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**Beyond Land and Politics: Social Stigma as a Hidden Catalyst  
of Communal Conflict in Ejisu Municipality, Ashanti Region,  
Ghana**



**Lawrence Bosiwah, Collins Obeng Amankwah**

## Beyond Land and Politics: Social Stigma as a Hidden Catalyst of Communal Conflict in Ejisu Municipality, Ashanti Region, Ghana

 Lawrence Bosiwah<sup>1\*</sup>,  Collins Obeng Amankwah<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Department of Ghanaian Languages and Linguistics, University of Cape Coast, Ghana



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### Abstract

**Purpose:** This study examines social stigma as a driver of interpersonal and communal conflict in Ejisu. While conflict in Ghanaian communities is frequently explained through economic inequality, land disputes, chieftaincy succession, and political competition, this study argues that stigma manifested through social labelling, exclusion, and identity-based discrimination constitutes an important yet underexplored source of social tension. The study investigates the dominant forms of stigma in Ejisu, examines how stigmatization contributes to conflict, and identifies strategies for promoting social cohesion and peaceful coexistence.

**Methodology:** The study adopted a mixed-methods approach informed by Social Identity Theory and Labelling Theory. Data were collected from 300 participants, comprising 250 survey respondents and 50 participants engaged in interviews and focus group discussions. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis, while qualitative data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's framework.

**Findings:** The findings reveal that ethnic and lineage-based stigma, socio-economic stigma, and occupational stigma are the dominant forms of stigmatization within Ejisu. Ethnic and lineage-based labelling, particularly the indigene-settler distinction, emerged as the most significant source of social tension and communal conflict. The study further found that unemployed youth, artisans, traders, and migrant settlers frequently experience exclusion, stereotyping, and diminished social recognition. These experiences foster resentment, weaken social cohesion, and increase the likelihood of interpersonal hostility and group-based conflict. The findings also demonstrate that stigmatized

individuals often engage in defensive resistance and reactive behaviour as mechanisms for reclaiming dignity, recognition, and social legitimacy. The study contributes to the literature on conflict and social exclusion by demonstrating that stigma operates as both a psychological and sociological mechanism underlying communal conflict. By integrating Social Identity Theory and Labelling Theory, the study advances understanding of how identity, recognition, and social belonging shape conflict dynamics in peri-urban African communities.

**Recommendations:** The study recommends inclusive governance structures that enhance the participation of marginalized groups in community decision-making. It further advocates community-based sensitization programmes, stigma-sensitive conflict resolution mechanisms, youth empowerment initiatives, and public campaigns aimed at challenging exclusionary narratives and stereotypes. Strengthening social inclusion and fostering a shared sense of citizenship are essential for sustainable peace and community development.

**Keywords:** *Social Stigma, Communal Conflict, Social Exclusion, Labelling, Social Identity, Indigene-Settler Relations, Ghana*

**JEL Classification codes:** *D74 – Conflict; Conflict Resolution, Alliances; Revolutions, J15 – Economics of Minorities, Races, Indigenous Peoples, and Immigrants, Non-labour Discrimination, J71 – Discrimination, Z13 – Economic Sociology; Economic Anthropology, Social and Economic Stratification, O15 – Human Resources, Human Development, Income Distribution, Migration*

## INTRODUCTION

### Background to the Study

Social stigma remains one of the most enduring mechanisms through which societies create and maintain social hierarchies, regulate group membership, and define acceptable forms of identity and behaviour. Across cultures and historical periods, individuals and groups perceived as different from dominant social norms have frequently been subjected to discrimination, exclusion, stereotyping, and social devaluation (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001). Although stigma is often examined as an individual psychological experience, contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes it as a structural and relational phenomenon embedded within social institutions, cultural practices, and power relations (Hatzenbuehler, 2016; Tyler & Slater, 2018).

Goffman (1963) conceptualized stigma as an attribute that deeply discredits an individual, reducing them from a whole and accepted person to one who is socially discounted. Subsequent scholars have expanded this understanding by arguing that stigma operates through processes of labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination within contexts characterized by unequal power relations (Link & Phelan, 2001; Pescosolido & Martin, 2015). Stigma therefore extends beyond personal prejudice and functions as a social mechanism through which communities define belonging, regulate social conduct, and determine access to resources and recognition.

Increasingly, scholars argue that stigma should not merely be viewed as a social condition but also as a dynamic process capable of generating conflict. The progression from stigma to conflict often occurs in stages. At the initial stage, stigma manifests as **latent conflict**, characterized by social distancing, internalized resentment, discrimination, exclusion from community decision-making, restricted access to opportunities, and persistent experiences of humiliation. Although these forms of exclusion may not immediately produce open confrontation, they gradually weaken trust, social cohesion, and individuals' sense of belonging. Over time, accumulated grievances create conditions under which latent tensions may evolve into manifest conflict, expressed through verbal confrontations, public protests, aggressive exclusion, interpersonal violence, communal disputes, or other overt forms of social contestation. Thus, stigma functions not simply as a marker of difference but as a catalyst that transforms hidden social tensions into observable conflict when grievances remain unresolved (Link & Phelan, 2001; Tyler & Slater, 2018; Wilkins, Harnett, & Lawson, 2020).

The relationship between stigma and conflict has therefore attracted growing attention within sociology, social psychology, peace studies, and development studies. Scholars argue that social stigma undermines social cohesion by fostering divisions between dominant and marginalized groups, thereby creating conditions that facilitate hostility, resentment, and social confrontation (Böhm, Voss, & Anic, 2019; Wilkins, Harnett, & Lawson, 2020). Where particular groups are persistently categorized as inferior, illegitimate, dangerous, or socially undesirable, exclusion becomes institutionalized, increasing the likelihood of resistance, social fragmentation, and conflict escalation.

The theoretical connection between stigma and conflict can be understood through Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and Labelling Theory (Becker, 1963). Social Identity Theory posits that individuals derive a significant portion of their self-concept from group membership and tend to favour members of their own groups while discriminating against perceived outsiders. Such distinctions often generate ingroup solidarity and outgroup hostility, particularly where social recognition, political influence, and economic resources are contested

(Hogg & Abrams, 2017). Labelling Theory similarly explains how persistent negative labels become internalized by both those who apply them and those who receive them, reinforcing exclusion, shaping social identities, and increasing the probability of conflictual interactions (Becker, 1963; Pinter et al., 2017).

Within the African context, stigma frequently intersects with ethnicity, kinship, migration status, occupation, religion, and socio-economic standing. Several studies have demonstrated that individuals identified as strangers, migrants, minorities, or socially disadvantaged persons often experience varying forms of exclusion that undermine their participation in community life (Bukari & Kuusaana, 2015; Adinkrah, 2015). In many African communities, social recognition remains closely linked to ancestry, lineage, and traditional authority structures, creating distinctions between those considered legitimate members of the community and those perceived as outsiders.

In Ghana, social relations continue to be shaped by ethnic identities, kinship systems, traditional authority structures, and socio-economic inequalities. Existing studies reveal that migrants, unemployed youth, petty traders, artisans, and economically disadvantaged groups often encounter stereotypes portraying them as socially inferior, irresponsible, criminal, or less deserving of community recognition (Yeboah & Adjei, 2018; Sackey, 2015). Such stereotypes influence access to resources, participation in local governance, and opportunities for social integration.

These dynamics are particularly evident within peri-urban communities experiencing rapid demographic and socio-economic transformation. Peri-urban areas are characterized by increasing migration, population growth, commercialization of land, economic competition, and expanding social diversity, all of which intensify struggles over belonging, legitimacy, and identity (Owusu, 2013; Songsore, 2017). In such contexts, social stigma increasingly serves as a mechanism of social control through which dominant groups regulate access to community resources, political participation, social recognition, and local opportunities by distinguishing insiders from outsiders.

