



COMMUNITY STORYTELLING NETWORK AND ENGAGEMENT FOR PROMOTING STRONG RESILIENT AGENCY AGAINST CONFLICT IN JOS, NIGERIA

Laguma, Joyce¹

Dem, Michael Nuhai²

^{1&2} Department of Mass Communication,
Plateau State University, Bokkos

+2348035098470¹

+2348035701346²

joycelaguma@plasu.edu.ng¹

michaeldem@plasu.edu.ng²

Abstract

The study examines the dynamics of communication infrastructure in communities that have experienced conflict. It explores how people come together during conflict to form a strong force through enhanced coordination, foster trust and mitigate or escalate conflict. This aims at using the communication infrastructure theory that attributes the power of a community to solve its problems. The theory advocates the use of the available communication resources at its disposal and explores how communication networks within communities influence civic engagement, social cohesion and community resilience. This study proposes that a well-developed communication infrastructure can significantly enhance the ability of communities to address social issues, including conflict and can be a strong force that can aid in the escalation of conflict. Qualitative research design was employed, 8 semi-structured interviews and two focus group discussions with residents in Dadin Kowa and Gyel communities of Jos South Local Government Area of Plateau State. Findings show that residents' strong engagement in community storytelling creates strong, resilient agency through the formation of community vigilante groups, which serve as a watchdog against external forces in case of a breakout of violent conflicts.

Keywords: community storytelling network, civic engagement, resilient agency, conflict

Introduction

The nexus between communication and community resilience has garnered increasing scholarly attention, particularly as conflict-prone societies seek sustainable pathways to peaceful coexistence. At the heart of this inquiry lies a fundamental question: how do the storytelling networks within communities influence their capacity to withstand, respond to, and recover from violent conflict? While existing literature has extensively documented the devastating consequences of ethno-religious violence in north central Nigeria (Nnabuihe, 2019; Njoku & Kolapo, 2022; Igbashangev & Abdullahi, 2023), comparatively less attention has been paid to the communicative mechanisms through which some communities not only survive but actively build resilient agency amidst protracted insecurity (Modeyin & Inobemhe, 2025).

Jos, Plateau State, presents a particularly compelling case. Since 2001, the city and its environs have witnessed recurring cycles of violence largely precipitated by the indigene-settler dichotomy and the instrumentalisation of religious and ethnic identities (Gambo et al., 2025). These conflicts have profoundly restructured neighbourhood relations, often along Christian-Muslim and Berom-Hausa lines in some communities, eroding the informal social ties that once enabled cross-group communication and cooperation (Madueke & Vermeulen, 2018). In this fractured communicative ecology, the very storytelling networks that might otherwise foster resilience risk becoming conduits for rumour, suspicion, and escalation.

The present study addresses this gap by investigating how community storytelling networks function in two distinctive neighbourhoods of Jos South Local Government Area. These two neighbourhoods are Dadin Kowa, a mixed Christian-Muslim community often cited as a peace icon, and Gyel, a segregated neighbourhood that has borne the brunt of repeated attacks.

The study provided a comprehensive knowledge of how communication resources influence community resilience by analysing two neighbourhoods with different conflict experiences and communication ecologies. In doing so, it moves beyond the prevailing emphasis on macro-level peacebuilding interventions to foreground the everyday communicative practices through which ordinary residents navigate insecurity, maintain social order, and forge collective responses to existential threats.

Statement of Research Problem

Communities that have experienced violent conflict face not only the immediate trauma of loss and displacement but also the erosion of the communicative infrastructures that underpin social cohesion and collective action. Despite growing recognition of community storytelling as a potential tool for social cohesion and resilience-building in conflict-affected settings, the communicative mechanisms that mediate how storytelling networks either foster or undermine resilient agency remain under-theorised and empirically underexplored. This gap is especially acute in the Nigerian context, particularly where recurrent ethno-religious violence in Jos, Plateau State, has exposed the limitations of top-down peacebuilding interventions. This has also highlighted the need for locally grounded, communicatively responsive strategies. Existing studies on resilience in Jos tend to focus on institutional responses (Bonkat, 2016), economic recovery (Eidelpes, 2022), or psychosocial outcomes (Ojewale, 2024), with little attention to how everyday storytelling practices across informal contexts shape collective sense-making, identity negotiation, and adaptive action in the face of structural insecurity. Consequently, there is insufficient evidence on how storytelling networks can be intentionally designed and supported, not merely as cultural expression but as infrastructures of resilient agency to counteract polarisation, rebuild trust, and enable anticipatory, collaborative responses to emerging conflict triggers (Abdulkadir, 2025; Akoh et al., 2023; Krause, 2018). This study, therefore, sets out to address the gaps stated herein.

