



Impact of Social Media on Public Trust in Government Crisis Communication in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Background: Social media has emerged as a critical channel for government communication in the digital era, particularly during crises when timely information, public reassurance, and trust-building are essential. In Nigeria, recurrent national emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the #EndSARS protests have intensified government reliance on social media platforms for crisis response. However, public trust in government communication remains contested, especially in environments characterised by misinformation, political scepticism, and heightened public scrutiny.

Objective: This study examined the role of Social Media on Public Trust in Government Crisis Communication in Nigeria, using the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) as the guiding theoretical framework.

Method: The study adopted a content analysis research design. Official social media posts and public comments from verified Nigerian government accounts on Twitter (X) and Facebook were analysed. Data were drawn from two major crisis contexts: the COVID-19 pandemic and the #EndSARS protests. Government messages were examined alongside audience reactions to assess communication strategies, public sentiment, and indicators of trust.

Results: Findings revealed notable differences in public reactions across crisis contexts. Government crisis communication during the #EndSARS protests attracted predominantly negative public responses (60%), reflecting distrust and perceived communication failure. In contrast, communication during the COVID-19 pandemic generated more balanced reactions, with 40% positive and 30% negative responses. Overall, the effectiveness of government crisis messaging was strongly influenced by message consistency, transparency, and perceived credibility.

Conclusion: The study concludes that while social media offers significant opportunities for effective government crisis communication in Nigeria, its success in fostering public trust depends mainly on how messages are framed, delivered, and sustained. Inconsistencies, delayed responses, and credibility gaps undermine public confidence, particularly during politically sensitive crises.

Unique Contribution: This study provides empirical evidence into the differential impact of government social media communication across distinct crisis types in Nigeria, highlighting how public trust is shaped not merely by platform use but by strategic communication choices within crisis contexts.

Key Recommendation: The study recommends that government agencies adopt more proactive, transparent, and responsive digital crisis communication strategies. Continuous engagement, prompt clarification of misinformation, and trust-centred messaging are essential for strengthening public confidence in government during future crises.

Keywords: Crisis Communication, Social Media, Nigerian Government, Digital Communication



INTRODUCTION

Social media has become an essential instrument for government communication in an era marked by rapid technical breakthroughs and the growth of digital platforms, especially during emergencies (Aboualola et al., 2023; Ezike et al., 2016). Governments worldwide use social media platforms to interact with citizens during emergencies, control public opinion, and distribute timely information (Saroj & Pal, 2020). Social media is increasingly important in shaping public opinion and public trust in governmental institutions in Nigeria, where governance is frequently beset by issues such as political unpredictability, economic downturns, and security concerns (Yagboyaju & Akinola, 2019).

Strategic information distribution is part of government crisis communication, which aims to reduce fear, minimise ambiguity, and encourage public compliance during crises. Preserving public confidence necessitates responsiveness, accuracy, and transparency in crisis communication (Coombs et al., 2019; Nwafor & Odoemelam, 2016). According to Jin et al. (2022), social media's interactive features allow government organisations to connect directly with the public, dispelling false information and offering real-time updates. For government organisations in Nigeria, social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and X have become essential resources, especially during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, terrorist attacks, and civil unrest.

Public trust in the government is a key factor in determining the efficacy of policies, especially during times of crisis. Perceptions of government accountability, competency, and openness constitute the foundation of trust (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2014). People are more inclined to follow instructions and support crisis management initiatives when they believe government communications are timely and dependable. Public trust is undermined by inconsistent messaging, a lack of transparency, and perceived inefficiencies in government, resulting in scepticism and non-compliance (Van der Meer & Jin, 2020). In Nigeria, attempts to use social media as an effective crisis communication tool are hampered by a long-standing mistrust of government institutions stemming from political unrest, corruption, and poor service delivery (Hassan et al., 2024).

