
The Influence of Social Media Platforms on the Spread of Political Propaganda and Misinformation in Nigeria's 2023 Presidential Election; Implications for Future Elections

Original Research Article | Volume 1 | Issue 4 | 2026 | Article Number: 036

Accepted: 31 August 2026 | Published: 10 September 2026 | ISSN: 2979-8582 (Online)



Crossref : <https://doi.org/10.67693/BJCR-VPRKUXIZ>



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Abstract

The 2023 Nigerian presidential election witnessed unprecedented use of social media platforms as vehicles for political propaganda and misinformation. This study investigates how platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp influenced the dissemination of biased narratives and deceptive content during the election period. The problem centres on understanding the extent to which social media shaped voter perceptions and potentially impacted electoral integrity. The objective is to explore the mechanisms of propaganda spread, identify patterns of misinformation, and assess implications for future electoral processes in Nigeria. Using a qualitative methodology, this research relies on content analysis of social media posts, newspapers reports and internet materials. This approach facilitates an in-depth understanding of how misinformation circulates and affects public opinion during critical political events. The study adopts the Agenda-Setting Theory as a theoretical framework, which explains how media influences public priorities by highlighting specific issues, thereby shaping perception and behaviour among audiences. Key findings reveal: (1) social media platforms served as primary channels for rapid dissemination of politically motivated misinformation; (2) coordinated campaigns by partisan actors exploited algorithmic biases to amplify divisive and false content; (3) many voters lacked sufficient media literacy to critically evaluate the authenticity of online information, increasing vulnerability to propaganda. Recommendations include: (1) strengthening digital literacy programs nationwide to empower voters in discerning credible information online; (2) enhancing regulatory frameworks to obligate social media companies to monitor and curb the spread of harmful misinformation; (3) fostering collaboration between electoral bodies, civil society, and technology firms to deploy real-time fact-checking and public awareness campaigns during elections.

Keywords: Social Media Platforms, Political Propaganda, Misinformation, Political Motivation And

INTRODUCTION

The advent of social media platforms has profoundly reshaped political communication in Nigeria, particularly evident during the 2023 presidential election, where platforms like Twitter (now X), Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram served as primary arenas for voter mobilization, discourse, and information dissemination (Oladapo, Oyebamiji, & Adeyemi, 2025). These tools empowered young voters by facilitating real-time updates, debates, and advocacy for electoral transparency, while political parties and candidates strategically deployed them for campaigns and direct electorate engagement (Oladapo et al., 2025). However, this digital surge also amplified the rapid spread of political propaganda and misinformation, including coordinated disinformation campaigns, deep fakes, and manipulated multimedia that targeted opponents and undermined institutional credibility (Ajakaiye, 2024; BBC, 2023).

In the 2023 election cycle, political actors exploited social media through paid influencers, bot networks, and fake news websites to propagate false narratives, often exploiting ethnic and religious cleavages to incite polarization and erode public trust (BBC, 2023b; CDD West Africa, 2024). Tactics such as doctored images, audio deep fakes falsely depicting candidates like Atiku Abubakar in rigging plots, and inorganic hashtags trended via algorithm manipulation fuelled toxic online debates and offline divisions, with whistle blowers confirming payments to influencers for emotionally charged disinformation (Ajakaiye, 2024; Hum Angle, 2024). Fact-checkers noted overwhelming volumes of such content, which distorted voter perceptions and challenged the integrity of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) processes (BBC, 2023).

These dynamics pose significant implications for future Nigerian elections, highlighting the dual-edged nature of social media as both a democratic enhancer and a vector for manipulation that threatens national cohesion (Hassan, as cited in Kofi Annan Foundation, 2025). Without robust interventions like enhanced digital literacy, platform regulations, and fact-checking initiatives, recurring misinformation could further polarize electorates and compromise democratic consolidation (Oladapo et al., 2025; CDD West Africa, 2024).

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the specific mechanisms through which social media platforms facilitated the dissemination of political propaganda and misinformation during Nigeria's 2023 presidential election.
2. To assess the extent to which such content influenced voter behavior, perceptions, and electoral outcomes.
3. To propose policy recommendations for mitigating social media-driven disinformation in upcoming Nigerian elections.

Research Questions

1. What were the predominant forms and tactics of political propaganda and misinformation on social media during the 2023 Nigerian presidential election?
2. How did exposure to social media misinformation affect voter trust and participation in the 2023 election?
3. What regulatory and educational strategies can Nigeria implement to curb social media propaganda in future elections?

