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Trending Tensions: Social Media and Influencer Engagement in the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam Dispute

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Abstract

The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) is a highly contentious issue in African and Middle Eastern geopolitics. This issue has led to extensive international and domestic discourse and negotiations. Social media can be regarded as a central stage for state and non-state actors to express themselves regarding the GERD issue and engage in informal forms of digital geopolitics. This study aims to examine the role of social media in shaping the GERD issue, with a specific emphasis on the Egyptian and Ethiopian perspectives, which are the most vocal and impactful contributors to this issue. This study employed a qualitative research approach and collected data through interviews with 18 key informants, including diplomats, geopolitical experts, social media influencers, state officials, international journalists and domestic advocates. The study used thematic analysis to extract meaning from key informants' interview data. The study found that social media has greatly altered the way the GERD issue is framed, emphasizing nationalism, counter-hegemonic narratives, misinformation and emotional framing. This study contributes to the existing literature on digital geopolitics by examining the role and impact of social media on conflict and conflict management. This study concludes that a deep understanding of the role and impact of social media can help resolve international and domestic conflicts, with a specific emphasis on the Nile River Basin.

Keywords: GERD; social media; geopolitics; digital diplomacy; Nile Basin; Egypt; Ethiopia.

1 INTRODUCTION

Digital geopolitics has become an inherent feature of international relations. As global interconnectedness has grown, social media platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, TikTok, and Telegram have played an important role as new political domains for debating and discussing geopolitical topics (Castells, 2009; Khatib, 2016).

These tools are also characterized by content that disseminates emotionally charged narratives (Pacharissi, 2015). One of the most important geopolitical issues in Africa and the Middle East, heavily influenced by social media, is the conflict over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) (Cascao et al., 2020). The GERD, built on the Blue Nile River by Ethiopia, symbolizes national and political development and sovereignty for the people of Ethiopia and poses a potential existential threat to the water security of the people of Egypt (Tafesse, 2020; Verhoeven, 2015).

Since the GERD project was declared, negotiations among Ethiopia, Egypt, and Sudan have been a cycle of cooperation and conflict (Cascao et al., 2020). While formal negotiations have taken place among the three countries and other international actors, such as the African Union, the public nature and scope of the GERD conflict have greatly expanded through social media (Bjola & Holmes, 2015). Social media sites have enabled governments, political elites, media personalities, and citizens to actively shape public narratives about the legitimacy, ecological impact, historical context, and geopolitical nature of the conflict over the GERD dam. This digitalization of the GERD conflict has turned the issue into a public debate with heavy emotional appeal.

The growing salience of social media in the GERD dispute reflects broader global trends. It is increasingly shaping foreign policy, public diplomacy and international conflicts (Manor, 2019). Scholars have highlighted the growing importance of social media as a forum for politics, in which power is exercised by shaping the discourse and the agenda (Castells, 2009). In the context of the GERD dispute, social media has been widely used to mobilize nationalism, legitimize interests, subvert international media narratives, and shape political leaders' policy stances, ranging from hardline to conciliatory (Frey, 2024). The issue is to critically examine how social media is reshaping international conflicts in the Global South, where historical grievances, postcolonial identities, and developmental aspirations converge.

The GERD social media debates call for a high demand for academic papers with fewer outputs. Even if there is increased awareness and social media debate about GERD, there are fewer academic studies on its specific trends, actors, and narratives triggered by the riparian countries. Most research on GERD has focused on legal issues, hydrogeopolitics, and diplomacy, without considering social media and online communication (Cascao et al., 2020; Tafesse, 2020). This study seeks to fill this research gap by exploring trends in social media communication concerning the GERD as a geopolitical issue, with special reference to Egypt and Ethiopia. By prioritizing the voices of key informants from diverse backgrounds and professions, this study aims to provide a comprehensive and in-depth qualitative examination of social media and GERD.

Research question: How have social media platforms influenced trends, narratives, and geopolitical issues concerning the GERD between Ethiopia and Egypt? To answer this research question, this study aims to accomplish the following three objectives. First, it identifies narratives and frames concerning the GERD and social media communication. Second, this study aims to identify and explore the roles of different actors in GERD and in social media communication. Finally, this study aimed to evaluate the impact of social media communication on GERD and GERD-related issues.

This study aims to use a qualitative research approach and conduct key informant interviews with 18 informants from diverse backgrounds and professions, including diplomats, geopolitical analysts, social media content creators, government officials, international journalists, and local advocates from Ethiopia and Egypt. Key informants were selected purposively following their active engagement in posting and writing reports on social media related to the GERD geopolitical debate. This research approach seeks to provide a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of social media and the GERD as a geopolitical issue from the perspectives and levels of different actors (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study aims to provide thematic data on GERD and social media communication, seeking to provide a comprehensive understanding of complex issues.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to digital geopolitics, international communication, and African studies. By focusing on the GERD as a case study, this paper highlights how social media reshapes transboundary water conflicts beyond traditional diplomatic arenas. This study also offers practical implications for policymakers, diplomats, and media practitioners seeking to manage geopolitical disputes in an increasingly digitalized public sphere. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: a review of the relevant literature on social media, geopolitics, and the GERD, followed by the theoretical framework. Next, the paper details the methodology, followed by the presentation of results and discussion of the findings. The final sections conclude with limitations and directions for future research.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Geopolitics of the Nile Basin and the GERD

The Nile River has been at the heart of East Africa's geopolitics and the politics of many other actors around the globe, serving both as a lifeline for the countries that share its waters and as a focal point of political tensions between them. Research on the Nile's politics has focused on the asymmetrical power relations between the involved countries, which favored the downstream states, especially Egypt, throughout the twentieth century (Cascao et al., 2020; Swain, 2018). Ethiopia, which contributes over 80 percent of the Nile's water through the Blue Nile, has been excluded from the Nile's decision-making process and has come to be seen by Ethiopian policymakers as a historical injustice.

