

The Psychology of Social Cohesion and Social Development in an Era of Polarization in Nigeria: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the psychology of social cohesion and its role in promoting sustainable social development in an era of increasing polarization in Nigeria. Its specific objectives were to, examine the concept, and psychological dimensions of social cohesion and their relevance to social development in Nigeria; assess the implications of increasing polarization for social development and peaceful coexistence in Nigeria; among others. This study is a qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR) employing PRISMA guidelines. This method enabled a critical examination and synthesis of existing literatures on the psychology of social cohesion and its implications for social development in an era of growing polarization in Nigeria. The sources of data relied exclusively on secondary data searched from credible academic databases like, WOS, SCOPUS, JSTOR, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Taylor and Francis Online, Wiley Online Library, SAGE Journals, books, and institutional reports from UNDP, World Bank, and African Polling Institute. Search period included studies published between 2021 - 2026 to ensure contemporary relevance. The records identified via database search were 139; duplicates removed were 51; articles screened were 78; and final studies included were 64. Its inclusion criteria: comprised studies that address one or more of the study variables, studies published in credible peer-reviewed outlets like WoS and Scopus, and studies that provided theoretical or empirical insights relevant to the Nigerian context. The search strategy employed Boolean operators such as "AND", "OR", and "NOT" to refine search results. Search terms included combinations of keywords such as, 'social cohesion', 'psychology of social cohesion', 'social development', 'social trust', 'social identity', 'polarization', 'Nigeria', inter alia. The method of data analysis employed qualitative content analysis, where the retrieved literature was carefully categorized, synthesized, and critically examined, according to recurring themes related to the study variables. Comparative evidences from USA, Nigeria versus South Africa were embedded. Tabulations were equally employed in the data analysis. Three theories relevant to the study were identified: social identity theory, intergroup contact theory, and social capital theory. The findings revealed that, the dynamics of social cohesion extends beyond peaceful coexistence to encompass psychological dimensions such as, social trust, shared identity; including polarization drivers like digital misinformation, and perceived injustice. It equally revealed that, increasing social polarization poses serious threats to social development in Nigeria. The study therefore concluded that, Nigeria's future social development depends on its ability to strengthen social cohesion despite persistent divisions. Thus, the study recommends that, policymakers should promote transparent and inclusive governance in diversity; and structural drivers of polarization should be addressed; inter alia. Thus, this review contributes to knowledge by integrating psychological theories with Nigeria's social development literature, and identifying research priorities for future empirical studies.

Keywords: Psychology; Psychology of Social Cohesion; Polarization; Social Cohesion; Social Development.



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INTRODUCTION

Social cohesion has increasingly become a central indicator of societal resilience, democratic stability, and sustainable development in the twenty-first century. Broadly defined, social cohesion refers to the extent to which members of a society trust one another, develop a sense of belonging, participate in civic life, and cooperate toward shared societal goals despite differences in identity, ideology, or socioeconomic status (Delhey et al., 2023). From a social psychological perspective, cohesive societies are characterized by interpersonal trust, collective efficacy, shared identities, and positive intergroup relations, which facilitate cooperation and reduce the likelihood of social conflict. Contrariwise, declining social cohesion is associated with social polarization, identity-based antagonism, institutional distrust, and weakened collective action, thereby undermining democratic governance and social development (González-Bailón & Lelkes, 2023). In recent years, concerns regarding social cohesion have intensified across both developed and developing societies, although the drivers and manifestations vary considerably. In advanced democracies such as the United States, Canada, and several European countries, polarization has increasingly been linked to ideological divisions, political partisanship, racial tensions, immigration debates, and digital media ecosystems that reinforce ideological echo chambers.

Although these societies generally possess strong institutional frameworks, increasing polarization has been associated with declining interpersonal trust, reduced confidence in public institutions, and diminished willingness among citizens to engage constructively across social divides (González-Bailón & Lelkes, 2023). The expansion of social media has further amplified selective exposure, confirmation bias, and identity-based competition, reinforcing the psychological processes that contribute to social fragmentation. However, the challenges facing developing societies like Africa, are often more complex than in advanced societies due to the combined influence of inequality, institutional weaknesses, political instability, social exclusion, protracted conflicts, and youth unemployment. These conditions can intensify perceptions of injustice, strengthen in-group identification, and promote negative stereotypes and hostility toward perceived out-groups. We shall return later (in more detail) to this comparative analysis between Africa versus advanced nations, and other African nations versus Nigeria in the furtherance of the discourse. Social psychological theories demonstrate that prolonged experiences of exclusion and competition can reinforce cycles of mistrust, prejudice, and intergroup conflict, making social cohesion a critical factor in understanding sustainable development within fragile societies, like Nigeria. To be sure, Nigeria reflects many

of these interconnected challenges. As Africa's most populous country, Nigeria possesses significant ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity. While this diversity represents an important national asset (social capital), it has also become a source of social and political tension due to unequal access to resources, identity-based mobilization, political exclusion, and institutional weaknesses. Since independence, Nigeria has experienced recurring ethnic tensions, religious conflicts, regional inequalities, electoral violence, separatist agitations, farmer-herder conflicts, insurgency, and banditry, all of which have placed considerable pressure on national cohesion and social integration (Africa Polling Institute, 2022). Additionally, contemporary polarization in Nigeria extends beyond traditional ethnic and religious divisions to include political and informational polarization. The rapid adoption of social media has created new opportunities for civic participation and political engagement but has also facilitated the spread of misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, identity-based narratives, and ideological echo chambers. These digital processes increasingly influence perceptions of belonging, trust, legitimacy, and national identity, particularly during elections and periods of social crisis (González-Bailón & Lelkes, 2023).

Thus, beyond overt conflict, weakened social cohesion has significant implications for community functioning and development outcomes. Evidence from Nigeria suggests that cohesive communities demonstrate stronger collective action, improved informal social control, greater community participation, and enhanced capacity to address shared developmental challenges (Adetunji et al., 2023; Adeleke et al., 2023). These findings highlight social cohesion as an important psychological and developmental resource that strengthens community resilience. However, persistent polarization undermines these benefits by weakening interpersonal trust, reducing civic engagement, and limiting cooperation across ethnic, religious, political, and socioeconomic boundaries. From the global frame of reference, the importance of social cohesion is increasingly recognized within global development frameworks, particularly the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Goals such as SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) emphasize that sustainable societies require inclusion, trust, participation, equity, and peaceful coexistence. Thus, social cohesion functions not only as a developmental outcome but also as an enabling condition for achieving sustainable development. Similarly, from a social psychological perspective, achieving these goals requires attention to the cognitive, emotional, and relational processes that shape social

interaction. Social psychological theories such as Social Identity Theory, Intergroup Contact Theory, and Social Capital Theory, demonstrate that perceptions of belonging, fairness, legitimacy, and intergroup relations influence cooperative behavior, civic participation, institutional trust, and collective efficacy. When these processes are weakened by polarization, misinformation, disinformation, identity-based mobilization, and structural inequalities, societies experience greater difficulty in pursuing collective developmental objectives. However, it is quite conceivable to affirm that, despite growing scholarly attention, important unfilled gaps remain: First, research on polarization has largely focused on advanced democracies, particularly the United States and Western Europe, with comparatively limited attention given to developing societies where ethnic, religious, political, socioeconomic, and informational forms of polarization often intersect. Second, although Nigerian scholarship has extensively examined ethnic conflicts, religious violence, insecurity, electoral disputes, and governance challenges, these issues are frequently studied separately across different disciplines. Consequently, limited attention has been given to integrating these diverse forms of polarization within a comprehensive social psychological framework of social cohesion. Third, relatively few studies have connected contemporary social psychological theories with sustainable social development in Nigeria, leaving insufficient understanding of the psychological pathways through which polarization affects civic participation, institutional legitimacy, national integration, and inclusive development.

Therefore, against this background, this paper re-examines social development in Nigeria through the lens of social psychology by synthesizing contemporary scholarship on social cohesion and polarization. Rather than treating ethnic, religious, political, economic, and digital divisions as isolated challenges, the paper argues that they represent interconnected expressions of psychological processes influencing trust, identity, cooperation, and collective action. Ultimately, this review contributes to existing literature by integrating social psychological theories with Nigeria's social development literature, synthesizing Nigeria's multiple forms of polarization into a unified analytical framework, and proposing social cohesion as a strategic pathway toward inclusive and sustainable development, while identifying research priorities for future empirical studies.

Statement of the Problem

Social cohesion is widely recognized as a fundamental psychological and social resource for national development because it promotes trust, shared identity, cooperation, civic participation, and peaceful coexistence among diverse groups. In heterogeneous societies such as Nigeria, social cohesion provides the psychological foundation necessary for effective governance, inclusive

development, and sustainable peace. However, recent socio-political developments indicate increasing levels of polarization in Nigeria, expressed through ethnic nationalism, religious intolerance, political extremism, misinformation, disinformation, regional agitations, and declining trust in public institutions. These dynamics have weakened interpersonal and intergroup relationships, intensified social fragmentation, and created psychological barriers to collective action and national integration (Gadjanova, 2022; Ossai, 2021). Although, Nigeria has implemented several initiatives aimed at promoting national unity, including the federal character principle, integration of the tribal images of the three major ethnic groups into the Nigerian currency (naira), the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), and various peacebuilding programs, the persistence of violent conflicts, identity-based politics, communal violence, separatist movements, terrorism, and electoral tensions suggests that these approaches have not adequately addressed the psychological mechanisms underlying social cohesion. Existing responses have largely focused on political, economic, and institutional reforms, while comparatively limited attention has been given to psychological processes such as social identity formation, intergroup perceptions, trust, prejudice, collective efficacy, emotional polarization, and perceived injustice, all of which influence citizens' willingness to cooperate across group boundaries (Akande et al., 2021; Ike et al., 2021).

Furthermore, transformations in digital communication and political engagement have introduced additional pathways through which polarization is reproduced and intensified. Social media platforms have expanded opportunities for civic participation and public discourse but have also facilitated the rapid spread of misinformation, hate speech, and identity-based narratives. These digital environments often reinforce in-group biases, strengthen perceptions of out-groups as threats, and reduce opportunities for constructive dialogue and mutual understanding. Consequently, many citizens increasingly prioritize ethnic, religious, regional, or political identities over broader national identification, weakening social trust and limiting collective responses to shared national challenges (Gadjanova, 2022). As shown in Table 1 below, recent empirical studies broadly support the present review's conclusion that social trust, inclusive identity, intergroup contact, and inclusive governance are important determinants of social cohesion, although significant contextual and methodological gaps remain. For example, Akande et al. (2021) found through participatory action research in conflict-affected communities that peacebuilding approaches emphasizing local participation, dialogue, and trust-building were more effective in promoting sustainable peace than purely top-down interventions. Similarly, Olademo et al. (2021), examining the Share-Tsaragi conflict in Kwara State, demonstrated that indigenous conflict-resolution mechanisms based on

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of the Findings with Recent WoS/Scopus Studies (2021 - 2026)

Study	Method	Key Findings	Alignment	Gap Identified
Turki (2026)	Quantitative survey of Nigerian adolescents using regression analysis.	Ethnic diversity alone does not promote cohesion; Intergroup contact reduces social distance while low institutional and interpersonal trust weakens social cohesion.	Strongly supports the present study.	Focuses mainly on Lagos with limited broader psychological mechanisms shaping national development.
Abdulkareem et al. (2022)	Cross-sectional survey with statistical analysis.	Found that, social exclusion, identity-based discrimination, weak institutional trust undermines national integration, while inclusive governance enhances cohesion.	Consistent with present study.	Emphasizes governance and public administration perspective more than the psychological processes underlying cohesion and polarization.
Atata & Omobowale (2022)	Qualitative case-study using interviews and thematic analysis.	Demonstrated that, ethnic, political exclusion, historical grievances reinforce polarization and weaken national unity, while inclusive participation improve cohesion.	Strongly aligned.	Limited generalizability due to qualitative design and insufficient examination of measurable psychological determinants of cohesion.
Lai et al. (2022)	Cross-national Quantitative analysis using large scale survey data and multivariate statistical models.	Reports that, social trust, and inclusive identity are significant predictors of social cohesion across diverse societies, whereas polarization reduces cooperation and collective well-being.	Strongly supports the present study.	Provides broad international evidence, but offers limited context-specific analysis of ethno-religious and political dynamics.