Ejisu presents a particularly appropriate setting for examining these dynamics because of its ongoing transition from a predominantly rural community governed largely through traditional authority structures to a rapidly urbanizing municipality characterized by the coexistence of customary leadership and formal administrative governance. Its incorporation into the expanding Greater Kumasi metropolitan area has accelerated migration, land development, commercial activities, and population diversification. While traditional institutions continue to exercise considerable influence over questions of identity, land ownership, and community membership, modern administrative structures increasingly shape governance, planning, and service delivery. This coexistence of traditional and formal governance systems has produced new negotiations over belonging, legitimacy, and access to resources.

Within this transitional environment, stigma becomes an important instrument through which both formal and informal social actors negotiate power, maintain social boundaries, and regulate community membership. Distinctions between indigenes and settlers, wealthy and poor households, employed and unemployed youth, and established families and recent migrants increasingly influence access to social networks, community participation, economic opportunities, and local decision-making. These processes create conditions under which latent forms of exclusion and resentment may progressively develop into manifest interpersonal and communal conflicts when marginalized groups challenge existing patterns of social control.

Understanding how stigma evolves from subtle social exclusion into overt conflict within Ejisu's changing governance and socio-economic landscape is therefore essential for strengthening social cohesion, promoting inclusive local governance, and supporting sustainable peace in rapidly urbanizing Ghanaian communities. **Statement of the Problem**

Conflict remains a persistent challenge in many Ghanaian communities and has traditionally been examined through factors such as land disputes, chieftaincy succession struggles, political competition, migration, and economic inequality (Tonah, 2012; Ayee et al., 2011). While these factors provide important explanations for the occurrence of conflict, they do not operate in isolation. Rather, many of these disputes are embedded within broader social processes through which particular individuals and groups are labelled, stereotyped, marginalized, or denied legitimate membership within their communities. Such processes of stigmatization frequently provide the social justification through which competition over land, political authority, and community resources becomes legitimized and sustained.

Emerging scholarship therefore suggests that conflicts are not driven solely by material interests but also by struggles over identity, dignity, recognition, legitimacy, and belonging (Honneth, 1995; Wilkins et al., 2020). Social stigma contributes to these struggles by constructing symbolic boundaries between "insiders" and "outsiders," "indigenes" and "settlers," or "legitimate" and "illegitimate" community members. These labels shape how individuals and groups are perceived, influence access to opportunities and decision-making, and reinforce unequal power relations. Consequently, stigma often serves as the social mechanism through which grievances are justified, discrimination normalized, and exclusion transformed into interpersonal and communal conflict.

Within Ghana, studies have documented the exclusion of migrants, youth, occupational groups, and economically disadvantaged populations (Bukari & Kuusaana, 2015; Adinkrah, 2015; Yeboah & Adjei, 2018). Likewise, research on land governance, chieftaincy succession, political contestation, and communal disputes has acknowledged the importance of identity and belonging in shaping conflict dynamics. However, these studies have generally treated stigma as a peripheral issue rather than examining how processes of labelling, stereotyping, and social exclusion actively reinforce and legitimize such conflicts. As a result, insufficient attention has been paid to stigma as an underlying social mechanism that sustains many disputes commonly understood as political, economic, or land-related.

This gap is particularly evident in rapidly urbanizing peri-urban municipalities such as Ejisu, where increasing migration, demographic change, commercialization of land, and the coexistence of traditional authority and formal administrative governance have intensified negotiations over identity, legitimacy, and community membership. Within these changing social environments, identity-based labelling, lineage-based exclusion, occupational stereotypes, and socio-economic stigmatization may shape how conflicts emerge, escalate, and are sustained. Yet empirical evidence explaining these relationships remains limited.

Furthermore, conflict prevention and peacebuilding interventions in Ghana have largely emphasized legal adjudication, mediation, political negotiation, and security responses. Although these approaches address the immediate manifestations of conflict, they often pay insufficient attention to the social processes of stigmatization that normalize exclusion, reinforce mistrust, and justify discrimination against particular groups. Without understanding how stigma underpins many forms of communal conflict, interventions aimed at promoting social cohesion and sustainable peace are likely to address symptoms rather than underlying causes.

This study therefore seeks to address this empirical and conceptual gap by examining the role of social stigma in the emergence and escalation of interpersonal and communal conflict in Ejisu Municipality. Rather than treating stigma as separate from land, political, or chieftaincy disputes, the study investigates how stigmatizing narratives and practices shape perceptions of legitimacy, belonging, and entitlement, thereby providing the social justification through which conflicts are initiated, sustained, and intensified. Specifically, the study identifies the dominant forms of stigma within the municipality, explores the experiences of stigmatized groups, and analyses the mechanisms through which stigma contributes to conflict dynamics in a rapidly urbanizing Ghanaian community.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To investigate how social stigma contributes to interpersonal and communal conflict in Ejisu.
2. To identify the major forms of social stigma prevalent within the municipality.
3. To examine the lived experiences of stigmatized individuals and groups in Ejisu.
4. To propose strategies for reducing social stigma and promoting peaceful coexistence within the municipality.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study contributes to both theory and practice. Theoretically, it advances scholarly understanding of the relationship between stigma, identity, and conflict by integrating Social Identity Theory and Labelling Theory within the context of communal relations in Ghana. In doing so, it broadens existing conflict literature beyond dominant economic and political explanations and highlights the importance of psychological and sociological factors in conflict formation.

Empirically, the study fills an important gap in Ghanaian scholarship by providing evidence on how stigma operates as a driver of interpersonal and communal conflict in a peri-urban municipality. The findings contribute to the growing literature on social exclusion, identity politics, and community conflict in Africa.

Practically, the study provides useful insights for the Ejisu Municipal Assembly, traditional authorities, civil society organizations, peacebuilding institutions, and development practitioners. Understanding the relationship between stigma and conflict can assist stakeholders in designing interventions that promote inclusion, social justice, and peaceful coexistence.

The study is also significant within the broader context of Ghana's urbanization process. As peri-urban communities continue to experience increasing migration, social diversification, and economic transformation, understanding the role of stigma in shaping social relations becomes critical for achieving sustainable development, community resilience, and national cohesion.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Conceptual Framework**

#### **Conceptualizing Social Stigma**

Social stigma is a multidimensional social process through which individuals or groups are devalued, discredited, and marginalized based on attributes perceived to deviate from socially accepted norms. The concept gained prominence through the seminal work of Goffman (1963),

who defined stigma as an attribute that transforms a person from a socially accepted individual into one who is socially discredited. According to Goffman, stigma functions as a mechanism of social categorization that creates distinctions between "normal" and "abnormal" members of society.

Contemporary scholars have expanded this perspective by emphasizing the structural and institutional dimensions of stigma. Link and Phelan (2001) argue that stigma involves a sequence of interconnected processes, including labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination operating within contexts of unequal power relations. Similarly, Pescosolido and Martin (2015) contend that stigma should not be viewed merely as an individual attitude but as a social system embedded within institutions, cultural norms, and public discourse.

Recent scholarship further conceptualizes stigma as a mechanism of social control that regulates access to resources, opportunities, social recognition, and community membership (Hatzenbuehler, 2016; Tyler & Slater, 2018). Through stigmatization, dominant groups construct symbolic boundaries that define who belongs, who exercises authority, and who is entitled to social and economic resources. Consequently, stigma functions not merely as a social perception but as an instrument through which existing inequalities and power relations are maintained.

Within African societies, stigma frequently intersects with ethnicity, kinship, migration status, disability, poverty, occupation, gender, religion, and social origin (Adinkrah, 2015; Sackey, 2015). In many communities, identity is socially negotiated through ancestry, lineage, and long-standing relationships with traditional authority, making perceptions of belonging central to everyday social interaction.

