

SCHOOL SAFETY IN THE ERA OF SOCIAL MEDIA THREADS: IMPLICATIONS FOR ADMINISTRATORS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The proliferation of social media platforms particularly thread-based applications such as X, Facebook Threads, WhatsApp, and TikTok has fundamentally altered the landscape of social interaction among Nigerian school-age populations. While these platforms offer unprecedented educational opportunities, they simultaneously generate complex, multidimensional safety threats that school administrators are critically ill-equipped to address. This position paper argues that Nigerian school administrators must urgently adopt proactive, data-driven, and culturally contextualised frameworks to safeguard students from cyberbullying, online radicalisation, sextortion, misinformation-driven violence, and predatory grooming facilitated through social media threads. Drawing on recent empirical evidence, national policy frameworks, and international best practices, the paper advances the position that passive, reactive approaches to school safety are no longer tenable in Nigeria's digital age. Specific implications for policy, administrator capacity building, stakeholder engagement, and legislative advocacy are proposed. The paper concludes with an urgent call for systemic reform in school safety governance as an institutional imperative.

Keywords: school safety, social media threads, Nigerian education, school administration.

1. INTRODUCTION

The global digital revolution, accelerated by the widespread adoption of smartphones and affordable mobile internet, has fundamentally reconfigured the contours of adolescent social life (Twenge et al., 2022). In Nigeria, this transformation is particularly pronounced: with an estimated 122.5 million active internet users as of 2024, and social media penetration growing at approximately 14% annually, the country represents one of Africa's most digitally engaged populations (Data Reportal, 2024). Schools once bounded institutions of learning now exist in a permeable digital ecosystem in which students navigate physical and virtual realities simultaneously (Oyewale & Adeyemo, 2023).

Nowhere is this duality more consequential for institutional governance than in the realm of school safety. Traditional safety frameworks gate control, perimeter surveillance, dress codes are manifestly inadequate to address threats that originate, escalate, and sometimes culminate in physical harm within digital environments. Social media threads, defined here as sequential, publicly or semi-publicly visible conversational chains on platforms including X, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Telegram, and Snapchat, have become the primary vector through which several categories of harm are orchestrated and disseminated among Nigerian students (Okonkwo & Nwosu, 2023).

This position paper takes a deliberate normative stance: Nigerian school administrators can no longer treat social media as external to the school environment. The evidence reviewed herein demonstrates, with disturbing clarity, that threats incubated in digital threads regularly manifest as physical violence, psychological trauma, self-harm, dropout, and even death within Nigerian secondary and tertiary institutions (Adesanya et al., 2024; UNICEF Nigeria, 2023). The imperative for administrators is not merely to respond to these threats but to anticipate, disrupt, and mitigate them through institutional policies embedded in broader socio-legal frameworks.

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides a conceptual framework linking social media thread dynamics to school safety. Section 3 reviews the current landscape of social media-related safety threats in Nigerian schools. Section 4 critically examines existing administrative responses and their limitations. Section 5 advances the paper's core position and practical recommendations. Section 6 addresses implications for policy, law, and professional practice, and Section 7 provides concluding reflections.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Social Media Threads as Socio-Technical Systems

Social media threads are best understood not merely as communication tools but as socio-technical systems that shape and are shaped by social norms, power dynamics, and institutional environments (Castells, 2021). The thread architecture characterised by nested responses, viral amplification, algorithmic curation, and anonymity or pseudonymity creates what Subrahmanyam and Smahel (2011) termed "hyper-social" spaces that amplify both prosocial and antisocial behaviours. For adolescents in particular, these platforms operate as primary sites of identity construction, peer validation, and social boundary negotiation (Valkenburg et al., 2022).