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Social media platforms

Social media platforms have significantly transformed Nigeria's communication landscape by enabling real-time interaction, information dissemination, and community mobilization. These platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and Insta-gram, have become central to Nigeria's development of communication and socio-political engagement, especially among the youth. The rapid proliferation of mobile phones and internet penetration has expanded access to these platforms, which are now used for various purposes such as social interaction, political mobilization, advocacy, and economic activities. Social media's ability to bypass infrastructural and cultural barriers that limit traditional communication channels makes it an essential tool for reaching underserved populations and fostering social change (Bawa, 2025; Folayan, 2020).

In Nigeria, social media platforms have a profound socio-economic and political impact, shaping behaviours and providing new avenues for economic empowerment and political participation. With over 36 million Nigerians actively using social media as of early 2024, these platforms facilitate commerce, particularly for start-ups and informal businesses, by enabling the sale of goods and services online. Politically, social media has shifted political communication dynamics by weakening traditional media gatekeeping and offering direct audience segmentation and engagement opportunities for politicians. This has increased political awareness and participation among Nigerian youths, who represent the largest share of social media users and often drive electoral behaviour through digital interactions (Folayan, 2020; Oparaugo, 2021; Business-day NG, 2024).

Furthermore, social media plays a role in Nigeria's digital creative economy by promoting cultural expression and employment opportunities. Platforms serve as showcases for Nigeria's cultural richness and entrepreneurial hustle, helping users to craft a unique digital social ecosystem that empowers millions. However, while social media opens vast opportunities for economic and social advancement, there are concerns about the consequences of uninformed usage, especially among youths, which necessitates attention to digital literacy and responsible use. Overall, social media platforms in Nigeria represent a dynamic force driving socio-economic development, political engagement, and cultural promotion across the nation (Royallite Global, 2021; Business-day NG, 2024).

Political Propaganda

Political propaganda in Nigeria refers to the deliberate and systematic manipulation of information, symbols, and narratives to shape public perceptions, mobilize support, and influence electoral outcomes, often through biased messaging that prioritizes persuasion over factual accuracy (Ngoa, 2011). Conceptually, it draws from classical theories like Harold Lasswell's framework of opinion control via symbols and representations, evolving into modern applications such as framing theory, where political actors construct messages to evoke emotions rather than evidence, particularly amplified by social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter (Uwa, 2023). In Nigeria's multi-ethnic context, propaganda exploits regional, religious, and ethnic divisions, functioning as a double-edged sword that drives democratic engagement while fostering misinformation, voter manipulation, and post-election instability (Okolie, 2021).

Historically, political propaganda traces back to Nigeria's colonial era, where nationalist leaders like Nnamdi Azikiwe and Obafemi Awolowo employed speeches, newspapers, and sermons to heighten anti-imperialist consciousness, portraying British rule as exploitative to rally support for independence without widespread violence (Ngoa, 2011). Post-independence, it intensified during military regimes and

civil wars, exemplified by Biafra's effective sloganeering ("On Aburi we stand") that garnered international sympathy against federal narratives, demonstrating propaganda's power in resource-scarce conflicts (Ngoa, 2011). In contemporary democracy, especially post-2015 elections, it manifests through digital dissemination of biased content, name-calling, and "plain folk" tactics like cultural displays to demoralize opponents and procure neutral alliances, often undermining governance trust (Uwa, 2023).

Theoretically, Nigerian political propaganda aligns with persuasion and conspiracy theories, where elites use coercive strategies like ideological macro-structuring to emphasize "our good things" while silencing dissent, perpetuating cycles of corruption and ethnic conflict (Ngoa, 2011). Social media exacerbates this by enabling rapid framing of opponents as corrupt or incompetent, altering voter perceptions and election results without regulatory checks, thus challenging democratic consolidation (Uwa, 2023). Mitigation requires digital literacy, legal frameworks, and platform-government collaboration to curb its manipulative spread, ensuring propaganda serves public education rather than elite dominance (Uwa, 2023).

Misinformation

Misinformation refers to the spread of false or misleading information without the intent to deceive, often proliferated through social and traditional media platforms, which significantly impacts public perception and societal stability. This phenomenon is increasingly problematic in Nigeria due to the high usage of social media combined with low levels of media literacy among the populace, resulting in widespread circulation of inaccurate news that fuels panic, conflicts, and political hostility (Adebisi, 2020). Motivations for sharing misinformation include the perceived civil duty to inform or warn others, but contextual factors such as media control, interpersonal trust, and socio-economic conditions like youth unemployment exacerbate its dissemination, posing complex challenges to effective communication and social cohesion (Adebisi, 2020).