In the Ashanti cultural context, including Ejisu, ideas of belonging are closely connected to indigeneity, lineage, and customary authority. One local concept that illustrates these dynamics is *ohoho* (Ohoho), commonly translated as "stranger" or "non-indigene." Although the term is not inherently pejorative, it may become stigmatizing when it is used to question an individual's legitimacy, restrict participation in community affairs, limit access to land or leadership opportunities, or portray certain groups as perpetual outsiders despite long periods of residence. Understanding how such culturally embedded labels operate provides important insight into the ways stigma is constructed, reproduced, and experienced within Ejisu's changing social environment.

## **Forms of Social Stigma**

### **Ethnic and Lineage-Based Stigma**

Ethnic and lineage-based stigma arises when individuals are devalued because of their ancestry, ethnic affiliation, clan membership, or migrant status. Such forms of stigma are particularly significant in societies where kinship and indigeneity influence access to power and resources (Geschiere, 2009). In many African communities, distinctions between "indigenes" and "settlers" create social boundaries that shape citizenship rights, land ownership, and participation in governance (Bukari & Kuusaana, 2015).

Ethnic stigma often produces perceptions of social inferiority and exclusion, thereby undermining social cohesion and fostering intergroup hostility. Individuals categorized as outsiders may experience systematic discrimination regardless of their length of residence or contributions to community development.

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Within communities such as Ejisu, these distinctions may be reinforced through local social categories that differentiate long-established families from newcomers. When labels associated with outsider status become linked to assumptions about trustworthiness, legitimacy, or entitlement, they may reinforce exclusion and increase the potential for social conflict.

### **Occupational Stigma**

Occupational stigma refers to the devaluation of individuals based on the nature of their work. Ashforth and Kreiner (2014) observe that occupations perceived as dirty, low-status, or undesirable frequently attract social disapproval. Occupational stigma extends beyond the workplace and often influences broader social relationships and community interactions.

In the Ghanaian context, artisans, informal workers, petty traders, and unemployed youth frequently encounter negative stereotypes linking them with deviance, criminality, or low social worth (Yeboah & Adjei, 2018). These perceptions reinforce social hierarchies and contribute to social tensions.

### **Structural Stigma**

Structural stigma refers to institutional arrangements, policies, and cultural practices that systematically disadvantage particular groups (Hatzenbuehler, 2016). Unlike interpersonal stigma, structural stigma operates through governance systems, organizational practices, and social norms that restrict access to opportunities and recognition.

Examples include exclusion from leadership positions, unequal access to resources, discriminatory administrative procedures, and biased law enforcement practices. Structural stigma is particularly significant because it legitimizes and perpetuates other forms of stigma.

### **Conceptualizing Conflict**

Conflict is a universal social phenomenon arising from incompatible interests, values, identities, goals, or perceptions among individuals and groups (Deutsch, Coleman, & Marcus, 2014). While conflict is often viewed negatively, contemporary conflict scholars argue that it is a natural feature of social interaction and can facilitate social transformation when managed constructively (Lederach, 2014).

Conflict may occur at interpersonal, group, organizational, communal, national, or international levels. According to Fisher (2015), conflict becomes destructive when parties perceive threats not only to their material interests but also to their identities, dignity, legitimacy, or sense of belonging. Consequently, conflicts frequently emerge from both tangible disputes over resources and symbolic struggles over recognition and social acceptance.

### **The Nexus Between Social Stigma and Conflict**

The relationship between stigma and conflict is increasingly recognized within peace and conflict studies. Stigma creates symbolic boundaries that divide societies into insiders and

outsiders, thereby undermining trust, weakening social cohesion, and legitimizing unequal treatment (Böhm et al., 2019). Persistent exclusion generates perceptions of injustice, humiliation, and resentment among marginalized groups, creating conditions under which latent social tensions may develop into overt conflict.

Honneth (1995) argues that social recognition is a fundamental human need. When individuals or groups are denied recognition and legitimacy, they frequently engage in struggles aimed at restoring dignity, equality, and social acceptance. Consequently, many conflicts arise not only from material deprivation but also from symbolic exclusion and identity-based grievances.

However, contemporary scholarship also recognizes that stigmatized individuals and groups are not merely passive recipients of discrimination. Rather, they often engage in various forms of stigma resistance and identity management to challenge, negotiate, or transform negative social labels (Lamont, 2018; Scambler, 2009). These responses may include rejecting stigmatizing identities, emphasizing alternative sources of social value, strengthening collective identities, mobilizing community support, or actively contesting discriminatory practices. Such strategies enable marginalized groups to reclaim dignity and social recognition while simultaneously reshaping relationships with dominant groups.

In rapidly changing communities such as Ejisu, where migration, urbanization, and shifting governance structures continually redefine community membership, stigma resistance may take diverse forms. Individuals labelled as outsiders may establish social and economic networks, participate in community development activities, cultivate relationships with traditional authorities, or invoke constitutional notions of citizenship and equal rights to challenge exclusionary narratives. While these strategies can promote social integration and resilience, they may also generate resistance from dominant groups seeking to preserve existing social hierarchies, thereby influencing the dynamics of interpersonal and communal conflict.

The conceptual framework therefore views the relationship between stigma and conflict as dynamic rather than linear. Stigmatization produces exclusion and unequal recognition, but individuals and groups also respond by negotiating, resisting, or redefining imposed identities. The interaction between stigmatization and stigma resistance shapes whether social tensions remain latent, are peacefully transformed, or escalate into overt conflict.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Social Identity Theory**

#### **Origins and Central Assumptions**

Social Identity Theory (SIT), developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979, 1986), explains how individuals derive a significant part of their identity from membership in social groups. According to the theory, people categorize themselves and others into social groups based on characteristics such as ethnicity, lineage, occupation, religion, socio-economic status, nationality, and political affiliation. These group memberships provide individuals with a sense of identity, belonging, and self-esteem.

The theory argues that individuals strive to maintain a positive social identity by comparing their own groups favourably with other groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Such comparisons often generate ingroup favouritism while simultaneously encouraging prejudice, discrimination, and exclusion toward perceived outgroups. Consequently, social identity is not merely an individual psychological construct but also a mechanism through which social boundaries are created and maintained.

## **Social Categorization and Group Boundaries**

A central concept within Social Identity Theory is social categorization. Individuals simplify complex social environments by classifying people into categories such as "us" and "them" (Hogg & Abrams, 2017). Although categorization facilitates social interaction, it also produces symbolic boundaries that distinguish legitimate members of a community from perceived outsiders.

Within peri-urban municipalities such as Ejisu, these categorizations frequently occur along dimensions of indigeneity, lineage, migration status, occupation, and socio-economic position. Long-established residents may distinguish themselves from migrants or settlers, while economically privileged groups may distance themselves from poorer households or unemployed youth. Such distinctions shape patterns of inclusion and exclusion and influence access to social recognition, participation, and community resources.

In the Ashanti cultural context, ideas of belonging are closely connected to ancestry, lineage, and customary authority. Local expressions such as *ɔhohɔ* (stranger or non-indigene) illustrate how social categorization may extend beyond simple identification to influence perceptions of legitimacy and entitlement. Although the term is not inherently derogatory, its use within particular social and political contexts may reinforce exclusion when individuals are portrayed as perpetual outsiders regardless of their contributions or length of residence.

## **Identity Threat and Conflict**

Social Identity Theory further explains that individuals respond negatively when their personal or collective identities are threatened (Branscombe et al., 1999). When groups perceive that they are denied recognition, dignity, or equal treatment, they experience identity threat that may generate resentment, reduced trust, and increased solidarity among members of the stigmatized group.

Such identity threats become particularly significant where social recognition influences access to land, leadership opportunities, community participation, or economic resources. Under these conditions, conflicts emerge not only because of competition over material resources but also because individuals seek recognition, legitimacy, and respect for their social identities.