Empirical studies on social media and crisis communication have shown that governments can increase public trust by implementing strategic communication techniques that prioritise involvement, accuracy, and openness (Lovari et al., 2020; Aligwe et al., 2016). The Nigerian government has used social media to dispel false information, issue health alerts, and implement public health measures during emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Rabilu & Nasidi, 2021). However, opinions on how effective these initiatives have been are divided; detractors contend that censorship, delayed answers, and inconsistent messaging have all led to public distrust (Egbunike, 2023; Nwafor Et al., 2019). Nigerians' trust in the government's commitment to open and honest communication has been damaged by government-imposed limitations on using social media for crisis communication, such as the 2021 Twitter ban (Gold et al., 2023).

Unverified information may spread quickly on social media, undermining official narratives and leaving the public confused and alarmed (Tandoc Jr, 2019). Social media disinformation poses



significant risks to public health and security in Nigeria, across a wide range of digital literacy levels. This is especially true during emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic and the End SARS demonstrations (Shu et al., 2020). Two-way communication between citizens and governments has improved public trust and compliance with crisis orders (Lee & VanDyke, 2015). However, social media's efficacy as a vehicle for fostering trust hinges on the government's capacity to communicate consistently, openly, and promptly. While prior studies have examined social media use in crisis communication and public trust largely in Western contexts, or have focused on single crisis events, institutional communication, or general media effects, limited empirical attention has been given to how government social media communication strategies differentially shape public trust across distinct crisis types within the Nigerian context, particularly from the perspective of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT).

This study aims to examine the impact of social media on public trust in government crisis communication in Nigeria. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. analyse the nature and patterns of Nigerian government crisis communication on social media platforms (Facebook and X) during the COVID-19 pandemic and the #EndSARS protests;
2. examine the dominant crisis response strategies adopted by the Nigerian government on social media within the framework of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT);
3. assess public sentiment and trust indicators in response to government social media communication during the selected crisis events.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Government Crisis Communication

Government crisis communication is the deliberate sharing of information by public officials to manage crises, reduce risks, and preserve public confidence. According to Coombs (2015), successful crisis response requires honest communication, timely updates, and a clear message. Governments use crisis communication to respond to economic downturns, pandemics, catastrophes, and security concerns. Proactive actions, real-time information, and post-crisis assessments are all components of an effective government crisis communication plan. It also entails cooperation with stakeholders, specialists, and the media to increase the message's credibility. Effective crisis communication relies heavily on audience segmentation, the function of spokespersons, and adherence to ethical communication norms. Governments that use participatory and open communication techniques during emergencies see increased public trust and compliance (Liu et al., 2016).

Role of Social Media in Modern Crisis Communication

Social media's ability to provide real-time information sharing, public interaction, and feedback systems has completely changed crisis communication. To quickly distribute crisis-related information, governments, emergency response teams, and organisations rely heavily on platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and X. According to Sanusi et al. (2025), social media's



accessibility and immediacy make it invaluable in times of crisis because they allow governments to control public perception and combat disinformation successfully.

Social media facilitates direct communication between citizens and authorities, which promotes responsiveness and confidence. However, strategic digital communication planning is necessary due to issues such as the proliferation of false news, information overload, and the potential for panic arising from unconfirmed stories (Nasidi et al., 2022; Aligwe et al., 2017). Research indicates that government crisis communication is more successful when social media monitoring and crisis mapping are used (Palen & Hughes, 2018). Social media's role in crisis communication underscores the need for governments to develop digital literacy initiatives and crisis response plans that leverage its strengths while mitigating its drawbacks.

