

Discourse analysis of social media commentaries on extrajudicial killings in Nigeria (Uromi, 2025) and Zambia (2026)

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Abstract: This study investigated the discursive construction of extrajudicial killings in the digital sphere, focusing on the 2025 Uromi massacre in Nigeria and the 2026 magical accusation marketplace case in Zambia. The aim was to analyze how digital publics justified or resisted jungle justice through social media interactions, with specific focus on identifying linguistic tropes, examining thematic patterns, and evaluating the impact of magical accusations on audience sentiment. Mediatized Conflict Theory and Social Constructivism provided additional theoretical context to explain how online platforms amplify local disputes into spectacles and shape collective social realities. A qualitative research design was employed, combining Netnography to observe digital publics in their natural online environments with Critical Discourse Analysis to examine linguistic tropes and socio-cultural dynamics. The study population comprised digital users engaging with extrajudicial killing content, from which a purposive sample of thirty high-engagement comments was selected for analysis. Findings indicated that digital commentaries functioned as surrogate tribunals, weaponizing institutional distrust and moral panic to validate mob violence. The study concluded that the digital gavel facilitated a collective social reality that systematically bypassed the presumption of innocence, posing a severe threat to the rule of law. Recommendations included implementing targeted digital literacy programs to counter harmful online narratives and strengthening judicial communication strategies to restore public trust in formal legal processes.

Keywords: Discourse Analysis, Extrajudicial Killings, Jungle Justice, Mediatized Conflict, Social Media.

Introduction

Extrajudicial killings, the unlawful execution of individuals without judicial process, represent one of the most persistent threats to human rights and democratic governance across Africa. These executions occur when state agents or civilian mobs bypass established judicial procedures to take the law into their own hands. The United Nations consistently condemns such practices globally, emphasizing that they erode the rule of law and undermine public trust in governance institutions. In African contexts, this phenomenon is particularly pronounced, as fragile legal systems, weak enforcement mechanisms, and deep-seated cultural anxieties converge to normalize extrajudicial violence.

In Nigeria, extrajudicial killings manifest through police brutality and mob justice. Historical reports from human rights organizations document widespread unlawful killings by security forces and mob lynching's of suspected offenders. The 2025 Uromi massacre serves as a primary example of this crisis, wherein a mob executed suspected criminals in broad daylight while videos and commentaries circulated extensively across digital platforms. This incident highlights the fragility of the formal justice system and demonstrates the expanding role of social media in amplifying and legitimizing extrajudicial violence.

Zambia reflects a distinct yet equally troubling manifestation of extrajudicial executions. In this setting, accusations of witchcraft or "magical theft" frequently trigger mob violence, particularly within rural communities and marketplace environments. The 2026 marketplace incident, in which individuals accused of sorcery suffered mob violence, illustrates how cultural beliefs intersect with institutional weaknesses to produce lethal outcomes. Reports from the Zambian Human Rights Commission confirm that witchcraft-related accusations account for numerous deaths annually, emphasizing the systemic nature of the issue.

The proliferation of social media platforms, including Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube, fundamentally alters how the public engages with issues of justice and violence. In environments characterized by deep institutional distrust, digital users frequently assume the role of surrogate tribunals. These online spaces frame individuals as guilty prior to trial and weaponized collective anger against perceived state failures. Consequently, digital commentaries do not merely reflect public opinion; they actively construct social realities, normalize extrajudicial violence, and delegitimize formal judicial processes.

The Nigerian and Zambian cases demonstrate the intersection of cultural traditions and contemporary communication technologies. In Nigeria, historical experiences with state brutality and governance failures shape digital narratives of institutional distrust. In Zambia, long-standing beliefs in witchcraft inform online commentaries that rationalize mob violence. These cultural frameworks illustrate that extrajudicial killings persist not only due to institutional deficits, but also through discursive traditions that resonate with communal identities. Furthermore, the transnational circulation of these digital narratives extends their reach to diasporic communities and international audiences, projecting local anxieties into global discussions on justice and human rights.

Statement of the Problem

Extrajudicial killings in Nigeria and Zambia have increasingly migrated into the digital sphere, where social media platforms amplify, justify, and contest acts of mob violence. Despite constitutional guarantees of the right to life and the existence of judicial systems, institutional distrust, moral panic, and cultural anxieties have fueled the normalization of “jungle justice.” In Nigeria, incidents such as the 2025 Uromi massacre illustrate how online commentaries weaponize anger against perceived state failures, while in Zambia, the 2026 “magical accusation” marketplace case highlights how accusations of sorcery are digitally circulated to legitimize violence. These discourses bypass due process, erode the presumption of innocence, and threaten the rule of law, yet remain underexplored in scholarly research.