Source: Researcher's Comparative Analysis of Findings Construct (2026)

shared cultural values, community participation, and reconciliation contributed significantly to peaceful coexistence and reduced conflict recurrence. Despite these contributions, much of the existing Nigerian literature has focused primarily on conflict management, violent extremism, governance challenges, and security concerns, with comparatively less emphasis on the psychological processes that influence social cohesion within an increasingly polarized society (Akanke et al., 2021; Ossai, 2021). Besides, a significant gap also remains in the integration of social psychological theories of identity, intergroup relations, trust, and collective behavior into discussions of social development in Nigeria. While many studies explain development challenges through structural factors such as economic inequality, institutional weaknesses, and political instability, insufficient attention has been paid to how citizens' perceptions, emotions, identities, and attitudes shape cooperation, inclusion, and national integration. This gap is important because sustainable social development depends not only on institutional capacity and economic progress but also on citizens' ability to establish trusting relationships, engage in collective problem-solving, and develop a shared sense of belonging. Failure to account for these psychological dimensions' limits both theoretical explanations of social fragmentation and the effectiveness of interventions designed to strengthen national cohesion.

Therefore, it is the thrust of this paper to contribute to knowledge by addressing these aforementioned gaps as there is a compelling need to re-examine social development in Nigeria through the lenses of the

psychology of social cohesion, especially in this era of increasing polarization. Such an examination is necessary to identify the psychological drivers of social fragmentation, explain how polarization undermines trust, identity, and collective efficacy, and provide evidence-based insights for strengthening social cohesion as a pathway toward sustainable peace, inclusive governance, and national development in Nigeria.

Research Objectives

The general objective of the study is, to examine the psychology of social cohesion and re-examine its role in promoting social development in an era of increasing polarization in Nigeria. However, specific objectives equally designed to guide the achievement of the main objective include, as follow:

Specific Objectives

1. To examine the concept and psychological dimensions of social cohesion and their relevance to social development in Nigeria;
2. To investigate the psychological factors contributing to social polarization and their influence on social cohesion in Nigeria;
3. To assess the implications of increasing polarization for social development, national integration, and peaceful coexistence in Nigeria; and
4. To propose evidence-based psychological and policy strategies for strengthening social cohesion and promoting sustainable social development in an era of

polarization in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarifications

For the purpose of conceptual precision and epistemological clarity, this section clarifies the major concepts that underpin the present study. These concepts include psychology, social cohesion, the psychology of social cohesion, social development, and polarization.

Psychology

Psychology is the scientific study of behavior and mental processes, including how individuals think, perceive, feel, learn, relate to others, and respond to their social and physical environments. It explains the cognitive, emotional, motivational, and behavioral processes that influence human actions across contexts. Contemporary psychology recognizes that behavior is shaped not only by individual characteristics but also by social relationships, cultural values, group memberships, and environmental conditions. This perspective provides insights into trust, cooperation, prejudice, social identity, group dynamics, and collective action (Haslam et al., 2023; Jetten et al., 2022). In this study, psychological perspectives are therefore essential for understanding processes that promote either social integration or fragmentation and for identifying pathways toward peaceful coexistence, national unity, and sustainable social development in Nigeria (Haslam et al., 2023; Jetten et al., 2022).

Social Cohesion

Social cohesion refers to the extent to which members of a society develop belonging, mutual trust, solidarity, and commitment to shared values that support peaceful coexistence and collective action. It is multidimensional, involving social relationships, inclusion, participation, trust, shared norms, and willingness to cooperate toward common objectives. Although, it involves shared values and collective commitments, cohesive societies also manage diversity and disagreement through cooperation, dialogue, and inclusive social arrangements. It therefore represents the capacity of diverse groups to maintain social connectedness despite differences in identity, interests, or perspectives (Arant et al., 2021; Jewett et al., 2021). In plural societies such as Nigeria, social cohesion supports peaceful intergroup relations, strengthens national belonging, and facilitates participation in development processes. Conversely, social exclusion, declining trust, and identity-based divisions can weaken cohesion and increase vulnerability to conflict and instability (Jewett et al., 2021; Arant et al., 2021). In simple terms, social cohesion may be understood as the social capacity to “stick together” while managing diversity constructively.

Psychology of Social Cohesion

The psychology of social cohesion examines the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes through which individuals and groups develop trust, belongingness, shared identity, and cooperative relationships. Drawing on perspectives such as Social Identity Theory, Intergroup Contact Theory, and Social Capital Theory, alongside concepts such as collective efficacy, it explains how individuals develop willingness to cooperate beyond narrow group boundaries. Factors including shared identity, empathy, perceived fairness, trust, and collective responsibility influence whether social relationships become inclusive or exclusionary (Bliuc et al., 2021; Van Bavel et al., 2021). Contemporary research also highlights the influence of digital communication, political discourse, and media narratives on social perceptions. These environments can strengthen solidarity through shared identities and constructive engagement or intensify division by reinforcing stereotypes, misinformation, and hostility toward perceived out-groups. Understanding the psychology of social cohesion therefore offers insights into reducing polarization in a plural society like Nigeria.

Social Development

Social development refers to the process through which societies enhance human well-being, social relationships, capabilities, participation, and quality of life by promoting inclusion, equity, justice, and access to opportunities. Unlike economic development, which primarily emphasizes production and material growth, social development focuses on human welfare, social inclusion, institutional effectiveness, and relationships that enable individuals and communities to participate meaningfully in societal progress. Contemporary perspectives view it as a people-centered process dependent on social trust, community participation, effective institutions, psychological well-being, and collective responsibility. Sustainable development therefore requires improvements in education, health, employment, and social protection, alongside stronger social relationships that support cooperation and resilience (Jewett et al., 2021). In societies experiencing weakened social cohesion, sustainable development outcomes can be constrained. Strengthening social cohesion therefore represents an important pathway toward sustainable social development by promoting inclusion, cooperation, and collective action in pursuit of shared societal goals (Jewett et al., 2021).

Polarization

Polarization refers to the process through which individuals or groups become increasingly divided into opposing positions characterized by stronger group identification, greater perceived differences, and declining

trust or goodwill toward others. From a psychological perspective, polarization is influenced by social identity processes, group norms, selective exposure to information, emotional responses, and communication environments that reinforce divisions. Digital platforms may intensify polarization by encouraging interactions within like-minded networks and amplifying narratives that portray opposing groups negatively. As polarization increases, opportunities for dialogue, cooperation, and consensus-building may decline, weakening social cohesion and creating challenges for national integration and sustainable social development. This is particularly significant in diverse societies such as Nigeria, where ethnic, religious, political, and regional identities may become sources of both social belonging and social division (Van Bavel et al., 2021; Bliuc et al., 2021).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative Systematic Literature Review (SLR) research design. The design is considered appropriate because the study seeks to critically examine the psychology of social cohesion and its implications for social development in an era of increasing polarization in Nigeria through the synthesis and interpretation of existing scholarly literature rather than the collection of primary data. The qualitative approach facilitates an in-depth understanding of the psychological, social, and developmental dimensions of social cohesion by drawing on established theories, empirical studies, policy documents, and institutional reports.

Sources of Data

The study relies exclusively on secondary data obtained from credible academic and institutional sources. These include peer-reviewed journal articles indexed in Web of Science (WoS) and Scopus, scholarly books, book chapters, conference proceedings, government publications, and reports from reputable international organizations such as the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), World Bank, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the African Union (AU). Preference was given to publications produced from 2021 - 2026: the reason was to ensure that the review reflects contemporary debates on social cohesion, polarization, psychology, and social development that are currently gaining attention.

Data Collection Procedure

Relevant literature was identified through systematic searches of major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, JSTOR,

ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis Online, Wiley Online Library, and SAGE Journals. Search terms included combinations of keywords such as “social cohesion,” “psychology of social cohesion,” “social development,” “social trust,” “social identity,” “polarization,” “political polarization,” “affective polarization,” “Nigeria,” “intergroup relations,” and “peacebuilding.” Boolean operators such as AND, OR, and NOT were used to refine search results and improve the relevance of retrieved studies. PRISMA guidelines were used to document the systematic identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion of relevant literature, as presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Chart

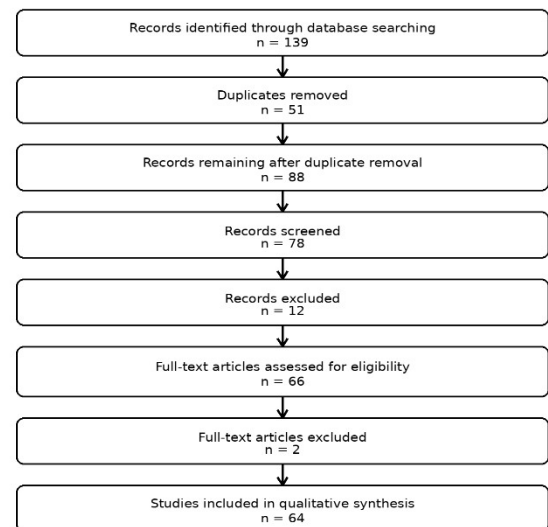


Figure 1: Prisma Flow Chart Demonstrating the Qualitative Data Inclusion Procedure of Relevant Literature Searches

Source: Researcher's Analytical Construct Demonstrating the PRISMA Guidelines (2026).

Database Selection Rationale

The databases were selected to ensure broad, multidisciplinary, authoritative and contextually relevant coverage of literature on the psychology of social cohesion, social development and polarization in Nigeria. Scopus and Web of Science were prioritized for their extensive coverage of high-quality, peer-reviewed and internationally indexed literature, facilitating the identification of influential and recent scholarship. Google Scholar was included to broaden retrieval beyond indexed journal literature and capture relevant interdisciplinary and emerging studies, including materials that may be particularly pertinent to the Nigerian context. JSTOR was selected for its strong coverage of foundational literature in the social sciences and humanities, while ScienceDirect provides substantial coverage of psychology, social sciences and interdisciplinary research. SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis

Online, Wiley Online Library, and SAGE Journals were included because they provide extensive access to contemporary peer-reviewed research in psychology, sociology, political science, communication, social development and related disciplines. Collectively, these databases enabled comprehensive retrieval of both foundational and recent scholarship, reduced the likelihood of database-specific publication bias, and supported an interdisciplinary examination of the psychological, social, political and digital dimensions of social cohesion and polarization in Nigeria.

