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Between Conflict and Cohesion: Digital Media, Peacebuilding and Social Cohesion in Nepal

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ABSTRACT

Digital media has become a central arena in which post-conflict societies negotiate grievance, identity, and collective belonging. Yet scholarship remains divided between accounts that treat social media as an accelerator of polarization and misinformation and accounts that emphasize its capacity for dialogue, voice, and peacebuilding. This article examines that tension in Nepal, a post-conflict democracy where rapid digital uptake has coincided with renewed concern about misinformation, hate speech, and expressive insecurity. Drawing on a cross-sectional survey of Nepali digital media users, the study analyzes 310 cleaned responses and estimates HC3 robust ordinary least squares models for two outcomes: perceived peacebuilding and social cohesion potential, and perceived conflict risk. Results show that respondents simultaneously report high concern about conflict risks and substantial belief in the peacebuilding value of digital media. Conflict-risk perception is positively associated with perceived peacebuilding potential ($B = .175$, $p = .020$), while verification efficacy is a consistent positive predictor of both peacebuilding potential ($B = .224$, $p < .001$) and conflict-risk perception ($B = .301$, $p < .001$). Perceived expressive unsafety is negatively associated with peacebuilding potential ($B = -.113$, $p < .001$), whereas avoiding comments because of online attacks predicts higher conflict-risk perception ($B = .120$, $p = .001$). Issue-following frequency, daily media time, and age also predict conflict-risk perception. The findings advance a conditional account of digital peacebuilding: online spaces may support social cohesion when users possess verification capacity and experience communicative safety, but their peacebuilding promise is undermined when digital participation becomes hostile, misinformed, or silencing. The article contributes Nepal-based quantitative evidence to debates on digital peacebuilding, social cohesion, and information disorder in fragile democratic settings.

Keywords: Digital media, hate speech, misinformation, peacebuilding, social cohesion

INTRODUCTION

Many of the quotidian encounters that people have with public affairs, difference and decline are now mediated through digital media. This move has created an enduring analytical tension in the field of peace and conflict studies. On the one hand, social media is interpreted as a low-effort communication otherwise invisible conflict settings more salient. Similarly, although such infrastructure can also enable the spread of misinformation and increase affective polarization (Cinelli et al., 2021; Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021; Vosoughi et al., 2018), it may

expose users to harassment and hate speech. This raises the question of whether digital media is good or bad for social cohesion, but it highlights peacebuilding not as a concern with the effects of technology, but with affordance: when do some become connective and some divisive?

This problem has a theoretically important setting in Nepal. It is both a post-conflict democracy, with its divergent ethnic, linguistic, regional, caste and political identities; and a rapidly evolving information environment. Recent statistics on Internet users show that social media use has grown to a high share of the population such that DataReportal reports figures for January 2025 being of 14.3 million identities, and in October 2025 (DataReportal, 2026). A total number of active social media user identities in Nepal (reported here as a useful indicator). While this expanding public sphere opens up voice, learning, civic participation and contact between communities, it has also made online spaces a site of significance within conflict narratives for both (mis)regulation of dissent.

Digital conflict risk and digital peacebuilding potential coexistProblem Statement There are already well-established areas of research that have made strides to document how misinformation, hateful and abusive content, and echo chambers work in the online world. However, the international evidence is largely platform-, event- or context-specific and sparse in countries other than South Asia. Although the scholarship and practice of Nepal has increasingly recognised online misinformation, political mobilization, and digital rights, empirically operable individual-level perceptions about risk that are individually valid but correlate with social cohesion outputs or peacebuilding outcomes have been less pursued. It matters because peacebuilding is not just an institutional project pursued by formal actors, it is also a relational everyday process by which citizens negotiate whether online interaction will be safe enough to engender interpersonal trust and dialogue (and recognition) across the lines of difference.

This article examines the conflict and cohesion effects of online communication in Nepal, by exploring how Nepali digital media users perceive these effects, and what individual-level factors are associated with perceptions of such effects. It formulates and empirically tests four hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 (H1): Perceived efficacy of conflict detection is positively related to perceived potential for peacebuilding and social integration H2: the perception of the possibility of building peace is positively correlated with the perception of conflict risk, which indicates a high level of diagnostic awareness rather than just digital pessimism. H3: Perceived online unsafety is negatively related to perceived peacebuilding potential. H4: Following public issues more often, spending more time on news per day and avoiding commenting due to possible attacks (others instead of self) as well as older age show positive relations with perceiving risk of conflict.

The article makes three contributions. Firstly, it helps engage Nepal in comparative discussions on digital peacebuilding and social cohesion using original survey data rather than mere policy diagnosis or testimonials. Second, it demonstrates that perceived risk of conflict and perceived potential for peacebuilding can be mutually reinforcing; users perceive digital media as a site for harm, but also a place where repair may happen. Third, it establishes verification efficacy and expressive safety as analytically separable requirements for digital peacebuilding. An effective verification model reinforces the ability for digital media to be a space that supports peace and risks being seen as not-unsafe; unfettered unsafety renders these opportunities impossible. This suggests a conditional non-deterministic theory of digital peacebuilding which avoids technological optimism and technological determinism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital media conflict and political contention

Much research on the link between digital media and conflict has been organized around affordances. Zeitzoff (2017) contends that social media transforms conflict in a number of ways- by lowering the cost of communication, increasing the velocity and reach of information, altering strategic interaction among movements, elites and states, and creating new types of data on public attitudes. This framework is still useful because it moves beyond treating platforms as neutral tools and instead treats them like infrastructures that change the incentives and capabilities of actors in conflict. However, even affordance-based approaches risk overstating technological novelty when they fail to attend to the extent to which online practices are embedded within

pre-existing social divisions and political institutions and media systems.