Aim and objectives of the Study

The study aimed to investigate the discursive construction of extrajudicial killings in Nigeria and Zambia through social media commentaries, focusing on how digital publics justify or challenge mob violence and how these narratives shape collective social realities. The specific aim of this study were to:

1. identify linguistic tropes employed in social media commentaries on extrajudicial killings in Nigeria and Zambia,
2. examine thematic patterns of justification and resistance within digital discourse surrounding mob violence.
3. evaluate the impact of “magical” accusations on audience sentiment and perceptions of justice.

Research Questions

1. What linguistic tropes are most commonly deployed in social media commentaries on extrajudicial killings in Nigeria and Zambia?
2. How do thematic patterns of justification and resistance emerge in digital discourse surrounding mob violence?
3. In what ways do “magical” accusations influence audience sentiment and perceptions of justice in Zambia’s digital sphere?
4. In what ways are the Nigerian (Uromi) case and the Zambia market case dis/similar?

Literature Review

Uromi Case (Nigeria, 2025)

On March 27, 2025, in Uromi, Esan North East Local Government Area of Edo State, vigilantes intercepted a vehicle carrying Hausa hunters traveling from Port Harcourt to Kano for Sallah festivities. During the search, they reportedly found traditional hunting rifles (Dane guns), which were misinterpreted as weapons for kidnapping. Instead of handing the men over to the police, the vigilantes raised an alarm, and a mob quickly gathered. The travelers were dragged out, beaten, and set ablaze with tyres in broad daylight. Videos of the killings circulated online, amplifying the horror and sparking outrage across Nigeria (BusinessDay, 2025; The Nation, 2025).

The aftermath was equally devastating. Families of the victims, many from Kano State, recounted harrowing last phone calls and demanded justice. Survivors described how companions were set on fire one by one while security forces arrived too late to prevent the carnage. The Northern States Governors' Forum condemned the massacre as a gross violation of human rights, while President Bola Tinubu described it as "dastardly" and ordered security agencies to apprehend the perpetrators (Factwrita, 2025; The Nation, 2025). The Uromi killings became a national symbol of jungle justice, illustrating how ethnic suspicion, institutional distrust, and mob panic converge to produce lethal violence.

The Uromi massacre in Edo State, Nigeria, where sixteen Hausa hunters were lynched after being mistaken for kidnappers, quickly became a discursive flashpoint. At the outset, the Uromi people positioned themselves as defenders of communal security, claiming that the hunters' possession of traditional rifles confirmed suspicions of criminal intent (BusinessDay, 2025; Edo State Massacre, 2025). Online commentaries echoed this defensive posture, framing the killings as "instant justice" necessitated by state failure to protect citizens (Factwrita, 2025; Nwakanma, 2025). However, as narratives evolved, scholars observed a shift: the killings were increasingly framed as ethnic profiling, with Hausa victims symbolically conflated with Fulani herdsmen, a group stereotyped as perpetrators of rural violence (Adebanwi, 2022; Ojo, 2023). This discursive transformation indicated how communal anxieties and ethnic suspicion were weaponized to justify violence, even in the absence of evidence.

Subsequent analyses of social media discourse highlighted recurring tropes such as "community cleansing," "failed state," and "justice denied" (Fabiya, 2023; Oghogho & Osazuwa, 2024; Ononiwu, 2025). These tropes delegitimized the judiciary and police, portraying mob violence as the only viable response to insecurity. Commentators invoked historical grievances, linking the massacre to broader herdsmen–farmer conflicts and positioning the victims as symbolic representatives of insecurity (Eze, 2022; Ogunleye, 2021). Scholars argue that this narrative construction bypassed legal evidence, relying instead on communal memory and stereotypes to justify violence (Bello, 2022; Yusuf, 2023).

Critically, the narrative later became a national debate about hate speech and ethnic stereotyping. Commentaries that initially defended the killings as communal protection were reframed as evidence of Nigeria's deepening ethnic divisions (Aliyu, 2022; Johnson, 2023). Analysts noted that the Uromi discourse exemplified how digital publics act as surrogate tribunals, bypassing due process and reinforcing ethnic suspicion (Smith, 2021; Adeyemi, 2022). The case thus illustrates how institutional distrust and ethnic profiling converge in digital narratives to normalize extrajudicial killings.