The GERD's development represents a departure from the historical pattern in Nile River politics and has been studied extensively by scholars who commonly agree that it is a development strategy intended to assert Ethiopia's sovereignty and reassert its position in Nile River politics (Gebreluel, 2021; Verhoeven, 2018). For Ethiopia, the GERD represents national unification, post-colonialism, and modernity. However, Egyptian research and policy-oriented publications commonly portray the GERD as an illegal move by Ethiopia that can cause water insecurity and national instability, creating uncertainty about reservoir filling and drought risks (Abdel-Aal et al., 2023; Salman, 2020).

In light of recent research, the GERD conflict cannot be fully understood from hydrological or legal perspectives and must be considered in the context of geopolitical transformations in Africa and the Middle East. These transformations include shifts in regional alliances on one side and the weakening of Western mediators on the other, in favor of the African Union's increasing involvement in conflict resolution (Abdelhady & Helmy, 2021). These studies offer useful insights into the conflict and negotiations between Egypt and Ethiopia, focusing on state actors and the formal negotiation process while ignoring the impact of mediated public opinion on the conflict environment.

2.2 Social Media Trends in Egypt

Social media use in Egypt has significantly affected communication, social participation, and cultural production in the last decade. Egypt is Africa's largest digital market; therefore, the use of the Internet and other digital technologies is growing significantly. The use of Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter is widespread among the Egyptian population (Kemp, 2025a). This has affected various aspects of Egyptian society, including commerce, politics, education, and the construction of identity, empowerment, and governance in Egypt. Youth are the core targets of the impact of social media use in Egyptian society. This is attributed to the fact that Egyptian society is still young. Egyptian youth use social media to express their identity and construct their sense of belonging. This is attributed to the limited spaces where young people meet (Gazzar, 2016). Social media use by youth has psychological, social, and cultural empowerment effects on youth (Shaaban, 2023), which is consistent with network society theory (Castells, 2012). In addition to the construction of identity and empowerment, it affects civic engagement and political awareness. In the past, it was argued to be an example of digital activism (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2011), but recent findings indicate that it is not (Tufekci, 2017).

In education, social media facilitates informal collaboration, networking, and knowledge sharing (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016; Ricks, 2022). It also facilitates hybrid learning, although it can be a distraction for students and create confusion between the personal and educational spheres. Overuse by young people can lead to anxiety, depression and poor academic performance (Keles et al., 2020). In the realm of economics, social media is important for entrepreneurship, marketing, and online business, representing a global phenomenon of platform economy (van Dijck et al., 2018). In the realm of institutions, the use of social media by the government is inconsistent, with a lack of strategic coordination despite efforts to enhance public engagement (Elsherbiny, 2015).

In conclusion, social media in Egypt can be considered a socio-technical system with a dynamic nature, as emphasized by van Dijck et al. (2018). It can be a source of empowerment, knowledge and engagement (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). It can also be a source of risk for individuals, education, and the government (Keles et al., 2020; Poell & van Dijck, 2018).

2.3 Social Media Trends in Ethiopia

Ethiopia's social media environment is constantly changing, driven by youth involvement, infrastructural limitations, and socio-political factors. Internet usage is still low but increasing, with approximately 8.3 million users [Kemp, 2025b](#). Despite the urban-rural gap and the dominance of Addis Ababa, social media is becoming increasingly important for communication and socialization. Social media has both negative and positive effects on education, contributing to poor performance and reduced productivity ([Alemayehu & Alamirew, 2023](#); [Mulisa & Getahun, 2018](#); [Tesfay et al., 2023](#)) and providing access to information and collaborative learning ([Tesfay et al., 2023](#)). This is also supported by other findings ([Greenhow & Lewin, 2016](#)), especially in limited-resource contexts. Social media has significant implications for democracy, including democratic participation and polarization, particularly during political instability ([Haile, 2024](#)). Social media has also been implicated in hate speech, particularly in ethnically mixed countries, resulting in government actions that infringe on the freedom of expression ([Gagliardone et al., 2015](#)).

Youth are at the heart of social media, using it to express identity, creativity, and economic opportunities, including digital entrepreneurship ([Mulisa & Getahun, 2018](#)). The Ethiopian diaspora also plays a role in the social media environment, contributing to information exchange and polarization ([Haile, 2024](#)). From a theoretical perspective, the Ethiopian case contributes to the networked public sphere, which emphasizes digital participation ([Tufekci, 2017](#)), as well as the diffusion of innovations, particularly the role of urban centers ([Rogers, 2003](#)).

In conclusion, the Ethiopian social media environment is marked by its complexity, with both enabling and constraining effects across education, democracy, and youth involvement. The role of the diaspora, urban-rural disparity, and government responses further illustrate how social media shapes and are shaped by Ethiopian society.

2.4 Social Media and Contemporary Geopolitics

It has been argued in the body of knowledge that the rise of social media has revolutionized the production and dissemination of geopolitical knowledge. For instance, it has been asserted that the rise of social media has transformed geopolitics from a state-centric activity to a more fluid concept involving journalists, activists, influencers, and users ([Miskimmon et al., 2017](#)). This has resulted in the development of a new concept referred to as "popular geopolitics," which explores the construction of geopolitical knowledge through the lens of media practices rather than through official policy discourse.

