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DISINFORMATION AND PUBLIC OPINION IN THE 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN NIGERIA: KEY LESSONS AND IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Disinformation, the deliberate spread of false information intended to deceive, has become a major challenge in modern democracies, particularly during elections. This paper focused on examining the role of disinformation in shaping public opinion, using the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria as a study. It explored how disinformation campaigns influenced voter perceptions and behaviours, with social media and artificial intelligence such as deepfake technology and AI-generated misinformation, serving as key facilitators of false narratives. The research employed both qualitative and quantitative methods, drawing on primary data from questionnaires and secondary sources. The paper was anchored on Information Disorder Theory and Social Constructionism. Wardle and Derakhshan's Information Disorder Theory (2017) explained how information, misinformation, and disinformation influence public perception, while Berger and Luckmann's Social Constructionism (1966) illustrated how social interactions shape reality, contributing to the acceptance of false information. The findings revealed that disinformation significantly shaped public opinion during the election, with social media and AI playing a crucial role in amplifying false narratives. To address this challenge, the study recommended stringent regulation of social media platforms, the implementation of media literacy programs, and the development of advanced technological tools to counter disinformation. These measures are essential to safeguarding the integrity of electoral processes and restoring public trust in democratic institutions.

Keywords: Disinformation, Public Opinion, Elections, Social Media, Misinformation

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INTRODUCTION

Disinformation, the intentional dissemination of false or misleading information to deceive, has emerged as a significant threat in modern democracies, particularly in the digital age. It is a coordinated effort to manipulate public perception through dishonest narratives. It is distinct from misinformation, which is misleading but not deliberately deceptive, and malinformation, which involves the harmful use of truthful information by distorting its context for personal or corporate gain. Malinformation can be weaponized through tactics such as doxing and strategic disclosures, making its consequences profound (Zimdars & McLeod, 2020).

The Presidential Election in Nigeria serves as a pertinent case study highlighting disinformation's impact on public opinion. Political actors, foreign entities, and individuals with vested interests employed disinformation strategies, including deepfakes, fake news websites, and coordinated bot networks, to shape voter perceptions (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018). For instance, fabricated quotes were falsely attributed to former President Olusegun Obasanjo, suggesting his endorsement of Peter Obi or inciting violence. Similarly, Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka was misrepresented as endorsing Rabiu Kwankwaso, while misleading claims suggested Atiku Abubakar feared Peter Obi's influence in the southeast despite actively campaigning there (Africa Check, 2023). These incidents underscore how digital platforms facilitate the rapid spread of falsehoods, influencing voter behaviour.

Also, social media algorithms play a crucial role in amplifying disinformation, as they prioritize engaging content, often promoting sensationalized or false narratives to maximize user interaction (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). During the Nigerian elections, voter Mojirayo Ogunlana observed the overwhelming spread of fake news, particularly on Twitter and WhatsApp, which contributed to public distrust (Nwonwu et al., 2023). The advancement of artificial intelligence has further exacerbated this issue. Deepfake technology enables the creation of realistic yet entirely fabricated videos, while automated bots flood social media with misleading content, creating an illusion of consensus around false narratives (Chesney & Citron, 2019; Ferrara, 2017). Additionally, psychological factors such as confirmation bias make individuals more susceptible to believing and sharing information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, reinforcing echo chambers (Nickerson, 1998).

The 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria was marked by heightened tensions, with disinformation intensifying distrust and political polarization. Politicians and their supporters frequently engaged in inflammatory rhetoric, replacing substantive discourse with personal attacks and derogatory statements. Bola Ahmed Tinubu was ridiculed for alleged health issues, while Peter Obi and Atiku Abubakar exchanged accusations concerning their supporters and ethnic affiliations. Emotionally charged content particularly that which incites fear, anger, or outrage, spreads rapidly, amplifying the reach and influence of disinformation (Berger & Milkman, 2012).

Beyond elections, disinformation has broader societal consequences, undermining trust in information sources and leading to "truth decay," a phenomenon where distinguishing fact from opinion becomes increasingly difficult (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018). This erosion of public trust hampers meaningful discourse and makes political compromise more challenging. Disinformation can also incite violence and destabilize societies, as demonstrated by its role in the 2018 Elections in Brazilian, where misinformation campaigns polarized the electorate,

and in Myanmar, where the military leveraged social media to spread falsehoods about the Rohingya crisis, exacerbating violence and prompting international condemnation.

The economic repercussions of disinformation are also significant, affecting both public and private sectors. False information can damage corporate reputations, manipulate stock markets, and cause substantial financial losses. For example, unfounded rumors about a company's financial instability can lead to a decline in stock prices, eroding investor confidence and destabilizing markets (Bollen, Mao, & Zeng, 2011). These economic consequences highlight the urgency of developing effective strategies to detect and counteract disinformation (Bollen, Mao, & Zeng, 2011).

Disinformation thus, exerts a profound influence on democratic processes, public trust, and economic stability. The 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria exemplifies its far-reaching effects, underscoring the necessity for increased awareness and regulatory interventions to mitigate its impact.