Documents Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria comprised publications that (i) addressed one or more of the study variables; (ii) were published in peer-reviewed outlets like WoS and/or Scopus; (iii) were written in English; and (iv) provided conceptual, theoretical, or empirical insights relevant to the Nigerian context or comparable multicultural societies. Publications lacking scholarly credibility, unpublished manuscripts, preprints, opinion pieces, blog posts, and non-peer-reviewed materials were excluded from the review.

Method of Data Analysis

The study employs qualitative content analysis as the principal analytical technique. Retrieved literature was carefully read, categorized, compared, and synthesized according to recurring themes related to the study variables. This content analysis enabled the identification of common patterns, areas of convergence and divergence, emerging issues, and knowledge gaps within the existing literature. The analysis further examined how psychological theories explain the relationship between social cohesion and social development under conditions of increasing societal polarization.

Theoretical Foundation

The study is anchored primarily on Social Identity Theory developed by Tajfel and Turner, complemented by insights from Intergroup Contact Theory and Social Capital Theory. Social Identity Theory explains how individuals' identification with social groups influences intergroup attitudes, cooperation, prejudice, and collective behavior. These theoretical perspectives provide an appropriate framework for understanding how identity formation, perceived group differences, trust, and social interactions contribute either to social cohesion or to polarization, and how these dynamics ultimately influence social development in Nigeria.

Scope of the Review

The review focuses on contemporary literature examining the interaction between psychological processes, social

cohesion, polarization, and social development, with particular emphasis on Nigeria. While evidence from other multicultural societies is incorporated where relevant to strengthen theoretical understanding and comparative analysis. The discussion remains primarily directed toward explaining the Nigerian experience and drawing implications for national integration, peaceful coexistence, and sustainable social development.

Ethical Considerations

As an SLR study involving secondary sources only, the study does not involve human participants or the collection of personal data. Consequently, issues relating to informed consent and participant confidentiality do not arise. Nevertheless, the study adheres to established standards of academic integrity through accurate citation of all sources, objective interpretation of findings, and avoidance of plagiarism, misrepresentation, or selective reporting of evidence. At this juncture, under this rubric, a PRISMA flow chart is used to demonstrate the inclusion procedures of relevant literatures identified through systematic searches of major academic databases. This is graphically illustrated, as follow:

Having addressed the methodology of this study in the foregoing utterances, in what follows, we shall attempt a literature review of the study. To that we now turn.

Literature Review

To be sure, many existing studies (e.g., Ezemenaka, 2021; Okolie-Osemene, 2021; Ugwueze et al., 2022) have focused primarily on conflict management, violent extremism, governance, security issues, or social development processes with relatively limited attention devoted to understanding how psychological processes shape social cohesion within the broader context of Nigeria's increasing polarization (Akanke et al., 2021; Ossai, 2021) capable of fostering sustainable social development. Again, significant gap lies in the limited integration of psychological theories of social identity, intergroup relations, and social trust into discussions of social development in Nigeria. Hence, it is the thrust of this paper to contribute to knowledge by filling the missing knowledge gap in literature by integrating the psychological dimensions of social cohesion that enables sustainable social development in a polarized society like Nigeria, with the following sub-themes:

Social Cohesion as a Mechanism for Social Development in an Era of Polarization in Nigeria: An Overview

Social cohesion refers to the capacity of members of a society to build trust, cooperate across social differences, participate in shared institutions, and pursue collective well-being. It represents a social process through which citizens develop a sense of belonging, mutual respect,

and commitment to common societal goals despite ethnic, religious, political, and socio-economic diversity. In contemporary Nigeria, where polarization has increasingly manifested through ethnic nationalism, religious extremism, electoral contestation, misinformation, and widening socio-economic inequalities, social cohesion has become an indispensable mechanism for sustainable social development. Social development extends beyond economic growth to encompass improvements in social inclusion, human welfare, justice, participation, security, and institutional effectiveness. Consequently, strengthening social cohesion offers a pathway for reducing conflict while promoting inclusive development and national integration. The relationship between social cohesion and social development is reciprocal: Whereas social cohesion approximates shared values that enables social equilibrium (social order); social development, on the other hand, presupposes the establishment of transformative structures for the improvement of the quality of human lives: thus, without the presence of social order (enabled by social cohesion), achievement of sustainable social development is almost impossible as such state of anarchy portends immanent contradictions-separatist agitations, political instability, intergroup conflicts, etc, that can cripple any social development efforts. Conversely, where there is no social development, it breeds immanent antinomies-marginalizing, inequalities, unemployment, etc, that can threaten the fabrics of a cohesive society.

Socially cohesive societies are characterized by higher levels of interpersonal trust, civic engagement, institutional legitimacy, and cooperation, all of which facilitate effective governance and equitable development. Conversely, persistent polarization weakens social capital, erodes confidence in public institutions, and reduces citizens' willingness to collaborate for collective progress. Waller and Anderson (2021) demonstrate that increasing polarization fragments social networks into ideologically homogeneous groups, thereby limiting constructive dialogue and collective action. Such fragmentation has significant implications for developing societies where collaborative governance and community participation remain essential for development outcomes. Nigeria presents a particularly important context for understanding the significant interpenetration of social development and social cohesion. The country's pluralistic composition, consisting of over 250 ethnic groups and multiple religious identities, creates enormous opportunities for cultural diversity but also increases vulnerability to identity-based polarization when political and economic institutions fail to ensure fairness and inclusion. Recent national evidence indicates declining interpersonal trust, increasing perceptions of injustice, and stronger identification with ethnic and religious groups than with national identity, suggesting that social

cohesion has weakened considerably in recent years. Such trends undermine citizens' willingness to cooperate across social boundaries, thereby constraining social development initiatives in education, health, security, governance, and community development. As a mechanism for social development, social cohesion promotes inclusive participation in governance and community decision-making. Inclusive participation strengthens democratic legitimacy by ensuring that diverse social groups perceive themselves as stakeholders in national development rather than competitors for scarce political and economic resources. Gadjanova (2022) argues that strengthening national identification alongside ethnic identity can reduce status anxieties associated with competitive politics in African societies, thereby fostering greater social stability and cooperation. In Nigeria, where electoral cycles frequently intensify ethnic and regional divisions, policies that encourage inclusive citizenship, equitable representation, and participatory governance are fundamental to strengthening social cohesion. Furthermore, social cohesion contributes to conflict prevention and peacebuilding, both of which are prerequisites for sustainable social development. Community-based approaches that emphasize dialogue, collaboration, indigenous conflict resolution mechanisms, and shared cultural values have demonstrated considerable effectiveness in reducing intergroup tensions and rebuilding trust within divided communities.

Studies on Nigerian communities reveal that locally driven consensus-building and collaborative conflict management strengthen peaceful coexistence more effectively than externally imposed interventions alone. These findings reinforce the argument that sustainable development depends not only on state institutions but also on resilient social relationships within communities. The contemporary era of polarization has also been intensified by digital communication technologies and social media platforms. While digital media facilitate civic participation and information sharing, they also amplify misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, identity politics, and ideological segregation, all of which weaken social cohesion. Recent studies (e.g, Waller & Anderson, 2021; Jost et al., 2022) demonstrate that online communication environments can reinforce echo chambers and accelerate opinion polarization, thereby reducing opportunities for constructive engagement across social divides. For Nigeria, where digital political mobilization has become increasingly influential, strengthening digital literacy, responsible media engagement, and inclusive public communication is essential for preserving social cohesion. Ultimately, social cohesion should be viewed as both a developmental resource and a policy objective. Building cohesive societies requires strengthening institutional trust, promoting social justice, ensuring equitable access to opportunities, protecting minority rights, encouraging civic participation, and fostering inclusive national identities. In

Nigeria's increasingly polarized environment, investments in social cohesion can improve governance effectiveness, reduce violent conflict, promote social resilience, and create conditions necessary for sustainable social development. Therefore, re-examining social development through the lens of social cohesion provides a valuable framework for addressing the structural and psychological divisions that continue to challenge Nigeria's national development.

A Critical Review of Studies on Social Cohesion as a Mechanism for Social Development in an Era of Polarization in Nigeria

The literature consistently recognizes social cohesion as a critical determinant of social development; however, important conceptual and methodological limitations remain. Waller and Anderson (2021) argue that polarization fragments social networks and weakens collective action by creating ideologically homogeneous communities. Although this perspective is theoretically robust and supported by network analysis, its findings are derived largely from Western democratic contexts, thereby limiting their direct applicability to Nigeria where polarization is shaped not only by ideology but also by ethnicity, religion, regional identity, and patronage politics. Consequently, the explanatory power of their conclusions for the Nigerian context is constrained by contextual differences. Similarly, Gadjanova (2022) contends that strengthening national identity alongside ethnic identity promotes political stability and cooperation in African societies. While this argument benefits from comparative cross-national evidence, it assumes that identity integration alone can reduce social fragmentation.

More recent evidence challenges this assumption by demonstrating that institutional quality, distributive justice, and government responsiveness exert stronger effects on social cohesion than identity narratives alone. For example, the OECD (2023) found that trust in public institutions, perceptions of fairness, and inclusive governance consistently predict social cohesion more strongly than shared identity across diverse national settings. Because the OECD analysis synthesizes evidence from multiple countries using standardized multidimensional indicators, its methodological breadth provides stronger empirical support than studies relying primarily on political discourse or comparative case analysis. Another limitation within the reviewed literature is the predominance of descriptive and conceptual approaches. Assertions that community dialogue and indigenous conflict-resolution mechanisms improve cohesion in Nigerian communities are generally supported by qualitative case studies. Although such studies provide valuable contextual insights, their findings often lack longitudinal designs and nationally representative samples, making causal inference difficult. In contrast, recent multilevel quantitative analyses

demonstrate that the developmental effects of social cohesion are mediated by institutional trust, economic inclusion, and social equality rather than community participation alone (Fonseca, Lukosch, & Brazier, 2023). These studies employ validated multidimensional measures of cohesion and sophisticated statistical modelling, making their conclusions methodologically more rigorous than single-community case studies. The relationship between digital media and social cohesion also remains contested. Waller and Anderson (2021) and Jost et al. (2022) largely portray digital communication as amplifying echo chambers, misinformation, and ideological polarization. However, more recent empirical evidence suggests that the effects of digital platforms are conditional rather than uniformly negative. A systematic review by Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023) found inconsistent evidence regarding the extent to which social media alone causes political polarization, concluding instead that institutional contexts, media literacy, and algorithmic exposure jointly shape outcomes. This review is methodologically stronger because it synthesizes findings from numerous empirical studies across different countries rather than relying on isolated observational evidence. Therefore, attributing Nigeria's declining social cohesion primarily to social media risks oversimplifying a phenomenon that is simultaneously driven by structural inequalities, weak governance, insecurity, and historical identity conflicts.

Overall, while the reviewed studies agree that social cohesion facilitates social development, they differ regarding its principal drivers and mechanisms. Recent evidence increasingly suggests that institutional trust, equitable governance, and social justice constitute more powerful and consistent predictors of cohesion than identity integration or community dialogue alone. Future research on Nigeria should therefore prioritize longitudinal and mixed-methods designs capable of establishing causal relationships between polarization, social cohesion, institutional performance, and sustainable social development.