Research in democratic and conflict settings finds that the impact of digital media on these issues is heterogeneous. A worldwide review by Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023) finds digital media to generate both democratic gains, such as information consumption and participation, and democratic harms like polarization and misinformation. In a similar vein, Boulianne (2020) shows that digital media use has very often been positively associated with civic and political participation, but relies upon large datasets which characterise the predictive power of online engagement to the expected outcome whilst controlling for past levels of activity; differentiation across the effects is conditional on many factors including national context and form of use. This has implications for peace research digital participation is not necessarily cohesion. Yet participation can be deliberative, solidaristic, exclusionary or confrontational depending on the norms and power relations that structure the communicative space.

Misinformation, hate speech, and polarization

Specifically, the strongest conflict-related evidence is related to information disorder and polarizing speech. Vosoughi et al. The United States 2018 even found that false news traveled further, faster, deeper and more broadly than true news on Twitter. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) account for the role of social media in the economics and incentives behind producing fake news, whilst Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) established a conceptual framework to distinguish between misinformation, disinformation and malinformation. These distinctions matter for conflict contexts because the danger of information disorder is not only in factual falsity, but also its ability to harden identities, undermine Kohlhus trust levels and render opponents seem illegitimate.

Research on polarization and hate speech extends this argument. Cinelli et al. (2021) demonstrate that platform architectures can foster echo chambers by structuring homophilous interaction and biased information diffusion. Kubin and von Sikorski (2021), reviewing 94 articles and 121 studies, find that pro-attitudinal media exposure can exacerbate political polarization, but they also note an imbalance in the literature: much more is known about media as a driver of polarization than about media as a possible resource for depolarization. Causal evidence from Germany further shows that anti-refugee sentiment on Facebook predicted offline hate crimes in municipalities with higher social media use (Muller & Schwarz, 2021). Cross-national work also links political disinformation and hate speech to societal polarization while warning that censorship-oriented responses can generate additional risks for rights and trust (Vasist et al., 2024).

This literature establishes the conflict relevance of social media but leaves two unresolved questions. First, if harmful information and hostile interaction are widely perceived, do users become less likely to see digital media as useful for peacebuilding, or do they also become more aware of the need for peace-oriented digital intervention? Second, what capacities enable citizens to distinguish between harmful and constructive digital communication? This article addresses these questions by examining verification efficacy and expressive safety alongside conflict-risk perceptions.

Peacebuilding, societal harmony, and digital interaction

For a long time, peacebuilding scholarship has made this distinction between the absence of direct violence and what to also call for transformation of structures and relationships sustaining positive peace (Galtung, 1969). A similar understanding of peacebuilding as a multilevel relational process linking local communities, middle-range leaders and formal political mechanisms is found in the work of Lederach (1997). And this relational orientation is positively correlated to social cohesion. It is about the state of horizontal relations between social groups and vertical relations between citizens and institutions in terms of trust, cooperation, identity, participation and perceived inclusion (Fiedler, 2023; Sonnenfeld et al., 2021).

Foundational social theory also provides insight why digital contact may be significant. Granovetter (1973) pointed to the strength of weak ties in connecting otherwise isolated networks, whereas Putnam (2000) made a clear distinction between bonding and bridging social capital. Intergroup contact theory suggests that under conditions of equal status, common goals, cooperation and institutional support, the negative attitudes toward an out-group can be diminished (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). While digital media creates weak ties and exposure to

difference, the conditions under which intergroup contact favor peace-making are not met simply by connectivity. As such, when online environments incentivize outrage, protect anonymity without accountability, or otherwise encourage harassment-contact can turn hostile instead of connective.

Recent digital peacebuilding scholarship therefore cautions against technological solutionism. Hirblinger et al. (2023) argue that digital peacebuilding should be studied through critical-reflexive engagement with the co-production of technical and social processes. Hirblinger (2024) further contends that digital peacebuilding cannot be separated from pre-digital peacebuilding; the digital is embedded in existing social and institutional relations. This perspective aligns the policy oriented evidence that media and communications can serve to support peacebuilding and social cohesion but causal evidence still remains mixed and very context sensitive (Idris 2020; Sonnenfeld et al, 2021). The main question is how to identify mechanisms that increase the chances that digital media will be conducive to bridging, recognition and nonviolent processes of dialogue.

Nepal and the empirical gap

Nepal is a particularly salient case as online platforms workings intersect with complex dynamics of an evolving post-conflict society and regulatory sphere. Current analyses of Nepal's information environment highlight misinformation and hate speech as major issues, alongside the demand for media literacy, accountable institutions and rights-evident governance (Acharya 2025; The Asia Foundation 2024). Scholarship on Nepal has also connected social media to political mobilization and civic engagement (Kharel, 2024), but there is less work accounting for how ordinary users simultaneously assess both conflict risks and peacebuilding opportunities.

The empirical gap is not only that no digital media research is being done in Nepal. Instead the gap is conceptual, as the existing literature has insufficiently explored how civilian assess ambivalently a shared digital space in a post-conflict context. If digital media is indeed both a space of misinformation and a space of voice then platform use may be the independent variable, but the dependent one cannot only be itself. It is the relational context within which online participation can be viewed as an opportunity for dialogue, strengthening and elevating marginal voices, and bridging communities without putting them in harm's way through silencing or assault. Perceived peacebuilding/social cohesion potential, conflict-risk perception, verification efficacy, and expressive safety are identified as measurable indicators of that condition in this study.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study utilises a cross-sectional quantitative survey design. This design is appropriate given that the objective of the research is to estimate associations between perceptions of digital media and outcomes related to peacebuilding among Nepali digital media users. While this design is not conducive to causal inference, it does enable a systematic consideration of relationships between theoretically specified constructs in an area where individual level quantitative evidence continues to be scarce.