Relevant theoretical grounding includes Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, updated for digital environments by Hanewald (2011), which situates the student within nested systems microsystem (family, school), mesosystem (peer interactions), exosystem (institutional policy), and macrosystem (cultural norms). Social media threads penetrate all these systems simultaneously, creating what researchers have termed the "digital mesosystem" in which traditional institutional boundaries become porous (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). This framework is particularly apt for Nigeria, where familial authority, religious institutions, peer culture, and state governance intersect in distinctive ways to shape student behaviour online (Onyekachi et al., 2023).

2.2 School Safety as Multi-Dimensional Construct

Contemporary conceptualisations of school safety have evolved substantially beyond physical security to encompass psychological safety, social safety, and increasingly, digital safety (Musu et al., 2019). The United States National Center for Education Statistics (2023) defines a safe school as one in which students are free from bullying, harassment, violence, and discrimination in all environments a definition that Nigerian educational policy is yet to fully incorporate in its digital dimensions. Bosworth and Judkins (2014) proposed a tripartite framework of school safety encompassing: (a) structural/environmental safety, (b) social-emotional safety, and (c) digital safety the latter gaining critical salience in the post-COVID educational landscape.

For Nigeria specifically, Adeleke and Fashina (2023) proposed an indigenised framework that integrates community stakeholders (parents, religious leaders, traditional authorities) as co-custodians of school safety a departure from purely administrative models. This paper adopts this expanded, contextualised framework as its primary analytical lens, positioning the school administrator as coordinator of a complex web of institutional, communal, and digital safety governance.

3. THE SOCIAL MEDIA SAFETY THREAT LANDSCAPE IN NIGERIAN SCHOOLS

3.1 Cyberbullying and Online Harassment

Cyberbullying defined as the deliberate, repeated use of digital platforms to harm, harass, intimidate, or exclude peers constitutes the most extensively documented social media-related safety threat in Nigerian schools (Gbadamosi et al., 2023). A 2023 survey of 1,847 secondary school students across Lagos, Abuja, and Kano by the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) found that 68.4% of respondents had witnessed cyberbullying on social media threads, while 41.2% had been direct victims. WhatsApp class groups and school-related Facebook pages were identified as the most common platforms for harassment, often involving public humiliation, rumour dissemination, and exclusionary behaviour.

What distinguishes cyberbullying from its offline counterpart in the Nigerian context is its amplification through thread dynamics: a single defamatory post, when shared across WhatsApp threads and Facebook groups, can reach thousands of peers within hours, producing psychological trauma disproportionate to the original act (Adesanya et al., 2024). The 2022 case at a federal government college in Enugu State in which a student died by suicide following the viral circulation of a doctored sexual image across school WhatsApp threads exemplifies the potentially lethal consequences of unaddressed cyberbullying (Punch Newspaper, 2022).

3.2 Sexual Exploitation and Sextortion

Social media threads have become primary vectors for sexual exploitation of Nigerian students. The proliferation of "sugar daddy" recruitment threads on Instagram and Telegram, in which vulnerable adolescents are targeted with economic incentives, has been well-documented by NOIPolls (2023). More alarming is the rise of sextortion the coercive use of intimate images to extract compliance which Interpol's (2023) African Cybercrime Assessment identified as a rapidly escalating threat in Nigerian schools, with victims predominantly aged 14–18 years.

According to a joint report by UNICEF Nigeria and the Federal Ministry of Education (2023), an estimated 1 in 6 Nigerian secondary school students had been approached for sexual purposes through social media threads in the preceding academic year. Female students bear a disproportionate burden, with 73% of reported sextortion cases involving girls aged 13–17 (NOIPolls, 2023). School administrators remain largely unprepared to identify, respond to, or report such cases, reflecting critical gaps in professional training and institutional protocols (Okonkwo & Nwosu, 2023).

3.3 Misinformation, Hate Speech, and Violence Instigation

Thread-based platforms have demonstrated a troubling capacity to incite intra-school violence in Nigeria through the rapid dissemination of misinformation and hate speech. The recurrence of ethno-religious tensions in Nigerian society exacerbated by the 2023 general elections has been actively reproduced within school social media threads (Premium Times, 2024). Researchers at the University of Lagos documented seven incidents between 2022 and 2024 in which violence in secondary schools was directly traceable to inflammatory posts and rumour threads on WhatsApp and Telegram (Adeyemi & Ola, 2024).