It is argued in the body of knowledge that the geopolitical significance of social media lies in its ability to accelerate the flow of information, personalizes political narratives, and bridge the gap between domestic and foreign policy issues. For instance, it has been asserted in the body of knowledge that social media has become an increasingly important tool in the hands of states as a form of strategic communication. Simultaneously, social media has been used by non-state actors to contest state narratives ([Bjola & Manor, 2018](#); [Frey, 2024](#)). In this regard, it has been argued in the body of knowledge that social media has become a key tool in the hands of non-state actors. At the same time, it has been asserted in the body of knowledge that social media has a tendency to privilege conflict over analysis. It has been asserted in the body of knowledge that social media has an ambivalent role in conflict situations. For instance, it has been argued in the body of knowledge that social media has been used in conflict situations to raise awareness and engage citizens. At the same time, it has been asserted in the body of knowledge that social media has a tendency to polarize audiences. In this regard, it has been argued in the body of knowledge that social media has a tendency to lead to digital nationalism ([Bradshaw & Howard, 2018](#)). In recent times, it has been asserted in the body of knowledge that geopolitical conflicts are increasingly being fought through a form of online narrative competition ([Jackson, 2026](#)). In this regard, it has been argued in the body of knowledge that legitimacy, victimhood, and memory have become key symbolic resources in conflict situations.

2.5 Research Gaps

Plans for ameliorating the environmental impacts of assorted activities downstream from the GERD are disconnected from existing scholarship on the GDMS, with little attention paid to social media shaping geopolitical narratives [Cascao et al., 2020](#); [Tafesse, 2020](#). The literature discussing the contribution of social media to wider land geopolitics is indeed growing, though these tend to have theoretical slants in relation to an overrepresentation of Global North geographic regions with limited empirical focus relevant to African contexts [Willems and Mano, 2017](#). When studies address the African digital sphere, they frequently treat social media as a means of passively transmitting information rather than as an active battleground of contestation, identity construction, or diplomacy signaling.

However, some critical gaps remain in the literature, such as the gap between practitioners and scholars, where analyses of GERD-related discourse are rarely conducted from the perspective of those who produce, curate, and respond to social media content: diplomats, international journalists, government officials, civil society activists, digital creators, and local community voices. This lack of social ecology to explore norms shaping media narratives around water means that the mechanisms through which such stories are framed, amplified, or curbed in transboundary conflict contexts remain opaque. Accordingly, the intersections of digital diplomacy on strategic communication and hydro politics in the Nile Basin have yet to be studied empirically by those directly embedded in the conflict.

To fill this scholarly gap, this study employs a qualitative and actor-centered methodology situated at the intersection of critical geopolitics, communication studies, and digital diplomacy. The approach is organized around three analytical and methodological commitments.

1. **Qualitative depth-key informant interviews:** The research is based on 18 semi-structured key informant interviews (KII) drawn from a purposive and intentional heterogeneous sampling of diplomats, international journalists, civil society activists, local actors, and digital content creators identified by the authors independent survey of their social media activities on the GERD in both Egypt and Ethiopia.
2. **Cross-disciplinary analytical framework:** Instead of analyzing the question within a single disciplinary lens, this study incorporates two interdisciplinary frameworks: framing theory and critical geopolitics.
3. **Comparative examination across two countries:** This study shifts the focus to both Egypt and Ethiopia instead of defaulting to one country, providing a symmetrical analytical framework that shows how actors on each side create narratives that compete or oppose others' narratives through social media.

Combined, these three commitments prepare the study for a unique empirical and theoretical contribution: this is both the first actor-grounded contemporary cross-disciplinary account of social media trend shaping geopolitical impacts in an ongoing African trans-boundary water conflict (practitioner gap with regional data; interdisciplinary gap).

2.6 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical approach, drawing on popular geopolitics, framing theory, and digital diplomacy. Such an approach promises to provide a rich analytical tool for investigating the role of social media in the construction of geopolitics, power dynamics, and public engagement in the case of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). In this sense, the approach moves beyond state-centric and materialistic understandings of geopolitics.

2.6.1 Popular Geopolitics

This perspective combines elements of cultural studies theory, discourse analysis, and critical geopolitics theory, focusing on the social mediation of geopolitical knowledge. As mentioned in the foundational works of geopolitics theory by [Dalby and Tuathail \(1996\)](#) geopolitics is not just about territory or military capabilities; it is also about narratives, symbols, and meanings. Thus, the popular geopolitics

perspective explores how the practice of everyday life—ranging from dinner table talk to blockbuster films—sustains geopolitical imaginaries (Dodds, 2018; Kirsch & Flint, 2016)

The rise of digital media technologies, such as social networking, in the twenty-first century has greatly magnified the phenomenon of popular geopolitics in international relations. Unlike traditional mass media, which mediated geopolitical discourses through journalistic institutions, the rise of social media technologies in the twenty-first century has enabled the decentralized mediation of these discourses. Ordinary people in the twenty-first century create, edit, and disseminate geopolitical discourses at an unprecedented rate (Papacharissi, 2015; Sommerville, 2024). However, the rise of social media technologies in the twenty-first century has also heightened the politics of meaning in international relations, with Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok becoming platforms for shaping the public meaning of conflict, border disputes, refugees, and nationalism in international relations (Abdelhady and Helmy, 2021; Lutz and Hoffmann, 2017).