Analysis unit: individual respondent. The analytic strategy includes treating composite Likert-type measures as (approximately) continuous once scale construction is complete, a common practice when multi-item scales exhibit interpretable internal structure and are analyzed using robust standard errors. The conclusion outlines the limitations of using self-report survey data, but since the research questions concern perceptions surrounding risk, efficacy and cohesion rather than platform trace behavior, this is a suitable method.

Data collection and sampling strategy

The study began with 313 online survey responses. After removing three duplicate submissions, the cleaned sample comprised 310 respondents; regression models included 309 because one respondent selected “prefer not to say” for gender. Participants were recruited through non-probability online convenience sampling. The sample was predominantly young, urban, and highly educated: 73.0% were under 35 years, 82.6% lived in urban areas, and 94.5% held at least a bachelor’s degree. Accordingly, the findings represent the perceptions of this specific digitally active and educated group rather than Nepali digital media users or the national population generally. They cannot be generalized to rural, older, less-educated, or less-connected users,

whose access, platform use, verification practices, and opportunities for online expression may differ. This limited external validity should be considered when interpreting the results.

Variables and measurements

In Model 1, the dependent variable is perceived peacebuilding potential and social cohesion (the average of eight Likert-type items regarding whether digital media can promote peace and harmony; help people from different communities to understand one another; provide a voice for groups which are marginalized in society; support campaigns to raise awareness on issues of inequality and discrimination between different groups; foster the development of peaceful journalism practices by journalists; encourage dialogue and mutual understanding among the general population; strengthen community campaigns focused on violence prevention, peacebuilding, reconciliation among conflicting groups (if applicable) across communities or regions targeted by particular media content throughout their dissemination.; connect people from various communities so as to engage them). The scale ranges from 1 to 5, with higher values indicating greater potential perceived peacebuilding and cohesion.

Model 2 If this file is in an ineditable format, please refer to the attached PDF for a version of the text that is editable. Variable: Dependent variable: Conflict-risk perception (mean of five Likert-type items Adapted from Fridman et al. (2020) capturing Perceived conflict between people with different views Personal attack when they disagree on social media Misinformation increases tension/risk Hate speech is a serious problem Social stabs amplified by social media It is on a scale from one to five, where higher numbers imply greater conflict risk perceived by participants.

The key predictors were verification efficacy (defined as the mean of two individual items: whether participants check news before sharing it and how confident they are in identifying misinformation), perceived unsafe expression (derived from reverse-coding of an item on feeling safe expressing political or social opinions online), and avoidance of commenting for fear of attack. Other predictors are frequency of following issues, media time per day, and demographic characteristics (age group, sex, education level, and residence). Ordinal variables were coded in increasing order, with higher values representing older age groups, greater education, various amounts of daily media time and frequency following public issues. In regression models, gender was coded as female = 1 male =0 and residence urban = 1 non-urban=0.

Data analysis techniques

In data screening: We screened the types of variables, how many missing values each variable has, we checked if there are duplicate submissions and outliers or inconsistent entries. Missingness was restricted to an optional contact field, which was excluded from the analysis There were no missing values for any analytic variables after cleaning. We recoded a small number of education and platform category entries with respect to computer accessibility, limited ranking-grid analysis to respondents assigning each rank from 1 to 6 precisely once. Because 248 of 310 respondents gave duplicate ranks in the ranking task, ranking results are reported descriptively for the valid subset only.

Descriptive statistics include frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, medians, interquartile ranges, minima, and maxima. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951). Bivariate relationships among primary constructs were estimated using Spearman correlations because Shapiro-Wilk tests indicated non-normal distributions for the main composite measures. Multivariable models were estimated using ordinary least squares with HC3 heteroskedasticity-consistent standard errors, following recommendations for finite-sample robustness when heteroskedasticity or influential observations may be present (Long & Ervin, 2000; White, 1980). Model diagnostics examined residual normality, homoscedasticity, multicollinearity, independence, linearity, influential cases and leverage. Sensitivity analyses involved excluding cases exceeding Cook's distance threshold values, excluding multivariate outliers using Mahalanobis distance and the use of Huber M-estimator robust regressions.

Reliability and validity

The conflict-risk perception scale had an acceptable internal consistency (α = .781) and peacebuilding/social cohesion scales were one-dimensional (α = .758). Reliability of verification efficacy was the lowest (α = .539), as would be

expected with a two-item scale, but has to be interpreted conservatively. The expression constraint composite with two items had low reliability (α = .096), making it not hold out as a composite predictor for regression models. Finally, modeling was conducted separately for perceived inability to express freely and willingness to comment without being attacked. This choice enhances construct validity by eliminating an internally inconsistent scale that would mask the unique expressive mechanisms.

In essence, we leverage the theoretical basis for validity by aligning survey items with relevant dimensions of risk for cross-community deliberative action surrounding digital conflict: information verification; expressive safety; voice, dialogue and intercommunity connection. Specifically, scale reliability checks; sensitivity analyses showing that core regression results remain stable after influential-case exclusions; and bivariate correlations closely aligned with theoretical expectations provide further evidence that constructs are valid.

