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## **“DIGITAL PEACEBUILDING”: EXAMINING YOUNG WOMEN LEADERS' USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA TO BUILD PEACE IN THE PHILIPPINES**

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### **“Digital Peacebuilding”**

The field of peacebuilding has witnessed significant growth in the utilisation of digital technologies, especially among youth-led organisations in recent years. This emerging practice is referred to as "digital peacebuilding" (Alliance for Peacebuilding, 2023), which is defined as "the use of digital technologies toward a peacebuilding objective, and the use of peacebuilding approaches in response to digital conflict drivers" (Build Up, 2023, p. 5). However, existing literature lacks a comprehensive analysis of how digital peacebuilding plays out in people's everyday lives. To address this gap, a shift from a narrow tool-focused approach to understand the interplay between technology, social practices, and peacebuilding is necessary. This new understanding recognises that technologies are deeply woven into complex social systems, with their impact intricately shaped by power dynamics and existing social practices (Hirblinger et al., 2022; Welch et al., 2015).

### **Young People's Role in Digital Peacebuilding**

Youth have been recognized globally for their significant role in peacebuilding, formalised by the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2250 on Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) (Simpson et al., 2018). However, youth, particularly young women, continue to be excluded and marginalised in peacebuilding efforts (Grizelj & Saleem, 2022; Pruitt, 2021). Current peacebuilding frameworks inadequately address gendered exclusions, neglecting young women's contributions to peace and their nuanced experiences (Pruitt, 2021; UN Women, 2018).

Everyday peace, defined as “the capacity of ordinary people to disrupt violent conflict and forge prosocial relationships in conflict-affected societies” (Mac Ginty, 2014, p. 2), gives platform for marginalised groups, such as youth, to collectively address conflict,

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violence, and exclusion (Berents & McEvoy-Levy, 2015). However, the use of social media to build everyday peace remains unexplored. This paper aims to address these gaps and asks: ***How do young Muslim, Lumad<sup>1</sup>, and Christian women in the Philippines use social media for peacebuilding?***

Through an intersectional feminist lens (Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991), the paper specifically looks at how women with diverse and intersecting social identities (including race, religion, and age) participate in everyday digital peacebuilding in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). BARMM was formally established as part of a peace agreement to end nearly five decades of armed conflict and several years of peace talks between the Philippine government, and several autonomist groups. By investigating young women's digital media practices in building everyday peace, the paper offers valuable insights into various ways technology is used for peacebuilding, young women's understanding of peace, and the representation and negotiation of gender across different conflict settings. A better understanding of young women's contributions to digital peacebuilding also contributes new evidence for policymakers and practitioners to make more informed decisions on how to advance more inclusive and equitable use of digital media to conflict resolution and peace.

### **Examining Digital Peacebuilding Practices on Facebook and TikTok**

I am a young woman and a Christian settler in Mindanao. I am actively engaged in peacebuilding in the region through youth leadership programs, youth peacebuilding dialogues, and peace education for more than a decade through my academic work at Mindanao State University and my leadership role in the Young Women+Leaders for Peace Philippines, an organisation advocating for young women's leadership for peace. It is through this positioning that I examine the digital peacebuilding practices of young women on social media. The empirical data analysed in this article stems from thirty (30) young women leaders, ages 18-30, who identify as, or are descendants of, Muslim, Lumad, and Christian settlers in Mindanao, Southern Philippines, collectively referred to as the *tri-people youth*. These young women are leading peacebuilding initiatives within BARMM or hold leadership roles in youth-led organisations in the region. The data gathered includes 500 social media posts, including audience engagement, of these young women leaders on TikTok and Facebook gathered in the span of five months (December 2023-May2024). Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2023), the study critically examines key issues and themes in women's digital peacebuilding strategies in the Philippines. This paper presents preliminary findings from Phase 1, focusing on social media analysis, while Phase 2, involving *kwentuhan* (talkstory) and co-participatory design workshops with young women, is not included in these initial results.

### **Mobilising non-violent actions, solidarity and care, and 'platform vernaculars' for peacebuilding**

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<sup>1</sup> *Lumad is a Visayan term meaning "native" or "Indigenous" and is the ascribed collective name of the non-moro indigenous peoples of Mindanao.*

Muslim, Lumad, and Christian young women build solidarity through social media to advocate for their representation in formal and informal peace and security decision-making forums, access to peace education and training opportunities, and platforms to network and learn. They seek protection from various forms of violence, including armed conflict and gender-based violence. They strongly oppose those resorting to violence in resolving conflicts and stand in solidarity with victims of war, including those affected by the war in Gaza. Interestingly, each group of women also has specific agendas: Lumad young women focus on mobilising solidarity around land rights and addressing their marginalisation within BARMM, Muslim young women work towards combating anti-Islamic rhetoric, emphasising the peaceful aspects of Islam, and Christian young women prioritise peace education and interfaith dialogue as pathways to peace across sectors. This showcases the heterogeneous conception of peace among these young women and unique experiences and perceptions of violence and insecurity rooted in their diverse and intersecting ethnic and religious identity.

Care is pivotal in their digital peacebuilding, both self and community care. This includes exercising, travelling, socialising with friends, and engaging in mutual aid. Young women also align much of their self-care to spirituality, particularly Muslim young women embracing Islamic teachings to care for themselves and their community. This aligns with existing literature on the role of care, challenging the rigidities of conflict, strengthening social relations, transformative and peaceful outcomes (Vaaitinen et al., 2019). Digital technologies, adept at forging connections and infiltrating intimate daily spaces, are well-suited for nurturing caring relationships (Papacharissi, 2010).

Young women's digital peacebuilding extends beyond the mere use of technology to promote peace and encompasses unique 'platform vernaculars', which Gibbs et al., (2015) define as distinctive combination of styles, grammars, and logics inherent to social media platforms and the ways they are appropriated and performed in practice. For example, preliminary findings suggest young women use TikTok to disseminate information, transforming it into a channel for current affairs updates of the ongoing peace process in BARMM. They also use TikTok and Facebook trends to discuss cultural practices linked to violence. For example, the "Of Course" trend is used by a young Muslim Maranao woman leader to initiate a conversation on *maratabat's* role in clan conflicts. *Maratabat*, integral to Maranao culture, involves personal honour and dignity and can lead to violent retaliation when offended. Such discussions deepen understanding of cultural concepts like *maratabat* and the need for positive transformation. Another trend, "A day in my life", offers insights into their routines, including how they organise community dialogues and capacity-building training in BARMM, providing glimpses into their workplaces and self-care practices as part of their work.

Overall, the paper underscores how young women's peacebuilding efforts are often ignored in formal processes and shows how their contribution to peace via social media is generative. Social media provides them with a vital platform to express their peace agenda, showcasing their everyday peace efforts and nuanced views on violence and insecurity. Their diverse and intersecting identities enrich broader peacebuilding discussions, contributing to national and international peace and security agendas.

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