Public Trust in Government During Crises

A key factor impacting compliance, collaboration, and the effectiveness of crisis management is public trust in the government during crises. Effective risk communication techniques, openness, and credibility are the foundations of trust. Governments are more likely to maintain the public's trust if they provide timely, reliable, and consistent information (Mansoor, 2021). Many factors, including media independence, government stability, and prior crisis management experiences, influence public trust. For instance, governments that used scientific reasoning, open communication, and compassionate messaging during health emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, saw increased public trust (Hyland-Wood et al., 2021). However, disinformation, contradictory statements, and a lack of responsibility lead to mistrust and decreased adherence to crisis protocols. To preserve confidence and promote cooperation in times of crisis, governments must continually gauge public opinion and adjust their communication strategies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by Coombs (2007), provides a framework for understanding how organisations, including governments, should respond to crises to protect their reputations and maintain public trust. SCCT emphasises that crisis response strategies should be tailored to the type of crisis, stakeholder perceptions, and the degree of responsibility attributed to the organisation. Coombs categorises SCCT crises into three clusters: victim, accidental, and preventable. Victim crises occur when the government is seen as a victim of external forces (e.g., natural disasters, terrorist attacks), accidental crises stem from unintentional incidents (e.g., technical failures), and preventable crises involve deliberate or negligent actions that result in harm (e.g., corruption scandals).

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is highly relevant to the study of the role of social media in government crisis communication and public trust, as it provides a structured framework for understanding how governments can effectively communicate during crises to maintain public confidence. SCCT categorises crises into three types: victim, accidental, and preventable. Each crisis type requires a different communication strategy, and social media serves as a powerful tool for governments to tailor their responses accordingly.



Public trust is largely influenced by how stakeholders perceive a government's response to a crisis. SCCT emphasises the need for crisis communication to align with public expectations, and social media plays a critical role in shaping these perceptions. Governments can counter misinformation and reassure the public by providing timely and accurate information. Moreover, SCCT outlines three primary response strategies: denial, diminish, and rebuild (Leung et al., 2023). Through social media, governments can implement these strategies effectively by addressing concerns, clarifying facts, and demonstrating corrective actions when necessary.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed content analysis to examine how the Nigerian government used Facebook and Twitter (X) for crisis communication during the #EndSARS protests and the COVID-19 pandemic and how these efforts influenced public trust. Content analysis is a systematic method for analysing communication messages, enabling an in-depth evaluation of government crisis communication strategies, public reactions, and trust levels. The study focuses on official government social media pages, including Twitter (X) accounts such as @NigeriaGov, @FMHDS, and @NCDCgov, as well as the Facebook pages of the Federal Ministry of Information & Culture and the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC). Relevant hashtags and keywords, such as #EndSARS, #COVID19Nigeria, and #StaySafeNigeria, were used to analyse posts. The data collection retrieved 200 social media posts, including government announcements, public responses, and engagement patterns. The selected posts cover the peak crisis periods, specifically from October to December 2020 for the #EndSARS protests and March 2020 to December 2022 for the COVID-19 pandemic. Only posts directly related to government crisis communication were included. The analysis employed thematic analysis to categorise posts into key themes, including government transparency, crisis response strategies, public trust, misinformation, and citizen engagement. Sentiment analysis was employed for the public trust responses.

RESULTS

Thematic Analysis of Government Crisis Communication Posts

This section presents a thematic analysis of Nigerian government crisis communication on Twitter (X) and Facebook, focusing on the #EndSARS protests (2020) and the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022). The analysis examines key themes, messaging strategies, and public responses to these official communications. A total of 200 messages were reviewed during the peak crisis periods.



Table 1: Thematic Analysis

Theme	Example Post
Transparency and Information Sharing	"The Nigerian government is committed to police reforms. A panel has been set up to address citizen concerns. #EndSARS" (<i>Twitter, Oct 2020</i>)
	"We have procured additional COVID-19 test kits to ensure early detection and safety for all Nigerians." (<i>Facebook, Aug 2020</i>)
Denial and Damage Control	"There were no fatalities at Lekki Toll Gate. Reports are exaggerated." (<i>Twitter, Oct 2020</i>)
	"Nigeria has one of the best COVID-19 response strategies in Africa." (<i>Twitter, Dec 2020</i>)
Public Engagement Efforts	"Join our live session with NCDC officials to discuss COVID-19 vaccine safety." (<i>Facebook, March 2021</i>)
	"We are launching a new digital platform for youth engagement. Your voice matters! #EndSARSDialogue" (<i>Twitter, Nov 2020</i>)
National Unity and Peace Messaging	"Let's stay united and build a stronger Nigeria. Violence is not the answer. #OneNigeria." (<i>Twitter, Nov 2020</i>)
	"We must fight this virus together. Protect yourself and others. #StrongerTogether." (<i>Facebook, April 2020</i>)
Health and Safety Directives	"COVID-19 is real. Protect yourself and loved ones by following NCDC guidelines." (<i>Facebook, July 2020</i>)
	"The second wave of COVID-19 is here. Wear a mask, wash your hands, and maintain social distance." (<i>Twitter, Jan 2021</i>)
Law Enforcement Justification	"Security forces acted professionally to restore order during the protests." (<i>Facebook, Oct 2020</i>)
	"Curfews are necessary to protect lives and properties. Please comply with the directives." (<i>Twitter, Oct 2020</i>)
Misinformation Management	"Beware of fake news! Not all information online is true. Follow only verified government sources." (<i>Facebook, Nov 2020</i>)
	"COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective. Do not listen to misinformation. #GetVaccinated" (<i>Twitter, May 2021</i>)