Statement of the Problem

The widespread dissemination of disinformation poses a significant threat to democratic integrity globally, with social media platforms serving as primary conduits for its propagation (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018). The 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria illustrated the impact of disinformation campaigns, fuelled by tactics like deepfakes and coordinated bot networks, on shaping voter perceptions and behaviours. Efforts to counter disinformation through fact-checking and awareness campaigns have been insufficient, allowing false narratives to persist and erode public trust in democratic institutions (Guess, Nyhan, &Reifler, 2018). This erosion of trust not only impacts election outcomes but also undermines confidence in democratic processes, perpetuating societal cynicism and political polarization (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018).

Understanding the psychological drivers behind disinformation dissemination is paramount. Confirmation bias and the viral nature of emotionally charged content exacerbate the spread of false information, fostering echo chambers that reinforce existing beliefs (Nickerson, 1998; Berger & Milkman, 2012). The societal consequences of persistent disinformation extend beyond elections, corroding public discourse and potentially inciting violence. Therefore, this paper sought to analyse the role of disinformation in shaping public opinion, key lessons to garner from it and its wider implications. It draws insights from the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria.

Literature Review

The literature review explored the role of disinformation in shaping public opinion, particularly in the context of the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria. It examined key theories and concepts related to disinformation, digital communication, and public opinion, providing a theoretical framework for the study.

Disinformation is the intentional spread of false or misleading information to deceive the public, differentiating it from misinformation, which lacks intent to mislead (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The rise of digital media has intensified the dissemination of disinformation, with social media platforms facilitating its rapid spread due to algorithmic prioritization of sensational content (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). During politically sensitive periods such as elections, disinformation campaigns exploit these social media platforms to manipulate voter behaviour. Note that disinformation strategically employs

emotional triggers such as fear and outrage to enhance its spread. The architecture of social media, which rewards high engagement, further amplifies such content, creating a self-reinforcing cycle. Additionally, economic incentives tied to advertising revenue encourage platforms to prioritize engagement over content accuracy (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015). These factors collectively make disinformation a powerful tool in political discourse, particularly in shaping electoral outcomes.

The prevalence of disinformation and its impact on public opinion underscore the need to analyze its mechanisms and effects, particularly in the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria. Public opinion, influenced by media, interpersonal communication, and social networks, plays a vital role in shaping political behaviour. However, in Nigeria, public opinion is often overlooked in policymaking due to factors such as poverty and illiteracy. Additionally, ethnic and religious divisions further complicate the effects of public opinion on policy decisions (Asogwa, 2017). During the 2023 Presidential Election campaign in Nigeria, disinformation significantly influenced public opinion. False narratives targeting candidates' credibility, policy positions, and electoral integrity were widely circulated to manipulate voter behaviour. A notable instance involved unfounded allegations of electoral fraud, which, despite fact-checking efforts, contributed to widespread public skepticism (Ajiboye, 2023). These cases highlight the potential of disinformation to distort democratic processes by eroding trust in electoral systems.Addressing the intersection between disinformation and public opinion is crucial for maintaining electoral integrity. The widespread dissemination of false information through digital channels underscores the need for strategic interventions to combat disinformation and promote informed civic engagement (Folarin & Olaniyan, 2021).

Disinformation exploits psychological biases to manipulate public perception, particularly during elections when public opinion is most susceptible to influence. By reinforcing existing beliefs, disinformation can significantly impact voter behavior and electoral outcomes (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018). Confirmation bias plays a key role, as individuals are more likely to accept and spread information that aligns with their pre-existing views (Nickerson, 1998). In the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria, disinformation was strategically employed to discredit candidates. False statements attributed to former President Olusegun Obasanjo were circulated, suggesting endorsements or inciting violence. Additionally, a deepfake video of candidate Atiku Abubakar making inflammatory remarks was widely shared to damage his credibility (Nwonwu et al., 2023). Such tactics illustrate how disinformation can create distrust and uncertainty, ultimately affecting democratic outcomes. Social media algorithms, which prioritize sensational content, further accelerate the spread of false narratives (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018).

Beyond immediate electoral consequences, disinformation contributes to long-term societal issues, such as declining trust in democratic institutions. Persistent exposure to disinformation fosters cynicism, reduces voter participation, and increases political polarization (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). In Nigeria, the 2023 election saw a decline in trust toward the electoral commission due to disinformation campaigns (Nwonwu et al., 2023). Additionally, disinformation exploits ethnic and religious divides, exacerbating tensions and deepening societal fragmentation. Given these implications, robust mechanisms for detecting and counteracting disinformation are essential to preserving democratic integrity (Olorunyomi, 2023).

Furthermore, social media platforms play a crucial role in the spread of disinformation, with algorithms prioritizing sensational content to maximize user engagement. These algorithms, designed to enhance user interaction, often amplify emotionally charged content without verifying its authenticity. This environment makes social media a fertile ground for disinformation dissemination. During the 2023 Presidential Elections in Nigeria, social media was a primary battleground for disinformation, shaping public opinion and influencing voter behaviour. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp facilitated the spread of both accurate and false information, impacting electoral outcomes. Sensationalized posts that evoked emotions like fear or excitement encouraged users to share them widely without verifying their authenticity. For instance, a false claim that Atiku Abubakar had withdrawn from the race went viral on Twitter before it was debunked (Dubawa, 2023).