The effects of misinformation in Nigeria extend beyond misinformation alone, impacting national security and governance structures. Studies have shown that fake news deepens social divisions, escalates ethnic and political conflicts, and undermines public trust in official sources and institutions, which complicates security management and democratic governance (Adebisi, 2025). Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp serve as primary conduits for misinformation because of their viral and algorithm-driven nature, allowing false narratives to rapidly shape public opinion and political dynamics. This has implications for electoral processes, social stability, and the effectiveness of government responses to crises (Adebisi, 2025).

To mitigate misinformation's harmful impact, a multifaceted strategy is necessary, involving media literacy education, government regulation, and active collaboration with social media companies to create robust fact-checking mechanisms (Onigbinde et al., 2024). Educating citizens on how to critically evaluate information and recognize misinformation is critical to building public resilience against fake news. Additionally, policy interventions must target the structural drivers of misinformation spread while encouraging responsible media practices. Such approaches aim to preserve democratic integrity and promote informed citizenship in Nigeria's complex socio-political environment (Onigbinde et al., 2024).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Agenda-Setting Theory

The agenda-setting theory, developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw during the 1968 American presidential election, explains how media influences public perception by focusing attention on certain topics and thereby shaping what the public considers important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Akporue, & Efebeh, 2025). This theory highlights the media's power to prioritize issues, which in turn influences the

public agenda. In the context of Nigeria's 2023 presidential election, this theory can be used to understand how social media platforms operated as modern mass media by setting the political agenda through the frequent and amplified spread of political propaganda and misinformation. The theory posits that social media platforms, by emphasizing certain political narratives, significantly influenced what voters perceived as the critical issues or candidates deserving attention.

Social media in Nigeria's 2023 election acted as a double-edged sword in agenda-setting; while it fostered political engagement and voter mobilization, especially among youth, it also facilitated the rapid dissemination of misleading information and political propaganda (Nwonwu, Tukur, & Oyedapo, 2023; Afolaranmi, 2025). Political parties and influencers strategically used social media to push their campaign narratives, often using paid influencers and manipulative tactics, such as spreading false stories and exploiting ethnic and religious tensions, to sway voter opinion (Osimen, & Adeyefa 2023; Usman, 2024). This manipulation aligns with the agenda-setting theory's explanation of media shaping public perceptions by not only setting the agenda but also highlighting specific perspectives within that agenda, sometimes at the expense of truth and political stability.

The implications for future elections in Nigeria are profound, as the agenda-setting role of social media can either strengthen or undermine democratic processes depending on how these platforms are used and regulated. There is a growing consensus on the need for digital literacy programs to improve citizens' ability to critically evaluate politically motivated content and for stronger legal frameworks and cooperation between the Nigerian government and social media companies to curb misinformation (EBSCO Research, 2004; Hassan, 2023). Understanding the agenda-setting dynamics on social media is crucial for developing strategies to counteract the negative effects of political propaganda and to enhance the transparency, fairness, and credibility of future elections.

Gap/Contribution to Knowledge

Previous studies on social media's role in spreading political propaganda and misinformation during Nigerian elections, particularly around 2023, exhibit notable gaps in scope, methodology, and forward-looking analysis. Limited Focus on National Presidential Scope: Many studies concentrate on subnational elections, such as the 2023 Lagos gubernatorial race, or broader themes like national security threats, rather than comprehensively analysing the presidential election's unique dynamics across Nigeria's diverse regions. This leaves a gap in nationwide data aggregation for presidential contests.

Insufficient Causal Evidence on Voter Impact: Research often documents prevalence and exposure to misinformation but relies on surveys or content analysis without experimental designs to prove direct influence on voting behaviour or election outcomes.

Lack of Implications for Future Elections: Existing works emphasize description and immediate effects, such as ethnic tensions or policy recommendations, but rarely project regulatory or mitigation strategies tailored to upcoming cycles like 2027.

This research addresses these by cantering on the 2023 presidential election nationwide, employing the secondary data that are well analysed, the study therefore, exposes tests for causal insights, and explicitly deriving implications like platform regulations and voter education for future polls.