The algorithmic architecture of thread platforms, which rewards engagement over accuracy, creates an epistemically hostile environment for adolescents whose critical digital literacy skills remain underdeveloped. The 2024 Africa Media Barometer found that only 23% of Nigerian secondary school students could reliably distinguish verified information from fabricated content on social media a figure that underscores the urgency of digital literacy integration into Nigeria's school curriculum (Friedrich Naumann Foundation, 2024).

3.4 Online Radicalisation and Extremist Recruitment

While less frequently discussed in educational literature, the use of social media threads for radicalisation and terrorist recruitment represents a growing threat to school safety in northern and north-central Nigeria. The National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC, 2023) has documented increasing use of encrypted Telegram channels and WhatsApp broadcast lists by Boko Haram affiliates and bandits to target school-age youths in Borno, Zamfara, and Niger states. The 2021 abduction of students from the Government Science College, Kagara, was preceded by documented recruitment activities on social media platforms (Vanguard, 2021). School administrators in conflict-affected states bear a particularly acute responsibility for monitoring online radicalisation without violating students' privacy rights a tension that current Nigerian policy frameworks have not yet resolved (Bello & Muhammed, 2024).

3.5 Mental Health Consequences

Emerging evidence links heavy social media engagement to significant mental health deterioration among Nigerian adolescents. A 2024 study published in the African Journal of Psychiatry and Mental Health reported a statistically significant positive correlation between social media thread usage exceeding three hours daily and elevated rates of depression ($r = 0.47$, $p < 0.01$), anxiety ($r = 0.51$, $p < 0.01$), and suicidal ideation ($r = 0.38$, $p < 0.05$) among secondary school students in southwest Nigeria (Awosanya et al., 2024). These mental health consequences directly impair academic performance, social integration, and vulnerability to further online exploitation — creating a compounding cycle of risk that school administrators must be equipped to interrupt.

4. CRITIQUE OF EXISTING ADMINISTRATIVE RESPONSES

4.1 Reactive and Punitive Orientations

The dominant approach of Nigerian school administrators to social media-related safety incidents remains overwhelmingly reactive and punitive (Adeleke & Fashina, 2023). Administrative responses typically follow a pattern of post-hoc investigation, suspension, expulsion, or referral to law enforcement interventions that address individual incidents without disrupting the systemic conditions that generate them. This approach is consistent with what Skiba et al. (2014) termed the "discipline-management" paradigm, which research consistently demonstrates as ineffective in reducing recurrence rates and actively harmful to the school climate.

A 2023 survey of school principals across Oyo, Rivers, and Kaduna states found that fewer than 12% had a documented digital safety policy, and only 6% had conducted any staff training on social media-related safety threats in the preceding two years (Oyewale & Adeyemo, 2023). This institutional unpreparedness reflects a broader policy vacuum at both state and federal levels.

4.2 Technology Prohibition as a False Solution

A common administrative response to social media threats in Nigerian schools is outright technology prohibition banning mobile phones on school premises. While such policies may reduce in-school social media exposure, they are demonstrably ineffective as safety interventions for several reasons. First, the threats documented above predominantly originate and escalate outside school hours, on home devices (Gbadamosi et al., 2023). Second, blanket prohibitions deprive students of the opportunity to develop critical digital literacy competencies under supervised conditions (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). Third, enforcement is inconsistently applied and easily circumvented, generating resentment without producing safety gains (Adeyemi & Ola, 2024).

The emerging scholarly consensus holds that digital engagement under informed supervision produces better long-term safety outcomes than prohibition a position aligned with the UNESCO (2023) framework on digital rights and responsibilities in education.