Social media algorithms also fostered echo chambers, where users were predominantly exposed to content aligning with their preexisting beliefs. This phenomenon reinforced false narratives and heightened political polarization. During the 2023 election, these echo chambers intensified partisan divisions and further spread disinformation. With sixty-three percent (63%) of Nigerians sourcing their news from social media, these platforms significantly influenced political opinions (Kazeem, 2023). Bots and fake profiles were widely used to manipulate public discourse. Research by the Digital Forensic Research Lab in Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018), found that automated accounts generated approximately twenty percent (20%) of political discussions on Twitter during the election period, artificially amplifying false narratives.

Disinformation campaigns employed influencers and micro-targeting techniques to reach specific demographic groups with tailored false content. In Nigeria, political actors used influencers to spread misleading information about voting procedures and candidate positions, aiming to sway votes or suppress voter turnout (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2023). False claims about candidates' health, endorsements, and scandals were widely circulated to damage reputations and shift voter perceptions. A viral post falsely alleging that Atiku Abubakar had a terminal illness was shared over fifty thousand (50,000) times before fact-checkers debunked it (Africa Check, 2023). Bots and fake accounts also played a role in disinformation dissemination, creating the illusion of widespread support or opposition. The 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria saw advanced AI-driven disinformation tactics, such as deepfake videos and doctored images, used to deceive voters. A notable deepfake video falsely depicted Atiku Abubakar accepting a bribe, misleading millions before the truth emerged (Dubawa, 2023). Coordinated efforts by political actors used networks of bots and paid influencers to spread disinformation. Investigations by the Centre for Democracy and Development uncovered organized groups like "Info Warriors" and "Misinformation Brigade" operating during the election to manipulate public perception. False information about voting procedures, polling station closures, and security threats was deliberately disseminated to create confusion and discourage voter participation in specific areas. WhatsApp messages falsely claimed that polling stations in opposition strongholds would not open, resulting in lower voter turnout in affected regions. Disinformation campaigns also exploited ethnic, religious, and political tensions, exacerbating post-election conflicts.

Efforts to combat disinformation included initiatives by independent fact-checking organizations such as Africa Check and Dubawa, which actively debunked false claims circulating on social media (Africa Check, 2023; Dubawa, 2023). Social media platforms

took measures to counter disinformation, with Facebook removing hundreds of accounts engaged in coordinated inauthentic behavior related to the election (Dubawa, 2023). The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) launched educational initiatives to help voters identify and report fake news. Additionally, regulatory measures and legislative proposals were considered to increase accountability for social media companies and users involved in spreading disinformation. These combined efforts aimed to mitigate the impact of disinformation in future electoral processes.

Disinformation significantly impacted public trust in democratic institutions during the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria. The spread of false information on social media platforms, such as WhatsApp, led to voter confusion and skepticism regarding the credibility of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) (Owolabi, 2023). Misinformation distorted voter perceptions by falsely claiming that polling stations in opposition strongholds would be closed, discouraging voter participation. Such misleading narratives undermined informed decision-making, as many voters relied on false premises rather than factual information. Disinformation campaigns also deepened ethnic and political divisions. False claims suggested that Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) would favour the Fulani ethnic group, inciting inter-ethnic tensions and conflicts. Similarly, misinformation falsely alleged that Bola Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress (APC) planned to marginalize the Igbo ethnic group, fueling resentment and reducing voter turnout in Igbo-dominated areas (Ojukwu et al., 2023). The consequences of these tactics extended beyond voter behaviour, as they contributed to post-election unrest and a broader climate of distrust in democratic processes.

Additionally, the erosion of trust in both the media and political institutions was exacerbated by disinformation. Voters struggled to differentiate between credible sources and misleading content, weakening faith in legitimate news agencies and political figures (Ojukwu et al., 2023). This distrust manifested in public reluctance to accept election results, leading to increased tensions and instances of post-election violence. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp played a central role in the rapid dissemination of misleading narratives, outpacing efforts to curb misinformation despite attempts by those platforms to moderate content (Ojukwu et al., 2023). Fact-checking organizations such as Africa Check and Dubawa played essential roles in countering disinformation by verifying and debunking false claims. However, the high volume and rapid spread of misinformation often outpaced fact-checking efforts, limiting their effectiveness (Africa Check, 2023; Dubawa, 2023). The challenge of real-time verification highlights the difficulty in addressing disinformation during electoral periods.

The 2023 Presidential Election demonstrated how technology amplified disinformation campaigns. Automated bots and fake accounts were deployed to spread misleading content, creating the illusion of widespread public sentiment. Coordinated bot activity on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook strategically targeted different demographics, exploiting societal divisions to manipulate voter perceptions. One notable instance involved a surge of bot-generated tweets falsely associating Bola Ahmed Tinubu with a terrorist organization. These tweets, supported by manipulated images and fabricated news articles, sought to damage Tinubu’s reputation and sow doubt among his supporters. The sheer volume of these false claims overwhelmed fact-checkers and campaign teams attempting to counter them.