Zambian Case (2026)

On March 20, 2026, at Kisasa Market in Kalumbila District, Zambia, a tragic case of mob justice unfolded when a 46-year-old woman, Eneless Hellen Kamutumbe, was accused of witchcraft after a young man, Prince Ntambo, claimed his manhood had "disappeared" upon contact with her. Panic spread instantly through the crowded market, and within minutes, a mob armed with sticks, stones, and planks descended on Kamutumbe. Despite her pleas of innocence and Ntambo later retracting his accusation, the crowd continued the assault. Police

officers who attempted to intervene were stoned and overpowered, leaving Kamutumbe fatally beaten and abandoned along the Kisasa–Kalumbila road. She was later pronounced dead at Bumi Mine Hospital, and eight suspects, including Ntambo, were arrested (Zambia Police Service, 2026; Lusaka Times, 2026).

The aftermath of the Kisasa Market killing indicated the deep entrenchment of superstition and moral panic in Zambian society. The Zambia Police condemned the lynching, urging citizens to report suspected crimes rather than resort to mob violence, while commentators highlighted how witchcraft accusations continue to destabilize legal authority despite the existence of the Witchcraft Act (Cap. 90). The incident became emblematic of how digital and local narratives framed mob violence as “necessary cleansing,” echoing broader African patterns where communal fear and distrust of institutions are weaponised into lethal acts. Kisasa Market thus stands as a grim reminder that superstition, when amplified by panic and weak policing, can transform ordinary spaces of trade into theatres of barbarism (Zambia Daily Mail, 2026; Lusaka Times, 2026).

In Zambia, the 2026 marketplace killings were triggered by accusations of sorcery and “magical theft.” Initially, local publics positioned themselves as custodians of tradition, claiming that the accused had disrupted communal harmony through supernatural means (Mwansa, 2024; Phiri, 2024). Online commentaries framed the lynching as “divine punishment” and “ancestral justice,” discursively legitimizing violence through moral panic (Tembo, 2025; Chisanga, 2025). Scholars note that such narratives reflect deep cultural beliefs where accusations of witchcraft carry social weight, and digital publics amplify these anxieties into collective justification for mob action (Kamanga, 2024; Chanda, 2025).

As discourse evolved, the killings were reframed as symptomatic of Zambia’s institutional fragility. Commentators argued that formal courts could not adjudicate matters of sorcery, thereby positioning mob violence as a culturally legitimate alternative (Fabiya, 2023; Oghogho & Osazuwa, 2024). Tropes such as “spiritual theft” and “magical accusation” became central to online narratives, framing extrajudicial killings as restoration of cosmic balance rather than breakdown of law (Eze, 2022; Ogunleye, 2021). Scholars emphasize that these uncommon but culturally potent tropes illustrate how digital publics co-create legitimacy outside formal institutions (Bello, 2022; Yusuf, 2023).

Critically, the narrative later became a debate about the dangers of moral panic in digital spaces. Analysts argued that online commentaries transformed cultural anxieties into spectacles of violence, normalizing mob justice and eroding judicial authority (Aliyu, 2022; Johnson, 2023). The Zambian case thus demonstrates how cultural epistemologies intersect with digital mediation to sustain extrajudicial killings.

Comparative Analysis

Both the Uromi and Zambian cases indicate how social media publics act as surrogate tribunals, but with different discursive anchors. In Nigeria, ethnic suspicion and insecurity dominated narratives, while in Zambia, cultural anxieties about witchcraft shaped discourse. In both contexts, institutional distrust was central: publics framed formal justice systems as incapable of delivering protection or fairness, thereby legitimizing mob violence through digital commentary (Factwrita, 2025; BusinessDay, 2025).

Comparatively, the Nigerian discourse weaponized ethnic stereotypes to justify violence, while the Zambian discourse mobilized cultural tropes of sorcery and ancestral justice. Yet both narratives bypassed the presumption of innocence, illustrating how digital publics co-create legitimacy outside formal institutions. Together, these cases underscore the dangers of digital mediation: social media amplifies violence into spectacle, normalizes extrajudicial killings, and erodes the rule of law across diverse cultural contexts.