Objectives

This study focuses on three specific objectives:

1. To analyse the community storytelling network in Dadin Kowa and Gyel communities of Jos South LGA, Nigeria.
2. To understand the differences in the community storytelling networks of Dadin Kowa and Gyel.

To understand the influence of the community storytelling network in building resilient agency in Dadin Kowa, Nigeria.

Literature Review

Communication Infrastructure Theory and Community Resilience

The conceptual underpinning of community resilience is increasingly viewed through the lens of Communication Infrastructure Theory (CIT). CIT posits that a neighbourhood's capacity for collective action is contingent upon its 'storytelling network', comprising residents, local media, and community organisations (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2001). In conflict-affected settings, this infrastructure serves as the primary mechanism for sense-making and crisis navigation. While traditional peacebuilding literature often emphasises macro-level institutional interventions (Bonkat, 2016), CIT shifts the analytical focus to the 'micro-level' communicative practices of everyday life. However, as noted in recent scholarship, i.e., these networks are not inherently stabilising; in fractured ecologies, they may inadvertently become conduits for the dissemination of rumours and the hardening of ethnic polarisations (Madueke & Vermeulen, 2018). This indicates that the mere presence of a communication network is not insufficient; rather, it is the *quality* and *inclusivity* of the storytelling that determines whether a community develops resilient agency or succumbs to further fragmentation.

Storytelling Networks as Catalysts for Resilient Agency

Resilient agency refers to the collective ability of a community to not only withstand external shocks but to proactively reorganise and adapt to a situation (Modeyin & Inobemhe, 2025). Within the Nigerian context, particularly in the volatile ethno-religious landscape of Jos, storytelling functions as a critical infrastructure for social cohesion. Existing research (Shoda, 2025) suggests that in integrated neighbourhoods like Dadin Kowa, cross-cutting storytelling networks foster a shared identity that transcends religious divides, thereby mitigating the 'indigene-settler' dichotomy. In contrast, segregated communities often exhibit 'echo-chamber' effects, where storytelling reinforces defensive postures rather than collaborative peacebuilding. While some studies focus on the economic or psychosocial dimensions of recovery (Eidelpes, 2022; Ojewale, 2024), there remains a significant theoretical gap regarding how informal storytelling—such as that found in community vigilante groups—translates into tangible security outcomes. This study seeks to bridge this gap by examining how communicative engagement facilitates the transition from passive survival to active, resilient agency.

Civic Engagement and the Mitigation of Conflict

The nexus between civic engagement and conflict mitigation is mediated by the availability of communicative resources. A robust communication infrastructure enables residents to coordinate

responses to emerging threats, effectively acting as an early-warning system. However, the efficacy of these networks is often undermined by the erosion of trust following protracted violence (Fisher et al., 2021). While contemporary debates in digital media and audience research highlight the role of social platforms in escalating tensions, the role of physical, localised storytelling networks in fostering 'watchdog' agencies remains underexplored (Ingram, 2024). By synthesising these perspectives, it becomes evident that community resilience is not a static trait, but a dynamic process sustained by the continuous exchange of narratives. Consequently, understanding the nuances of these networks in diverse urban settings like Jos is essential for developing locally grounded strategies that counteract polarisation and rebuild the social fabric.

Methodology

To gain deeper insights into the topic under investigation, this study adopts a purely qualitative approach by conducting 8 semi-structured interviews (4 in Dadin Kowa and 4 in Gyel) and 2 focus group discussions with residents in Dadin Kowa and Gyel. The participants for the semi-structured interviews included community leaders, youth leaders, security personnel, women leaders, vigilantes, and traders. While the participants in the focus group discussions were resident members of the community which are between the ages of 25 and 60. The participants were selected because they are the key channels of the community storytelling networks through daily interaction with neighbours, interactions in the market and direct beneficiaries of a network of storytellers. The FGD sessions comprise 12 respondents each, all with over 20 years of residence in the communities under study. The purposive and snowballing sampling techniques were used to select respondents for the study because residents kept directing us to people that they think can provide all the necessary data needed for the study, like vigilante members, community influencers, opinion leaders and leaders of community-based organisations.