Table 1 categorises the Nigerian government's social media communication during the #EndSARS protests (2020) and the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022) into different themes. The table highlights the government's various approaches to managing public perception, controlling narratives, and maintaining order during crises. The effectiveness of these strategies varied significantly, depending on the context and the level of public trust in government institutions.

The Nigerian government attempted to project transparency and credibility by sharing updates on police reforms and COVID-19 management. For instance, a post on Twitter in October 2020 stated: *"The Nigerian government is committed to police reforms. A panel has been set up to address citizen concerns. #EndSARS."* Similarly, during the pandemic, the government shared health updates, such as *"We have procured additional COVID-19 test kits to ensure early*



detection and safety for all Nigerians." (Facebook, August 2020). These messages were intended to build trust and demonstrate accountability, but their impact varied. In the case of #EndSARS, many Nigerians did not believe in the government's commitment to police reforms, given the long history of unfulfilled promises regarding police brutality. Consequently, these messages were often met with scepticism and frustration. However, during COVID-19, public health messages were better received because they provided concrete, actionable information that directly affected people's safety.

In moments of crisis, the government sometimes resorted to denying events or downplaying their severity. For example, following the Lekki Toll Gate shooting, a government Twitter post in October 2020 stated: *"There were no fatalities at Lekki Toll Gate. Reports are exaggerated."* Similarly, regarding the pandemic, a Twitter post in December 2020 claimed: *"Nigeria has one of the best COVID-19 response strategies in Africa."* These forms of communication backfired significantly during the End of SARS, as multiple eyewitness accounts and independent media reports contradicted the government's claim. This further fueled public distrust and resentment, as citizens perceived these messages as deliberate misinformation. During COVID-19, while the claim about Nigeria's response strategy was not outright false, it failed to acknowledge the country's healthcare limitations, leading to a mixed public reaction. In both cases, downplaying public concerns led to criticism rather than reassurance.

The government also attempted to engage directly with the public to address concerns and correct misinformation. For example, during the pandemic, the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) hosted interactive sessions, such as *"Join our live session with NCDC officials to discuss COVID-19 vaccine safety."* (Facebook, March 2021). Similarly, during the protests, the government announced an online dialogue initiative: *"We are launching a new digital platform for youth engagement. Your voice matters! #EndSARSDialogue."* (Twitter, November 2020). The effectiveness of these efforts varied. COVID-19 engagement sessions were well-received because they provided credible health information from experts. However, the End SARS dialogue initiative was met with suspicion, as many protesters believed it was a delay tactic rather than a genuine attempt to address police brutality. This highlights the importance of timing and sincerity in engagement efforts. Citizens are more likely to participate when they perceive the government's intentions as genuine and solution-oriented.