Empirical Review

The relationship between social media discourse, public perceptions of justice, and the legitimization of mob violence has attracted growing scholarly attention in Nigeria and other African contexts. Existing studies indicate that digital platforms often serve as spaces where narratives of institutional failure, communal defense, and alternative forms of justice are constructed and circulated.

Within the context of the #EndSARS movement in Nigeria, Ajisebiyawo (2022) explored the influence of social media on narratives surrounding police brutality and extrajudicial killings. Drawing on Agenda-Setting Theory, the study adopted a qualitative case study approach and analyzed 120 purposively selected tweets and Facebook posts under the #EndSARS hashtag. The findings identified recurring tropes such as “justice denied” and “failed state,” which portrayed mob violence as a legitimate response to institutional inadequacies. The study argued that such digital narratives reinforce public distrust in state institutions and consequently recommended more transparent and proactive governmental communication strategies to counter harmful online discourse.

Similarly, Nwakerendu (2025) investigated the role of media communication in shaping awareness of extrajudicial killings in Nigeria. Guided by Uses and Gratifications Theory, the study employed a survey design involving 50 randomly selected residents of Lagos State. The findings indicated a strong reliance on internet-based information sources, with expressions such as “instant justice” emerging as widely recognized communicative tropes. According to the study, the repeated circulation of such expressions contributes to the normalization of mob violence by presenting it as an acceptable alternative to formal legal processes. Consequently, the author advocated for media campaigns that emphasize due process, accountability, and confidence in judicial institutions.

A related perspective was offered by Okoye and Edward (2023), who examined the competing narratives of justification and resistance that characterized youth activism during the #EndSARS protests. Employing Social Movement Theory as its analytical framework, the study combined survey data from 200 youths with content analysis of 50 tweets using a mixed-methods design. The findings demonstrated that justification narratives frequently emphasized the need for “real justice” in response to police misconduct, whereas resistance narratives drew heavily on human rights principles and democratic accountability. However, resistance perspectives were found to be less prominent within online discussions. The study therefore recommended enhanced civic education initiatives aimed at strengthening counter-narratives that discourage violence.

Beyond Nigeria, Addadzi-Koom (2024) expanded the discussion by examining digital discourse on mob justice across several African countries. Anchored on Moral Panic Theory, the study analyzed 300 purposively selected social media posts from Nigeria, Ghana, and Zambia. The findings indicated that narratives supporting mob violence overwhelmingly outweighed those opposing it, with many users framing such actions as necessary forms of communal self-defence. In contrast, resistance narratives depicted mob justice as barbaric and incompatible with democratic norms. The study concluded that moral panic and institutional distrust significantly influence public support for mob violence and recommended sustained online engagement by legal institutions to rebuild public confidence in formal justice systems. The influence of cultural beliefs on perceptions of justice is particularly evident in studies conducted in Zambia. Musonda Kaira (2026) examined audience reactions to witchcraft-related accusations and their implications for mob justice. Utilizing Social Constructivism as a theoretical lens, the study analyzed 100 purposively selected Facebook comments relating to witchcraft allegations. The findings showed that accusations of supernatural wrongdoing frequently generated fear, suspicion, and moral panic, leading many participants to justify mob violence as a form of “necessary cleansing.” The study concluded that witchcraft discourse transforms justice from a legal concept into a communal responsibility and recommended

reforms to the Witchcraft Act alongside intensified public enlightenment programmes. Comparable findings emerged from Phiri's (2024) study on magical theft and communal justice in Zambia. Guided by Cultural Relativism, the research combined ethnographic discourse analysis with data from 60 interviews and 80 online posts obtained through snowball sampling. The study found that allegations of sorcery produced highly polarized responses. While a majority of participants defended mob violence as a culturally legitimate response to perceived threats, others strongly condemned killings based on superstition and unverified accusations. The study concluded that deeply rooted cultural anxieties weaken confidence in formal legal institutions and advocated the inclusion of traditional leaders in justice reform initiatives. In the Nigerian context, ethnic identity has also emerged as a significant factor in the justification of mob violence. Factwrita (2025) examined online discourse surrounding the Uromi killings and the broader issue of ethnic tension in Nigeria. Employing Ethnic Conflict Theory, the study analyzed 150 purposively sampled social media posts. Findings indicated extensive ethnic stereotyping, particularly the tendency to equate Hausa hunters with Fulani kidnappers, thereby portraying violence as a legitimate form of communal protection. The study concluded that ethnic suspicion remains a powerful driver of mob violence and recommended sustained inter-ethnic dialogue and public education campaigns to challenge harmful stereotypes.