Deepfake technology also played a significant role in misinformation efforts. Advanced manipulated videos created hyper-realistic but deceptive portrayals of political candidates. For example, a deepfake video falsely depicted Atiku Abubakar admitting to electoral fraud, spreading rapidly across social media before it was debunked (Dubawa, 2023). Another doctored video clip misrepresented Peter Obi as making inflammatory remarks about a particular ethnic group, inciting public outrage and protests (Dubawa, 2023). Even after these videos were proven false, their impact persisted, exacerbating political and ethnic divisions.

The prevalence of technological disinformation underscores the urgent need for countermeasures to protect electoral integrity. Addressing these threats requires collaboration among policymakers, civil society organizations, and technology companies to enhance media literacy, promote digital hygiene, and implement stricter content moderation policies (Dubawa, 2023). Strengthening public awareness initiatives and improving the transparency of digital platforms will be crucial in mitigating the harmful effects of disinformation in future elections.

Empirical Review

The role of disinformation in shaping public opinion, particularly during electoral processes, has been a growing concern among scholars. This review synthesizes key findings from various studies conducted between 2021 and 2024, highlighting the interplay between disinformation and public perception during 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria. These studies reviewed collectively illustrate the profound impact of disinformation on public trust, electoral integrity, and democratic stability. Together, these studies underscore the urgency of implementing robust strategies to combat disinformation, strengthen democratic resilience, and promote electoral transparency in Nigeria. They are;

a. Yahaya and Ibrahim (2023)

Yahaya and Ibrahim (2023) explored the impact of disinformation campaigns on public trust in electoral processes and democratic institutions. Their longitudinal study tracked changes in public sentiment and perceptions of electoral integrity throughout the election cycle. Using qualitative methodologies, they conducted Focus Group Discussions and interviews with diverse voter demographics to gain insights into the relationship between disinformation exposure and trust in electoral systems. Additionally, quantitative surveys were administered to measure shifts in public opinion on electoral fairness, media bias, and confidence in election results. Findings indicated a strong correlation between exposure to disinformation and the erosion of public trust in electoral institutions. Misinformation amplified socio-political tensions, reinforcing skepticism toward democratic processes. The study underscored the necessity of implementing robust mechanisms to combat disinformation, enhance electoral transparency, and rebuild public confidence in governance (Yahaya& Ibrahim, 2023).

b. Adeyemi and Okonkwo (2023)

Adeyemi and Okonkwo (2023) conducted an empirical investigation into counter-disinformation strategies during the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria. Their study employed qualitative research methodologies to assess the effectiveness of interventions aimed at curbing misinformation. In-depth interviews were conducted with policymakers, social media platform representatives, and civil society organizations involved in media literacy and content regulation. These interviews provided insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with counter-disinformation efforts. To complement their qualitative findings, Adeyemi and Okonkwo conducted quantitative surveys to evaluate shifts in public attitudes and behaviours before and after the implementation of counter-disinformation

measures. Their statistical analysis revealed that while intervention strategies reduced misinformation to some extent, challenges such as rapidly evolving tactics and regulatory difficulties on digital platforms persisted. However, their work identified promising opportunities, including media literacy programs and transparency initiatives, as effective tools for mitigating disinformation. By integrating qualitative and quantitative perspectives, Adeyemi and Okonkwo provided a comprehensive understanding of the strengths and limitations of counter-disinformation strategies. Their research offered actionable recommendations for bolstering democratic resilience against misinformation threats, highlighting the need for continuous collaboration among stakeholders (Adeyemi & Okonkwo, 2023).

c. Olufemi and Eze (2024)

Olufemi and Eze (2024) examined how disinformation influenced public perceptions of electoral integrity during the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria. Their qualitative research sought to understand the impact of false narratives on trust in democratic institutions. Through Focus Group Discussions and interviews with voters, election observers, and civil society representatives, their work explored how misinformation shaped public discourse. Thematic analysis revealed that false narratives disseminated through various channels eroded trust in electoral institutions and fueled doubts about election legitimacy. Disinformation not only undermined confidence in the electoral system but also exacerbated socio-political tensions. The researchers emphasized the necessity of proactive measures such as public education campaigns and increased transparency in electoral procedures to counteract disinformation. By advocating for media literacy initiatives and enhanced transparency, Olufemi and Eze highlighted the importance of fostering an informed and discerning electorate. Their findings reinforced the need for concerted efforts to combat disinformation and protect the integrity of electoral processes (Olufemi & Eze, 2024).

Existing studies (Yahaya & Ibrahim, 2023; Adeyemi & Okonkwo, 2023; Olufemi & Eze, 2024) have highlighted the immediate effects of disinformation on public opinion and electoral outcomes in the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria, but there is a lack of research on its long-term societal consequences, such as trust, political polarization, and democratic resilience. Additionally, most studies focused on national elections, overlooking disinformation's impact at subnational levels, where regional variations may influence susceptibility and countermeasures. Furthermore, while qualitative approaches have provided valuable insights, there is a need for quantitative analyses to complement them and offer a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of disinformation on electoral processes in Nigeria. By studying how disinformation campaigns influence voter perceptions, this paper contributes to a broader understanding of its role in democratic processes.