## **Labelling Theory**

### **Foundations of Labelling Theory**

Labelling Theory emerged from symbolic interactionism and is principally associated with the works of Lemert (1951), Becker (1963), and Scheff (1966). The theory argues that deviance and social difference are not inherent characteristics of individuals but are socially constructed through processes of labelling. Individuals become stigmatized because influential members of society define particular characteristics, behaviours, or identities as undesirable or inferior.

According to Becker (1963), social groups create rules, determine acceptable behaviour, and assign labels to those perceived as violating these expectations. Once labels are applied, they shape social interactions by influencing how individuals are perceived and treated by others.

### **Primary and Secondary Labelling**

Lemert (1951) distinguishes between primary and secondary deviance. Primary deviance refers to initial behaviours that may depart from social expectations without fundamentally altering an individual's identity. Secondary deviance occurs when repeated labelling leads individuals to internalize negative social identities or to respond to those labels through behavioural adaptation.

Although originally developed to explain deviance, this distinction provides valuable insight into social stigma. Individuals repeatedly labelled as outsiders, strangers, poor, unemployed, or socially inferior may gradually experience changes in self-perception and social relationships. Others may reject these labels and actively construct alternative identities that challenge prevailing social stereotypes.

### **Labelling, Power and Social Control**

A major contribution of Labelling Theory is its emphasis on power. Becker (1963) argues that not all members of society possess equal authority to define acceptable identities or behaviours. Dominant groups including political leaders, traditional authorities, economic elites, and influential social groups exercise greater power to create and sustain labels that shape public perceptions.

Within communities such as Ejisu, this perspective helps explain how labels associated with indigeneity, migration status, occupation, lineage, or economic position become mechanisms of social control. Such labels influence access to leadership, community participation, land, and social recognition while simultaneously legitimizing unequal treatment.

### **Theoretical Synthesis**

Although Social Identity Theory and Labelling Theory originate from different theoretical traditions, they complement one another in explaining the relationship between social stigma and conflict. Labelling Theory primarily explains how stigma is socially constructed, whereas Social Identity Theory explains how these socially constructed identities influence individual behaviour, group relations, and conflict dynamics.

Labelling Theory begins by explaining how dominant groups assign socially meaningful labels to particular individuals or populations. These labels define who belongs, who is excluded, and who is considered legitimate within a given social setting. Repeated exposure to these labels influences everyday interactions and gradually shapes public perceptions of both labelled and non-labelled groups.

Social Identity Theory extends this explanation by illustrating how these externally imposed labels affect social categorization. As individuals repeatedly encounter stigmatizing labels, they may internalize them as part of their social identity or actively resist and redefine them. In either case, labelling reshapes the boundaries between ingroups and outgroups, strengthens collective identities, and influences how individuals interpret their relationships with others.

Consequently, the two theories explain successive stages within the same social process. Labelling Theory explains the origin of stigma through processes of social definition and power, while Social Identity Theory explains how these labels become psychologically and socially meaningful by influencing identity formation, group membership, and intergroup relations.

This interaction also explains why stigma may produce different outcomes. Some individuals internalize negative labels, resulting in withdrawal, diminished self-esteem, and social isolation. Others engage in stigma resistance by rejecting imposed identities, strengthening collective solidarity, participating in community activities, or challenging discriminatory practices. These responses alter patterns of social interaction and may either reduce social tensions through greater inclusion or intensify conflict when dominant groups resist such challenges.

## **Application of the Theoretical Framework to the Study**

The integrated use of Social Identity Theory and Labelling Theory provides a comprehensive framework for examining the relationship between social stigma and conflict within Ejisu Municipality. Labelling Theory explains how social categories associated with indigeneity, migration status, lineage, occupation, and socio-economic status become sources of stigmatization through processes of social definition and unequal power relations. Social Identity Theory subsequently explains how these labels influence individual and collective identities by reinforcing distinctions between insiders and outsiders, thereby shaping perceptions of belonging, legitimacy, and entitlement.

Within Ejisu's rapidly changing peri-urban environment, where traditional authority structures coexist with formal administrative governance, these processes become particularly significant. Increasing migration, urban expansion, and changing socio-economic conditions have intensified negotiations over identity and community membership. Labels such as *shoho* may influence perceptions of legitimacy and belonging, affecting access to social networks, participation in community affairs, and opportunities for leadership.

The framework further recognizes that individuals and groups subjected to stigma are not passive recipients of exclusion. They may internalize stigmatizing identities, negotiate alternative identities, or actively resist discriminatory labels through collective action, community participation, and identity reconstruction. These responses shape whether social tensions remain latent, are peacefully negotiated, or escalate into overt interpersonal and communal conflict.

Accordingly, this study adopts both theories as complementary analytical lenses. Labelling Theory explains how stigma is produced and maintained, while Social Identity Theory explains how stigmatized identities influence social categorization, group behaviour, and conflict. Together, they provide a robust theoretical foundation for understanding how social stigma contributes to conflict dynamics within Ejisu Municipality.

## **Empirical Review**

### **Social Stigma and Conflict in Africa**

Research across Africa demonstrates that social stigma significantly influences conflict dynamics. Geschiere (2009) found that struggles over autochthony and belonging in several African countries frequently generate tensions between indigenous populations and migrant groups. Similar findings have been reported in Nigeria, Kenya, Côte d'Ivoire, and Cameroon, where identity-based exclusion has contributed to communal violence and political instability.

Bukari and Kuusaana (2015) found that migrant farmers in northern Ghana frequently experience stigmatization through the “stranger” label, limiting their access to land rights and participation in local governance. Such exclusion often contributes to conflicts over resources and social legitimacy.

### **Youth Stigmatization and Social Conflict**

Youth unemployment has become a significant source of social concern across Africa. Several studies indicate that unemployed youth are frequently portrayed as dangerous, irresponsible, and prone to criminal behaviour (Honwana, 2012; Yeboah & Adjei, 2018).

Yeboah and Adjei (2018) found that unemployed youth in Kumasi and Ejisu regularly experience social labelling that undermines their sense of belonging and social recognition.

Such experiences often encourage distrust of authority and increase the likelihood of confrontation.

Similarly, Honwana (2012) argues that prolonged social exclusion contributes to frustration and feelings of marginalization among African youth, thereby increasing vulnerability to conflict and social unrest.

### **Socio-Economic Stigma and Marginalization**

Research consistently demonstrates that poverty-related stigma contributes to social exclusion and conflict. Adinkrah (2015) found that economically disadvantaged individuals in Ghana frequently experience suspicion, disrespect, and social discrimination.

Walker et al. (2013) further argue that poverty stigma undermines social participation and reinforces structural inequalities. Marginalized populations often develop grievances arising from experiences of humiliation and unequal treatment.

### **Occupational Stigma and Community Relations**

Occupational stigma remains a relatively underexplored area within African conflict studies. However, existing evidence suggests that occupations associated with low social status frequently attract negative stereotypes (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014).

In Ghana, artisans, informal workers, and petty traders are often perceived as less educated and socially inferior (Adinkrah, 2015). Such perceptions influence social interaction and contribute to exclusion from decision-making processes.

### **Research Gap**

Although existing studies acknowledge the role of exclusion, discrimination, and identity politics in conflict formation, few studies explicitly examine social stigma as a primary driver of interpersonal and communal conflict in peri-urban Ghanaian communities. Most Ghanaian studies focus on land disputes, chieftaincy conflicts, youth unemployment, migration, and economic inequality without systematically analyzing the psychological and sociological mechanisms through which stigma produces conflict.

Furthermore, limited empirical attention has been given to the experiences of stigmatized groups within rapidly urbanizing municipalities such as Ejisu. This study therefore fills an important empirical and theoretical gap by examining how social stigma operates as a mechanism of exclusion, identity threat, and conflict within a peri-urban Ghanaian context.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Philosophy**

This study is anchored in the pragmatist research philosophy. Pragmatism is particularly suitable for studies that seek to understand complex social phenomena through multiple forms of evidence and methodological approaches (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Morgan, 2014). Unlike positivism, which privileges objective measurement, or interpretivism, which emphasizes subjective meanings, pragmatism recognizes that social reality is multifaceted and that no single method is sufficient for understanding complex human experiences.