The Psychological Dimensions of Social Cohesion and Their Relevance to Social Development in Nigeria

The concept of social cohesion extends beyond structural and institutional arrangements to encompass a range of psychological processes that shape how individuals perceive, relate to, and cooperate with one another within society. From a psychological perspective, social cohesion is underpinned by cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions such as interpersonal trust, social identity, sense of belonging, empathy, perceived fairness, collective efficacy, and prosocial behavior—we shall return to these later. These psychological mechanisms influence citizens' willingness to participate in collective action, support democratic institutions, resolve conflicts peacefully, and contribute to national development. In

increasingly polarized societies such as Nigeria, understanding these psychological dimensions is critical for designing interventions that strengthen social cohesion and promote sustainable social development. These dimensions are fully addressed, as follow:

Interpersonal Trust

One of the most fundamental psychological dimensions of social cohesion is interpersonal trust. Trust facilitates cooperation by reducing uncertainty in social interactions and encouraging individuals to work collectively toward shared goals. Where trust exists among citizens and between citizens and public institutions, social participation, civic responsibility, and compliance with public policies are enhanced. Conversely, low levels of trust encourage suspicion, social withdrawal, and fragmentation. Recent psychological evidence demonstrates that trust is shaped by everyday social experiences, perceived fairness, and the quality of interpersonal relationships, all of which significantly influence prosocial intentions and cooperative behavior (Columbus et al., 2022). In Nigeria, persistent insecurity, corruption, and unequal access to public resources have weakened institutional and interpersonal trust, thereby limiting effective collaboration for national development.

Social Identity and Sense of Belonging

Another important psychological dimension is social identity and sense of belonging. Social Identity Theory posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from their membership in social groups. While group identification can strengthen solidarity within communities, excessive attachment to ethnic, religious, or political identities may produce intergroup prejudice and social polarization when superordinate national identities are weak. Nigeria's diverse ethnic and religious composition illustrates this challenge, as identity-based competition frequently undermines national cohesion and inclusive development. Jost et al. (2022) argue that cognitive and motivational processes operating within social communication environments reinforce group-based identities and ideological divisions, making individuals less receptive to alternative viewpoints and reducing opportunities for constructive dialogue. Strengthening an inclusive Nigerian identity alongside respect for cultural diversity therefore remains essential for enhancing social cohesion. A closely related psychological construct is the sense of belonging, which reflects individuals' perception of being accepted, valued, and included within society. Feelings of belonging promote psychological well-being, civic participation, and social responsibility, whereas social exclusion often produces alienation, resentment, and conflict. Communities characterized by strong belonging are generally more resilient during periods of economic hardship, political instability, or violent conflict because

members are more willing to provide mutual support and cooperate for collective welfare. Consequently, strengthening inclusive social environments in schools, workplaces, and communities can significantly improve both psychological well-being and social development outcomes.

Perceived Fairness and Social Justice

Perceived fairness and social justice also constitute essential psychological foundations of social cohesion. Citizens are more likely to trust institutions, comply with laws, and support public policies when they perceive that resources, opportunities, and political representation are distributed equitably. Conversely, perceptions of injustice contribute to frustration, identity-based grievances, and declining confidence in governance. In Nigeria, widespread perceptions of marginalization, unemployment, poverty, and unequal political representation continue to fuel ethnic and regional tensions, thereby weakening social cohesion and slowing developmental progress. Policies that promote procedural justice, transparency, and inclusive governance therefore have important psychological effects that extend beyond institutional reforms.

Collective Efficacy

Another significant psychological dimension is collective efficacy, defined as a group's shared belief in its capacity to achieve common goals through collective action. Communities with high collective efficacy exhibit stronger cooperation, volunteerism, conflict resolution, and civic engagement, all of which contribute to sustainable development. Recent systematic evidence indicates that interventions designed to increase positive intergroup contact, strengthen shared identities, build trust, and challenge stereotypes consistently improve social cohesion and collective action across diverse societies (Orazani et al., 2023). Such findings have important implications for Nigeria, where community-driven development programs, peacebuilding initiatives, and participatory governance depend heavily on citizens' confidence in collective problem-solving.

Empathy and Prosocial Behavior:

Empathy and prosocial behavior further reinforce social cohesion by encouraging compassion, mutual assistance, tolerance, and cooperation across social boundaries. Individuals who demonstrate empathy are more likely to engage in helping behaviors, reject prejudice, and support inclusive social policies. These psychological qualities are particularly valuable in multi-ethnic societies where positive interpersonal interactions reduce stereotypes and foster reconciliation following periods of conflict. Educational institutions, religious organizations, civil society groups, and the media there-

-fore have significant roles in cultivating empathy, tolerance, and responsible citizenship among Nigerians. Overall, the psychological dimensions of social cohesion constitute the social and emotional foundations upon which sustainable development depends. Trust, inclusive social identity, belonging, perceived fairness, collective efficacy, empathy, and prosocial behavior strengthen citizens' capacity to cooperate across social divides, participate in democratic governance, and contribute to national development. In the context of contemporary Nigeria, where political, ethnic, and religious polarization continues to threaten national unity, policies and programs that address these psychological processes are essential for promoting peaceful coexistence, strengthening institutional legitimacy, and achieving inclusive social development.

Critical Review of Studies on the Psychological Dimensions of Social Cohesion and Their Relevance to Social Development in Nigeria

The reviewed literature broadly agrees that psychological factors such as interpersonal trust, social identity, belonging, perceived fairness, collective efficacy, empathy, and prosocial behavior underpin social cohesion. Nevertheless, the evidence differs considerably regarding the relative importance of these dimensions, largely because of variations in theoretical orientation, research design, and contextual scope. Columbus et al. (2022) argue that interpersonal trust develops through everyday social interactions and perceptions of fairness, thereby facilitating cooperation and prosocial behavior. Although their findings are supported by experimental and behavioral evidence, the study primarily examines interpersonal-level processes and gives limited attention to macro-level institutional factors.

More recent cross-national evidence indicates that institutional trust, government effectiveness, and perceived procedural justice exert stronger and more consistent effects on social cohesion than interpersonal trust alone, particularly in politically fragmented societies (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2024). Because the OECD study synthesizes comparative longitudinal evidence from multiple countries using multidimensional indicators of cohesion, its conclusions provide a broader empirical basis than studies relying mainly on behavioral experiments. The literature on social identity similarly presents competing explanations. Jost et al. (2022) emphasize cognitive and motivational mechanisms that reinforce ideological and group identities, thereby increasing polarization and reducing openness to opposing viewpoints. While this psychological explanation is theoretically compelling, it largely privileges individual cognitive processes over structural conditions. Recent evidence suggests that identity polarization is more accurately understood as an interaction between psychological predispositions and

institutional contexts. For instance, Bauer et al. (2024) demonstrate that political exclusion, unequal representation, and weak institutional legitimacy intensify identity-based divisions even among populations with relatively moderate ideological preferences. Their multilevel comparative analysis, which integrates individual survey data with institutional indicators across several democracies, offers stronger causal inference than studies based primarily on laboratory or cross-sectional psychological designs. Similarly, the discussion of collective efficacy also warrants closer scrutiny. Orazani et al. (2023) conclude that interventions promoting intergroup contact, shared identities, and stereotype reduction consistently improve collective action and social cohesion. However, the studies synthesized in their review vary substantially in intervention quality, duration, and outcome measures, limiting the generalizability of their conclusions. More recent meta-analytic evidence demonstrates that the effectiveness of collective efficacy interventions depends heavily on contextual factors such as socioeconomic inequality, governance quality, and community participation rather than psychological interventions alone (Drury, Alfadhli, & Ferguson, 2024). Meta-analytic approaches provide stronger evidence because they aggregate findings across numerous independent studies while accounting for heterogeneity and publication bias. Furthermore, the reviewed literature generally assumes that empathy and prosocial behavior naturally translate into improved social cohesion.

However, recent research indicates that empathy often remains selective, favoring in-group members over out-group populations, particularly in polarized societies. This suggests that empathy alone may not reduce intergroup conflict unless supported by inclusive institutions and opportunities for sustained positive intergroup contact (Cikara, 2024). Compared with earlier conceptual discussions, this evidence is methodologically stronger because it integrates findings from neuroscience, behavioral experiments, and longitudinal social psychological research. Overall, the literature correctly identifies psychological processes as central to social cohesion, yet it often treats them as independent determinants of development. Recent evidence increasingly supports a more integrated framework in which psychological mechanisms interact with institutional quality, distributive justice, and governance structures. For Nigeria, this implies that interventions aimed solely at improving trust, empathy, or national identity are unlikely to achieve lasting social cohesion unless accompanied by reforms that strengthen institutional legitimacy, equitable resource distribution, and inclusive political participation.

Dimensions of Polarization in Nigeria

Polarization in Nigeria has become increasingly multidimensional, extending beyond political competition

to encompass ethnic, religious, regional, socio-economic, and digital spheres. In social psychology, polarization refers to the process through which social groups become increasingly divided, resulting in stronger in-group identification, distrust of out-groups, and reduced willingness to cooperate. Contemporary scholarship argues that polarization undermines social cohesion by weakening interpersonal trust, democratic participation, and collective problem-solving (Casal Bértoa & Rama, 2021). The various dimensions of polarization in Nigeria can be enunciated as follow:

Ethnic Polarization: This is one of the most enduring dimensions of polarization in Nigeria. Nigeria's more than 250 ethnic groups continue to shape political alignments, resource distribution, and perceptions of state legitimacy. Electoral competition frequently reinforces ethnic identities, encouraging citizens to prioritize ethnic affiliation over national identity-typical of this is the current ethnic based identity groups like, the "Arewa" ethnic based association of the Hausas, "Oduduwa" ethnic based association of the Yorubas, and the "Ohaneze" ethnic based association of the Igbos: these ethnic association divides have polarized Nigeria more than strengthening common identity for national cohesion, with the attendant immanent contradictions of uneven development among the ethnic groups. Across African democracies, increasing electoral competition has been associated with stronger ethnic identification, heightened perceptions of discrimination, and declining intergroup trust, dynamics that are highly relevant to Nigeria's political environment (Gadjanova, 2022).

Religious Polarization: This shares nexus with ethnic polarization. It reflects itself, particularly between the predominantly Muslim North and Christian South. Although religion has historically served as a source of moral guidance and community solidarity, it has increasingly become intertwined with political mobilization, identity conflicts, and violent extremism. Religious differences often intersect with ethnic and regional identities, creating overlapping fault lines that intensify mistrust and weaken prospects for national integration. Studies on peacebuilding in Nigeria similarly demonstrate that crises often deepen religious divisions while simultaneously revealing opportunities for interfaith cooperation when inclusive institutions are strengthened (Ossai, 2022).

Regional and Political Polarization: A third dimension is regional and political polarization, reflected in persistent perceptions of marginalization, uneven development, and unequal political representation across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. Contentious debates surrounding federal appointments, resource allocation, restructuring, and state creation frequently reinforce regional grievances. Such divisions become particularly pronounced during election cycles, when political elites

often mobilize regional loyalties to secure electoral advantage, thereby reducing citizens' commitment to a shared national identity. Research on African electoral systems further shows that ethno-political polarization significantly increases the likelihood of electoral violence where ethnic competition overlaps with political contestation (Müller-Crepon, 2022).

Socio-economic Polarization: There is growing socio-economic polarization in Nigeria -- High levels of poverty, unemployment, educational inequality, and unequal access to public services have widened the gap between social groups. These disparities generate perceptions of exclusion and injustice, particularly among young people, thereby increasing susceptibility to identity-based mobilization and social unrest. Socio-economic inequalities often reinforce existing ethnic and regional cleavages rather than operating independently, making polarization more complex and difficult to address.