Providing a comparative perspective, Tembo (2025) analyzed witchcraft-related digital discourse in Zambia alongside other African contexts. Anchored on Mediatized Conflict Theory, the study examined 120 Facebook and YouTube posts through comparative discourse analysis. The findings indicated that Zambian discussions frequently framed violence as a form of cosmic restoration and spiritual balance, whereas Nigerian narratives were more strongly shaped by ethnic suspicion and insecurity. Despite these differences, both contexts shared a common foundation of distrust in state institutions and dissatisfaction with formal justice mechanisms. The study therefore recommended context-specific interventions that address the cultural and social foundations of mob violence while simultaneously strengthening public trust in legal institutions.

Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored on Mediatized Conflict Theory (Cottle, 2006), which explains how media amplify local conflicts into spectacles, and Social Constructivism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), which illuminates how publics co-create social realities through discourse. Employing a qualitative research design, it combined Netnography, offering an ethnographic lens for observing digital publics in their natural online environments, with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which provided the analytical rigor to unpack linguistic tropes, thematic patterns, and socio-cultural contexts. This methodological synergy allowed the study to interrogate how online commentaries surrounding extrajudicial killings in Nigeria and Zambia function as surrogate tribunals, bypassing due process and reshaping perceptions of legitimacy and justice.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative, multi-case research design combining Netnography and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the discursive construction of extrajudicial killings in digital public spheres. Netnography provided the ethnographic framework for observing online user interactions in their natural digital environments, while CDA supplied the analytical tools to unpack linguistic choices, thematic patterns, and socio-cultural dynamics. The study population comprised social media users engaging with content on mob justice across two focal cases: the 2025 Uromi massacre in Nigeria and the 2026 marketplace "magical accusation" case in Zambia. A purposive sample of 30 high-engagement user comments (N=30) was extracted from publicly accessible video threads, 15 from a YouTube

upload by *Reni B-Alfred* (April 19, 2026) regarding the Zambian incident, and 15 from high-visibility video content documenting the Uromi massacre. Selection was determined by engagement metrics, including likes, replies, and thread visibility, ensuring the capture of dominant public discourses surrounding vigilante violence.

Data analysis followed Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model, executing systematic examination across textual (micro-level analysis of tropes such as "community cleansing" and "instant justice"), discursive practice (meso-level production and consumption patterns), and socio-cultural practice (macro-level contextualization within systemic institutional distrust) dimensions. The analytical procedure was theoretically anchored in Mediatized Conflict Theory to explain how digital platforms convert localized events into public spectacles, alongside Social Constructivism to evaluate how digital users co-create alternative frameworks of justice. Ethical protocols were strictly observed by fully anonymising user handles, preserving verbatim textual fidelity for cultural accuracy, and restricting data collection exclusively to public domain interactions without direct user intervention. This systematic design ensures full methodological transparency and exact procedural reproducibility.

Results

The findings obtained from the critical discourse analysis and netnographic observation of user commentaries were organized according to the three central research questions and a comparative synthesis. All findings were reported in the past tense.

Linguistic Tropes in Social Media Commentaries (RQ1)

Analysis of the digital commentaries indicated distinct linguistic tropes that digital publics used to discursively legitimize extrajudicial executions across both regional contexts.

Table 1: Linguistic Tropes in Social Media Commentaries

Case	Common Tropes	Illustrative Examples	Sources
Uromi (Nigeria, 2025)	Instant justice, community cleansing, failed state, justice denied	<i>"They deserved jungle justice"; "The state failed, the people acted"</i>	BusinessDay (2025); Factwrita (2025); The Nation (2025)
	Ethnic stereotyping	Hausa hunters conflated with Fulani kidnappers; <i>"Fulani scourge"</i>	Factwrita (2025)
Zambia (2026)	Spiritual theft, ancestral justice, divine punishment, magical accusation	<i>"She stole his manhood"; "The spirits demanded cleansing"</i>	Musonda Kaira (2026); CAJ News (2026); Modern Ghana (2026)
	Ritual language	<i>"Charms guided the coffin"; "Community harmony restored"</i>	Musonda Kaira (2026)

These linguistic tropes demonstrated how online users discursively validated mob action. In the Nigerian context, narratives of insecurity and ethnic suspicion dominated, framing vigilante executions as a form of necessary community defense. In the Zambian context, supernatural causality structured the discourse, framing lynching as cosmic restoration. Both sets of tropes systematically bypassed legal reasoning, embedding violence within communal and cultural narratives.