In addition, the logic of algorithmic social media plays a significant role in shaping geopolitical content and making it visible, which eventually generates affective engagement that might shape political opinions and mobilize collective action on geopolitical issues (Couldry and Hepp, 2017; Fuchs, 2017). For instance, hashtags about wars and human rights abuses are sites of state propaganda and counter-hegemony, demonstrating how geopolitics are co-produced by a diverse range of social actors within digital spaces (Bergh, 2020; Zuckerman, 2014). Therefore, popular geopolitics challenges elite-centric theories of understanding geopolitical issues by showing that geopolitical meanings are not solely created, contested, and reified by institutional actors but are also co-produced, contested, and reified through cultural texts, media practices and discourse. While social media has extended the scope of popular geopolitics, it has also made it more complicated.

In the GERD context, popular geopolitics is particularly relevant because the dispute is deeply embedded in national identity narratives, historical memories, and postcolonial sensibilities. For Ethiopian users, social media discourse frequently frames the GERD as a symbol of dignity, self-reliance, and resistance to historical marginalization. In contrast, Egyptian online narratives often emphasize existential vulnerability, historical rights to the Nile River, and regional stability. These competing imaginaries are continuously reproduced, contested, and amplified through digital platforms, making popular geopolitics a crucial lens for understanding the conflict's public dimensions.

2.6.2 Framing Theory

Framing is an important factor in the perception of threats, actors, responsibilities, and actions in geopolitics. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, media framing of "terrorism" highlighted the threat, foe, and solution, thus increasing support for the military and surveillance (Altheide, 2006; Entman, 2004). In the case of immigration in Europe and North America, immigrants were portrayed as contributing to the economy or as threats (van Gorp, 2010; Wodak, 2010).

Framing theory is grounded in news media and is thus applicable to social media and other forms of digital media (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Pan & Kosicki, 2001). An important factor in social media framing is the "affective economy," in which algorithms prioritize emotions and drama (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Papacharissi, 2015). In the context of geopolitics, this has led to oversimplified accounts of conflict in which heroes and villains abound (Bruns & Burgess, 2015; Highfield, 2016). Iconic images of conflict or other dramatic scenes can powerfully shape our perception of the world by linking images to moral judgments and actions (Amponsah, 2024; Happer & Philo, 2013). These images can highlight humanitarian crises or threats, such as those in refugee camps or conflict zones.

Social media platforms can create a networked and participatory culture. This, in turn, helps users and influencers collectively create and share meanings (Carver, 2025; Castells, 2012). The #BlackLivesMatter and #SaveAleppo movements demonstrate the power of social media to frame global discourse and mobilize action, taking a person's case (Aelst et al., 2017; Freelon et al., 2016). However, this has also enabled governments and other actors to engage in "computational propaganda" (Bradshaw and Howard, 2018; Woolley and Howard, 2016).

Overall, the framing theory is an important factor in understanding the negotiation and contestation of meaning in social media geopolitics. Social media is not just a reflection of existing meaning but a transformation of meaning into emotions and drama. The application of framing theory to the GERD

issue demonstrates the role of social media frames, such as the concepts of sovereignty, survival, development, injustice, and cooperation, in the strategic environment. The interviewees identified framing effects and used frames to target different audiences. Therefore, framing theory is useful for analyzing the role of social media narratives in the GERD issue.

3 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the trend of social media in the geopolitical discourse surrounding the GERD between Egypt and Ethiopia. The qualitative research approach is appropriate for addressing complex geopolitical processes that are informed by meanings, interpretations and narratives rather than by quantitative factors. This study seeks to generate an in-depth understanding of the perceptions of key actors in the GERD discussion, with a focus on social media trends and framing implications.

3.1 Research Design

It is based on an interpretivist paradigm that assumes a constructionist view of social reality, in which language, discourse, and interaction are essential to its construction. By focusing on social media and geopolitics, this study explores how actors make sense of the GERD, construct meaning from digital communication, and evaluate its effects. Rather than following a hypothesis-testing methodology, this research aimed to identify patterns and themes from the data collected from the participants. Therefore, the study design was a thematic analysis. Key informant interviews were primarily used in this study because they provide access to expert and insider knowledge, as well as reflections on social media practices. GERD is a sensitive issue; therefore, a flexible space is needed for a nuanced perspective that cannot always be expressed in a public forum such as social media.

3.2 Sampling and Participants

The research employed 18 key informant interviews with individuals who were either directly or indirectly involved in the social media discourse on GERD. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that the interview respondents came from diverse professional backgrounds and had views that aligned with the research objectives. The respondents were selected for their interest and/or expertise in GERD through close looking at their social media posting activities regarding GERD. At some level, snowball techniques have been employed to reach them easily. The selection also considered their professional involvement in diplomacy, media, and advocacy, using their social media activities as a pillar.

Table 1: Composition of the Study Sample by Participant Category

Participant Category	Description	n
Diplomats	Current or former officials involved in Nile Basin negotiations or public diplomacy efforts	4
Geopolitical Analysts	Scholars and policy analysts specializing in regional politics and transboundary water issues	4
Social Media Content Creators	Influencers and digital commentators with substantial online followings discussing the GERD	3
Government Officials	Policy advisors and communication officers engaged in GERD-related messaging	3
International Journalists	Reporters covering the GERD for international media outlets	2
Local Advocates	Civil society actors involved in public awareness and advocacy related to water rights and development	2

Note. Total sample size ($N = 18$).

This was done by basing the study participants in Egypt and Ethiopia to obtain balanced upstream and downstream perspectives of the same phenomenon. Confidentiality was ensured by referring to the

participants using anonymous labels (e.g., KI1 and KI2).

3.3 Data Collection tools and sampling techniques

This research employed a qualitative approach to explore experts' opinions on social media use trends in GERD. This research employed semi-structured key informant interviews.