Ethical considerations

The study conformed to well-defined ethical standards throughout its research process. Participation in the survey was voluntary and the respondents were made aware of the study's aim, methodology and objectives before consenting to take part in the research. Their anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, and personal identification was kept away during the process of collecting information. They were also made aware of their freedom to either opt out of participating in the survey or stop responding at any moment in time. Data collected was intended for academic purposes only and no data was leaked to anyone. Risks involved in the process of survey were minimized, and there was guarantee that there would be no harmful impact to the respondent's psyche, socially or emotionally. In addition, the research was carried out using integrity, professionalism, and utmost respect towards participant's rights and privacy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data screening and sample profile

Data screening began with 313 raw responses and 38 variables. Three duplicate substantive submissions were removed, leaving a cleaned analytic sample of 310. The regression sample contains 309 cases. Analytic-variable missingness after cleaning was zero. The optional contact field was missing for 192 respondents (61.9%) and was excluded from analysis. The ranking grid contained serious response-format issues: only 62 respondents submitted valid unique rankings while 248 assigned duplicate ranks. As a result, ranking results are viewed solely as descriptive evidence from the valid subset of data only.

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics and media characteristics of participants in this study. Most of the sample (49.4%) both recipients that aged between 25–34; From urban citizens by 82.6%; And respondents with at least bachelor or master higher education, from university (94.5%). The main platform is most often reported as Facebook (40.6%), followed by YouTube (17.7%), WhatsApp/Viber (13.2%) and Instagram (12.6%) and TikTok (8). The majority of respondents use digital media for public issues some, most or all the time and the modal daily media-use category is 3 to 4 hours.

Table 1
Demographic profile of Respondents (N = 310)

Characteristic	Category	N	%
Age group	18-24	74	23.9
	25-34	153	49.4
	35-44	62	20.0
	45+	21	6.8
Gender	Female	133	42.9
	Male	176	56.8
	Prefer not to say	1	0.3
Residence	Urban	256	82.6
	Semi-urban	35	11.3
	Rural	19	6.1
Education	Secondary or below	2	0.6
	Higher secondary	15	4.8
	Bachelors	112	36.1
	Masters or above	181	58.4
Occupation	Employed	131	42.3
	Student	127	41.0
	Self-employed	32	10.3
	Unemployed	11	3.5
	Other	9	2.9

Note. Percentages might not sum up to 100% due to rounding.

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Table 2
Digital Media Usage Profile of Respondents

Characteristic	Category	N	%
Most-used platform	Facebook	126	40.6
	YouTube	55	17.7
	WhatsApp/Viber	41	13.2
	Instagram	39	12.6
	TikTok	25	8.1
	Online news portals	14	4.5
	X/Twitter	7	2.3
	Other	3	1.0
Daily media uses time	<1 hour	20	6.5
	1-2 hours	105	33.9
	3-4 hours	115	37.1
	>4 hours	70	22.6
Follow public issues	Never	9	2.9
	Rarely	27	8.7
	Sometimes	93	30.0
	Often	115	37.1
	Very often	66	21.3

Note. Platform categories use cleaned coding. WhatsApp and Viber were combined because respondents used them interchangeably in the platform field.

Descriptive statistics and scale reliability

Respondents reported high perceived conflict risk (M = 4.095, SD = .578) and high verification efficacy (M = 4.100, SD = .620). They also reported substantial perceived peacebuilding/social cohesion potential (M = 3.910, SD = .469). Expression constraint was lower but still above the scale midpoint (M = 3.361, SD = .725). Figure 1 shows the mean level of the primary constructs with 95% confidence intervals.

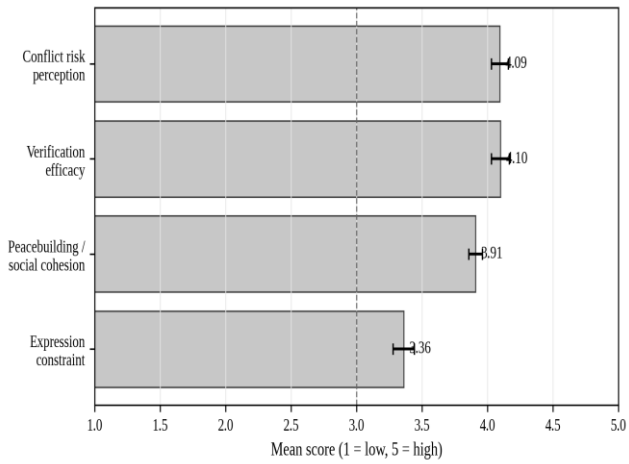
The item-level results reinforce this ambivalent pattern. Large majorities agreed or strongly agreed that misinformation increases social tension (96.1%), hate speech is a serious problem (86.5%), and personal attacks occur in online discussions (83.5%). At the same time, large majorities agreed or strongly agreed that digital media gives voice to marginalized groups (91.0%), helps people understand different communities (91.0%), and can support peace journalism and awareness campaigns. The descriptive evidence therefore does not support a one-directional narrative of digital decay or digital optimism; it shows simultaneous risk awareness and perceived peacebuilding utility.

Table 3
Reliability Estimates and Descriptive Statistics

Scale	*Items*	*N*	*Alpha*	*M*	*SD*	*Median*	*IQR*	*Min*	*Max*
Conflict-risk perception	5	310	.773	4.095	.578	4.000	.600	1.000	5.000
Verification efficacy	2	310	.539	4.100	.620	4.000	.500	1.000	5.000
Peacebuilding/social cohesion	8	310	.758	3.910	.469	4.000	.500	1.625	5.000
Expression constraint	2	310	.096	3.361	.725	3.500	1.000	1.000	5.000

Note. alpha = Cronbach's alpha reported as index of reliability (internal consistency). Constraint on expression was not used as a combined predictor in regression models due to very low reliability.

Figure 1
Average values for principal constructs



Note. The vertical error bars indicate the 95% confidence interval for the means. All constructs are scored from 1 to 5.