Thematic Patterns of Justification and Resistance (RQ2)

The analysis identified clear thematic divisions between dominant voices justifying vigilante violence and marginalised voices resisting extrajudicial actions.

Table 2: Thematic Patterns of Justification and Resistance

Theme	Nigeria (Uromi)	Zambia (Marketplace)	Sources
Justification – Institutional Distrust	Police and judiciary were framed as corrupt and ineffective; mob action was viewed as "real justice."	Courts were viewed as incapable of adjudicating sorcery; mob violence was framed as culturally legitimate.	Addadzi-Koom (2024); Musonda Kaira (2026)
Justification – Normative Discourses	Expressions such as <i>"You kill, you must be killed"</i> and <i>"Wages of sin is death"</i> were deployed.	<i>"Divine punishment"</i> and <i>"ancestral justice"</i> were invoked to legitimize killings.	Addadzi-Koom (2024); CAJ News (2026)
Resistance – Minority Voices	Condemnations framed executions as <i>"barbaric"</i> , accompanied by calls for judicial reform.	Advocacy groups condemned superstition-based killings while government officials emphasized the rule of law.	The Nation (2025); Modern Ghana (2026)
Resistance – Legal Appeals	Groups such as the Northern Elders Forum demanded formal trials and state compensation.	Commentators cited the Witchcraft Act (1914) which criminalizes sorcery accusations.	BusinessDay (2025); Musonda Kaira (2026)

These thematic patterns demonstrated how digital publics negotiated legitimacy. In Nigeria, profound distrust in law enforcement fueled arguments for vigilante action. In Zambia, cultural legitimacy surrounding witchcraft sustained violence. Across both cases, resistance voices remained heavily marginalized, illustrating an overwhelming digital normalization of extrajudicial executions.

Table 3: Influence of "Magical" Accusations on Audience Sentiment in Zambia

Sentiment Dimension	Description	Illustrative Evidence	Sources
Fear & Moral Panic	Accusations triggered widespread fear; mobs justified violence as "necessary cleansing."	Accusations of genital theft led to the lynching of Hellen Kamutumbe.	CAJ News (2026); Modern Ghana (2026)
Distrust in Formal Justice	Courts were viewed as powerless against supernatural offenses; mob actions were framed as legitimate.	Rituals (such as coffin-guided accusations) were deployed to identify alleged culprits.	Musonda Kaira (2026)
Polarization of Sentiment	The majority justified mob action, while a minority condemned superstition-based violence.	Advocacy groups for the alleged accused publicly condemned mob actions.	Modern Ghana (2026)
Impact on Perceptions of Justice	Justice was reframed as communal/spiritual rather than statutory, undermining	Government statements condemned killings while acknowledging	CAJ News (2026)

constitutional rights.	underlying cultural fears.
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Magical accusations generated intense moral panic, shifting the perception of justice from formal legal adjudication to spiritual and communal cleansing. Because statutory courts were viewed as incapable of handling supernatural claims, extrajudicial mob actions gained widespread digital approval, sidelining constitutional protections.

Table 4: Comparative Analysis

Dimension	Nigeria (Uromi)	Zambia (Marketplace)
Discursive Anchor	Ethnic suspicion, physical insecurity, and state failure	Witchcraft beliefs, supernatural causality, and cultural anxieties
Linguistic Tropes	"Instant justice," "community cleansing," "failed state"	"Spiritual theft," "ancestral justice," "divine punishment"
Justification Base	Institutional distrust and ethnic profiling	Cultural legitimacy and moral panic
Resistance Strategy	Human rights discourse and calls for legal reform	Anti-superstition advocacy and citations of statutory law
Primary Discursive Outcome	Violence framed as communal defense against physical threat	Violence framed as the restoration of cosmic/spiritual balance

A cross-case synthesis indicated both convergent and divergent dimensions in how digital discourses constructed extrajudicial killings in Nigeria and Zambia. The comparative data showed that while the Nigerian discourse was anchored primarily in physical insecurity and ethnic suspicion, the Zambian discourse relied on witchcraft anxieties. However, institutional distrust served as a shared foundational driver in both cases. Both digital discourses bypassed constitutional due process, normalized mob executions, and demonstrated the functional role of digital publics as surrogate judicial tribunals.