4.3 Inadequate Counselling Infrastructure

Nigeria's student-to-counsellor ratio in public secondary schools stands at approximately 1,200:1 nationally a figure that renders individualized counselling support for social media-related distress functionally impossible for the vast majority of students (Federal Ministry of Education, 2022). In private schools, while ratios are marginally better, counsellors rarely possess specific training in digital safety or online trauma (UNICEF Nigeria, 2023). This infrastructure deficit means that students experiencing cyberbullying, sextortion, or online harassment have limited recourse to professional institutional support, increasing their reliance on social media threads as the primary site of help-seeking — often exacerbating rather than resolving their distress.

5. POSITION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Core Position

This paper advances the following position: the governance of school safety in Nigeria must be fundamentally reconceived as a digital-physical continuum in which social media environments are treated as extensions of the school environment for regulatory, disciplinary, and protective purposes. School administrators are not merely managers of physical spaces but guardians of total student environments — including the digital environments in which students spend increasing portions of their developmental lives. This reconceptualisation carries significant practical implications for policy, training, parental engagement, and interagency collaboration.

5.2 Institutional Policy Imperatives

Every Nigerian school public and private, secondary and tertiary should be required by law to develop, implement, and regularly review a Comprehensive Digital Safety Policy (CDSP) that encompasses the following minimum elements:

1. A clear definition of digital safety violations and graduated disciplinary responses proportionate to severity and intent;
2. Specific protocols for reporting, documenting, and responding to cyberbullying, online sexual exploitation, hate speech, and radicalisation incidents;
3. A designated Digital Safety Coordinator among administrative staff, with defined responsibilities and accountability mechanisms;
4. Mandatory digital safety induction for all new students at the commencement of each academic year;
5. Clear procedures for inter-agency referral to law enforcement, child protection services, and mental health providers;
6. Regular policy review cycles incorporating student, parent, and community input.
7. The Federal Ministry of Education should develop a standardised CDSP template as a national policy instrument, adaptable to school-level contexts, with compliance monitored through the National Education Management Information System (NEMIS).

5.3 Administrator Capacity Building

School administrators cannot effectively address what they do not understand. A structured, mandatory professional development curriculum on digital safety should be integrated into administrator pre-service and in-service training through the National Institute for Educational Planning and Administration (NIEPA). Such training should equip administrators with competencies in:

- i. Digital threat identification and risk assessment;
- ii. Trauma-informed responses to online victimisation;
- iii. Evidence-based documentation for law enforcement and child protection purposes;
- iv. Facilitation of age-appropriate digital literacy programmes for students;
- v. Community engagement on digital safety, including culturally sensitive communication with parents and guardians.

The Teacher Registration Council of Nigeria (TRCN) and the National Universities Commission (NUC) should incorporate digital safety competencies into professional licensure requirements for school leaders.

5.4 Curriculum Integration

Digital citizenship education encompassing critical evaluation of online content, responsible social media use, privacy protection, and recognition of online exploitation should be formally integrated into Nigeria's secondary school curriculum as a standalone subject or as cross-curricular component across Social Studies, Civic Education, and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) at all levels. Evidence from Kenya, South Africa, and Rwanda demonstrates that structured digital citizenship curricula produce measurable improvements in students' capacity to recognise and report online threats (Partnership for Learning, 2023).

The Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council (NERDC) should be mandated to develop curriculum guidelines incorporating current social media threat typologies, with content reviewed biennially to remain current with evolving platforms and tactics.

5.5 Stakeholder Engagement and Community Partnerships

In recognition of Nigeria's communal social structures, effective school digital safety governance must extend beyond institutional boundaries to incorporate parents, religious leaders, community associations, and traditional authorities as active partners. This aligns with Adeleke and Fashina's (2023) indigenised framework and reflects the demonstrated effectiveness of community-based approaches in Nigerian public health and security contexts. Specific modalities should include:

- a. Termly digital safety workshops for parents and guardians, conducted in local languages where applicable.
- b. Interdenominational/interfaith school safety committees that address digital threats as moral community concerns.
- c. Formalised partnerships between schools and local civil society organisations with digital safety expertise, such as the Paradigm Initiative and the Child Online Safety in Nigeria (COSN) network.
- d. Student-led digital safety ambassadors trained to identify and support peers experiencing online threats.