The choice of pragmatism was informed by the nature of the research problem. Social stigma and conflict involve both observable social patterns and subjective experiences. While quantitative methods are useful for measuring the prevalence and distribution of stigma-related experiences, qualitative methods provide deeper insights into the meanings individuals attach to stigmatization, exclusion, and conflict. Pragmatism therefore enabled the integration of

numerical trends with lived experiences to produce a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010).

Furthermore, pragmatism emphasizes the practical consequences of knowledge generation and seeks solutions to real-world social problems (Biesta, 2010). Since the study aims not only to explain the relationship between stigma and conflict but also to propose interventions for social cohesion and peacebuilding, the pragmatist paradigm provides an appropriate philosophical foundation.

### **Research Approach**

The study employed a mixed-methods research approach involving the integration of quantitative and qualitative techniques. Mixed-methods research is increasingly recognized as an effective strategy for investigating multidimensional social phenomena because it combines the strengths of quantitative and qualitative inquiry while minimizing their individual limitations (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007).

The quantitative component enabled the researcher to establish the prevalence, patterns, and distribution of social stigma and conflict experiences among residents of Ejisu. It also facilitated the examination of relationships between key variables through statistical analysis. Quantitative methods were particularly useful for generating generalizable findings regarding the forms of stigma present within the municipality and their association with conflict.

The qualitative component complemented the quantitative findings by providing rich descriptions of participants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of social exclusion and conflict. Qualitative inquiry allowed participants to articulate how stigma affects their social identities, relationships, and interactions within the community. Such insights would have been difficult to capture through quantitative measures alone.

The integration of both approaches enabled methodological triangulation, which enhances the validity, credibility, and completeness of research findings (Fetters, Curry, & Creswell, 2013). Through triangulation, evidence obtained from one method was corroborated by findings from another method, thereby increasing confidence in the conclusions drawn.

### **Research Design**

The study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2017), a convergent design involves the simultaneous collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, followed by the integration of findings during interpretation. This design is particularly useful when researchers seek to obtain complementary perspectives on a phenomenon and compare findings from different data sources.

The quantitative phase employed a cross-sectional survey design. Cross-sectional surveys are widely used in social science research because they facilitate the collection of data from a large population at a single point in time and enable the examination of relationships among variables (Bryman, 2016). The survey design was appropriate because it allowed the researcher to assess the prevalence of social stigma and conflict experiences among different social groups within Ejisu.

The qualitative phase incorporated ethnographic elements. Ethnography seeks to understand social phenomena within their natural social and cultural contexts through close engagement with participants and their lived experiences (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). The ethnographic orientation was important because stigma is socially constructed through everyday interactions, cultural meanings, and community narratives. Understanding these dynamics required detailed exploration of participants' experiences and interpretations.

The combination of survey and ethnographic approaches provided both breadth and depth, thereby enhancing the explanatory power of the study.

### **Study Area**

The study was conducted in Ejisu Municipality in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. Ejisu forms part of the rapidly expanding Greater Kumasi metropolitan area and has experienced significant demographic, economic, and social transformation over the past two decades (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021).

The municipality is characterized by increasing urbanization, population growth, migration, and economic diversification. These changes have produced greater social heterogeneity, bringing together individuals from different ethnic, occupational, and socio-economic backgrounds. Such diversity creates opportunities for social interaction but also increases the potential for social differentiation, exclusion, and identity-based tensions.

Ejisu was purposively selected because it represents a typical peri-urban municipality where traditional social structures coexist with modern socio-economic transformations. The municipality therefore provides an appropriate context for examining how social stigma emerges and influences interpersonal and communal conflict.

### **Population of the Study**

The target population consisted of adult residents of Ejisu aged between 18 and 65 years. The study focused on adults because they are more likely to participate actively in community life and possess sufficient knowledge of local social relations and conflict dynamics.

The population included unemployed youth, traders, artisans, farmers, civil servants, traditional authorities, religious leaders, migrant settlers, community elders, and indigenous residents. The inclusion of diverse social categories was necessary because experiences of stigma and conflict vary across social positions and identities.

### **Sample Size Determination**

The study involved a total sample of 300 participants, comprising 250 respondents for the quantitative component and 50 participants for the qualitative component.

The quantitative sample size was determined using Yamane's (1967) sample size determination formula:

$$[n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}]$$

where:

- (n) = sample size
- (N) = population size
- (e) = level of precision (0.05)

The resulting sample was considered adequate for generating statistically reliable findings while maintaining feasibility in data collection.

For the qualitative phase, 50 participants were selected based on the principle of information richness and data saturation. Data saturation occurs when additional interviews no longer generate new themes or insights (Guest, Namey, & Chen, 2020). The sample size was therefore considered sufficient to capture diverse experiences and perspectives regarding stigma and conflict.

## **Sampling Techniques**

The study employed a combination of probability and non-probability sampling techniques.

### **Stratified Random Sampling**

Stratified random sampling was used during the quantitative phase. The population was divided into strata based on gender, age, and occupational status. Respondents were then randomly selected from each stratum.

Stratification improves representativeness by ensuring that important population subgroups are adequately represented within the sample (Etikan & Bala, 2017). This approach was particularly important because experiences of stigma may vary across demographic categories.

### **Purposive Sampling**

Purposive sampling was employed during the qualitative phase. Participants were selected based on their experiences, social positions, and relevance to the study objectives.

Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research because it facilitates the selection of information-rich cases capable of providing detailed insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). Participants included traditional leaders, youth leaders, migrant settlers, traders, artisans, and individuals who had experienced social exclusion or conflict.

### **Convenience Sampling**

Convenience sampling was used as a supplementary strategy in public locations such as markets and transportation terminals where participants were readily accessible. Although convenience sampling has limitations regarding representativeness, it enhanced participant accessibility and increased response rates.

## **Data Collection Instruments**

Three primary instruments were employed:

1. Structured Questionnaire
2. Semi-Structured Interview Guide
3. Focus Group Discussion Guide

The use of multiple instruments enhanced methodological triangulation and improved the robustness of findings (Denzin, 2017).

The questionnaire contained both closed-ended and Likert-scale items designed to measure experiences of stigma, perceptions of exclusion, conflict involvement, and proposed interventions.

The interview guide facilitated in-depth exploration of personal experiences and perceptions, while focus group discussions generated collective reflections on community relations, identity, and social tensions.

## **Validity and Reliability**

### **Validity**

Validity refers to the extent to which a research instrument accurately measures the intended construct (Bryman, 2016).

Content validity was ensured through extensive review of relevant literature and consultation with experts in sociology, peace studies, and social psychology. Instrument items were aligned with the study objectives, conceptual framework, and theoretical assumptions.

Construct validity was enhanced by operationalizing social stigma and conflict using indicators derived from established scholarly literature (Link & Phelan, 2001; Goffman, 1963).

Methodological triangulation further strengthened internal validity by enabling cross-verification of findings from multiple data sources.

### **Reliability**

Reliability refers to the consistency and stability of research measurements (Field, 2018).

A pilot study involving 20 participants was conducted prior to the main survey. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. Following Nunnally's (1978) recommendation, a reliability coefficient of 0.70 or higher was considered acceptable.

Standardized administration procedures and the training of research assistants further enhanced reliability and minimized measurement errors.

### **Data Analysis**

Quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS Version 26). Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize participant characteristics and patterns of stigma and conflict.

Inferential statistics, particularly Pearson correlation analysis, were employed to examine relationships between social stigma and conflict variables. Correlation analysis was considered appropriate because it measures the strength and direction of associations between variables (Pallant, 2020).

Qualitative data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage thematic analysis framework. The process involved data familiarization, coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and report writing.