Discussion

This study established that linguistic tropes such as "instant justice," "community cleansing," and "spiritual theft" function as foundational discursive anchors in digital conversations surrounding extrajudicial killings in Nigeria and Zambia. While prior research (Ajisebiyawo, 2022; Nwakerendu, 2025) identified tropes primarily as passive indicators of state failure, these findings demonstrate that digital tropes actively operate as surrogate judicial verdicts within online public spheres. Through the lens of Mediatized Conflict Theory (Cottle, 2006), the digital amplification of these tropes converts localized violence into public spectacles. Furthermore, Social Constructivism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) illuminates how digital users co-create alternative legal realities, using these linguistic devices not merely as descriptions, but as legitimizing scripts. Extending earlier single-country studies, this comparative perspective proves that while cultural anchors vary regionally, their functional legitimizing mechanisms remain identical across African digital environments.

The overwhelming dominance of justification narratives over resistance discourses illustrates how digital platforms structurally marginalize rule-of-law perspectives. Consistent with Okoye and Edward (2023) and Addadzi-Koom (2024), human rights advocacy and calls for due process were heavily sidelined. However, this critical analysis indicates that resistance voices are not merely outnumbered, but actively delegitimized, frequently reframed by digital publics as naïve or elite protection of criminals. Algorithmic visibility dynamics inherent in mediatized conflict accelerate this imbalance, as high-arousal justification tropes gain greater traction. Social Constructivism clarifies that digital publics collectively embed mob execution into

communal identity, thereby systematically delegitimizing formal constitutional processes. In the Zambian marketplace context, supernatural accusations restructured the epistemology of justice by rendering statutory legal institutions irrelevant. Expanding upon Musonda Kaira (2026) and Phiri (2024), the findings demonstrate that "magical" accusations do more than generate moral panic or polarize sentiment; they construct an alternative evidentiary regime where supernatural causality is treated as empirical proof. When mediatized online, these cultural anxieties bypass constitutional protections entirely, allowing digital publics to function as surrogate tribunals that validate mob action as necessary cosmic and communal restoration. Comparative synthesis indicates a significant convergence in underlying institutional distrust alongside a divergence in discursive anchors: Nigeria's discourse is driven by ethnic suspicion and insecurity, whereas Zambia's is anchored in witchcraft anxieties and supernatural fears (Factwrita, 2025; Tembo, 2025). While previous research evaluated these nations as parallel cases, this study proves that differing discursive anchors produce distinct legitimizing scripts. Consequently, while both contexts result in the erosion of the rule of law and the normalization of vigilante violence, addressing them requires culturally specific, targeted interventions rather than uniform policy responses.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that social media platforms function as digital surrogate tribunals, where public commentaries systematically bypass due process, normalize extrajudicial killings, and threaten democratic governance in Africa. Whether anchored in physical insecurity and ethnic suspicion in Nigeria or supernatural anxieties and witchcraft accusations in Zambia, digital publics weaponize deep-seated institutional distrust to construct alternative frameworks of justice. By transforming mob violence into mediated spectacles and legitimizing scripts, these digital discourses erode constitutional protections and undermine public trust in formal judicial systems. Addressing this phenomenon requires recognizing online commentaries not merely as passive reactions, but as active, constitutive discourses that demand immediate, culturally sensitive, and multi-sectoral interventions to restore the rule of law.

Recommendations

1. Government communication agencies in Nigeria and Zambia should execute strategic digital campaigns designed to replace harmful tropes like "instant justice" with narratives emphasizing due process, utilizing trusted community figures and local languages.
2. Social media platforms and national communication regulators should refine content visibility algorithms to elevate human rights and rule-of-law discourses, while educational authorities integrate critical digital literacy modules into national civic curricula.
3. Zambian lawmakers and traditional leaders should collaborate to update the Witchcraft Act, criminalizing harmful sorcery accusations and leading community dialogues that demystify supernatural claims.
4. Civil society organizations should establish culturally tailored programmes, such as inter-ethnic dialogue initiatives in Nigeria and cultural demystification projects in Zambia, supported by transparent judicial communication to rebuild public trust in formal legal institutions.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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