Table 4
Selected item-level descriptive statistics

Indicator	*Agree/strongly agree n (%)*	*M (SD)*
Misinformation increases social tension	298 (96.1)	4.352 (.684)
Hate speech is a major issue	268 (86.5)	4.174 (.837)
Personal attacks occur in online discussion	259 (83.5)	4.065 (.860)
Conflict among people with different views	249 (80.3)	3.935 (.879)
Social media strengthens divisions	253 (81.6)	3.952 (.707)
Checks information before sharing	272 (87.7)	4.184 (.777)
Confident identifying misinformation	253 (81.6)	4.016 (.722)
Digital media can promote peace and harmony	224 (72.3)	3.765 (.917)
Helps understand different communities	282 (91.0)	4.087 (.655)
Gives voice to marginalized groups	282 (91.0)	4.116 (.696)
Peace journalism reduces online conflict	270 (87.1)	4.094 (.716)
Feels safe expressing opinions online	64 (20.6)	2.697 (.988)
Avoids commenting due fear of attacks	168 (54.2)	3.419 (1.014)

Note. The safety item is not reverse coded in this table; higher values indicate greater felt safety. Other items are scored from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Ranking analysis

The ranking task asked respondents to rank possible causes of online conflict from 1 (most important) to 6 (least important). Because only 62 respondents used each rank exactly once, the ranking results are reported only for the valid subset. Misinformation had the strongest ranking profile, with a mean rank of 2.44 and the largest share of first-place rankings (33.9%). Lack of digital literacy and political polarization were also frequently ranked first, while identity-based bias was rarely ranked first and had the highest mean rank.

Table 5
Valid ranking results for perceived causes of online conflict (n = 62)

Cause	*Mean rank*	*SD*	*Median rank*	*Ranked 1st n (%)*
Misinformation	2.435	1.374	2	21 (33.9)
Hate speech	3.065	1.474	3	6 (9.7)
Weak regulation	3.210	1.648	3	10 (16.1)
Lack of digital literacy	3.484	1.861	3	13 (21.0)
Political polarization	3.823	1.668	4	11 (17.7)
Identity-based bias	4.984	1.399	6	1 (1.6)

Note. Lower mean rank indicates greater perceived importance. Results are restricted to respondents who assigned each rank from 1 to 6 exactly once.

Assumption testing and bivariate relationships

Shapiro-Wilk tests indicated non-normality for the main scales and for the residual term in both regression models. This is unsurprising for Likert composite measures with high agreement levels and ceiling effects. Multicollinearity was low: the maximum variance inflation factor was 1.517 in Model 1 and 1.490 in Model 2. The Durbin-Watson statistics were close to 2, indicating no evidence of problematic residual autocorrelation in the ordered survey data. The Ramsey RESET tests did not reject linear functional form at conventional levels.

Spearman correlations show that perceived peacebuilding/social cohesion potential is positively correlated with conflict-risk perception (rho = .321, $p < .001$) and verification efficacy (rho = .373, $p < .001$), and negatively correlated with perceived unsafe expression (rho = -.224, $p < .001$). Conflict-risk perception is positively correlated with verification efficacy (rho = .337, $p < .001$), avoidance of commenting due to attacks (rho = .227, $p < .001$), and issue-following frequency (rho = .227, $p < .001$). These relationships support the assumption that those people who show higher engagement with public issues, who pay attention to the credibility of information, experience a higher risk of online conflicts.

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Table 6

Spearman correlations among primary study variables

Variable	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*
1.Conflict-risk perception	1					
2.Verification efficacy	.337***	1				
3.Peacebuilding/social cohesion	.321***	.373***	1			
4.Unsafe expression, reversed	-.036	-.162**	-.224***	1		
5.Avoid commenting due attacks	.227***	.067	.115*	.041	1	
6.Issue-following frequency	.227***	.172**	.125*	-.080	.104	1

Note. * p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001. The unsafe expression item is reverse coded so that higher values indicate greater perceived unsafety.

Regression analysis

Two HC3 robust OLS models were estimated. Model 1 predicts perceived peacebuilding/social cohesion potential. Model 2 predicts conflict-risk perception. Both models prove statistically significant. Model 1 explains 26.0% of the variance in perceived peacebuilding potential (adjusted R2 = .235), while Model 2 explains 22.4% of the variance in conflict-risk perception (adjusted R2 = .201). The use of HC3 robust standard errors are justified by non-normal residuals and, for Model 1, evidence of heteroskedasticity in the Breusch-Pagan test.

In Model 1, conflict-risk perception is positively associated with perceived peacebuilding/social cohesion potential (B = .175, p = .020, standardized beta = .214).

People who trust verification processes also have hig her beliefs in peacebuilding (B = .224, p < .001, standardized beta = .296). Perceived unsafe expression is negatively associated with peacebuilding potential (B = -.113, p < .001, standardized beta = -.238). Avoiding comments due to attacks, issue-following frequency, daily media time, gender, education, and urban residence are not statistically significant in Model 1, while age approaches significance (B = .065, p = .056).

In Model 2, verification efficacy is the strongest positive predictor of conflict-risk perception (B = .301, p < .001, standardized beta = .324). Avoiding comments due to fear of attacks (B = .120, p = .001), issue-following frequency (B = .081, p = .027), daily media time (B = .091, p = .025), and age (B = .100, p = .026) are also significant positive predictors. Perceived unsafe expression, gender, education, and urban residence are not significant after adjustment.

Table 7

Model fit statistics for HC3 robust OLS models

Model	*N*	*R2*	*Adj. R2*	*Robust F*	*p*	*AIC*	*BIC*	*RMSE*
M1: Peacebuilding/social cohesion	309	.260	.235	8.766	<.001	337.928	378.994	.403
M2: Conflict-risk perception	309	.224	.201	5.619	<.001	476.823	514.157	.507

Note. Robust F tests use HC3 heteroskedasticity-consistent covariance estimates.