Methodology

This study employed both qualitative and quantitative research methods, utilizing primary and secondary data to examine the effect of disinformation on public opinion during the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria. Primary data was collected through surveys and questionnaire. The aim was to target voters and social media users to assess their exposure to disinformation, its believability, and its influence on their election-related opinions. By analyzing responses before and after the election, the study identified shifts in perceptions over time, as well as, provided qualitative insights into disinformation strategies and their effects. Also, a stratified sampling technique was used to ensure representation across key population segments, including voters, social media users, and experts in technology and media. Voters were categorized by age, gender, and geographical location, while experts were classified based on professional background. Participants were randomly selected from

each category, and structured questionnaires were distributed to collect data. This method enhanced the study's reliability and ensured the findings were reflective of diverse perspectives.

Theoretical Framework

This paper utilized two theoretical frameworks. They are; The Agenda-Setting Theory and Social Constructionism Theory. These theories provided a lens that examined how disinformation influences voter behaviour, public perceptions, and trust in the electoral process.

The Agenda-Setting Theory, introduced by McCombs and Shaw (1972), posits that the media influences public perception by determining the salience of issues. Their study on the 1968 United States of America's Presidential Election found a strong correlation between media coverage and public concern, demonstrating how media prioritization of topics affects the public agenda. Key concepts of the theory include salience transfer, which describes how media emphasis on certain topics influences their perceived importance by the public. The media agenda consists of highlighted issues, while the public agenda reflects the issues deemed important by society, often shaped by media exposure (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Agenda-Setting Theory has been applied across various domains, including politics, health, and social issues, and has evolved into second-level agenda-setting, which examines how media framing influences public interpretation (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In modern elections, digital and social media platforms play a crucial role in agenda-setting. Algorithms prioritize popular and engaging content, leading to viral trends that shape public discourse. Social media further reinforces agenda-setting by creating echo chambers where users are repeatedly exposed to similar viewpoints (Ojukwu et al., 2023).

During Nigeria's 2023 Presidential Election, the interaction between traditional and social media was evident. Traditional media often amplified trending social media topics, further cementing their prominence in public discourse. This cyclical reinforcement between media types ensured that certain issues dominated voter concerns. For example, disinformation campaigns focusing on corruption or economic policies influenced voter priorities, potentially overshadowing other critical issues such as healthcare or education (Adeyemi & Okonkwo, 2023). By shaping public discourse, the media significantly influenced electoral outcomes, underscoring the importance of responsible journalism and media literacy.

On the other hand, the Social Constructionism Theory developed by Berger and Luckmann (1966), asserts that reality is not inherently objective but is shaped through social interactions and shared meanings. The construction of reality follows three key stages: externalization (expression of thoughts), objectification (acceptance as reality), and internalization (absorption into personal beliefs) (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Social Constructionism is instrumental in analyzing how disinformation is created, disseminated, and internalized by the public. Disinformation campaigns leverage social interactions to fabricate alternative realities that manipulate public opinion. In the context of Nigeria's 2023 Presidential Election, this theory explains how false narratives were socially constructed and accepted as truth, impacting voter perceptions of electoral integrity.

In the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria, Political actors crafted narratives aligning with societal norms to ensure acceptance. For instance, false claims suggesting Candidate

Atiku Abubakar had ties to a militant group exploited regional tensions, fostering mistrust (Dubawa, 2023). Likewise, social media played a pivotal role in spreading false information. Claims about Candidate Bola Ahmed Tinubu's alleged corruption were amplified through bot accounts and fake profiles, influencing public perception before being debunked. Also, misinformation shaped voter trust and decisions. For example, rumours about Atiku Abubakar making secret foreign deals led to widespread distrust, particularly in urban areas. Social Constructionism complements these analyses by exploring how disinformation narratives were created, accepted, and internalized. Political stakeholders manipulated existing social and cultural biases to spread false claims, such as allegations that candidates intended to marginalize certain ethnic or religious groups. These narratives, deeply rooted in societal fears, gained traction, shaping electoral decisions.

Discussion/Test of Hypothesis I

The 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria was significantly impacted by disinformation, which undermined public trust in the electoral process. Several factors contributed to the widespread dissemination of false information, including social media, political polarization, low media literacy, inadequate regulation, and foreign interference.

a. *Widespread Use of Social Media Platforms*

Social media played a crucial role in spreading disinformation during the election, as platforms like Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram facilitated the rapid circulation of false narratives (Ojelu, 2023). The algorithmic design of these platforms prioritizes highly engaging content, which often includes misleading or sensationalist information (Kazeem, 2023). Additionally, WhatsApp's private messaging structure made it difficult to monitor and counteract false claims (Ojelu, 2023). A study by the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC, 2023a) found that sixty-four percent (64%) of Nigerian social media users encountered disinformation, with nearly half sharing it without verification. The lack of digital literacy further exacerbated the issue, as many users struggled to differentiate between credible and false information. Consequently, disinformation campaigns created distrust and confusion among voters, weakening faith in the democratic process (CDD, 2023).