Therefore, the sample size used for the study was 32 (8 interviewees and 24 FGD respondents). The researchers used narrative data analysis to analyse the transcripts from the interviews and FGDs. This method gives room for people to give their views and feelings on a particular phenomenon (Laguma, 2022).

Results and discussion

The narrative data obtained from the focus group discussions and key informant interviews offer a textured understanding of how community storytelling networks operate within two distinct sociopolitical ecologies in Jos South. Drawing on Communication Infrastructure Theory (CIT), this section analyses how everyday communicative practices shape resilient agency, civic engagement, and conflict mitigation. The discussion is organised around three thematic pillars that emerged from the interview data: the structure and quality of storytelling networks, the role of cross-group communication in fostering or hindering trust, and the translation of narrative exchange into collective security action.

Divergent Communication Ecologies: Integrated versus Segregated Neighbourhoods

A striking finding is the marked divergence in storytelling network configurations between Dadin Kowa and Gyel. In Dadin Kowa which is a mixed Christian-Muslim community, storytelling operates as an integrated, multi-directional infrastructure. Residents, religious leaders, youth representatives, and vigilante groups routinely exchange information across religious lines, often through informal gatherings at markets, viewing centres, and places of worship. As one community leader noted, disputes are resolved by convening both parties and listening to each side, with the Imam or pastors involved only when necessary. This suggests that Dadin Kowa's storytelling network functions as a *bridging* mechanism, connecting disparate social groups through shared narratives of mutual interest.

In contrast, Gyel, which is characterised by segregation along ethno-religious lines—exhibits an echo-chamber effect. Here, storytelling tends to occur within homogenous peer groups: older men converse among themselves at designated spots, while youths exchange information primarily through digital platforms or physical spaces like football pitches and beer parlours. Cross-group communication, though not absent, is mediated by suspicion. One respondent in Gyel admitted that Christians remain fearful of venturing into Muslim-dominated areas, even as Muslims occasionally visit Christian neighbourhoods for trade. This asymmetry indicates that while storytelling persists, its ability to foster reciprocal trust is constrained by deeply embedded spatial and psychological boundaries.

Importantly, however, Gyel is not a monolith of dysfunction. The presence of cross-neighbourhood initiatives demonstrates that intentional interventions can partially reconfigure fractured storytelling networks. Yet, these remain episodic rather than systemic.

From Storytelling to Resilient Agency: The Vigilante as Communicative Institution

One of the most significant contributions of this study is the empirical link between storytelling networks and the emergence of resilient agency, specifically, the formation and operation of community vigilante groups. In Dadin Kowa, storytelling does not end with narrative exchange; it translates into coordinated security action. When tension is reported in neighbouring areas, residents immediately alert one another, and the vigilante group begins patrols. This process is underpinned by a communication protocol that involves youth leaders, community elders, and the local police. The vigilante thus functions as a communicative institution, both a product of storytelling (born from shared narratives of risk) and a vehicle for further storytelling (circulating early warnings and security updates).

This finding challenges conventional understandings of vigilante groups as merely reactive or extra-legal. In Dadin Kowa, the vigilante operates as a trusted intermediary within the neighbourhood's storytelling network, reinforcing rather than undermining formal security structures. The police station at Rantiya, for instance, serves as a physical hub for interfaith meetings, where Christians and Muslims jointly deliberate on security matters. This co-location of storytelling and security governance suggests that resilient agency is not merely about physical defence but about the communicative capacity to anticipate, coordinate, and de-escalate.

In Gyel, by contrast, vigilante activity is more fragmented and reactive. While residents contribute to barricades and security lights, the absence of regular cross-community storytelling meetings means that early warnings are often delayed or distorted. One respondent recounted that during crises, youths from both sides would gather at the expressway, waiting for the other to make the first move, a clear indicator of communicative breakdown. Without a robust storytelling infrastructure, resilient agency remains localised and defensive rather than collaborative and pre-emptive.

The Dual Role of Storytelling: Cohesion and Polarisation

A recurring theme across both communities is the ambivalence of storytelling. While it can build trust and enable collective action, it can also amplify suspicion and propagate harmful rumours. In Agwan Baki of Dadin Kowa, which is a predominantly Christian neighbourhood, an elderly female respondent observed that residents often attribute any killing to “Fulani attackers” or “silent

killings by Muslims,” even when evidence is lacking. This reflects what CIT scholars term *fractured storytelling ecologies*, where narratives become weaponised to reinforce in-group solidarity at the expense of out-group demonisation (Igwe, 2025).