Digital and Media Polarization: This has emerged as a significant contemporary dimension. Social media platforms facilitate rapid dissemination of political narratives, misinformation, and identity-based rhetoric that amplify existing divisions. Digital echo chambers encourage interaction with like-minded individuals while limiting exposure to alternative viewpoints, thereby intensifying ideological and identity polarization. Recent studies demonstrate that online platforms can reinforce polarized social organization and accelerate societal divisions when external political events trigger identity-based engagement (Waller & Anderson, 2021). Typically, since 2023 key digital and/or social media dimensions have gained major attention as contemporary drivers of polarization. These include (but not limited to), Deepfakes and Social Trust, Digital Citizenship, and Misinformation Eco-system. We shall address these contemporary drivers of polarization, sequentially:

Deepfakes and Social Trust

Deepfakes represent a new form of digital polarization because AI-generated audio, images and videos can fabricate apparently authentic political events, statements and endorsements. Their danger lies not only in persuading citizens to believe falsehoods but also in making genuine evidence appear questionable. Recent experimental evidence shows that political deepfakes can erode trust in media and intensify partisan polarization, even though they are not necessarily more believable than other forms of misinformation (Barari et al., 2025). Similarly, experimental research indicates that exposure to fabricated crisis-related content can produce genuine distrust in government (Ahmed et al., 2025). In Nigeria, where political and ethnic identities already influence perceptions of credibility, deepfakes can therefore deepen the "us-versus-them" mentality and weaken shared confidence in institutions, journalism and fellow

citizens. The social-cohesion implication is a decline in the common epistemic ground required for constructive democratic dialogue.

Digital Citizenship

Digital citizenship has emerged as a contemporary driver of polarization because citizens increasingly participate in political discourse not merely as information consumers but as producers, distributors and interpreters of digital content. While responsible digital citizenship promotes critical engagement and constructive civic participation, its uneven development can also facilitate partisan mobilization, identity-based antagonism and the rapid amplification of divisive narratives. Digital-citizenship competencies shape how citizens interpret political information, engage opposing viewpoints and participate in online civic spaces (Cleofas & Labayo, 2024). Similarly, digital citizen empowerment can influence the quality and accountability of citizens' participation in digital governance (Sharma et al., 2024). In Nigeria, disparities in digital literacy and responsible online engagement can therefore intensify political, ethnic and religious divisions, as citizens may selectively consume and share information that reinforces existing group identities. Thus, digital citizenship constitutes both a civic resource and a potential mechanism through which Nigeria's existing social cleavages are reproduced and intensified in the digital sphere.

Misinformation Ecosystem

The contemporary misinformation ecosystem is more than the circulation of isolated false stories; it involves interconnected users, influencers, political actors, algorithms, platforms, messaging applications, partisan communities and sometimes mainstream media. Research increasingly shows that false and highly partisan information can generate emotional engagement and contribute to political polarization (Weismueller et al., 2024). Nigerian evidence is particularly instructive: misinformation is shaped by contextual factors such as patriotism, ethnicity, religion, altruism and regional identity, while social networks influence how audiences respond to false information (Umejei et al., 2024). Digital literacy is therefore critical, as Nigerian research finds that greater social-media knowledge can reduce tendencies to share false information (Mi & Apuke, 2024). Consequently, addressing polarization requires an ecosystem approach combining platform accountability, professional fact-checking, media literacy and responsible digital citizenship rather than relying exclusively on the correction of individual false claims. Ultimately, these dimensions interact rather than exist independently. Ethnic, religious, regional, socio-economic, and digital forms of polarization reinforce one another, producing a cycle of mistrust that undermines social cohesion, democratic stability, and sustainable

national development.

The Psychological Factors Contributing to Social Polarization and Their Influence on Social Cohesion in Nigeria

Social polarization is fundamentally a psychological phenomenon that emerges when individuals and groups develop increasingly rigid attitudes, strong in-group identification, distrust of out-groups, and resistance to alternative viewpoints. Although political, economic, and institutional conditions often trigger polarization, psychological processes determine how individuals perceive social differences, respond to perceived threats, and interact with members of other groups. In Nigeria, where ethnic, religious, regional, and political identities remain highly salient, these psychological processes have contributed significantly to social fragmentation, weakened national integration, and reduced the effectiveness of collective efforts toward social development. In what follows, some of these factors that trigger polarization and their influence on social cohesion in Nigeria are discussed below.

Social Identity

One of the primary psychological drivers of social polarization is social identity. According to Social Identity Theory, individuals derive part of their self-esteem and self-concept from membership in social groups. While group identification provides belonging and psychological security, it may also generate in-group favoritism and prejudice toward perceived out-groups when identities become politicized or threatened. In polarized societies, individuals increasingly define themselves according to ethnic, religious, or political affiliations rather than shared national identity. Jost et al. (2022) argue that cognitive and motivational processes strengthen ideological identification and promote "us-versus-them" thinking, making individuals more likely to reject opposing viewpoints and cooperate only with members of their own groups. These dynamics are particularly relevant in Nigeria, where electoral competition and identity politics frequently reinforce ethnic and religious divisions rather than national unity.

Perceived Threat and Self-uncertainty

Another significant psychological factor is perceived threat and self-uncertainty. Individuals experiencing uncertainty about their social, economic, or political future often seek psychological security by identifying more strongly with highly cohesive groups that provide certainty, purpose, and clear social norms. Hogg (2023), through Uncertainty-Identity Theory, explains that self-uncertainty motivates stronger attachment to distinctive social identities and may increase support for polarized or even extremist groups that offer clear boundaries

between "us" and "them." In Nigeria, widespread unemployment, insecurity, poverty, and political instability create conditions that heighten uncertainty, making citizens more susceptible to identity-based mobilization and intergroup hostility.

Confirmation Bias and Motivated Reasoning

Confirmation bias and motivated reasoning also contribute substantially to polarization. Individuals naturally seek information that confirms pre-existing beliefs while dismissing contradictory evidence. This selective information processing reinforces stereotypes and ideological rigidity, particularly within digital communication environments. As people increasingly consume information from ideologically homogeneous networks, opportunities for constructive dialogue diminish while hostility toward opposing groups intensifies. Jost et al. (2022) noted that motivated cognition interacts with online communication environments to deepen affective polarization by strengthening emotional attachment to one's group and increasing distrust of opponents. These psychological tendencies have become increasingly evident in Nigeria's social media landscape, where misinformation, political propaganda, and ethnic narratives often spread rapidly during elections and periods of national crisis.

Stereotyping and Prejudice

Closely related is the role of stereotyping and prejudice. Psychological categorization simplifies complex social realities by assigning generalized characteristics to members of other groups. Although categorization is a normal cognitive process, persistent negative stereotypes encourage discrimination, social exclusion, and intergroup conflict. In Nigeria, historical grievances and recurring conflicts have reinforced stereotypes among various ethnic and religious communities, limiting opportunities for mutual trust and cooperation. Such prejudices reduce empathy, increase suspicion, and weaken interpersonal relationships that are essential for social cohesion and peaceful coexistence.

Emotional Processes

Emotional processes, particularly fear, anger, resentment, and perceived injustice, also intensify social polarization. Emotional responses often shape political and social judgments more strongly than objective evidence. Citizens who perceive discrimination, exclusion, or marginalization are more likely to experience resentment toward institutions and rival groups, thereby strengthening identity-based polarization. Emotional polarization further reduces willingness to compromise, forgive, or participate in collaborative problem-solving, thereby weakening the social trust necessary for sustainable development.

Selective Information Exposure

The influence of digital communication and social media has further amplified these psychological mechanisms. Social media algorithms often expose users to information consistent with their existing beliefs, reinforcing echo chambers and limiting cross-group interaction. González-Bailón and Lelkes (2023) conclude that while social media can facilitate civic engagement, it can also strengthen psychological processes associated with polarization by encouraging network segregation, selective exposure, and emotionally charged communication. Similarly, Bliuc et al. (2021) demonstrate that online environments intensify intergroup polarization by reinforcing ideological identities and reducing opportunities for constructive engagement across political divides. These developments are particularly significant in Nigeria, where online political discourse increasingly shapes public opinion and electoral behavior.

Thus, the cumulative effect of these psychological factors is the erosion of social cohesion. As trust declines and group boundaries become more rigid, citizens become less willing to cooperate across ethnic, religious, or political lines. Institutional legitimacy weakens, civic participation declines, and community-based problem-solving becomes increasingly difficult. Conversely, evidence suggests that interventions promoting positive intergroup contact, shared identities, trust-building, empathy, and cooperative engagement can significantly reduce prejudice and strengthen social cohesion (Orazani et al., 2023). Such psychological interventions are particularly relevant for Nigeria, where sustainable social development depends on rebuilding trust across diverse communities and fostering an inclusive national identity.

In sum, psychological factors including social identity, self-uncertainty, perceived threat, confirmation bias, stereotyping, emotional polarization, and selective information exposure significantly contribute to social polarization in Nigeria. These factors undermine trust, cooperation, and collective efficacy, thereby weakening social cohesion and constraining national development. Addressing these psychological drivers through inclusive governance, civic education, intergroup dialogue, peace education, and responsible digital communication is therefore essential for strengthening social cohesion and promoting sustainable social development in Nigeria.

Critical Review of Studies on the Psychological Factors Contributing to Social Polarization and Their Influence on Social Cohesion in Nigeria

The reviewed literature consistently identifies psychological processes as central to the emergence of social polarization; however, the studies differ substantially in their explanations of whether polarization is primarily driven by individual cognition or by broader institutional and sociopolitical conditions. For instance,

Jost et al. (2022) attribute polarization largely to cognitive and motivational processes that reinforce ideological identities, confirmation bias, and resistance to opposing viewpoints. While this perspective is theoretically robust and supported by experimental social psychology, it places greater emphasis on individual-level mechanisms than on the structural conditions that shape identity formation. More recent comparative evidence suggests that psychological predispositions alone cannot adequately explain persistent polarization. Instead, institutional exclusion, governance failures, and political inequalities interact with psychological processes to intensify identity-based divisions (Nature Reviews Psychology, 2024). Because these conclusions are derived from multidisciplinary syntheses combining psychological, political, and sociological evidence, they provide stronger explanatory power than studies relying predominantly on laboratory experiments.

Similarly, Hogg's (2023) application of Uncertainty–Identity Theory argues that economic and political uncertainty strengthens attachment to highly cohesive identity groups. Although this framework effectively explains why uncertainty increases group identification, its empirical evidence is largely derived from controlled experiments conducted in relatively stable democracies. Consequently, its direct applicability to Nigeria is constrained because uncertainty in Nigeria is simultaneously influenced by insecurity, historical grievances, weak institutions, and socioeconomic deprivation. Recent multilevel studies demonstrate that identity-based polarization is most severe where psychological uncertainty coincides with institutional distrust and perceived political exclusion, indicating that contextual variables moderate the effects predicted by Uncertainty–Identity Theory (Cikara, 2024). Such multilevel analyses offer stronger causal inference than experimental studies because they integrate individual psychological measures with societal-level institutional indicators.

The literature on digital communication also reveals important inconsistencies. González-Bailón and Lelkes (2023) and Bliuc et al. (2021) argue that social media algorithms reinforce echo chambers, selective exposure, and ideological segregation. However, more recent systematic evidence challenges the assumption that digital media independently cause polarization. A comprehensive review by Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2024) concludes that empirical findings remain mixed, with the effects of social media varying according to political institutions, media literacy, platform design, and offline social contexts. The methodological superiority of this review lies in its synthesis of hundreds of empirical studies across multiple countries, making its conclusions more reliable than those based on isolated observational studies. This suggests that attributing Nigeria's increasing polarization primarily to social media oversimplifies a phenomenon rooted equally in governance deficits, economic inequality, and identity politics.