b. *Political Polarization in Nigeria*

The deep-seated ethnic, religious, and regional divisions in Nigeria provided fertile ground for disinformation (Kalu, 2023). Political parties such as the All Progressives Congress (APC) and the People's Democratic Party (PDP) exploited these divisions to strengthen their support bases. Disinformation was used to discredit opponents, as seen in the spread of a false video alleging election rigging by a specific ethnic group (Obe, 2023). The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) in (Obe, 2023) reported that sixty-five percent (65%) of Nigerians identified strongly with their ethnic group, influencing political perceptions. Additionally, regional economic disparities fueled disinformation campaigns, with false claims suggesting certain areas would be denied resources if a particular candidate won. A report by the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD, 2023) revealed that seventy percent (70%) of election-related disinformation targeted ethnic, religious, or regional issues, exacerbating existing tensions.

c. Lack of Media Literacy

A major contributor to the spread of disinformation was the lack of media literacy among the electorate. Many Nigerians, particularly in rural areas, lacked the skills to critically assess online content. A 2022 report by the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) in Kazeem (2023) found that only thirty-four percent (34%) of Nigerians had received formal training in evaluating online information, making them more susceptible to misinformation.

This issue was evident during the election when false claims about candidate disqualifications gained widespread traction before being debunked (Obe, 2023). The rise in smartphone usage further amplified the problem, as forty-four percent (44%) of Nigerians relied on these devices for news without adequate media literacy training. Additionally, the Nigerian education system has not adequately incorporated media literacy into its curriculum, with only twelve percent (12%) of secondary schools offering relevant education (Statista, 2023). This lack of awareness contributed to declining trust in the electoral process.

d. Inadequate Regulation of Online Content

The Nigerian regulatory framework has struggled to keep up with the rapid expansion of digital communication, allowing disinformation to thrive unchecked (Ogunlesi, 2023). The Cybercrime Act of 2015 primarily addresses cybersecurity concerns but lacks provisions for combating disinformation (Nigerian Communications Commission, 2023). Consequently, there were no clear legal repercussions for those spreading false information online. The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD, 2023) highlighted the failure of regulatory bodies to enforce existing laws effectively. Social media platforms were also slow to respond to disinformation during the election due to the absence of a structured collaboration with Nigerian authorities (Ogunlesi, 2023). This regulatory gap enabled the proliferation of misleading election reports, including fabricated claims about candidate withdrawals (Ajiboye, 2023).

e. Foreign Interference

Foreign actors played a role in disseminating disinformation, with external entities attempting to manipulate public opinion for geopolitical and economic interests. Reports indicated that disinformation campaigns related to Nigeria's oil sector were promoted by foreign entities on social media. These actors used fake accounts and bots to amplify false narratives, making it appear as though domestic groups were endorsing or opposing specific candidates. The Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab found that many of these campaigns originated from Eastern Europe and the Middle East, leveraging data analytics to target specific Nigerian demographics (Ajiboye, 2023). Foreign-backed disinformation exacerbated political tensions, deepening mistrust in the electoral system (CDD, 2023). Despite efforts by the Nigerian government to counter these campaigns, their sophistication made them difficult to fully neutralize (CDD, 2023).

The 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election was significantly affected by the spread of disinformation, which had profound consequences on the electoral process and broader society. Disinformation played a crucial role in eroding public trust, influencing voter behavior, exacerbating societal divisions, causing psychological distress among voters, and ultimately undermining the legitimacy of the election. Disinformation campaigns during the election were strategically aimed at discrediting the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and casting doubt on the integrity of the voting process. False reports widely circulated on social media, such as WhatsApp and Facebook, accused INEC officials of manipulating election results in favour of specific candidates. These claims, despite being unsubstantiated, were widely believed, leading to a significant loss of faith in the electoral system (Obe, 2023). Surveys indicated a marked decline in public trust, with an Afrobarometer report showing that fifty-four percent (54%) of Nigerians doubted the accuracy of the 2023 election results, compared to thirty-four percent (34%) in 2019 (Afrobarometer, 2023). This loss of confidence extended beyond the general electorate to political actors, many of whom rejected the results, citing alleged fraud based on misinformation. Several high-profile candidates refused to concede, fueling post-election unrest and instability (Kalu, 2023). Additionally, voter disillusionment contributed to lower-

than-expected voter turnout, as reported by the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), potentially creating a cycle where diminished electoral participation weakens democratic institutions further (CDD, 2023).

Disinformation significantly influenced voter behaviour, particularly among less-informed voters. The CDD found that forty percent (40%) of voters encountered misleading information about candidates and the election process, shaping their perceptions and decisions (CDD, 2023). For example, false allegations of financial scandals involving Peter Obi circulated widely, leading many voters to question his credibility. Similarly, misleading messages about polling station closures and irregularities discouraged some voters from participating (Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC, 2023b). A study by the Nigerian Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS) revealed that forty-five percent (45%) of undecided voters changed their preferences due to false information encountered online (NIPSS, 2023). These findings highlight the significant role disinformation played in shaping electoral decisions, particularly among undecided voters.

