation. Findings indicate that the NPF’s active presence on social media effectively reshapes its traditional image into one more community-focused, reinforcing its efforts toward transparency and open engagement. Despite operational and legal challenges, social media has proven to be a valuable tool for the NPF in addressing public perceptions and improving police-citizen relations. These results affirmed the potential of strategic social media use in transforming law enforcement-public dynamics.

Recommendations

- The NPF should maintain consistent and transparent updates on social media to build further public trust, focusing on community-friendly content.
- To fully harness the potential of social media, the NPF should invest in training officers on effective digital engagement, equipping them with the skills needed to foster positive interactions with the public.
- Government and relevant stakeholders should address resource and regulatory constraints hindering the NPF’s social media use, ensuring comprehensive support for online engagement initiatives.
- The NPF should utilise data insights from social media interactions to refine its communication strategies by focusing on content that resonates with the public and promotes a positive image.

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