FINDINGS / DISCUSSION

The Predominant Forms and Tactics of Political Propaganda and Misinformation on Social Media during the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election

During the 2023 Nigerian presidential election, predominant forms of political propaganda and

misinformation on social media included manipulated multimedia such as doctored images, fake audio clips, and mislabelled videos, often deployed to tarnish opponents' reputations or fabricate endorsements. For instance, photo shopped photos falsely linked candidates like Kashim Shettima to Boko Haram, while synthetic audio portrayed figures like Atiku Abubakar attempting election rigging, amplified via Twitter bots, trolls, and paid influencers who earned up to ₦500,000 monthly to push partisan narratives (Bassey, Josiah, Akpede, & Santas, 2024). Hashtag manipulation and coordinated bot networks further trended false claims, such as fake INEC press releases postponing polls or announcing investigations into candidates like Bola Tinubu, exploiting ethnic and religious cleavages to incite division and undermine electoral trust (CDD West Africa. 2024). These tactics, cross-posted from Twitter and Facebook to WhatsApp for wider offline reach, marked a sophisticated escalation from prior elections, with platforms like TikTok introducing derogatory songs and challenges targeting low-literacy audiences (International Centre for Journalists. 2023).

Deep fakes and deliberate mistranslations emerged as potent propaganda tools, where videos were re-captioned or repurposed old footage recirculated with new ethnic-biased narratives and English articles twisted into Hausa, Igbo, or Yoruba to alter meanings entirely, as seen on pages like Daily True Hausa (Hum Angle Media. 2024). Fake social media accounts, parody profiles screen shorted for WhatsApp virility, and partisan blogs (e.g., Podium Reporters, Igbo Times) proliferated dubious claims of candidate withdrawals, exaggerated decamping's, or scams like phony ₦85,000 giveaways attributed to Atiku, diluting genuine discourse and polarizing voters along identity lines (Bassey, Josiah, Akpede, & Santas, 2024). Twitter Spaces hosted non-moderated disinformation sessions by party activists, glorifying allies while delegitimizing rivals and INEC, fostering echo chambers that hindered fact-checking efforts amid poor platform moderation in local languages (CDD West Africa. 2024).

The implications of these tactics extended beyond voter manipulation, eroding democratic integrity by weaponizing pre-existing distrust, fuelling post-election violence risks, and overwhelming understaffed platforms unable to label or remove content promptly (CDD West Africa. 2024). Fact-checkers like CDD's Election War Room debunked over 60 claims, yet politicized "fact-check" info graphics undermined credibility, while infrastructural issues like unreliable internet exacerbated unchecked spread (Hum Angle Media. 2024).). Ultimately, this misinformation ecosystem highlighted the dual-edged role of social media in Nigeria's polls, demanding enhanced digital literacy, regulation, and platform accountability to safeguard future elections (Bassey, Josiah, Akpede, & Santas, 2024; Hum Angle Media. 2024).

The Exposure to Social Media Misinformation and Its Effect on voters Trust and Participation in the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria

Exposure to social media misinformation during Nigeria's 2023 presidential election significantly undermined voters' trust in electoral institutions and processes, while also contributing to reduced participation levels. Research indicates that platforms like Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok amplified false narratives, manipulated media, and coordinated disinformation campaigns aimed at glorifying candidates, discrediting opponents, and eroding confidence in the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). For instance, synthetic audio, fake press releases, and deliberate mistranslations in local languages preyed on existing ethnic and religious cleavages, fostering widespread scepticism about the election's integrity and leading to voter apathy or suppression. (International Centre for Journalists. 2023) Studies highlight that this exposure was rampant, with short-staffed social media companies failing to adequately moderate or remove harmful content, exacerbating distrust among users who encountered daily falsehoods. (Centre for Democracy and Development West Africa. 2024; Omoregie, Momoh, & Ehigiatior, 2025).

The mechanisms of misinformation spread, including hashtag manipulation, bot networks, and paid influencers, directly correlated with diminished voter turnout, as misleading content distorted public discourse and heightened political polarization. Empirical findings from Abuja residents during the campaign revealed that unreliable internet, power outages, and viral fake news such as photo shopped images linking candidates to militants intensified divisions and confused voters, prompting many to disengage from participation. Disinformation's permeation from online echo chambers to offline conversations further amplified its reach, with new partisan websites and cross-posting tactics turning rumours into dominant narratives that questioned INEC's credibility. (Issue Lab. 2024) This environment not only suppressed enthusiasm but also weaponized identity politics, resulting in lower mobilization compared to prior elections despite increased social media penetration (Centre for Democracy and Development West Africa. 2024; Omoregie,. & Edogiawerie, 2026).

Overall, the 2023 election demonstrated how unchecked misinformation exposure eroded participatory democracy in Nigeria, necessitating enhanced digital literacy, proactive fact-checking, and platform accountability to rebuild trust. While social media boosted engagement for some, its negative effects evident in voter behaviour shifts toward abstention underscore the need for regulatory frameworks that balance free speech with electoral safeguards. Future elections must prioritize countering these dynamics to sustain democratic vitality (Bassey, Josiah, Akpede, & Santas, 2024; Hum Angle Media. 2024).