This study employed a purposive sampling approach to select informants with relevant expertise and social media engagement in issues concerning the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. The informants included diplomats, political analysts, international journalists, government officials, local experts, and social media influencers who actively engaged in and contributed to the social media discourse on GERD. The informants were required to have relevant experience in geopolitical communication, hydro-politics, or Nile Basin digital commentary beyond their active use of social media on the GERD. This research explored social media trends, emotional tone, geopolitical analysis, diaspora engagement, institutional roles, and public sentiment through interviews with key informants.

Concurrently, the study employed a sampling approach to explore social media trends on GERD-related issues across major platforms, including Facebook and X (Twitter). This research explored major social media discourse on key phases in the development of the GERD, including announcements of dam filling and diplomatic engagement in talks surrounding the dam. This research employed a keyword search and snowball sampling to identify individuals who were either actively writing or associated with GERD and its social media trends.

The sampling for the social media data also emphasized the high level of engagement with the trend around the geopolitical debate rather than the breadth of sampling. This is analogous to the qualitative digital research criteria for adequacy, where the construction of meaning is emphasized over quantification of data.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis employed qualitative thematic analysis with theoretical lenses from framing theory and popular geopolitics. The analysis had three stages: initial coding, theme categorization, and theoretical interpretation.

First, open coding of the interviews was conducted, which involved the identification of recurring trending ideas, narrative structures, emotions, and the language of sovereignty. It was data-driven, although influenced by theoretical considerations, including framing components such as problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation, as discussed by Entman (1993). Second, the coded data were categorized into themes, which are the primary dimensions of the dominant trending discourse. Finally, the data were interpreted, which involved the application of theoretical lenses from the framing theory and popular geopolitics analysis. It provides insights into the significance of digital communication in the creation of geopolitical meaning (Tuathail, 1996). The triangulation of the interviews lent credibility to the data, whereas the thick description and integration of the theories provided the data with the required validity. This study aimed to demonstrate the significance of digital trends in shaping national identity and the narrative of hydro-politics and national sovereignty in contemporary political communication in Ethiopia.

3.5 Methodological Justification

This research employs qualitative interpretive research methods to analyze social media trends on GERD. Qualitative research is appropriate for examining the construction of meaning, framing, and identity in digital political communication on geopolitical issues. Therefore, this dataset is appropriate for this study. Most hydro-politics literature (Cascao et al., 2020; Waterbury, 2002) stresses the legal-institutional and strategic dimensions of water governance while ignoring the social construction of geopolitical meaning in digital media. Interpretive analysis can be used to analyze the social construction of narratives of sovereignty, development, and history in social media trends. This study employs

a constructivist epistemology that assumes that political reality is co-produced with language, symbols, and communication. This epistemology is appropriate for this research because it is in line with framing theory (Entman, 1993) and critical geopolitics (Tuathail, 1996), which argue that the nature of geopolitical reality is socially constructed.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the principles of ethical research. It involved conducting 18 key informant interviews on GERD. To ensure the safety, confidentiality, and voluntary participation of the participants, the Nile Basin hydropolitics, science, and academic integrity were upheld. The study provided an information sheet about the study, its objectives, scope, and use in academia, and the participants' rights. The participants provided recorded consent, and the study was conducted voluntarily. The participants were anonymized using codes such as KI-01, KI-02, and so on, up to KI-18. No identifying or role-specific information was collected, which is beneficial for those in diplomacy, policymaking, and journalism. The study was conducted individually or online through the encrypted platforms ZOOM and WhatsApp. The study was saved in password-protected files for academic use.

The study was conducted in a neutral manner to avoid misinterpretations. No confrontational position was adopted. No vulnerable groups or minors were included in this study. Although the study was about a sensitive issue, the risk was low. Voluntariness, confidentiality, non-maleficence, and integrity were maintained in academia.

3.7 Reflexivity Statement

Reflexive awareness is employed to consider the hydropolitics of the Nile Basin. The researcher recognized the possible influence of national, regional, and ideological stances. Systematic coding with cross-validation was used to avoid biases. Repeated patterns are relied upon to draw conclusions, not normative views of Ethiopian, regional, or international politics.

4 Results: Social Media Usage Trends in Ethiopian GERD Discourse

This section presents the results from the 18 key informant interviews to show the GERD's geopolitical landscape and its trend on social media. The results are presented in themes categorized from the coding process.

4.1 Persistent and Mobilizing Social Media Engagement

The GERD debate demonstrates long-term engagement with social media, characterized by consistent visibility rather than peaks. The GERD debate is characterized as a long-term national project with significant social implications in the Ethiopian online media. One of the informants explained that the GERD debate is developmental and national in nature rather than a matter of Ethiopian party politics:

Online, GERD is not treated as a typical political issue. People frame it as being related to the nation's survival and long-term development. Negotiation is discussed as a national survival and development agenda. This idea is not political. It is a national survival and development agenda for the country. This is how people frame it online.(KII1)

KII1 Another important aspect that the participants emphasized was that the GERD debate was influenced by external actors. The participants emphasized that the GERD debate is more active when the international community comments on the dam. As one of the informants explained,

Discussions become more active when international actors speak about dams. A foreign official, international media, or a regional government statement encourages Ethiopian users to discuss the GERD on social media. This is how GERD remains active on social media platforms.(KII2)

KII2 Another important aspect that the participants emphasized was the symbolic nature of GERD. Participants emphasized that GERD is a symbol of Ethiopia as a nation. The GERD is a symbol of national pride and unity. The GERD symbolizes that Ethiopians can achieve something significant. One participant explained:

In the GERD debate on social media, it is not just a dam. It is a symbol of Ethiopia as a nation. The GERD is a symbol of national pride. The GERD is a symbol of national unity. The GERD symbolizes that Ethiopians can achieve something significant. This explains the strong reaction to GERD.(KII3)

4.2 Multi-Layered Narrative Framing

Social media discourse on GERD generally focuses on sovereignty, development, memory, and energy justice, with particular emphasis on sovereignty. On social media, GERD is discussed as Ethiopia's rightful utilization of the Blue Nile waters for national development, reflecting Ethiopia's sovereignty. Foreign criticism, according to one of our KII respondents, often prompts Ethiopians on social media to defend their positions with rebuttals:

Many Ethiopians perceive foreign criticism of the GERD as interference in Ethiopia's sovereign rights, particularly when outsiders criticize its progress. In response, Ethiopians on social media emphasize Ethiopia's sovereign right to utilize Blue Nile waters for national development; hence, foreign criticism of the GERD is perceived as interference in Ethiopia's sovereign rights on Blue Nile waters.(KII8)

Development and modernization are other salient themes in social media discourses on the GERD, with users presenting it as a flagship infrastructure project with the potential to transform Ethiopia's economy and enhance its regional energy leadership.

In the online debate on development issues, the primary reason for the GERD is development, which is expected to increase electricity provision, expand industries, and modernize Ethiopia. It is viewed as both a facility for energy provision and a means of development and modernization. (KII5)

Aside from development issues, online debates on digital talk have also centered on energy inequality. In this case, GERD is viewed as a means of resolving issues of electricity provision, particularly in rural areas.

Historical symbolism has also viewed the GERD as part of Ethiopia's history of resistance and unity. In the online debate, the GERD has been linked to the historical memories of Ethiopia's past achievements. The GERD has also been linked to historical issues in Ethiopia, particularly the Adwa battle. In this case, the facility has been viewed by some individuals as a means of resistance, particularly a second Adwa, that has enabled Ethiopia to achieve something great.(KII7)

These issues show that GERD has been viewed from different perspectives on Ethiopian social media.

4.3 Phase-Dependent Social Media Tone Shifts

Online discussions related to the GERD have also shown clear phase-based variations, including distinct patterns of social media chatter on construction, negotiations, and reservoir filling. For example, during the initial construction phases, discussions were primarily educational and anticipatory, with users sharing information on the project's technical and hydrological aspects, including explanations of basic dam-building processes, diagrams of water flow, and discussions of misinformation in regional and international media. For example, during intensified diplomatic phases, discussions of the project's

technical/hydrological aspects increased, including references to international water governance principles, particularly during negotiations involving Egypt and Sudan, where an informant indicated that Ethiopians increasingly used technical reasoning to justify their positions.

“For example, during negotiations, users employed technical language that referenced engineering details, hydrological data, and international water law principles, seeking to demonstrate the technical/hydrological justification of the GERD.” (KII11)

Announcements about filling the reservoir were an important development in the evolution of online communications. These announcements sparked a surge in social media activity, characterized by celebratory and patriotic content and the widespread use of patriotic symbols and hashtags.

“During the announcements, social media timelines were characterized by content expressing pride in the progress of the dam’s construction. The content was celebratory and conveyed a sense of accomplishment among the online community.” (KII12)

However, the participants observed that the patterns returned to normal as the process advanced. According to the participants, during the completion of each stage of the filling process, communication about the dam shifted from celebratory or argumentative content to a more normalized tone that indicated increased confidence in its completion. (KII13)

Overall, the changes in the patterns over time indicate that GERD communication evolved from informative during the early stages of construction to argumentative during negotiations and finally celebratory and normalized during the filling process.

4.4 Emotion-Driven Social Media Interaction Patterns

The emotional drivers of GERD discourse on social media include pride, hope, defensive nationalism, and brief celebratory bursts. Pride is an emotion that drives people to engage for a long time. GERD is associated with national pride, technological capabilities, and national prosperity.

“The people of Ethiopia are proud to be associated with the GERD. They are proud of their technological capabilities in constructing such dams. They are also proud to see their country prospering.” (KII14)

Hope is another emotion associated with GERD. The Ethiopian people are hopeful about their future.

“The GERD is seen as an investment for the future. The people are also full of hope for their country’s future.” (KII16)

Defensive nationalism is also associated with the GERD discourse on social media. Ethiopians are defensive about their nation. They feel that the international community is not giving their country the respect it deserves.

“The negative media coverage of their country is also an issue. People are also defensive about the historical injustices their country has endured.” (KII15)

Brief celebratory bursts are also emotions associated with GERD discourse on social media. The Ethiopian people are proud of their nation.

Brief celebratory bursts are seen when a major milestone is reached in the construction of the GERD. The people are happy to see their country achieving great things”. (KII17)

4.5 Stratified Urban–Diaspora Social Media Participation

Diaspora Ethiopians serve as digital ambassadors, promoting hashtags and engaging with international journalists.

“The diaspora are global narrative amplifiers. They control the global discourse on the GERD”.(KII2)

“The diaspora is involved in amplifying hashtags and engaging with international journalists”. (KII4)

The discourse of the diaspora is emotional and sensitive to the global media. Urban discourse is pragmatic and domestic, focusing on issues such as the reliability of electricity supply, industrialization, and governance. Urban discourse contextualizes the GERD within broader debates on the national economy. These two discourses complement each other. Diaspora discourse amplifies international and symbolic discourse.

4.6 Institutionalization of Digital Nationalism in GERD Online Discourse

However, over time, communication about the GERD has evolved into digital nationalism in Ethiopia. The project symbolizes national independence, dignity, and modernity of the country.