Thematic analysis was selected because it provides a systematic yet flexible approach to identifying patterns of meaning within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The identified themes were interpreted in relation to Social Identity Theory and Labelling Theory.

### **Trustworthiness of Qualitative Data**

The rigor of the qualitative component was evaluated using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of trustworthiness.

- **Credibility** was enhanced through prolonged engagement, triangulation, and member checking.
- **Dependability** was ensured through detailed documentation of research procedures and decision-making processes.
- **Confirmability** was promoted through reflexive note-taking and audit trails.
- **Transferability** was strengthened through rich contextual descriptions of the study setting and participants.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional review authority prior to data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their rights, and the voluntary nature of participation.

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured through the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage procedures. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without consequences.

Given the sensitive nature of discussions surrounding stigma and conflict, particular attention was paid to minimizing psychological discomfort and ensuring respectful engagement throughout the research process.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Introduction

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study in relation to the four research questions. The presentation integrates quantitative and qualitative findings to provide a comprehensive understanding of how social stigma contributes to interpersonal and communal conflict in Ejisu. Quantitative data are presented using frequencies and percentages, while qualitative data are presented through illustrative participant narratives. The findings are discussed in relation to Social Identity Theory, Labelling Theory, and existing empirical literature.

### Research Question One

#### How Does Social Stigma Contribute to Interpersonal and Group Conflict in Ejisu?

##### Stigma as a Source of Social Division and Conflict

The quantitative findings revealed that a substantial majority of respondents perceived social stigma as a significant contributor to conflict within the municipality. Out of the 250 survey respondents, 197 (78.8%) agreed that negative labelling and social exclusion frequently generate tensions between individuals and groups, while only 21.2% disagreed.

**Table 1: Perceived Relationship Between Social Stigma and Conflict**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Agree	102	40.8
Agree	95	38.0
Disagree	34	13.6
Strongly Disagree	19	7.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>100</b>

The findings suggest that social stigma functions as a mechanism through which social boundaries are created and maintained. Individuals who experience exclusion often perceive such treatment as unjust, thereby increasing hostility and mistrust.

Interview participants consistently described stigma as a major source of interpersonal confrontation.

A migrant trader explained:

*“Whenever there is a misunderstanding in the market, settlers are blamed first. People assume we are responsible even before the facts are known.”*

Similarly, an unemployed youth stated:

*“People think we are criminals simply because we gather in groups. Sometimes conflicts start because people disrespect us before even knowing us.”*

These findings demonstrate that stigma contributes to conflict by creating perceptions of injustice and unequal treatment.

### **Identity Threat and Conflict Escalation**

The qualitative findings further revealed that stigmatized individuals often perceive exclusion as an attack on their dignity and identity.

Participants repeatedly referred to experiences of humiliation, disrespect, and marginalization. Such experiences frequently produced defensive reactions and social resistance.

This finding strongly supports Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which argues that individuals derive self-worth from social group membership and react negatively when their identities are threatened. In Ejisu, distinctions between indigenes and settlers create identity boundaries that influence perceptions of legitimacy and belonging.

The finding also aligns with Honneth's (1995) recognition theory, which posits that struggles for recognition often become sources of social conflict. Many participants indicated that their grievances were not solely economic but were rooted in feelings of disrespect and exclusion.

### **Labelling and Defensive Resistance**

The study found that stigmatized individuals frequently respond through defensive resistance.

Among survey respondents, 65.2% agreed that people who experience repeated discrimination become more confrontational toward authority figures and community institutions.

Participants explained that persistent labelling often generates resentment and withdrawal from community cooperation.

A youth leader observed:

*“When people continue calling someone a troublemaker, eventually that person stops caring about community expectations.”*

This finding supports Labelling Theory (Becker, 1963), which suggests that repeated negative labelling influences self-perception and social behaviour.

The result is also consistent with Yeboah and Adjei's (2018) study of youth identity in Kumasi and Ejisu, which found that stigmatized youth often develop oppositional identities as a response to exclusion.

## **Research Question Two**

### **What Forms of Social Stigma Are Most Prevalent in Ejisu?**

#### **Ethnic and Lineage-Based Stigma**

The findings indicate that ethnic and lineage-based stigma represents the most prevalent form of stigmatization in Ejisu.

**Table 2: Major Forms of Stigma Identified by Respondents**

<b>Form of Stigma</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Ethnic/Lineage-Based	120	48.0
Socio-economic	67	26.8
Occupational	43	17.2
Other	20	8.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>100</b>

Nearly half of all respondents identified ethnic and lineage-based distinctions as the dominant source of exclusion.

Participants repeatedly referred to the labels “settler,” “stranger,” and “non-indigene.”

A participant explained:

*“No matter how long you live here, some people still see you as an outsider.”*

These findings support Bukari and Kuusaana's (2015) observation that the “stranger” label continues to influence access to rights and participation within Ghanaian communities.

The findings further reinforce Social Identity Theory by demonstrating how social categorization creates boundaries between ingroups and outgroups.

### **Socio-Economic Stigma**

Socio-economic stigma emerged as the second most common form of stigmatization.

Approximately 26.8% of respondents indicated that poverty and unemployment frequently attract negative stereotypes.

Participants reported that poor individuals are often perceived as less trustworthy and less competent.

These findings corroborate Walker et al. (2013), who argue that poverty stigma contributes significantly to social exclusion and psychological distress.

### **Occupational Stigma**

Occupational stigma was also prominent.

Artisans, transport workers, and informal traders frequently reported experiences of disrespect and social devaluation.

One artisan remarked:

*“People think artisans are uneducated. They rarely listen to our opinions during meetings.”*

This finding aligns with Ashforth and Kreiner's (2014) argument that occupations associated with lower social prestige often become targets of social devaluation.

### **Research Question Three**

#### **How Do Stigmatized Individuals and Groups Experience Social Exclusion?**

##### **Exclusion from Community Decision-Making**

The findings indicate that exclusion from local decision-making structures is one of the most significant experiences reported by stigmatized groups.

Nearly 72% of survey respondents from marginalized groups reported feeling underrepresented in community discussions and governance processes.

Participants frequently stated that influential decisions are often dominated by wealthy individuals, indigenous families, and politically connected actors.

A migrant settler stated:

*“Community decisions are made for us, not with us.”*

This reflects structural stigma as described by Hatzenbuehler (2016), where institutional arrangements systematically disadvantage certain groups.

### **Social Humiliation and Loss of Recognition**

Participants repeatedly emphasized experiences of humiliation, disrespect, and diminished social value.

Many respondents described feeling invisible within community affairs.

Such findings resonate with Honneth's (1995) argument that denial of recognition undermines personal dignity and generates social struggles.

### **Psychological Consequences of Stigma**

The qualitative data revealed that stigma contributes to anger, frustration, low self-esteem, and social withdrawal.

Several participants reported avoiding public meetings because they anticipated ridicule or dismissal.

These findings support Corrigan and Watson's (2002) observation that stigma can produce both self-stigma and social disengagement.

### **Research Question Four**

#### **What Strategies Can Be Adopted to Reduce Social Stigma and Prevent Conflict?**

##### **Community Sensitization and Public Education**

The most frequently recommended intervention was community sensitization.

Approximately 82% of respondents supported educational campaigns aimed at reducing stereotypes and promoting social inclusion.

Participants emphasized that many forms of stigma are learned through socialization and can therefore be challenged through awareness creation.

This finding supports Tyler and Blader (2013), who argue that positive intergroup contact and inclusive narratives improve social cohesion.

##### **Inclusive Governance**

The findings further reveal strong support for inclusive governance.

Participants recommended increasing the representation of settlers, youth, women, and occupational minorities in community decision-making.

The recommendation aligns with contemporary peacebuilding literature, which identifies inclusion as a critical factor in conflict prevention (Lederach, 2014).