During both crises, the government promoted messages of national unity and non-violence. For example, a Twitter post in November 2020 urged: *"Let's stay united and build a stronger Nigeria. Violence is not the answer. #OneNigeria."* Similarly, during the pandemic, a Facebook post in April 2020 read: *"We must fight this virus together. Protect yourself and others. #StrongerTogether."* These messages aimed to pacify tensions and encourage collective responsibility. However, their effectiveness depended on public perception of the government's actions. In the context of COVID-19, unity messaging was generally well-received because it aligned with global health campaigns promoting collective action against the virus. However, during the End SARS protests, unity messaging was perceived as dismissive; protesters felt the



government was using "peace" narratives to avoid addressing their demands for justice and accountability.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the government focused on public health awareness and behavioural directives. A Facebook post from July 2020 stated: *"COVID-19 is real. Protect yourself and loved ones by following NCDC guidelines."* Similarly, in January 2021, a Twitter post warned: *"The second wave of COVID-19 is here. Wear a mask, wash your hands, and maintain social distance."* These messages were critical to promoting health and safety, and they generally achieved higher acceptance than other government communication strategies. However, enforcement inconsistencies (e.g., government officials not following guidelines themselves) led to some scepticism and non-compliance among citizens.

The government posted messages that framed law enforcement as necessary for maintaining order. For instance, in October 2020, a Facebook post stated: *"Security forces acted professionally to restore order during the protests."* Similarly, a Twitter post from the same period read: *"Curfews are necessary to protect lives and properties. Please comply with the directives."* This approach had negative consequences during the End SARS protests, as many citizens had already witnessed police brutality firsthand (Ebele & Elekwa, 2023). The attempt to portray security forces as professional and justified in their actions contradicted public experiences, further deepening distrust. In contrast, COVID-19-related security measures, such as lockdowns and curfews, were better tolerated because people understood their necessity in controlling the virus's spread. However, harsh enforcement tactics sometimes led to a backlash, particularly when security agents were accused of abusing their power.

The government also used social media to combat misinformation and discourage fake news. For example, a Facebook post from November 2020 warned: *"Beware of fake news! Not all information online is true. Follow only verified government sources."* Similarly, a Twitter post from May 2021 encouraged vaccine adoption: *"COVID-19 vaccines are safe and effective. Do not listen to misinformation. #GetVaccinated."* The effectiveness of these messages depended on the level of public trust in government sources. During COVID-19, misinformation management was relatively successful, as citizens saw a global effort to combat fake news about vaccines and the virus. However, during the End of SARS, warnings about misinformation were seen as an attempt to suppress dissent. Protesters accused the government of using the term "fake news" to discredit legitimate concerns and reports.

Sentiment Analysis of Public Responses

Sentiment analysis of public responses to government crisis communication on Facebook and X revealed how citizens reacted to official messages during the End SARS protests (2020) and the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022). Public reactions were classified into positive, neutral, and negative sentiments.

Table 2: Public Response Analysis

Crisis Event	Positive (%)	Neutral (%)	Negative (%)
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#ENDSARS (2020)	15%	25%	60%
COVID-19 (2020-2022)	40%	30%	30%

Table 2 analyses public reception to the Nigerian government's crisis communication on social media during two significant events: the End SARS protests and the COVID-19 pandemic. The data indicate that only 15% of responses to government crisis communication during End SARS were positive, 60% were negative, and 25% were neutral. This overwhelming negative reception highlights the deep-rooted distrust in the government's handling of the protests. Several factors contributed to this outcome.

The government's denial of police brutality and violence played a significant role in public dissatisfaction. Among the most controversial posts, *"There were no fatalities at Lekki Toll Gate* and another one, *Reports are exaggerated"* drew intense backlash from citizens, activists, and international observers. Independent reports and eyewitness accounts contradicted this official statement, making the government's stance appear misleading and untrustworthy. Instead of reassuring the public, such posts amplified existing frustrations and led to increased online activism, both nationally and globally.

The government's attempt at damage control and pacification through posts like *"Let's stay united and build a stronger Nigeria, violence is not the answer, #OneNigeria all failed* to resonate with the public. While national unity messaging is often effective in times of crisis, in this case, it was perceived as an attempt to silence genuine concerns rather than address the root issues of police brutality. Many young Nigerians, the primary drivers of the protests, viewed these messages as dismissive and lacking concrete action. Even the public engagement efforts, such as the announcement of an #EndSARSDialogue platform, were met with skepticism. Protesters saw this as a delay tactic rather than a genuine engagement effort. The failure to follow up with tangible reforms further reinforced distrust, leading to the overwhelmingly negative reception of government communication during this period.