Furthermore, Orazani et al. (2023) report that interventions promoting intergroup contact, shared identity, and trust improve social cohesion across societies. Although these findings support the contact hypothesis, the reviewed interventions differ considerably in duration, quality, and contextual implementation, thereby limiting generalizability. More recent meta-analytic evidence indicates that psychological interventions produce more sustainable reductions in polarization when accompanied by institutional reforms that enhance procedural justice, inclusive governance, and equitable access to public resources (Drury et al., 2024). Meta-analytic evidence is methodologically stronger because it aggregates findings across numerous independent studies while accounting for heterogeneity and publication bias.

Overall, the reviewed studies correctly identify psychological mechanisms as important contributors to polarization but often treat them as isolated determinants. Recent evidence increasingly supports an integrated perspective in which social identity, uncertainty, emotional processes, and selective information exposure interact dynamically with institutional quality, political inclusion, and socioeconomic inequality. For Nigeria, this implies that interventions focusing solely on psychological reorientation are unlikely to produce enduring social cohesion unless accompanied by broader governance reforms that address structural sources of perceived injustice and exclusion.

The Implications of Increasing Polarization for Social Development, National Integration, and Peaceful Coexistence in Nigeria

Certainly, increasing social polarization has profound implications for social development, national integration, and peaceful coexistence, particularly in heterogeneous societies such as Nigeria. Polarization is characterized by widening social, political, ethnic, and religious divisions that reduce trust, intensify intergroup hostility, and weaken citizens' commitment to shared national goals. As these divisions become more entrenched, they undermine collective action, democratic governance, and social stability, all of which are essential prerequisites for sustainable development. In Nigeria, the persistence of identity-based politics, regional grievances, violent conflicts, and increasingly polarized public discourse has intensified concerns regarding the country's long-term unity and developmental trajectory. One major implication of increasing polarization is the weakening of social development: Social development depends on cooperation among citizens, equitable access to opportunities, effective institutions, and inclusive participation in governance. However, polarization reduces interpersonal trust and social capital, making citizens less willing to collaborate across ethnic, religious, or political boundaries. It also diverts public resources from development initiatives toward conflict management,

security operations, and humanitarian responses. Furthermore, polarized societies often experience slower policy implementation because competing groups prioritize sectional interests over collective welfare. Jost et al. (2022) argue that ideological and affective polarization diminish opportunities for constructive deliberation and collective problem-solving, thereby constraining effective governance and societal progress. A second implication concerns national integration: Nigeria's multicultural character requires institutions and policies that promote shared citizenship while respecting cultural diversity. Increasing polarization, however, strengthens ethnic and regional identities at the expense of national identity, thereby weakening citizens' attachment to the Nigerian state. Evidence from Nigeria suggests that stronger ethnic identification is associated with lower satisfaction with democratic governance, whereas institutional trust and perceptions of government performance are more influential in strengthening national cohesion (Brigevich & Oritsejafor, 2022). This finding suggests that inclusive governance, fairness, and institutional accountability are essential for reducing identity-based divisions and fostering national integration.

Furthermore, polarization also threatens peaceful coexistence by increasing social distance between communities: As individuals become more psychologically attached to their in-groups, mistrust and prejudice toward out-groups intensify, reducing opportunities for dialogue and reconciliation. In contexts where historical grievances already exist, polarization increases the likelihood of communal violence, retaliatory attacks, and prolonged social fragmentation. Empirical evidence from Jos, Nigeria, demonstrates that ethnic segregation alone does not necessarily prevent conflict; rather, peaceful coexistence depends on sustained intergroup engagement, informal community leadership, and trust-building initiatives that reduce social distance (Eke, 2022). These findings highlight the importance of continuous interaction and cooperative relationships in maintaining peace within diverse societies.

Another significant implication is the erosion of democratic governance and civic participation: Democratic institutions function effectively when citizens trust public institutions, respect opposing viewpoints, and participate constructively in political processes. Increasing polarization encourages political intolerance, electoral violence, hate speech, and the rejection of democratic outcomes, thereby weakening democratic legitimacy. In Nigeria, divisive political communication and identity-based electoral mobilization have contributed to post-election mistrust and perceptions of exclusion, thereby undermining national integration and confidence in democratic institutions. When democratic processes become viewed primarily through ethnic or religious lenses, citizens become less committed to national interests and more supportive of sectional political agendas. More so, polarization also has important economic and humanitarian consequences: For instance,

persistent conflict discourages domestic and foreign investment, disrupts agricultural and commercial activities, damages infrastructure, and increases unemployment and poverty. In northeastern Nigeria, for example, violent conflict has displaced millions of people and strained relationships between internally displaced persons and host communities, creating new social tensions that require sustained peacebuilding and social integration efforts (Kamta & Scheffran, 2022). These conditions reduce human capital development, increase dependency on humanitarian assistance, and divert resources away from education, healthcare, and social welfare programs.

Additionally, increasing polarization weakens social cohesion, which serves as the psychological and institutional foundation for sustainable development: As trust declines and group identities become increasingly antagonistic, communities lose their capacity for collective action, mutual assistance, and collaborative problem-solving. This erosion of social cohesion limits the effectiveness of community development programs, peacebuilding initiatives, and public policy implementation. Consequently, achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those relating to peace, justice, strong institutions, and reduced inequalities, becomes considerably more difficult in polarized societies. Addressing these implications requires comprehensive interventions that strengthen inclusive governance, equitable resource distribution, civic education, intergroup dialogue, and institutional accountability. Policies that promote national identity without suppressing cultural diversity, alongside responsible media practices and digital literacy programs that counter misinformation and hate speech, can reduce polarization and rebuild trust among citizens. Community-based peacebuilding, participatory governance, and equitable socio-economic development are equally essential for restoring social cohesion and fostering peaceful coexistence.

Thus, from the backdrop of the foregoing utterances, increasing polarization poses significant threats to Nigeria's social development, national integration, and peaceful coexistence by weakening trust, reducing civic cooperation, intensifying identity-based divisions, and undermining democratic governance. Sustainable national development therefore depends on deliberate efforts to strengthen social cohesion, promote inclusive institutions, and encourage constructive engagement across ethnic, religious, political, and regional boundaries.

Critical Review of Studies on the Implications of Increasing Polarization for Social Development, National Integration, and Peaceful Coexistence in Nigeria

The reviewed studies generally agree that increasing polarization undermines social development, national

integration, and peaceful coexistence. However, they differ considerably regarding the mechanisms through which these outcomes occur and the relative importance of psychological versus institutional drivers. Jost et al. (2022) explain that ideological and affective polarization reduce constructive deliberation and collective problem-solving through cognitive and motivational processes. Although this framework is theoretically rigorous and supported by experimental evidence, it focuses predominantly on individual psychological mechanisms while giving comparatively less attention to structural factors such as institutional quality, political exclusion, and governance deficits. Recent multidisciplinary evidence argues that the developmental consequences of polarization are better explained through the interaction between psychological processes and institutional performance rather than cognition alone (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2024). Because this conclusion is derived from a synthesis of evidence across psychology, political science, and communication research, it offers stronger explanatory power than single-discipline studies. The discussion of national integration similarly reveals methodological differences. Brigevidich and Oritsejafor (2022) conclude that institutional trust and government performance are stronger predictors of national cohesion than ethnic identification in Nigeria. While this finding is highly relevant, its cross-sectional design limits causal interpretation because perceptions of trust and national identity may influence one another over time. More recent comparative evidence demonstrates that improvements in institutional fairness, procedural justice, and inclusive governance consistently produce measurable increases in social trust and national cohesion across diverse political systems (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2024).

The OECD analysis is methodologically superior because it employs standardized multidimensional indicators and longitudinal comparative data rather than relying on a single-country survey. Similarly, Eke (2022) argues that peaceful coexistence in Jos depends more on sustained intergroup engagement and informal community leadership than on ethnic segregation. Although the study provides rich contextual insights through qualitative field research, its findings are geographically specific and therefore difficult to generalize across Nigeria's highly diverse conflict settings. Recent evidence indicates that community dialogue initiatives achieve more durable peace when combined with accountable local governance, equitable service delivery, and institutional trust-building, suggesting that social interaction alone is insufficient to sustain long-term peace (United Nations Development program [UNDP], 2024). Because these conclusions are drawn from multi-country program evaluations using mixed-methods designs, they provide stronger external validity than localized case studies. The literature also tends to assume that conflict-induced economic decline is a direct consequence of polarization. Kamta and

Scheffran (2022) correctly demonstrate that violent conflict disrupts livelihoods and strains relationships between internally displaced persons and host communities. Nevertheless, more recent research suggests that the relationship is reciprocal rather than unidirectional: economic inequality, youth unemployment, and governance failures simultaneously fuel polarization while also reducing development outcomes (World Bank, 2024). This broader analytical perspective is methodologically stronger because it integrates macroeconomic indicators with conflict and governance data across multiple fragile states. Overall, the reviewed studies provide convincing evidence that polarization weakens trust, democratic governance, and peaceful coexistence. However, recent evidence increasingly challenges explanations that prioritize psychological or identity-based factors in isolation. Instead, the strongest evidence supports an integrated framework in which psychological polarization interacts dynamically with institutional effectiveness, distributive justice, economic inequality, and political inclusion. For Nigeria, this implies that sustainable social development will require not only interventions promoting intergroup dialogue and national identity but also comprehensive institutional reforms that strengthen governance, accountability, and equitable access to socioeconomic opportunities.

Polarization: A Critical Comparative Analysis of African Evidence Versus Advanced Societies Evidence (Nigeria Vs USA) and the Influence on Social Cohesion.

Although polarization has become a global concern, its drivers and implications for social cohesion differ significantly between African societies and advanced democracies. In Nigeria, polarization is predominantly rooted in ethnic, religious, and regional identities, with political competition often reinforcing pre-existing social cleavages. These identity-based divisions weaken interpersonal trust, civic participation, and national integration, thereby undermining sustainable social development. In contrast, polarization in the United States is driven largely by ideological and partisan identities, where political affiliation increasingly shapes citizens' social relationships, institutional trust, and perceptions of national identity rather than ethnic or regional loyalties alone (Toprakiran et al., 2024). Despite these contextual differences, both countries demonstrate that identity remains the principal psychological mechanism through which polarization erodes social cohesion. A recent meta-analysis by Hu and Cheung (2024) confirms a strong positive relationship between social identity and social integration, suggesting that the nature of group identification significantly influences the extent of social cohesion across societies. Similarly, Bliuc et al. (2024) argue that polarization represents a gradual fragmentation of society in which competing identities become increasingly

incompatible, resulting in declining trust, cooperation, and collective action. This theoretical perspective is particularly applicable to Nigeria, where identity-based political mobilization frequently transforms social diversity into social fragmentation. However, an important distinction exists between the two contexts. While the United States possesses relatively stronger democratic institutions capable of moderating political polarization despite persistent ideological divisions, Nigeria's comparatively fragile institutional structures often amplify identity conflicts and reduce opportunities for constructive intergroup engagement. Consequently, the social and developmental consequences of polarization tend to be more severe in Nigeria, where ethnic and religious identities remain closely intertwined with access to political and economic resources. This comparison demonstrates that although the manifestations of polarization differ between developing and advanced societies, its psychological consequences—reduced trust, weakened shared identity, and diminished social cohesion—are remarkably similar. The Nigerian experience therefore contributes valuable African evidence to the global discourse by illustrating how identity-driven polarization can impede inclusive social development in culturally diverse societies.