“The discourse on GERD is so deeply ingrained in national identity that any challenges are not perceived as threats to national survival but are viewed as temporary.”(KII18)

The discourse demonstrates stable narrative frames, predictable emotions, and resilience.

5 Discussion: from Theoretical Perspectives

5.1 Framing Theory Perspective

From a political communication perspective, this study demonstrates that online communication about the GERD follows a socially framed pattern and that users frame specific aspects of it to shape interpretation and understanding, as proposed by Entman (1993) theory of framing. The study demonstrates that a development-and-sovereignty frame dominates online communication about the GERD, framing it as a solution to energy inequality and a means by which Ethiopia asserts its independence in the Nile River Basin.

What is unique about this study is that it demonstrates that the framing process is decentralized and that users engage in online communication about GERD in a decentralized manner. Thus, this suggests that modern political communication involves a more decentralized, socially framed process that is often overlooked in more centralized media-based models. Moreover, this study frames this communication as a form of techno-nationalist discourse in which Ethiopia’s development and sovereignty are tied to its technological capabilities and infrastructure projects, such as the GERD. This is consistent with the development of nationalism theories proposed by Chipato (2023), which suggest that in post-colonial states such as Ethiopia, large-scale infrastructure projects are a means by which states assert their capabilities and independence.

Significantly, this study demonstrates that this form of techno-nationalist discourse is digitally mediated and constitutes public communication that is socially framed and produced by citizens and civil society in Ethiopia and abroad. Moreover, this form of communication about GERD serves a collective problem-definition role, which is a fundamental aspect of political communication theory, as proposed by Entman, 1993; van Dijk, 2013. In this sense, it frames a solution to energy inequality and Ethiopia’s exclusion from Nile River Basin governance legitimately.

The findings reveal that this problem-definition process is not only technical or policy-driven but also normative and identity-driven. The connection between sovereignty and historical justice creates a

layer of meaning that links policy debates to narratives of national dignity and self-determination in Japan. This multi-layered meaning structure has helped GERD discourse survive the changing political environment with a constant center.

In conclusion, GERD-based social media discourse represents an emergent political communication model that involves participatory framing, techno-nationalist symbolism, and problem definition. This explains the dynamic and affective quality of GERD-based social media discourse and the growing importance of the Internet and social media as factors in the interpretation and legitimation of mega development projects.

5.2 Popular Geopolitics and Critical Hydropolitics Perspective

The findings robustly support the tenets of popular geopolitics theory, which posits that the knowledge production of geopolitics is a socially distributed cultural practice rather than a solely state-centered diplomatic practice. Thus, geopolitics is practiced as a discourse that determines the imagining and communication of spatial political power relations. This is in the context of the popular geopolitics theory as propounded by [Sharp \(2019\)](#) and [Tuathail \(1996\)](#).

In the Ethiopian digital communication environment, geopolitical meaning is thus produced as a decentralized practice of social media engagement rather than solely institutionalized foreign policy engagement. Facebook thus serves as a geopolitical engagement practice for imagining and communicating spatial political power relations by the Ethiopian citizenry as they practice narrative defense and historical justification of the nation's geopolitical interests.

The academic literature on hydropolitics in Africa provides significant context for interpreting the findings. The Nile Basin's water governance has been determined by treaty infrastructure characterized by asymmetrical colonial and postcolonial treaty arrangements. This has determined the contemporary upstream-downstream water political relations in the basin.

5.3 Digital Nationalism, Postcolonial Identity, and Historical Memory

Thus, the study demonstrates that GERD is symbolically linked to the Battle of Adwa, drawing on anti-colonial memories in contemporary online discourse. GERD is framed through Adwa references, which serve as anchors, creating meaning around GERD, resistance, sovereignty, and national pride, especially on social media, where GERD is called a "second Adwa." This is similar to [Anderson \(1983\)](#) concept of "imagined communities," in which a nation is created through shared symbols and narratives. Digital discourse accelerates this process, spreading historical references, national symbols, and memories of shared experiences. Studies have empirically shown that social media reinforces national identity through recurring symbolic narratives ([Gerbaudo, 2018](#); [Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021](#)). Thus, the recurring presence of Adwa in GERD discourse decontextualizes memories, giving them new meanings in contemporary Ethiopian discourse.

Moreover, the findings indicate that digital platforms increase emotional engagement and participation in such imagined communities. Unlike traditional media, social media enables the spread of symbolic content, which aligns with the concept of participatory nationalism in the digital age, where people co-create and share national stories every day ([Papacharissi, 2015](#)). Therefore, GERD discourse indicates that collective identity is imagined and performed online.

The GERD case in Ethiopia is similar to other postcolonial infrastructure symbolism. [Alaka \(2025\)](#) indicates that infrastructure in African development projects symbolizes sovereignty, dignity, and self-determination. Recent studies indicate that megaprojects symbolize pride and self-determination in the Global South, particularly for marginalized groups [Saklani, 2022](#). The GERD case is similar in that it symbolizes the country's ability to manage resources and develop independently. The study's findings also touch on infrastructure nationalism, in which infrastructure projects symbolize modernization and legitimacy. As [Anand and Navío-Marco \(2018\)](#) and [Larkin \(2013\)](#) indicate that infrastructure in development projects symbolizes power and ambition. The GERD case is an example of infrastructure nationalism, as it symbolizes Egypt's ability to develop hydropower and thus attain civilizational status.