Nevertheless, the data also reveals that storytelling can be reflexively managed. In Dadin Kowa, community leaders actively counter rumours by convening emergency meetings and fact-checking through trusted intermediaries. One youth leader emphasised that when a dispute arises, the cause must be investigated rather than generalised to an entire religious group. This deliberative practice, which is essentially a form of narrative accountability, distinguishes resilient communities from those trapped in cycles of retaliatory storytelling.

Media, Social Media, and the Limits of External Engagement

Contrary to expectations, traditional media (radio, television) play a minimal role in the day-to-day storytelling networks of either community. Most respondents reported that they do not routinely take community issues to media houses, nor do media organisations actively seek out their peacebuilding stories. The exception is social media: the Dadin Kowa Youth Facebook page serves as a platform for discussing community issues and proposing solutions. However, this remains largely positive and intra-community rather than a tool for external advocacy.

The relative absence of media engagement is noteworthy. It suggests that resilient agency in these contexts is built primarily through oral, face-to-face, and peer-mediated communication, not through institutionalised media channels. This finding complicates the prevailing digital optimism in communication for development literature, which often assumes that social media automatically enhances civic engagement. Here, Facebook functions more as an extension of existing offline networks than as a transformative public sphere.

Government Neglect and NGO Intermediation

Finally, a critical structural factor emerges from the data: the near-absence of government support for communication infrastructure. In Gyel, the traditional ruler explicitly blamed the government for failing to rebuild homes or facilitate the return of displaced persons, arguing that this neglect perpetuates communal fragmentation. In contrast, NGOs, particularly faith-based organisations and Catholic relief agencies have stepped in to provide skill acquisition, peace education, and dialogue platforms. These NGOs function as meso-level storytellers, bridging grassroots

narratives with institutional resources. However, their impact remains uneven and project-based, lacking the continuity required to sustain long-term communicative resilience.

Findings

Drawing on the narrative analysis of the two focus group discussions and eight semi-structured interviews, the following key findings emerged:

Integrated storytelling networks correlate with higher community resilience.

Dadin Kowa's mixed religious composition, coupled with regular cross-group meetings, facilitates rapid information sharing, dispute resolution, and coordinated security responses. In contrast, Gyel's segregated structure produces fragmented storytelling that often reinforces suspicion and defensive postures.

Vigilante groups function as communicative institutions, not merely security actors.

In Dadin Kowa, the vigilante operates within a broader storytelling ecology that includes youth leaders, religious figures, and the police. This integration enables early warning systems and de-escalation protocols, demonstrating that resilient agency is fundamentally communicative.

Storytelling can both mitigate and escalate conflict.

While Dadin Kowa exemplifies narrative accountability, where rumours are investigated and disputes are de-generalised. Other areas like Angwan Baki in Dadin Kowa exhibit polarised storytelling, where out-group attributions persist in the absence of cross-group dialogue.

Traditional media play a negligible role in community storytelling networks.

Neither community routinely engages with radio or television for peacebuilding purposes. Social media, particularly Facebook, serves as a supplementary platform but remains secondary to oral and peer-mediated communication.

Government absence is a structural constraint on resilient agency.

Respondents across both communities lamented the lack of state support for communication infrastructure, housing reconstruction, and conflict resolution. NGOs have partially filled this gap, but their interventions are often short-term and insufficiently integrated into local storytelling ecologies.

Cross-group rituals and shared economic activities foster narrative bridging.

In Dadin Kowa, joint Sallah and Christmas celebrations, as well as market interactions, create recurring opportunities for positive intergroup storytelling. These rituals function as narrative contact zones, where stereotypes can be challenged and trust built incrementally.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how community storytelling networks influence resilient agency against conflict in two neighbourhoods of Jos South, Nigeria. By applying Communication Infrastructure Theory to qualitative data from Dadin Kowa and Gyel, the research demonstrates that the quality, inclusivity, and reflexivity of storytelling networks matter more than their mere presence. In Dadin Kowa, an integrated communication ecology, comprising residents, religious leaders, youth, vigilantes, and the police has produced a form of resilient agency characterised by anticipatory coordination, cross-group accountability, and the institutionalisation of narrative checks. In Gyel, despite pockets of collaboration, the legacy of segregation and government neglect has left storytelling networks fragmented, reducing their capacity to generate collective security responses.