Polarization: A Critical Comparative Analysis of African Evidences (Nigeria Versus South Africa) and the Influence on Social Cohesion

Nigeria and South Africa, Africa's two largest economies, present distinct yet comparable manifestations of polarization with important implications for social cohesion. In Nigeria, polarization is primarily driven by ethnic, religious, and regional identities, with political competition often reinforcing historical divisions and undermining national integration. Conversely, South Africa's polarization is deeply rooted in the enduring legacy of apartheid, where racial inequality, socio-economic exclusion, and periodic xenophobic tensions continue to shape intergroup relations despite three decades of democratic governance. Although the historical contexts differ, both countries demonstrate that identity-based divisions remain central obstacles to building cohesive societies. Recent evidence from South Africa indicates that persistent inequality, crime, unemployment, and community violence continue to weaken trust, social inclusion, and collective efficacy, particularly in low-resource communities (Nyathi et al., 2024). Likewise, Bornman et al. (2024) found that although younger South Africans increasingly interact across racial boundaries, social categorization, intergroup anxiety, and perceived socio-economic threats continue to limit meaningful intergroup relationships, suggesting that contact alone is insufficient to overcome entrenched divisions. These findings parallel the Nigerian experience, where ethnic and religious identities frequently supersede national identity, reducing interpersonal trust and civic

cooperation. Nevertheless, an important difference distinguishes the two contexts. South Africa's polarization remains largely shaped by racial and socio-economic inequalities inherited from apartheid, whereas Nigeria's fragmentation is more strongly associated with ethnic, religious, and regional competition for political power and resource allocation. Despite these differences, both countries illustrate that polarization is fundamentally sustained through psychological processes of identity formation and intergroup perceptions rather than structural inequalities alone. Consequently, the comparative evidence reinforces the argument that strengthening shared identities, institutional trust, and meaningful intergroup engagement is indispensable for promoting social cohesion across diverse African societies. The Nigerian case therefore complements South African evidence by demonstrating how different historical trajectories can converge in producing similar psychological barriers to national cohesion and inclusive social development.

Theoretical Review

At this juncture, we shall review multiple theories while situating them to the study context to demonstrate their relevance to the study. We shall also substantiate their claims with empirical evidences from WoS and Scopus indexed studies, in a tabulated format. These theories include:

1. The Social Identity Theory;
2. Intergroup Contact Theory; and
3. Social Capital Theory.

As presented in Table 2 below, Social Identity Theory, Intergroup Contact Theory, and Social Capital Theory provide complementary explanations of the psychological and social mechanisms underlying social cohesion and polarization in Nigeria. Although related perspectives such as System Justification Theory, Social Dominance Theory, and Collective Action Theory offer valuable insights into power relations, inequality, and mobilization, they address more specific aspects of social behavior rather than providing a comprehensive framework for understanding the psychological, relational, and structural foundations of social cohesion. Consequently, the justification for choosing the selected theories over others is because, they are better aligned with the objectives and scope of this study. In what follows, we shall address these theories, sequentially; and situate their relevance to the study. Thereafter, a critical evaluation of the theories follows up to find a dominant theoretical framework out of the trio.

Social Identity Theory (SIT)

Social Identity Theory (SIT) was developed by Henri Tajfel and later expanded with John Turner in the 1970s

Table 2: Comparative Relevance of the Three Theories to the Study (Supported by Wos/Scopus indexed Empirical Evidences, 2021+)

SN	Theory	Core Focus	Point of Relevance to the Study	Empirical Evidences Substantiating the Theoretical Claims (WoS/Scopus indexed evidences).
1.	Social Identity Theory	Group identity, categorization, in-group/out-group dynamics	Explains how ethnic, religious, and political identities contribute to polarization, and weaken national cohesion.	a). Myers (2022) - found that a shared group identity reduced partisan identity, and promoted respectful dialogue. b). Wakefield and Wakefield (2023) - showed that stronger group identification on social media significantly increased affective polarization.
2.	Intergroup Contact Theory	Positive interaction between groups	Explains how structured contact reduces prejudice, builds trust, and promotes peaceful coexistence among Nigeria's diverse populations	a). Reimer et al. (2021) - evaluated a large-scale adolescent intergroup program and found that, structured intergroup contact significantly reduced intergroup anxiety, strengthening social cohesion. b). Thomsen and Thomsen (2023) - found that intergroup contact reduced affective polarization among weak and moderate party identifiers, indicating that positive cross-group interaction enhances trust and democratic coexistence.
3.	Social Capital Theory	Trust, networks, reciprocity, and civic participation.	Explain how social relationships and institutional trust strengthen cohesion, collective action, and sustainable development.	a). Lee et al. (2022) - found that, social trust, network density, and shared language significantly strengthened social identity and sustained co-operative participation. b). Sörbom & Jezierska (2023) - demonstrated that, the structure and quality of social capital within civil society organizations influence social cohesion or polarization.

Source: Researcher's Comparative Theoretical and Empirical Analysis Construct (2026)

and 1980s. The theory explains how individuals derive part of their self-concept from the social groups to which they belong. According to the theory, individuals classify themselves and others into social categories such as ethnicity, religion, nationality, political affiliation, gender, or occupation. These classifications create a sense of belonging and identity that influences attitudes, perceptions, and behavior. The theory rests on three interrelated cognitive processes:

1. Social categorization: Individuals organize the social world by categorizing people into groups (e.g., "us" versus "them").
2. Social identification: Individuals adopt the norms, values, and behaviors of groups with which they identify.
3. Social comparison: Individuals compare their in-group with relevant out-groups, often seeking positive distinctiveness to maintain or enhance self-esteem.

A central proposition of Social Identity Theory is that people naturally favor members of their own group (in-group favoritism) while sometimes discriminating against members of other groups (out-group bias). Such biases may occur even when group differences are minimal or arbitrarily assigned. The theory therefore explains prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination, intergroup conflict, and political polarization. In contemporary societies, social identity has become increasingly influenced by media narratives, political rhetoric, and digital communication platforms. These factors can intensify

group identities and deepen social divisions, particularly where ethnic or religious identities are already politically salient.

Relevance to the Study

Social Identity Theory is highly relevant to the study. For instance, Nigeria is characterized by significant ethnic, religious, regional, and political diversity. While this diversity constitutes a valuable national asset, it also creates multiple social identities that may become sources of division when manipulated for political or economic purposes. Nigerians often identify strongly with ethnic groups such as the Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Ijaw, Tiv, Kanuri, and others, as well as religious affiliations including Christianity and Islam. During elections and periods of political competition, these identities frequently become more pronounced, encouraging in-group loyalty and distrust toward perceived out-groups. Besides, Social Identity Theory helps explain why polarization undermines social cohesion. Strong identification with ethnic or religious groups may reduce national identification, thereby weakening trust, cooperation, and collective action for national development. The theory also provides insight into how narratives emphasizing shared national identity and common goals can reduce intergroup tensions and promote inclusive development. Thus, SIT offers an appropriate psychological framework for understanding how identity-based divisions influence social cohesion and developmental outcomes in Nigeria.

Intergroup Contact Theory

Intergroup Contact Theory was proposed by Gordon Allport in his seminal work *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954). The theory argues that direct interaction between members of different social groups can reduce prejudice, improve mutual understanding, and foster positive intergroup relationships when specific conditions are met. According to Allport, effective contact is most likely when four optimal conditions exist: namely, Equal status among participants; Common goals; Intergroup cooperation, and Institutional or legal support. Later scholars, including Thomas Pettigrew and Linda Tropp, demonstrated through extensive meta-analyses that positive intergroup contact reduces prejudice even when these ideal conditions are only partially present. They further identified several mechanisms through which contact improves relationships, including: Increased empathy; Reduced intergroup anxiety; Greater trust; Improved knowledge of other groups; and Increased perspective-taking. The theory has become one of the most influential psychological explanations for prejudice reduction and peacebuilding. It has informed interventions in education, community development, conflict resolution, and multicultural policy across many countries.

Relevance to the Study

Intergroup Contact Theory is particularly relevant to the Nigerian context because many forms of polarization are sustained by limited meaningful interaction between members of different ethnic, religious, and regional communities. Nigeria has experienced episodes of communal violence, political conflicts, religious extremism, and ethnic mistrust that have weakened social cohesion. Segregated communities, misinformation, and identity politics often reduce opportunities for constructive interaction, allowing stereotypes and prejudice to flourish. Thus, the theory suggests that carefully designed opportunities for positive interaction—through educational institutions, youth development programs, community dialogue, interfaith initiatives, national service schemes, and collaborative development projects—can reduce prejudice and strengthen social cohesion. Hence, for this study, Intergroup Contact Theory explains the psychological processes through which social interaction can rebuild trust, reduce polarization, and encourage cooperation among Nigeria's diverse populations. It also supports policy recommendations that emphasize dialogue, inclusive institutions, and community engagement as strategies for sustainable social development.

Social Capital Theory

Social Capital Theory was developed through the contributions of several scholars, particularly Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman, and Robert D. Putnam.

Although each scholar conceptualized social capital differently, they generally agree that social relationships constitute valuable resources that facilitate cooperation and collective action. Bourdieu viewed social capital as the resources individuals obtain through durable social networks. Coleman emphasized the role of trust, norms, and social obligations in facilitating coordinated action, while Putnam focused on civic engagement, community participation, and generalized trust as essential components of democratic governance and social development. Putnam distinguished between two major forms of social capital:

- a). Bonding social capital: Strong ties among people with similar identities, such as family members, close friends, or members of the same ethnic or religious group.
- b). Bridging social capital: Connections between people from different social, ethnic, religious, or cultural backgrounds that promote broader social integration.

Later scholars also identified linking social capital, which refers to relationships between citizens and institutions possessing greater authority or power, such as government agencies. Social Capital Theory argues that societies with high levels of interpersonal trust, civic participation, reciprocity, and social networks experience greater economic growth, political stability, effective governance, and community resilience. Conversely, declining trust and weakening social networks contribute to fragmentation, conflict, and reduced collective capacity.

Relevance to the Study

Social Capital Theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how trust, networks, and civic participation influence social cohesion in Nigeria. Typically, polarization often weakens interpersonal trust and reduces cooperation between communities. While bonding social capital strengthens solidarity within ethnic or religious groups, excessive reliance on bonding ties without corresponding bridging social capital may reinforce exclusion, suspicion, and intergroup conflict. The study seeks to examine social cohesion during an era of increasing polarization. Social Capital Theory explains that sustainable social development depends not only on strong internal community networks but also on relationships that connect diverse communities and strengthen confidence in public institutions. In Nigeria, for example, promoting bridging and linking social capital through inclusive governance, civic participation, inter-ethnic collaboration, transparent institutions, and community development initiatives can enhance trust, reduce polarization, and support national unity. The theory therefore offers a valuable framework for identifying mechanisms through which psychological and social processes contribute to long-term social cohesion and development. Thus, from the above theoretical

analysis, supported by empirical evidences, the three theories complement one another in explaining the psychological and social dynamics of cohesion in a polarized society. Collectively, these theories provide a strong interdisciplinary framework for examining the psychology of social cohesion in Nigeria.