Table 8

HC3 robust regression estimates predicting peacebuilding/social cohesion potential

Predictor	*B*	*Robust SE*	*95% CI*	*T*	*P*	*Std. beta*	*Partial R2*
Intercept	2.515	.408	[1.712, 3.317]	6.168	<.001		.113
Conflict-risk perception	.175	.075	[.028, .321]	2.346	.020	.214	.018
Verification efficacy	.224	.055	[.116, .333]	4.060	<.001	.296	.052
Unsafe expression, reversed	-.113	.030	[-.172, -.054]	-3.764	<.001	-.238	.045
Avoid commenting due attacks	.042	.035	[-.028, .111]	1.187	.236	.090	.005
Issue-following frequency	-.004	.027	[-.057, .050]	-.144	.886	-.008	<.001

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Daily media time	.035	.033	[-.029, .100]	1.075	.283	.066	.004
Age ordinal	.065	.034	[-.002, .131]	1.918	.056	.116	.012
Female	-.011	.052	[-.114, .092]	-.209	.835	-.012	<.001
Education ordinal	-.050	.047	[-.142, .042]	-1.075	.283	-.067	.004
Urban residence	-.056	.076	[-.205, .093]	-.738	.461	-.045	.002

Note. Outcome is the peacebuilding/social cohesion scale. Female is coded 1 = female, 0 = male. Urban residence is coded 1 = urban, 0 = non-urban.

Table 9

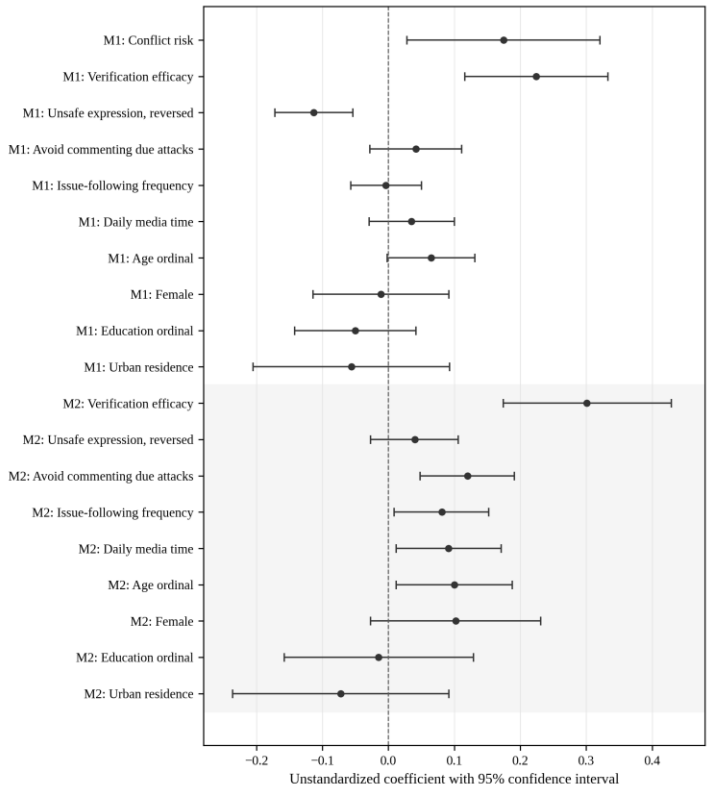
HC3 robust regression estimates predicting conflict-risk perception

Predictor	***B***	***Robust SE***	***95% CI***	***T***	***p***	***Std. beta***	***Partial R2***
Intercept	1.632	.452	[.742, 2.521]	3.608	<.001		.042
Verification efficacy	.301	.065	[.174, .429]	4.641	<.001	.324	.067
Unsafe expression, reversed	.040	.034	[-.027, .106]	1.181	.239	.068	.005
Avoid commenting due attacks	.120	.036	[.048, .191]	3.296	.001	.211	.035
Issue-following frequency	.081	.036	[.009, .152]	2.228	.027	.139	.016
Daily media time	.091	.040	[.012, .171]	2.256	.025	.139	.017
Age ordinal	.100	.045	[.012, .188]	2.238	.026	.146	.016
Female	.102	.066	[-.027, .231]	1.550	.122	.087	.008
Education ordinal	-.015	.073	[-.158, .129]	-.201	.840	-.016	<.001
Urban residence	-.072	.083	[-.236, .092]	-.864	.388	-.047	.002

Note. Outcome is the conflict-risk perception scale. Female is coded 1 = female, 0 = male. Urban residence is coded 1 = urban, 0 = non-urban.

Figure 2

HC3 robust coefficients across regression models



Note. Horizontal lines show 95% confidence intervals. M1 predicts peacebuilding/social cohesion; M2 predicts conflict-risk perception.

Diagnostics and robustness

The use of robust inference is supported by model diagnostics. While the normality of residuals is rejected in both models, OLS coefficients can still be interpreted as conditional means (Spector et al., 2015); and robust standard errors correct for heteroskedasticity. Model 1: Since the Breusch-Pagan test is significant (p=. 033), but not in Model 2

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(p = 132). No multicollinearity exists with maximum VIF values below above 1.6. Otherwise you find some linearity tests do not reject the functional form you specify. The central findings are robust against sensitivity analyses which show that results are not driven by influential cases.

When dropping cases with Cook's distance above 4/N, excluding multivariate outliers, and estimating Huber robust regression for Model 1: the positive coefficients for the role of conflict-risk perception and verification efficacy remain statistically significant whereas the negative coefficient for whether participants perceived an unsafe expression remains statistically significant. In contrast, results for verification efficacy, commenting avoidance due to attacks, frequency of following issues, time spent on media daily and age continue to be significant across the same robustness checks (Model 2).