5.6 Mental Health Integration

The relationship between social media-related victimisation and mental health deterioration requires urgent integration of psychological support into the school safety response framework. Administrators should advocate for the restoration of the 1:400 student-to-counsellor ratio mandated by the National Policy on Education (FME, 2013) and ensure that school counsellors receive specific training in online trauma, digital victimisation, and crisis management in digital contexts. Additionally, peer-support networks trained in digital safety and mental health first aid should be established in all schools, drawing on international models such as the Youth Internet Safety Network (YISN, 2022).

5.7 Legislative Advocacy

School administrators should be positioned as active advocates for stronger legislative frameworks governing online child safety in Nigeria. The Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act 2015 (as amended 2024) provides a partial legal basis for prosecuting cyberbullying and online sexual exploitation of minors, but enforcement mechanisms remain

weak and school-specific provisions are absent (Nwafor & Ekwueme, 2024). Administrators' professional associations including the All-Nigeria Confederation of Principals of Secondary Schools (ANCOPSS) should actively engage the National Assembly to advocate for:

- i. Mandatory school digital safety policies as a statutory requirement;
- ii. Platform accountability provisions requiring social media companies to respond promptly to school safety-related reports;
- iii. Dedicated funding for digital safety infrastructure in the Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC) and State Universal Basic Education Board (SUBEB) budget frameworks.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, LAW AND PRACTICE

6.1 Policy Implications

The National Policy on Education (7th Edition, 2023) requires urgent revision to explicitly address digital safety as a component of the school environment mandate. The National Educational Policy's silence on social media-related threats is a critical governance gap that normalises institutional inaction. Policy revision should mandate digital safety provisions at school, local government, state, and federal levels, with clear accountability lines and performance indicators.

6.2 Legal Implications

The Child Rights Act (2003), adopted in 33 of 36 states, must be interpreted and enforced expansively to cover digital environments. Courts and law enforcement agencies in Nigeria have generally lagged in applying child rights frameworks to online contexts a jurisprudential gap that school administrators should help address by ensuring comprehensive documentation and reporting of digital violations (Nwafor & Ekwueme, 2024). The National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) and the Nigeria Computer Emergency Response Team (NGCERT) should be formally integrated into school safety response networks.

6.3 Practice Implications

At the level of daily practice, school administrators must move from crisis-management to prevention-oriented governance. This means allocating resources for digital safety programmes in school budgets, dedicating staff meeting time to digital threat updates, and regularly engaging with law enforcement liaisons. The shift from reactive to proactive governance requires a fundamental change in administrative culture one that treats digital safety not as a peripheral concern but as a core institutional responsibility equivalent to physical security, academic quality, and child welfare.

7. CONCLUSION

The era of social media threads has irrevocably altered the safety terrain of Nigerian schools. Cyberbullying, sextortion, online radicalisation, misinformation-driven violence, and social media-linked mental health crises are not emerging threats — they are present, documented, and escalating realities that claim the wellbeing, dignity, and in some cases, the lives of Nigerian students. School administrators who continue to treat these threats as external to their institutional mandate are not merely professionally negligent; they are complicit in the harms that inaction perpetuates.

This paper has argued, with the force of current evidence and ethical principle, that school safety governance in Nigeria must be reconceived as a digital-physical continuum. This reconceptualisation demands proactive institutional policies, administrator competency development, curriculum reform, community engagement, mental health integration, and legislative advocacy. None of these imperatives requires extraordinary resources they require administrative will, professional commitment, and the intellectual honesty to acknowledge that the schools Nigeria's children inhabit are no longer bounded by walls.

The Nigerian school administrator who leads a safe school in the twenty-first century is one who understands that the most dangerous corridor in any school may not be a physical hallway it may be a WhatsApp thread.

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