The reception of government communication during the COVID-19 pandemic was more balanced. 40% of responses were positive, indicating that the government's public health crisis communication was more successful than its handling of the End SARS protests. The negative reception was also lower, at 30%, with the remaining 30% neutral. One key reason for this more favourable response was the nature of the crisis. Unlike End SARS, which involved direct conflict between citizens and the government, COVID-19 was a global health emergency that required cooperation from both the government and the people. This context made public health messaging more acceptable. The government's transparency in health updates contributed to the higher positive reception. Posts such as *"We have procured additional COVID-19 test kits to ensure early detection and safety for all Nigerians"* were seen as proactive and informative. These messages aligned with global health campaigns and were less politically charged, making them more credible and widely accepted.



Public engagement efforts during the pandemic were more successful than those during the End SARS protests. The government used social media to organise Facebook Live Questions and Answers (Q&A) sessions with health experts, such as the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), where citizens could ask questions about vaccines and COVID-19 safety measures. Posts like "*Join our live session with NCDC officials to discuss COVID-19 vaccine safety.*" (Facebook, March 2021) helped counter misinformation and build public trust in the government's health initiatives.

However, there was still some skepticism, with 30% of responses negative. This was primarily due to historical distrust in government institutions, which affected public perception of vaccine safety and the enforcement of COVID-19 restrictions. Some people believed that the government was using the pandemic as a means to control the population or justify unnecessary spending. Others criticised the poor enforcement of lockdowns, pointing out inconsistencies in policy implementation, such as restrictions for ordinary citizens while government officials continued holding large gatherings.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results, the study concludes that the effectiveness of government social media crisis communication in Nigeria is not determined by platform availability, but by the credibility, transparency, and contextual appropriateness of communication strategies adopted. Government use of social media can foster public trust during crises perceived as external and non-political, such as the COVID-19 pandemic; however, it becomes ineffective and even counterproductive during politically sensitive crises where the government is perceived as responsible, as demonstrated during the #EndSARS protests.

The study further concludes that crisis type and responsibility attribution are central to public trust outcomes, consistent with the assumptions of Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). In a context marked by historical governance deficits and public scepticism, crisis communication strategies that rely on denial, message control, or symbolic engagement are unlikely to sustain trust. Instead, public trust is contingent on timely acknowledgement of public concerns, consistency of messaging, and perceived sincerity of government responses.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these conclusions, the study makes the following recommendations:

1. Government agencies should prioritise transparent and proactive disclosure of accurate, real-time information during crises, rather than relying on denial or damage-control strategies that contradict independent reports and eyewitness accounts.
2. Crisis communication on social media should move beyond one-way information dissemination to genuine two-way engagement, where public concerns are acknowledged and addressed promptly through interactive communication mechanisms.
3. Dedicated and professionally trained digital crisis response teams should be established within government agencies to monitor public sentiment, respond to misinformation in real time, and maintain message consistency across platforms.



4. To address the challenge of misinformation, government agencies should collaborate with fact-checking organisations and invest in digital literacy programmes that enable citizens to identify credible information sources during crises.
5. Security and law-enforcement-related messaging during crises should be framed to acknowledge public grievances, emphasise accountability, and promote dialogue rather than defensive justification, in order to prevent further erosion of public trust.

Ethical clearance

Ethical consent was obtained from the participants in this study. They were made to understand that the exercise was purely for academic purposes, and their participation was voluntary.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Authors' Contributions.

Qaribu Yahaya Nasidi conceived the study, including the design; Bishir Bala collated the data; Almansur Ado Sani handled the analysis and interpretation; and Ahmed Abubakar handled the initial manuscript. All authors have critically reviewed and approved the final draft, and are responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.

Data availability statement

The data can be obtained upon request from the corresponding Author.

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