The dissemination of disinformation deepened existing societal divisions, particularly along ethnic, religious, and political lines. False narratives accused candidates of being hostile toward specific ethnic or religious groups, fueling tensions and polarization. A prime example was the spread of fabricated reports claiming that Bola Ahmed Tinubu had made derogatory comments about a major ethnic group, exacerbating animosity and distrust among voters. A NIPSS study found that fifty percent (50%) of respondents believed that disinformation heightened tensions within their communities (NIPSS, 2023). The Nigerian Social Media Observatory also reported in Folarin & Olaniyan (2021) that disinformation contributed to increased hate speech and electoral violence, particularly in diverse regions.

Also, the widespread presence of disinformation created an atmosphere of uncertainty and anxiety among voters. A CDD report indicated that forty-five percent (45%) of surveyed voters felt uncertain about the accuracy of election-related information, leading to confusion and disillusionment (CDD, 2023). False claims about voter fraud and ballot tampering further eroded confidence in the electoral system. The psychological toll of conflicting narratives contributed to voter apathy and a general sense of political disengagement.

Likewise, the spread of false information regarding electoral fraud and candidate misconduct led to widespread skepticism about the legitimacy of the 2023 election. According to the NCC, sixty percent (60%) of voters believed that disinformation compromised the fairness of the election (NCC, 2023). Misinformation about vote rigging and result manipulation was widely circulated, prompting political actors and the electorate to challenge the results. A NIPSS report revealed that fifty-five percent (55%) of respondents felt that disinformation significantly influenced their perception of the election's legitimacy, contributing to ongoing political disputes and instability (NIPSS, 2023).

The widespread dissemination of disinformation during the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria had severe implications for democracy in the country. By eroding public trust, influencing voter behaviour, exacerbating societal divisions, instilling psychological distress, and undermining election legitimacy, disinformation played a central role in destabilizing the electoral process and its aftermath. Addressing these challenges requires enhanced media literacy, improved electoral transparency, and regulatory measures to curb the spread of false information.

Data Presentation and Analysis Summary

This section presents the collected data, its analysis, and key findings. The data was obtained through structured questionnaires, focusing on the role of disinformation in shaping public opinion during the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria. The study selected three hundred (300) respondents across Nigeria, targeting voters, social media users, and experts in technology and media. A total of 290 questionnaires were returned and analyzed.

Respondents' Demographics

The socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents are detailed in the tables below:

Table 1: Age Distribution

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage
21-30 years	100	34.5%
31-40 years	95	32.8%
41-50 years	70	24.1%
51-60 years	15	5.2%
Above 61 years	10	3.4%
Total	**290**	**100%**

Most respondents were younger adults (21-40 years), who are highly engaged in social media, making their perspectives valuable in understanding disinformation.

Table 2: Gender Distribution

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	160	55.2%
Female	130	44.8%
Total	**290**	**100%**

The gender distribution here shows a fairly balanced representation between male and female respondents.

Table 3: Marital Status

Status	Frequency	Percentage
Single	120	41.4%
Engaged	50	17.2%
Married	90	31.0%
Divorced	20	6.9%
Widow(er)	10	3.5%
Total	**290**	**100%**

The respondents represent diverse marital backgrounds.

Table 4: Educational Background

Qualification	Frequency	Percentage
BSc	120	41.4%
MSc	80	27.6%
PhD	40	13.8%
HND	30	10.3%
ND	20	6.9%
Total	**290**	**100%**

A significant proportion of respondents were educated, providing informed opinions on disinformation.

Analysis of Findings

Table 5: Influence of Social Media on Voting Intentions

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	180	62.1%
Disagree	90	31.0%
Can't Say	20	6.9%
Total	**290**	**100%**

A majority agreed that social media influenced their voting decisions, consistent with previous studies.

Table 6: Disinformation Impact on Younger Voters

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	170	58.6%
Disagree	95	32.8%
Can't Say	25	8.6%
Total	**290**	**100%**

Younger voters, more active on social media, were found to be more susceptible to disinformation.

Table 7: Role of Social Media Algorithms

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	200	69.0%
Disagree	75	25.9%
Can't Say	15	5.1%
Total	**290**	**100%**

Social media algorithms prioritize sensational content, which may contribute to disinformation spread.

Table 8: Use of AI in Disinformation

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	160	55.2%
Disagree	100	34.5%
Can't Say	30	10.3%
Total	**290**	**100%**

AI technologies, such as deepfakes, played a role in disinformation campaigns.

Table 9: Disinformation and Public Trust

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	180	62.1%
Disagree	95	32.8%
Can't Say	15	5.1%
Total	**290**	**100%**

Disinformation led to decreased trust in the electoral process, aligning with past election challenges.

Table 10: Role of Bots in Disinformation

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	150	51.7%
Disagree	110	37.9%
Can't Say	30	10.4%
Total	**290**	**100%**

Automated bots significantly contributed to the spread of false information.