##### **Youth Empowerment and Economic Inclusion**

Participants also emphasized employment creation and skills development programmes.

Respondents argued that economic empowerment would reduce both the reality and perception of social marginalization.

This finding is consistent with Honwana (2012), who links youth exclusion to social frustration and conflict vulnerability.

### **Overall Discussion of Findings**

The findings demonstrate that social stigma is a significant predictor of interpersonal and communal conflict in Ejisu. The study reveals that conflict is driven not only by material

competition but also by symbolic struggles over dignity, legitimacy, recognition, and belonging.

The dominance of ethnic and lineage-based stigma confirms that identity remains a powerful organizing principle within community relations. Social Identity Theory effectively explains how distinctions between indigenes and settlers generate ingroup favoritism and outgroup discrimination (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Likewise, Labelling Theory provides insight into how persistent negative labels reinforce exclusion and contribute to cycles of hostility and resistance (Becker, 1963).

The findings also extend existing Ghanaian scholarship by demonstrating that stigma operates as a hidden mechanism underlying many conflicts commonly attributed to economic or political factors. The study therefore argues that sustainable peacebuilding requires addressing not only material inequalities but also the social and psychological dimensions of exclusion.

Ultimately, conflict in Ejisu emerges as a struggle for recognition, identity, and belonging as much as a struggle for resources and power.

### **Key Findings**

The study set out to examine social stigma as a cause of interpersonal and communal conflict in Ejisu Municipality. The findings reveal that social stigma constitutes a significant yet often overlooked driver of conflict, operating through mechanisms of social exclusion, identity-based discrimination, and unequal recognition. The study demonstrates that conflict in Ejisu is not solely a product of material competition over resources, political influence, or economic opportunities, but also a consequence of symbolic struggles over dignity, belonging, and social legitimacy.

A key finding of the study is that ethnic and lineage-based stigma represents the most dominant form of stigmatization within the municipality. The prevalence of labels such as “settler,” “stranger,” and “non-indigene” suggests that social membership and community acceptance remain strongly influenced by ancestry and lineage affiliations. This finding supports earlier studies conducted in Ghana and other African contexts which argue that distinctions between indigenous populations and migrant groups often create social boundaries that limit participation and access to resources (Bukari & Kuusaana, 2015; Geschiere, 2009). The persistence of such distinctions demonstrates that rapid urbanization and modernization have not eliminated traditional forms of social categorization. Instead, these identities continue to shape social interaction, access to community decision-making processes, and perceptions of legitimacy.

The prominence of ethnic and lineage-based stigma strongly validates the assumptions of Social Identity Theory. Tajfel and Turner (1986) argue that individuals derive self-esteem and social meaning from their membership in social groups and tend to favour members of their own groups while discriminating against outsiders. The findings indicate that the distinction between indigenes and settlers functions as an important social boundary within Ejisu, creating an “ingroup” and “outgroup” dynamic that contributes to exclusion and conflict. This suggests that conflict within the municipality is partly rooted in processes of social categorization through which dominant groups seek to preserve status, identity, and influence.

Another important finding is the significant role of socio-economic stigma in generating social tensions. Participants reported that poverty and unemployment often attract negative stereotypes that portray affected individuals as irresponsible, lazy, criminal, or socially inferior. Such perceptions contribute to feelings of humiliation and social marginalization. This finding

corroborates previous studies which have shown that poverty-related stigma undermines social participation and reinforces existing inequalities (Walker et al., 2013; Adinkrah, 2015). The findings suggest that socio-economic disadvantage in Ejisu is not merely an economic condition but also a social identity that shapes how individuals are perceived and treated by others.

The study further reveals that unemployed youth constitute one of the most stigmatized groups within the municipality. Participants reported that unemployed young people are frequently associated with deviant behaviour, criminality, and social irresponsibility. Such stereotypes often result in suspicion and discrimination even in situations where no wrongdoing has occurred. This finding is consistent with Yeboah and Adjei's (2018) study, which found that unemployed youth in urban Ghana frequently experience social labelling and exclusion. The findings imply that youth unemployment contributes to conflict not only through economic hardship but also through the social stigma attached to joblessness. Consequently, addressing youth unemployment alone may not eliminate social tensions unless efforts are also made to challenge negative societal perceptions of unemployed youth.

The findings also highlight the significance of occupational stigma as a source of exclusion and conflict. Artisans, petty traders, and informal-sector workers reported experiencing disrespect and social devaluation because of the nature of their occupations. Participants indicated that individuals engaged in manual or informal work are often regarded as less educated, less influential, and less deserving of participation in community affairs. This finding aligns with Ashforth and Kreiner's (2014) argument that occupations perceived as low-status frequently attract social stigma and reduced social recognition. The findings suggest that occupational prestige remains an important determinant of social status and influence within Ejisu.

A particularly significant finding concerns the relationship between stigma and social exclusion. The study found that stigmatized individuals often experience exclusion from community decision-making processes, leadership opportunities, and social networks. Many participants indicated that their opinions are disregarded because of their ethnic background, economic status, occupational identity, or migrant status. This finding supports Hatzenbuehler's (2016) concept of structural stigma, which emphasizes how institutional arrangements and social norms systematically disadvantage certain groups. The findings therefore demonstrate that stigma operates not only at the interpersonal level but also through broader social structures that regulate access to power and recognition.

The study further found that experiences of exclusion frequently generate feelings of anger, resentment, frustration, and distrust. Participants described social exclusion as a form of humiliation that undermines their sense of dignity and belonging. These findings resonate with Honneth's (1995) theory of recognition, which argues that individuals require social recognition to develop positive self-identity and social integration. When recognition is denied, individuals often experience social injustice and may engage in struggles aimed at restoring their dignity. The findings therefore suggest that many conflicts in Ejisu are rooted in demands for recognition rather than solely in competition over material resources.

Another notable finding is that stigmatized individuals often respond to exclusion through defensive resistance and confrontation. Some participants reported withdrawing from community activities, while others described becoming more confrontational toward community leaders and institutions. This finding strongly supports Labelling Theory, which argues that persistent negative labels influence self-perception and behaviour (Becker, 1963;

Lemert, 1951). The findings suggest that individuals who are repeatedly categorized as outsiders, criminals, or socially inferior may eventually reject dominant social expectations and develop oppositional identities. In this way, stigma becomes self-reinforcing by creating the very behaviours that dominant groups fear or condemn.

The findings also reveal widespread dissatisfaction with formal mechanisms for resolving stigma-related conflicts. Many participants perceived legal and administrative institutions as ineffective in addressing underlying grievances associated with exclusion and discrimination. Instead, respondents emphasized the importance of community dialogue, social inclusion, and awareness creation. This finding supports contemporary peacebuilding scholarship, which argues that sustainable conflict resolution requires addressing underlying social relationships and perceptions rather than focusing exclusively on legal settlements or coercive interventions (Lederach, 2014; Wilkins et al., 2020).

Perhaps the most important contribution of this study is its demonstration that conflict in Ejisu is fundamentally linked to struggles for recognition, belonging, and social legitimacy. While previous studies on conflict in Ghana have emphasized land disputes, chieftaincy succession, political competition, and economic inequalities (Ayee et al., 2011; Tonah, 2012), the present study reveals that stigma serves as an underlying mechanism through which these conflicts are often experienced and interpreted. Social stigma shapes who is recognized as a legitimate community member, whose voice is heard, and whose interests are protected. Consequently, conflict emerges not only from unequal access to resources but also from unequal access to dignity and social recognition.

Overall, the findings contribute to existing scholarship by demonstrating that social stigma should be understood as both a social and psychological driver of conflict. The integration of Social Identity Theory and Labelling Theory provides a robust explanatory framework for understanding how social categorization, negative labelling, exclusion, and identity threats generate interpersonal and communal tensions. The study therefore advances conflict scholarship by highlighting the importance of recognition, inclusion, and social belonging as critical dimensions of peacebuilding and community development within rapidly urbanizing African societies.