Critical Evaluation of the Selected Theories

The three selected theories provide complementary but distinct explanations for social cohesion in a polarized society. Social Identity Theory (SIT) offers a robust psychological explanation of how individuals derive their sense of self from group memberships and how these identities shape intergroup attitudes, cooperation, and conflict. Its major strength lies in explaining the psychological origins of polarization along ethnic, religious, and political lines, which remain central features of contemporary Nigerian society. Recent empirical evidence further demonstrates a significant positive relationship between social identity and social integration, reinforcing the theory's relevance for understanding cohesion in diverse societies (Hu & Cheung, 2024). However, SIT has been criticized for placing greater emphasis on group categorization than on the institutional and relational conditions that facilitate reconciliation. Intergroup Contact Theory (ICT) complements SIT by explaining how structured, meaningful interactions between members of different groups can reduce prejudice and foster mutual understanding. The theory is particularly relevant for multicultural societies such as Nigeria, where sustained intergroup engagement can strengthen peaceful coexistence. Nevertheless, its effectiveness depends on specific conditions—including equal status, common goals, and institutional support—which are often difficult to achieve in deeply polarized contexts. Consequently, ICT is more effective as a conflict-reduction mechanism than as a comprehensive explanation of social cohesion.

Social Capital Theory (SCT) broadens the analysis by emphasizing trust, reciprocity, civic participation, and social networks as foundations of collective well-being and social development. Its strength lies in linking interpersonal relationships with broader developmental outcomes, making it highly relevant for policy interventions. Recent systematic evidence also indicates that social capital plays a significant role in strengthening collective resilience and community-level cooperation (Grisolia et al., 2024). However, the theory pays relatively less attention to the psychological processes through which identities and perceptions of "us" versus "them" emerge. Overall, while all three theories are complementary, Social Identity Theory provides the dominant theoretical framework for this study. This is because the study seeks to re-examine the psychology of social cohesion in an era of polarization, where identity-based divisions constitute the primary drivers of social fragmentation in Nigeria that shape social development

outcomes. SIT directly explains the cognitive and motivational processes underlying group affiliation, prejudice, and intergroup relations, while Intergroup Contact Theory and Social Capital Theory serve as complementary frameworks that explain how positive interactions and trust-building can mitigate the divisive effects of social identities and promote sustainable social cohesion.

DISCUSSION

Objective One: To examine the concept and psychological dimensions of social cohesion and their relevance to social development in Nigeria. The findings of this study demonstrate that social cohesion extends beyond peaceful coexistence to encompass psychological constructs such as social trust, shared identity, reciprocity, belongingness, civic participation, and collective efficacy. These psychological dimensions are fundamental to promoting social development because they enhance cooperation among diverse groups, strengthen confidence in public institutions, and encourage citizens' participation in national development. In the Nigerian context, where ethnic, religious, and political diversity significantly shapes interpersonal relations, the presence of strong psychological bonds is essential for fostering inclusive governance and sustainable development. This finding aligns with empirical evidence reported by Lai et al. (2022), whose survey of ethnically and religiously diverse Nigerian secondary schools found that educational environments significantly influence the formation of national identity and intergroup tolerance, both of which are central psychological dimensions of social cohesion. The study concluded that inclusive educational experiences promote stronger national identity and facilitate social integration, thereby contributing to long-term social development. Similarly, Brigeovich and Oritsejafor (2024) found, using Afrobarometer survey data from Nigeria, that although ethnic identity remains influential, citizens' trust in public institutions and perceptions of government performance are stronger predictors of democratic satisfaction than ethnic affiliation alone. Their findings suggest that institutional trust serves as a critical psychological resource for strengthening national cohesion and enhancing developmental outcomes in plural societies such as Nigeria. Overall, these findings reinforce the argument that strengthening psychological components of social cohesion—particularly trust, shared national identity, and inclusive participation—is indispensable for achieving sustainable social development in Nigeria.

Objective Two: To investigate the psychological factors contributing to social polarization and their influence on social cohesion in Nigeria. The findings reveal that psychological factors such as identity-based prejudice, perceived injustice, institutional mistrust, fear of

marginalization, and intergroup stereotyping significantly contribute to increasing social polarization in Nigeria. These psychological processes reinforce in-group solidarity while simultaneously intensifying distrust and hostility toward perceived out-groups, thereby weakening national cohesion and reducing opportunities for collaborative social development. Supporting this finding, Atata and Omobowale (2022), found that collective identity functions as a psychological resource for mobilizing support for separatist movements in southeastern Nigeria. Their study demonstrated that identity narratives strengthen in-group attachment but simultaneously deepen social divisions and reinforce polarization between ethnic groups and the Nigerian state. Likewise, Eke (2022) found that prolonged ethnic conflict in Jos has reinforced social distance and psychological distrust among communities, making intergroup interaction increasingly difficult despite geographical proximity. The study showed that persistent segregation and perceived group threats sustain polarization by reducing opportunities for positive intergroup contact and mutual trust.

Objective Three: To assess the implications of increasing polarization for social development, national integration, and peaceful coexistence in Nigeria. The findings indicate that increasing social polarization poses serious threats to social development by weakening national integration, reducing interpersonal and institutional trust, undermining civic participation, and increasing the likelihood of social conflict. As divisions become more entrenched, citizens become less willing to cooperate across ethnic, religious, and political boundaries, thereby limiting collective efforts toward national development and peaceful coexistence. Supporting this, Abdulkareem et al. (2022) empirical investigation involving 689 Nigerian respondents found that, trust in government significantly influences citizens' willingness to participate in governance through digital platforms. The study demonstrated that declining institutional trust discourages civic engagement, thereby weakening democratic participation and inclusive development. Similarly, recent evidence by Afolabi et al. (2025) showed that recurrent pastoral conflicts in Nigeria significantly erode interpersonal trust and social cohesion, particularly across religious communities. Their instrumental-variable analysis indicates that conflict-induced distrust reduces cooperation among communities and undermines prospects for sustainable peace and national integration. These findings signify that; the consequences of social polarization extend beyond political disagreements to encompass broader developmental challenges. Without deliberate efforts to rebuild trust, strengthen inclusive institutions, and encourage constructive intergroup engagement, Nigeria's aspirations for national integration, peaceful coexistence, and sustainable social development may remain difficult to achieve.

Summary and Conclusions

This paper examined the psychology of social cohesion and re-examined social development within the context of increasing polarization in Nigeria. It explored how psychological processes, including social identity, prejudice, stereotyping, intergroup relations, trust, and collective behavior, influence social interactions and national development. The paper established that Nigeria's ethnic, religious, political, and socioeconomic diversity presents significant opportunities for growth but also creates conditions that may foster division when differences are manipulated or poorly managed. The rise in political polarization, misinformation, economic inequality, insecurity, and identity-based conflicts has further weakened social cohesion, reducing citizens' trust in institutions and limiting cooperation across social groups. The study highlighted that social cohesion is a fundamental requirement for sustainable social development because it promotes peaceful coexistence, mutual trust, civic participation, inclusion, and collective responsibility. Drawing on relevant psychological theories, the paper demonstrated that individuals' attitudes and behaviors are strongly shaped by their group identities and social environments. Consequently, reducing polarization requires deliberate efforts to encourage positive intergroup contact, inclusive governance, equitable distribution of resources, effective conflict resolution mechanisms, and educational initiatives that promote tolerance, empathy, and national identity. The role of families, schools, religious organizations, community leaders, civil society, the media, and government institutions was identified as essential in fostering values of unity, respect for diversity, and social responsibility. In conclusion, Nigeria's future social development depends largely on its ability to strengthen social cohesion despite persistent divisions. While polarization presents serious challenges to national unity and democratic stability, it is neither inevitable nor irreversible. Applying psychological insights to public policy, leadership, education, and community engagement can help transform differences into sources of strength rather than conflict. Building trust, promoting inclusive participation, combating discrimination, and encouraging constructive dialogue across social groups are critical steps toward achieving a more cohesive society. Ultimately, sustainable national development can only be realized in an environment where citizens share a sense of belonging, work collaboratively toward common goals, and embrace diversity as a valuable resource for collective progress. Strengthening the psychological foundations of social cohesion is therefore not only a social necessity but also a strategic imperative for Nigeria's long-term peace, stability, and development.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following

recommendations are proposed to strengthen social cohesion and promote sustainable social development in Nigeria:

1. **Promote Inclusive Civic and Peace Education:** Educational institutions should integrate civic education, peace education, and social-emotional learning into school curricula to foster empathy, tolerance, critical thinking, and respect for diversity. These psychological competencies can reduce prejudice and strengthen a shared national identity.
2. **Strengthen Intergroup Dialogue and Community Engagement:** Government, civil society organizations, traditional institutions, and religious bodies should facilitate regular intergroup dialogue, collaborative community projects, and reconciliation initiatives that encourage meaningful interaction among diverse ethnic, religious, and political groups, thereby building trust and reducing social divisions.
3. **Implement Inclusive and Equitable Governance:** Policymakers should promote transparent, accountable, and inclusive governance by ensuring equitable access to public resources, equal political participation, and fair representation of all social groups. Addressing perceived marginalization is essential for rebuilding citizens' trust and reinforcing social cohesion.
4. **Address Structural Drivers of Polarization:** Governments at all levels should implement policies that reduce poverty, unemployment, and socioeconomic inequalities through inclusive economic development, youth empowerment, and improved access to quality education and social services. Tackling these structural challenges will reduce the conditions that often intensify polarization and social conflict.
5. **Leverage Psychological Research in Public Policy and Media Regulation:** Psychological evidence should inform national policies on peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and social integration. At the same time, government agencies, media organizations, and digital platforms should promote responsible communication, strengthen digital literacy, and discourage misinformation and hate speech that deepen social polarization.

Collectively, these recommendations underscore the need for coordinated psychological, educational, and policy interventions to foster trust, inclusion, and cooperation among Nigeria's diverse populations. Their effective implementation would contribute significantly to strengthening social cohesion and advancing sustainable social development in an increasingly polarized society.

Contribution to Knowledge

This paper contributes to knowledge by providing a psychologically grounded and multidimensional understanding of social cohesion and social development in Nigeria, moving beyond approaches that treat cohesion primarily as a political, economic or institutional concern. It demonstrates that social cohesion is fundamentally shaped by psychological processes such

as social identity, trust, belonging, perceived threat, intergroup attitudes and collective perceptions, which influence how Nigerians relate across ethnic, religious, regional and political boundaries. The paper further contributes by connecting these psychological processes to Nigeria's broader social-development challenges, arguing that persistent polarization can weaken mutual trust, civic cooperation, institutional legitimacy and the sense of shared national belonging required for sustainable development. By integrating conventional forms of polarization with emerging digital manifestations, the study offers a more contemporary explanation of how existing social cleavages are reproduced and intensified in changing communication environments. Besides, the paper by fore-grounding digital polarization and its nuanced dimensions as contemporary drivers of polarization provokes further academic research in this of scholarship. Its findings on the psychological explanation of social cohesion in a polarized society like Nigeria and its implications for social development (especially, the digital dimensions that have gained wide currency in recent times) can form basis for replication and further investigations. Ultimately, the paper advances the proposition that social development and social cohesion are mutually reinforcing processes: meaningful development requires social trust and inclusive belonging, while stronger cohesion provides the psychological and social foundation for collective action, peaceful coexistence and sustainable national development. This integrated perspective provides a useful conceptual basis for rethinking policies and interventions aimed at strengthening Nigeria's social cohesion in an increasingly polarized society.

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