Crucially, the findings challenge both techno-optimistic accounts of digital media and state-centric peacebuilding models. Localised, oral, and peer-mediated storytelling remains the bedrock of community resilience, even as platforms like Facebook offer supplementary spaces for deliberation. Moreover, the absence of government support, both material and communicative, emerges as a structural barrier that NGOs can only partially mitigate. For lasting peace, storytelling networks require not only grassroots energy but also institutional recognition and resourcing.

The study also contributes a theoretical refinement to CIT by introducing the concept of narrative accountability, which is the deliberate practice of investigating the origins of a rumour or dispute

before allowing it to generalise into communal suspicion. This practice, evident in Dadin Kowa, offers a measurable indicator of storytelling network health that future research could operationalise.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussion, the following recommendations are proposed for policymakers, peacebuilding practitioners, community leaders, and non-governmental organisations:

Government and NGOs should support regular, structured meetings where residents from different religious and ethnic backgrounds can share security-related information, resolve disputes, and plan collective actions. These forums should rotate between neighbourhoods and include women and youth as active participants, not passive attendees.

Rather than viewing vigilante groups as purely security actors, peacebuilding programmes should train them in conflict-sensitive communication, early warning protocols, and narrative de-escalation techniques. Police-community dialogue platforms, such as the one at Rantiya station, should be replicated in segregated areas like Gyel.

Given the limited reach of traditional media, interventions should focus on low-tech, accessible platforms: community notice boards, mosque and church announcements, town crier systems, and locally produced audio recordings. Social media should be leveraged but not over-relied upon, given digital divides.

The Plateau State government should prioritise the reconstruction of homes and public facilities in conflict-affected areas like Gyel, and facilitate the safe return of displaced persons. Visible state investment would signal that peaceful coexistence is accompanied by tangible recovery, thereby reinforcing positive narratives.

The Catholic NGO's skill acquisition and women's contribution groups, as well as the inter-community football tournaments, have demonstrable benefits for narrative bridging. Donors

should fund multi-year, not project-based, initiatives that embed storytelling components into economic and social programmes.

Community leaders and religious figures should be trained in techniques for countering rumour and avoiding generalisations. Schools and youth groups can integrate modules on verifying information before sharing it—a form of digital and oral literacy tailored to conflict-prone settings.

Given its success, Dadin Kowa's approach to integrated storytelling and vigilance should be documented as a case study and shared with other mixed communities in Jos North and Jos South through peer-to-peer learning exchanges.

Women in this study emerged as both carriers of narrative and, in some cases, as excluded from formal security meetings. Future research should examine how gendered communication patterns shape resilient agency and whether women-only storytelling forums yield distinct peacebuilding outcomes.

APPENDIX

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. Can you explain your activities in this neighbourhood that could require members to protect themselves?
2. Comment on your involvement in neighbourhood activities?
3. How are disputes resolved within the neighbourhood among members and others outside your community?
4. Do you have an active vigilante group in your neighbourhood and how are members recruited?
5. Can you comment on the intercommunal communication in your neighbourhood especially pertaining conflict?
6. Comment on the communal vigilante group in your neighbourhood and its activities.
7. What can you say affects the way people communicate in your neighbourhood?
8. What can you say are the issues you often discuss with your peers when it comes to protecting your neighbourhood against external aggression?
9. How would you assess the use of neighbourhood storytelling in your community?
10. Can you remember the pressing issue(s) in your neighbourhood that fellow neighbours and individual families collectively addressed?
11. What is your view on the level of participation in neighbourhood activities when it comes to protecting your neighbourhood?

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. What means do you use in passing information within the neighbourhood?
2. Did any conflict in Jos affect the way people relate with others outside the neighbourhood?
3. Do you have regular community meetings to discuss issues that affect your communities?
4. What are the topics you discuss most in the meetings?
5. Are there occasions where a prominent issue in the community encouraged members to protect their neighbourhood?
6. How are disputes resolved within the neighbourhood?
7. Can you comment on the intercommunal communication in your neighbourhood?
8. How often do you have community meetings in your neighbourhood with the vigilante group?
9. How would you assess the influence of discussing the violent conflict that affected your neighbourhood neighbourhood and how it can be used to promote community engagement?
10. Can your comment on the use of neighbourhood storytelling network in your community which could mobilize members towards community engagement?
11. How has communication within the community help residents accept the reality of experiencing violent conflict and the need to protect their neighbourhood?

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