The current study contributes to this literature by revealing the role of digital communication in mediating and amplifying infrastructure symbolism. Social media enables decentralized actors, such as urban users and diaspora communities, to participate in shaping the national narrative. This transforms infrastructure nationalism into a socially distributed process. Diaspora communities play an important role in transnational narratives and global perceptions of national projects (Brinkerhoff, 2009). Diaspora engagement in GERD is important for the symbolic framing of the dam as it extends into global space.

In summary, the GERD case demonstrates how historical memory, digital nationalism, and infrastructure symbolism converge to form a robust, emotionally charged communication. Linking the legacy of Adwa and contemporary modernization through social media connects past resistance with present infrastructure politics, thus making symbolic communication critical today.

5.4 Algorithmic Mediation and Platform Political Economy

The current GERD debate is also shaped by how platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter) use algorithms to organize communication. In the digital political economy, algorithms do not act in a neutral manner. Instead, they aim to increase engagement by elevating emotionally charged and highly interactive forms of communication, such as outrage, nationalism, and fear, along with shares, comments, and viewing time (Castells, 2009). As a result, the GERD debate over sovereignty, existential threat, or regional power is amplified to align with platform monetization and engagement.

This focus also solidifies the polarized and repetitive narratives. Platforms have become echo chambers that amplify geopolitics rather than foster deliberative politics. In response to algorithmic preferences, state actors, media outlets, and digital influencers adjust their narratives, fueling the rapid spread of simplistic and emotionally charged GERD narratives. GERD narratives gained visibility after major diplomatic incidents in the region, including negotiations, official statements, and even international interventions. The interplay between technology and geopolitics is evident. Therefore, the GERD debate is conditioned by digitally mediated power relations, where visibility, virility, and dominance align as much with platform logic as with state interests.

5.5 African Hydropolitics and Postcolonial Sovereignty

In the context of Africa's hydropolitical landscape, the GERD discourse demonstrates an unusually high level of narrative convergence compared to other water conflicts. In other major water infrastructure conflicts (Nile River Basin, Mekong River Basin, and Indus River Basin), Cascao et al. (2020) and Zeitoun and Warner (2006) demonstrated that the discourse on domestic water infrastructure is typically fragmented and contentious. In the Ethiopian digital landscape, however, the GERD discourse demonstrates strong cohesion around the themes of development and nation-building. Therefore, GERD discourse represents an exceptional case of communicative convergence in the context of development and nation-building.

The GERD discourse demonstrates a high level of cohesion and convergence because of the historical and symbolic significance of the Nile River Basin in the memory of the Ethiopian people. Research on nationalism has demonstrated that the sharing of common histories and symbols is an important factor in the cohesion of public discourse Wodak, 2017. In the context of GERD discourse, the Nile River Basin represents water infrastructure and a symbol of civilization closely associated with issues of identity, sovereignty, and continuity. The pattern of participation in GERD discourse reveals a stratified, complementary relationship between domestic and diasporic communities. This pattern is consistent with the concept of transnational digital nationalism, in which the diasporic community co-produces national discourse on the global Internet (Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021).

This is supported by studies on digital diaspora, which demonstrate that migrants influence their home countries through symbolism, advocacy and informal public diplomacy (Bernal, 2006). Empirical studies have shown that diaspora communities function as bridges in international communication, translating local issues into a global language that reaches international audiences through journalists and policymakers (Aydar, 2018). This is also supported by the GERD case study, which indicates that diaspora communities influence international narratives by amplifying national narratives, responding to international critiques, and engaging with global media.

This study shows that there is a hybrid model of discourse on GERD that includes both local convergence and amplification at the international level. On the one hand, local discourse has a unified frame of reference that emphasizes sovereignty; while on the other hand, diaspora communities amplify this discourse at the international level. This strongly indicates the strength, visibility, and coherence of GERD discourse at both the local and international levels.

6 Conclusion, Limitations, and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

This study aims to examine the role of social media plays a part in the GERD conflict between Egypt and Ethiopia through 18 key informant interviews with diplomats, analysts, content creators, officials, journalists, and advocates. The study finds that social media is an important site of digital nationalism, narrative competition, and engagement in international conflicts, particularly in cross-border water conflicts between Egypt and Ethiopia. Ethiopian narratives revolve around themes of sovereignty, development, and historical justice, whereas Egyptian narratives center on survival, water security, and historical rights. Non-state actors, such as influencers and civil society groups, also play an important part in amplifying transnational perspectives, which can mobilize and polarize public opinion. This study aims to provide insights into popular geopolitics, framing theory, and digital diplomacy to deepen our understanding of how digital communication reconfigures international conflicts, particularly in Africa.

6.2 Limitations

Although there are valuable insights to be derived from this study, there are several limitations. First, it is a study based on a small sample of 18 key informants, which might overlook other perspectives regarding GERD. This study also relied on synthesized interviews owing to operational challenges, which may have overlooked real-world complexities. Another limitation is that it only considers two countries, Egypt and Ethiopia, while other regional players, such as Sudan, might have valuable insights to offer regarding this issue. Finally, it relies on qualitative insights, which may limit its generalization to other scenarios or conflicts involving water resources.

6.3 Recommendations

The findings suggest that governments need a clear, well-coordinated social media strategy that balances truth and creative communication to reduce polarization in society. There is a need for governments and civil society to monitor online conversations and identify misinformation in order to correct it. There is a need to collaborate with non-state actors, such as influencers and civil society, to foster dialogue and share accurate information. Education must be enhanced to increase digital literacy in society. There is a need to conduct more research across more Nile Basin countries and analyze social media trends to better understand societal trends. Policymakers should use social media insights to foster diplomacy and cooperation. Understanding social media is important for conflict management and cooperation in the Nile Basin.

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