Table 10

Regression assumption diagnostics

Model	*Test*	*Statistic*	*P*
M1	Shapiro-Wilk residual normality	.956	<.001
M1	Breusch-Pagan homoscedasticity	19.657	.033
M1	Durbin-Watson independence	2.058	--
M1	Ramsey RESET linearity	1.032	.311
M1	Max VIF	1.517	--
M2	Shapiro-Wilk residual normality	.956	<.001
M2	Breusch-Pagan homoscedasticity	13.738	.132
M2	Durbin-Watson independence	2.041	--
M2	Ramsey RESET linearity	2.441	.119
M2	Max VIF	1.490	--

Note. Peacebuilding/social cohesion model(M1). Conflict-risk perception model(M2). Variance inflation factor (VIF).

Table 11

Sensitivity analyses for primary significant predictors

Model	*Predictor*	*Specification*	*B*	*P*
M1	Conflict-risk perception	Full HC3	.175	.020
		Exclude Cook's D > 4/N	.172	<.001
		Exclude Mahalanobis p < .001	.192	.003
		Huber M-estimator	.150	<.001
M1	Verification efficacy	Full HC3	.224	<.001
		Exclude Cook's D > 4/N	.230	<.001
		Exclude Mahalanobis p < .001	.217	<.001
		Huber M-estimator	.219	<.001
M1	Unsafe expression, reversed	Full HC3	-.113	<.001
		Exclude Cook's D > 4/N	-.121	<.001
		Exclude Mahalanobis p < .001	-.119	<.001
		Huber M-estimator	-.107	<.001
M2	Verification efficacy	Full HC3	.301	<.001
		Exclude Cook's D > 4/N	.286	<.001
		Exclude Mahalanobis p < .001	.271	<.001
		Huber M-estimator	.287	<.001
M2	Avoid commenting due attacks	Full HC3	.120	.001
		Exclude Cook's D > 4/N	.109	<.001
		Exclude Mahalanobis p < .001	.105	.002
		Huber M-estimator	.105	<.001

Note. Robustness results reproduce the direction and significance of the central estimates. Only focal significant predictors are shown for parsimony.

DISCUSSION

Digital ambivalence and the conflict-cohesion relationship

The results complicate a binarism between digital contention and digital coalescence. They perceive some high levels of misinformation, hate speech, personal attacks and division; but they also find digital media to have potential for awareness, voice, understanding and intercommunity connection. This positive relationship speaks against the assumption that awareness of conflict risk leads to digital cynicism regarding peacebuilding potential. Future research may consider such correlations, as users who perceive risks of conflict more strongly also tend to perceive a more urgent need for and possibility of peacebuilding-oriented digital communication in this sample.

Such a finding corresponds to non-deterministic accounts of digital media. The higher conflict frame propounded by Zeitzoff (2017) captures why the competitive capabilities of digital platforms can ramp up controversial communication, however the current results demonstrate that such acceleration does not fully deplete the peacebuilding potentials of digital media. Similarly, Hirblinger et al. The co-construction of technical infrastructures and social expectations supported the critical-reflexive approach by Parker et al. (2023). Users do not simply assess platforms through tool use; they assess them as social ecologies for which conflict and cohesion effects hinge on norms of verification, safety, and dialogue.

Verification effectiveness as a peacemaking capacity

The most stable predictor across both models is verification efficacy. It has positive correlation with perceived peacebuilding/social cohesion and conflict-risk perception. Theoretically, this dual function is meaningful. Not only does verification boost user perceptions of digital media; it also seems to raise awareness and vigilance toward the conflict threats from misinformation and hate speech. In these information-disordered settings, the ability to fact-check and call out false statements may be a civic peacebuilding asset because it nurtures both critical vigilance and positive engagement.

This finding has direct relevance to the misinformation literature. This means that since false information reaches the public very fast and widely (Vosoughi et al., 2018), and even facilitate polarization because of disinformation and hate speech (Vasist et al., 2024) then peacebuilding cannot wait for bad content to circulate before intervening. It also entails boosting capacities at the user-level to assess credibility before they spread misinformation. Note that this does not mean placing the burden of responsibility from platforms and institutions on individuals, but rather media and information literacy is a condition for any one part of a larger accountability ecosystem.

Freedom of expression and the boundaries of online engagement

One of the major findings includes the negative coefficient for perceived unsafe expression in Model 1. When citizens do not feel safe to express political or social opinions, digital media cannot form a peaceful dialogue space. This is consistent with the idea that bridging always has to be done offline, not online. Contact about recognition and dialogue will support cohesion, whereas contact where hostility has been normalised may just reproduce fear, silence and withdrawal. REGRESSION RESULTS Table 2 here Beyond the comfort variable: Perceived expressive unsafety: The regression results suggest that perceived expressive unsafety (WE4) is yet another discomfort variable, associated with lower perceived peacebuilding potential even when controlling for conflict-risk perception, verification efficacy, media use and demographics.

It is also important to distinguish between why you might avoid unsafe expression versus avoiding comments due to being lynched. Unsafe expression predicted lower peacebuilding and avoidance of commenting on Muslim majority areas predicted greater conflict-risk perceptions. This induces a pattern of two similar yet dissimilar processes. Safety lowering the extent to which people believe that digital media is a force for positive public good On the other hand, not commenting may reflect awareness of online hostility experience and thus

increase perceived conflict risk. This is thus in line with the broader polarization literature suggesting that hostile climates of communication tend to lower deliberation and limit who steps into the public arena (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021).

Comparison with prior literature

The findings align with global evidence that despite its participatory and polarizing effects, digital media consistently generates news overuseper addere to the level of in consumendum et al. Merchie (2017); Boulianne (2020); Lorenz-Spreen et al. Digital media can facilitate civic engagement (Boulianne, 2023), and Cinelli et al. (2020), Muller and Schwarz (2020) and Vosoughi et al. (2018) show ways that platforms can bolster divisiveness and harm. This paper expands on this literature by demonstrating that from the perspective of Nepali users, these mechanisms are indistinct. Digital media can be a place of conflict and peacebuilding for the same respondents.