### **Implications of the Study**

The findings of this study have important theoretical, policy, practical, and societal implications. First, the study demonstrates that social stigma is not merely a social attitude or interpersonal prejudice but a significant driver of interpersonal and communal conflict. These findings challenge conventional approaches to conflict analysis in Ghana, which have traditionally emphasized land disputes, chieftaincy succession, political competition, and economic inequality as the primary causes of conflict (Ayee et al., 2011; Tonah, 2012). The study shows that beneath many visible disputes lie deeper struggles for recognition, dignity, legitimacy, and social belonging.

From a theoretical perspective, the study confirms the relevance of Social Identity Theory and Labelling Theory in explaining conflict dynamics within African communities. The findings reveal that social categorization and negative labelling contribute significantly to social exclusion and identity-based tensions. The study therefore demonstrates that conflict is not only material but also symbolic, involving contestations over social identity and recognition. This expands existing applications of these theories beyond their traditional use in social psychology and deviance studies to the field of communal conflict and peacebuilding.

From a governance perspective, the findings suggest that conflict prevention strategies should move beyond reactive interventions and legal adjudication toward addressing the underlying social processes that produce exclusion and resentment. Community governance structures that fail to incorporate marginalized populations may unintentionally reinforce social divisions and increase conflict vulnerability. Inclusive governance therefore becomes an essential component of sustainable peacebuilding.

The findings also have implications for social policy. The stigmatization of unemployed youth, migrants, artisans, and economically disadvantaged populations indicates the need for social policies that promote inclusion, equal participation, and social recognition. Economic development programmes alone may be insufficient if social attitudes and discriminatory practices remain unchanged.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of social cohesion as a development objective. Communities characterized by high levels of stigma and exclusion are likely to experience reduced trust, weak collective action, and persistent social tensions. Consequently, reducing stigma should be viewed not only as a human rights concern but also as a prerequisite for sustainable local development and community resilience.

### **Contribution to Knowledge**

This study makes several important contributions to knowledge.

First, it contributes to the growing literature on conflict studies by introducing social stigma as a significant explanatory variable in the analysis of interpersonal and communal conflict within Ghanaian communities. While existing studies have largely focused on political, economic, and resource-based explanations of conflict, this study demonstrates that stigma constitutes an important social and psychological mechanism through which conflict emerges and escalates.

Second, the study contributes to the sociology of stigma by extending scholarly understanding of the consequences of stigmatization beyond individual psychological outcomes. Previous studies have frequently examined stigma in relation to health, mental illness, disability, and social welfare. This study demonstrates that stigma also functions as a catalyst for social tensions, collective grievances, and communal conflict.

Third, the study advances the application of Social Identity Theory and Labelling Theory within African conflict studies. By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the research provides a multidimensional explanation of how social categorization, labelling, exclusion, and identity threats interact to produce conflict. This theoretical integration offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding the relationship between stigma and social instability.

Fourth, the study contributes empirical evidence from a peri-urban Ghanaian municipality. Although urbanization and migration continue to transform many Ghanaian communities, limited empirical research has examined how these transformations influence social stigma and conflict. The findings therefore enrich existing knowledge on social relations within rapidly changing peri-urban environments.

Finally, the study develops a conceptual framework linking social stigma, social exclusion, identity threat, and conflict. This framework may serve as a useful analytical model for future studies examining similar phenomena in Ghana and other African contexts.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed.

### **Recommendations for the Ejisu Municipal Assembly**

1. The Assembly should establish community-based social cohesion committees responsible for identifying and addressing stigma-related grievances before they escalate into conflict.
2. Public education programmes focusing on tolerance, diversity, and social inclusion should be integrated into local development initiatives.
3. The Assembly should create platforms that encourage meaningful participation of youth, migrants, artisans, traders, and other marginalized groups in local governance processes.
4. Employment generation and vocational training programmes should be expanded to reduce socio-economic exclusion and improve opportunities for unemployed youth.
5. Municipal conflict prevention policies should explicitly address social exclusion and identity-based discrimination as potential sources of conflict.

### **Recommendations for Traditional Authorities**

1. Traditional leaders should actively discourage derogatory labels and exclusionary narratives directed toward settlers, migrants, and marginalized groups.
2. Community forums, festivals, and traditional gatherings should be used as platforms for promoting unity, mutual respect, and shared citizenship.
3. Traditional authorities should ensure that community decision-making processes are inclusive and representative of diverse social groups.
4. Customary conflict resolution mechanisms should incorporate principles of social inclusion and recognition.

### **Recommendations for Civil Society Organizations and Religious Institutions**

1. Civil society organizations should implement sensitization campaigns aimed at challenging stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes within communities.
2. Religious institutions should promote messages emphasizing equality, human dignity, and peaceful coexistence.
3. Non-governmental organizations should support advocacy programmes designed to empower stigmatized groups and enhance their participation in community affairs.
4. Community dialogue initiatives should be organized regularly to strengthen intergroup understanding and trust.

### **Recommendations for National Policy Makers**

1. National social cohesion policies should incorporate stigma reduction as an important component of peacebuilding and conflict prevention.
2. Government institutions should develop anti-discrimination frameworks that address identity-based exclusion at both local and national levels.
3. Social protection programmes should incorporate measures that reduce the social marginalization of vulnerable populations.
4. National youth policies should address both the economic and social dimensions of youth exclusion.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future studies should:

1. Examine the gendered dimensions of social stigma and conflict within Ghanaian communities.

2. Conduct comparative studies across different regions and municipalities to determine variations in stigma-related conflict dynamics.
3. Investigate the role of social media in shaping and reproducing stigmatizing narratives.
4. Employ longitudinal research designs to examine changes in stigma and social cohesion over time.
5. Explore the relationship between political stigmatization and electoral conflict in Ghana.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined social stigma as a cause of interpersonal and communal conflict in Ejisu Municipality in the Ashanti Region of Ghana. Drawing on Social Identity Theory and Labelling Theory, the study investigated the forms of stigma present within the municipality, explored the experiences of stigmatized individuals and groups, and examined how stigma contributes to conflict.

The findings reveal that social stigma is a significant driver of social tensions within Ejisu. Ethnic and lineage-based stigma emerged as the most prevalent form of stigmatization, followed by socio-economic and occupational stigma. Distinctions between indigenes and settlers, as well as stereotypes directed toward unemployed youth, artisans, and economically disadvantaged individuals, were found to undermine social cohesion and contribute to feelings of exclusion and marginalization.

The study further established that stigmatization contributes to conflict through processes of labelling, discrimination, social exclusion, and identity threat. Individuals and groups who experience persistent exclusion often develop feelings of resentment, injustice, and distrust, which increase the likelihood of interpersonal confrontation and communal tensions. These findings support the propositions of Social Identity Theory and Labelling Theory, both of which emphasize the role of social categorization and labelling in shaping group relations and social behaviour.

Importantly, the study demonstrates that conflict within Ejisu cannot be understood solely in terms of competition over material resources or political power. Rather, conflict is also rooted in struggles for recognition, dignity, belonging, and social legitimacy. The findings therefore broaden existing understandings of conflict in Ghana by highlighting the importance of social and psychological factors in conflict formation.

The study concludes that sustainable peace and social cohesion require more than legal interventions and economic development programmes. They require deliberate efforts to promote inclusion, challenge stigmatizing narratives, strengthen community participation, and foster a shared sense of citizenship among diverse social groups. Addressing social stigma is therefore essential not only for conflict prevention but also for community development, democratic participation, and social justice.

Ultimately, the study contributes to scholarship by demonstrating that social stigma constitutes a critical yet underexplored dimension of conflict in peri-urban Ghanaian communities. It calls for greater attention to issues of recognition, inclusion, and identity in both academic research and policy interventions aimed at building peaceful and cohesive societies.

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