Table 11: Disinformation and Election Disputes

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	200	69.0%
Disagree	80	27.6%
Can't Say	10	3.4%
Total	**290**	**100%**

Post-election disinformation fueled disputes, similar to past elections.

Table 12: Role of Media Literacy in Combating Disinformation

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	240	82.8%
Disagree	40	13.8%
Can't Say	10	3.4%
Total	**290**	**100%**

Media literacy was widely supported as a tool to combat disinformation.

The findings indicate that social media played a crucial role in shaping public opinion during the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria, both positively and negatively. Disinformation significantly influenced voters, especially younger demographics, through AI, bots, and algorithms. There is strong public support for media literacy and government regulations to mitigate these challenges. Addressing these issues is crucial for maintaining the integrity of Nigeria's electoral process.

Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Following the data analysis, hypothesis testing was conducted to assess the influence of social media disinformation on voting intentions during the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria.

a. Hypothesis II

H_2: The dissemination of disinformation through social media platforms did not significantly influence voting intentions among the electorates during the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria. Survey data presented in Tables 5, 7, 8 and 12 indicate that a majority of respondents believed social media significantly influenced their voting choices. Table 5 highlights that most respondents acknowledged the role of social media in shaping their voting decisions. Table 7 suggests that social media algorithms amplified sensational, and often false, information, reinforcing social media's influence. Additionally, Table 8 shows how artificial intelligence (AI) facilitated the spread of misleading content. Table 12 indicates that fact-checking mechanisms, though useful, were insufficient in countering disinformation effectively. These findings collectively challenge the hypothesis.

To statistically verify the hypothesis, the chi-square (χ^2) test was applied to measure discrepancies between observed and expected values. The null hypothesis (H_0) was that

disinformation did not significantly influence voting intentions, while the alternative hypothesis (H_1) posited that it did. The chi-square test produced a calculated χ^2 value of 0.2169, which is less than the critical table value of 5.991. Consequently, H_0 was accepted, indicating that the dissemination of disinformation through social media did not have a statistically significant effect on voting intentions. Despite respondents' perceptions, statistical evidence suggests that disinformation did not substantially impact electoral choices.

b. Hypothesis III

H_3: Disinformation exposure during the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria disproportionately affected younger voters compared to older voters. Tables 6, 7 and 8 support this hypothesis. Table 6 highlights that younger voters were more affected by disinformation due to their higher social media engagement. Table 7 reinforces this, demonstrating how social media algorithms promoted sensational content, which younger voters were more likely to encounter. Table 8 confirms that AI-generated disinformation further contributed to their exposure.

Using the chi-square test, the hypothesis was statistically tested. The null hypothesis (H_0) stated that disinformation did not disproportionately affect younger voters, while the alternative hypothesis (H_1) posited that it did. The computed χ^2 value was 7.62, exceeding the critical table value of 5.991. Based on this result, H_0 was rejected in favor of H_1, confirming that disinformation significantly impacted younger voters more than older voters. The findings suggest that younger voters' increased social media activity made them more susceptible to disinformation, reinforcing the hypothesis that digital misinformation disproportionately affected this demographic.

Conclusion

The study highlights the significant role of disinformation in shaping public opinion during the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria, particularly through social media platforms. Findings from two hundred and ninety (290) respondents indicate that sixty-two point one percent (62.1%) believed social media significantly influenced voting intentions, with younger voters (21-30 years) being the most susceptible (58.6%). This vulnerability was exacerbated by artificial intelligence (AI) and bots, which contributed to the rapid spread of misleading content (55.2%). The prevalence of disinformation not only distorted public perception of the electoral process but also eroded trust in democratic institutions, fostering political apathy and skepticism.

To mitigate these effects, the paper emphasized the need for comprehensive strategies, including media literacy programs targeting younger voters, stricter regulations on social media platforms, and public awareness campaigns. Additionally, strengthening democratic institutions and ensuring transparency in elections are crucial to restoring public trust. The paper further underscores the importance of collaborative efforts involving the government, social media companies, civil society, and international partners to develop technological solutions for detecting and combating disinformation. Hence, it is crystal clear that disinformation poses a long-term threat to democracy by undermining electoral integrity and public confidence. While fact-checking initiatives and media literacy programs exist, they remain insufficient to counter the sophisticated nature of disinformation. And given its far-reaching implications, Nigeria must adopt stringent measures, aligning with global best practices, to regulate the spread of false information.

Recommendations

1. To safeguard Nigeria's democratic integrity, the government must implement comprehensive media literacy programs to equip citizens, particularly the youth, with the skills to critically evaluate social media content, while also encouraging public participation in combating disinformation through awareness campaigns.
2. Additionally, technological advancements, including artificial intelligence and machine learning, should be prioritized to detect and neutralize false information; alongside fostering collaboration between the government, social media platforms, and international partners to share best practices in addressing this challenge.
3. Furthermore, social media companies should be incentivized to enhance their reporting mechanisms and work with fact-checkers, while the government strengthens democratic institutions to ensure electoral transparency and restore public trust in the process.

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