This also builds off of the digital peacebuilding literature. You may be interested in how Hirblinger (2024) disentangled digital peacebuilding from context, as the concept should not be divorced from pre-digital social and political circumstances. This claim is supported also by the Nepal findings, as platform effects seem conditional on social capacities such as verification and expressive safety. Thus, digital media can only contribute to cohesion indirectly through access of technology. It is a relational outcome mediated by information behaviors, and norms of disagreement and the perceived costs of speaking out.

Finally, the findings also extend research on social cohesion by including digital media in the analysis of horizontal relations. Social cohesion is a research area in part concerned with trust, cooperation, and identity among groups (Fiedler, 2023; Sonnenfeld et al., 2021). This study argues that digital spaces increasingly mediate these components. Respondents see an online voice for marginalized groups, awareness campaigns, peace journalism and intercommunity connectivity as potential bridges to cohesion; however, mistrust in communication arising from misinformation and attacks on the media shatter those bridges.

Theoretical implications

The core implication is that digital peacebuilding should be theorised as conditional relational capacity. Three conditions appear especially salient. Users need to be able to make judgements of information credibility. Second, online expression must feel safe enough to support participation in the first place. Third, digital engagement must be both bridge- and dialogue-oriented rather than simply exposure- or mobilization-oriented. These conditions associate platform affordances with the peacebuilding outcomes without treating technology as an independent determinant of social cohesion.

And confliction-risk perception can be usefully diagnostic in its awareness, are also implied by the findings. This is an important distinction for peace research. High perceived risk may signal fear and withdrawal but also the identification of vital conflict dynamics to be addressed. Perceived risk of conflict is positively associated. The former of these is linked with users' fears and disengagement from the conflict, whilst the latter is related to people's engagement in peace mediation.

Practical, managerial and policy implications

In terms of practical implications, we must recognize that media and information literacy is itself a peacebuilding effort rather than purely an educational aim. Verification training, skills in fact-checking and identifying fake information must be incorporated into the design of dialogue and journalism projects for peacebuilding. Nevertheless, it is important to point out: one should avoid talking about individual responsibilities of the user. Peacebuilding activities are an organization and facilitation type of thing for platform owners, news media companies, and civil society actors who all need to be acknowledged.

And what does that mean for civil society organizations and media managers, the authors emphasize that moderated spaces must be designed to safeguard expression while also encouraging legitimate, respectful disagreement. Campaigns of solidarity that elevate marginalized voices or foster cross-community understanding will be ineffective if participants fear harassment or personal attacks. Moderation norms, community guidelines, rapid response to hate speech, and visible support for targeted users are therefore not peripheral issues; they are conditions for social cohesion.

For decision-makers, the research clearly supports a system of balanced governance. Indeed, the dangers associated with misinformation and hate speech make a case for action, but regulatory measures that rely on coercion or censorship can have the effect of threatening the free expression necessary for building peace. Governance systems that value rights ought to incorporate platform responsibility, transparency in content management, media literacy, fact-checking, and the promotion of free expression. This approach is consistent with UNESCO's "Social Media 4 Peace" model, which promotes resilience and peace through free expression (UNESCO, 2023).

CONCLUSION

This study examines the association between digital media, conflict risk, peacebuilding and social cohesion in Nepal. Results suggest that participants in the analytic sample of Nepali digital media users understand the online public sphere as risky but also have the potential to foster peacebuilding. Whereas misinformation, hate speech, personal attacks, and societal division are broadly recognized, participants also see the potential for increasing awareness, expressing themselves, building understanding, and intercommunal connection through digital media. Multivariable analysis suggests that verification efficacy and expressive safety contribute to the dual interpretation. Namely, verification efficacy predicts both peacebuilding potential and conflict risk awareness while expressive safety negatively predicts perceived peacebuilding potential.

This study has several limitations. The non-probability online sample was predominantly urban and highly educated, which limits the generalizability of the findings. The cross-sectional design does not support causal conclusions, while self-reported measures may be affected by social desirability and common-method bias. The modest internal consistency of the verification-efficacy scale is a substantial constraint on interpreting verification efficacy as a peacebuilding capacity. The expression-constraints composite also failed to meet acceptable reliability criteria, and duplicate rankings prevented reliable interpretation of the ranking task. Finally, the study measured perceptions of possible digital-media effects rather than actual platform behaviour, exposure to harmful content, or observed peacebuilding and conflict-related actions. The findings should therefore be interpreted cautiously.

Future research needs to adopt longitudinal designs to examine if verification efficacy and expressive safety are associated with longitudinal online peacebuilding behaviors. Future experimental work could investigate the effectiveness of fact-checking interventions, norm-promoting messages, and other moderations in decreasing hostility and increasing intergroup understanding. Qualitative and ethnographic studies are needed to explore experiences of using digital media and the risks associated with such usage for members of marginalized communities. Platform-based research is necessary because of differences in visibility, moderation, algorithmic organization, and interpersonal norms between Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, WhatsApp/Viber and Instagram.

The article's central conclusion is that digital media's peacebuilding potential in Nepal is real but conditional. When online platforms facilitate credibility, enable safe expression and promote bridging interaction, they can foster social cohesion. The same platforms can aggravate tension when participation is considered risky or silencing due to the spread of hate speech, misinformation and attacks. This means that connecting in the digital age to advance peacebuilding is not enough. It can and must be lived in communicative environments where users can check, say, listen with confidence and disagree without consequence.

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