The Regulatory and Educational Strategic Implementation in Nigeria to Curb Social Media Propaganda in Future Elections

In Nigeria, regulatory and educational strategies to curb social media propaganda in future elections are increasingly being implemented to mitigate risks posed by misinformation, hate speech, and digital manipulation. One regulatory effort includes legislative actions such as the introduction and ongoing discussions around the Social Media Regulation Bill and amendments to the Nigeria Data Protection Act. These laws aim to mandate social media companies to establish physical offices within Nigeria, thereby ensuring better oversight and accountability of content circulating on these platforms. Furthermore, efforts to empower a watchdog body with prosecutorial authority to enforce electoral laws demonstrate a move towards stronger state capacity in monitoring and addressing election-related disinformation online (Kofi Annan Foundation & National Peace Committee. 2025; Within Nigeria. 2025).

Official discourse highlights the complexity of regulating social media in a way that balances national security and democratic freedoms. Government officials argue that unregulated social media fosters misinformation and social discord, posing risks to electoral integrity and societal stability. Meanwhile, civil society groups and digital rights advocates caution against overly restrictive laws that might suppress freedom of expression and political dissent. This tension underscores the need for nuanced, balanced regulation that targets harmful propaganda while preserving democratic participation, as evidenced in ongoing debates about Nigeria's social media bills and frameworks (MACSA Blog. 2025; IJR Journal. 2025).

Educational initiatives complement regulatory measures by focusing on civic education and media literacy as crucial tools for empowering citizens to critically assess online content related to elections. Workshops organized by institutions like the Kofi Annan Foundation and the National Peace Committee engage election stakeholders, including the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), political parties, security agencies, and civil society, to build awareness on the role of digital tools in peaceful elections. These educational approaches emphasize media literacy in a linguistically diverse country with many local languages and advocate for strengthening public understanding to reduce the impact of digital propaganda, highlighting that law enforcement alone is insufficient to combat misinformation (Kofi Annan Foundation

& National Peace Committee. 2025; Business Day. 2025).

CONCLUSION

Social media platforms profoundly influenced political propaganda and misinformation during Nigeria's 2023 presidential election, serving as double-edged swords that boosted voter engagement and mobilization among youth while amplifying hate speech, deep fakes, manipulated media, and echo chambers of ethnic division that polarized discourse and undermined electoral integrity. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram enabled rapid dissemination of false narratives such as fabricated audio of candidates rigging votes or algorithmically boosted smears against opponents exacerbating offline tensions along Nigeria's historical ethno-religious fault lines and eroding public trust in the process. For future elections, these dynamics necessitate urgent interventions, including robust digital literacy campaigns to empower fact-checking, collaborative regulatory frameworks between the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), government, and tech firms for content moderation, legal penalties for deliberate disinformation, and platform-specific policies to curb bots, paid influencers, and algorithmic manipulation, thereby harnessing social media's democratic potential without sacrificing credibility or peace.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Implement Comprehensive Media Literacy Programs:** Establish nationwide media literacy initiatives targeting youth and rural voters to enhance critical thinking and fact discernment on platforms like Twitter and WhatsApp. These programs should integrate into school curricula and community workshops, focusing on verifying sources and recognizing deep fakes, as misinformation polarized voters during the 2023 election. For future polls, partnering with INEC and civil society can scale efforts to counter propaganda's rapid spread.
2. **Strengthen Fact-Checking Mechanisms and Partnerships:** Create dedicated fact-checking desks on major social media platforms and collaborate with independent bodies like Dubawa or Africa Check for real-time debunking of false narratives. During 2023, manipulated audio and bot-driven smears undermined trust, necessitating prompt responses from tech firms and regulators. This approach, including metadata analysis, will build voter resilience ahead of 2027 elections.
3. **Enforce Regulatory Frameworks and Platform Accountability:** Develop policies mandating social media companies to label political ads, curb algorithmic amplification of divisive content, and penalize coordinated disinformation campaigns. Nigeria's 2023 polls saw websites and influencers amplifying fake stories into national debates, eroding electoral integrity. INEC-led oversight with government agencies can ensure authentic information flow, promoting ethical use by parties.
4. **Promote Ethical Campaign Practices and Stakeholder Collaboration:** Encourage political actors to adopt codes of conduct for social media, including transparent voter mobilization without hate speech or smears. The 2023 election highlighted echo chambers fuelling ethnic tensions, recommending multi-stakeholder forums with CDD and tech influencers for monitoring. This fosters trust and counters polarization in upcoming cycles.

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