Exposure And Responsiveness to Online Political Disinformation in the 2023 General Elections: A Study of Anambra State Voters

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the Anambra State Voters' exposure and responsiveness of to online political disinformation during Nigeria's 2023 general elections. Drawing from communication studies, political science, and digital sociology, the research examines how digital misinformation and deliberate falsehoods circulated through social media platforms influenced electoral perceptions and behaviors. A quantitative research design was employed using a structured questionnaire distributed among a representative sample of registered voters across Anambra State. Findings indicate that online platforms, particularly WhatsApp, Facebook, and X (formerly Twitter) were the most prominent sources of political information and disinformation. Respondents reported high exposure to false narratives about political candidates' health, credentials, and affiliations, which significantly shaped their political attitudes. However, voters with higher levels of media literacy exhibited greater resilience to deceptive content. The study underscores the role of digital media in shaping electoral behavior and highlights the urgent need for digital literacy programs, factchecking collaborations, and regulatory mechanisms to mitigate the impact of online disinformation on Nigeria's democratic process.

Keywords: Online disinformation, voter behavior, Anambra State, 2023 general elections, Nigeria, media literacy

INTRODUCTION

The 2023 general elections in Nigeria marked a watershed moment in the nation's democratic evolution. Conducted on February 25 and March 18, 2023, the elections recorded an unprecedented number of registered voters 93,469,008, according to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC, 2023) and demonstrated the growing integration of technology in electoral processes. For the first time, the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Results Viewing Portal (IReV) were deployed nationwide to enhance transparency and real-time result transmission.

Beyond these technological innovations, the election cycle witnessed heightened political participation by Nigeria's youth population, with citizens aged below 35 comprising over 40% of the electorate. Much of this engagement was mobilized through online communication channels, particularly social media platforms that facilitated unprecedented levels of political discourse, campaign mobilization, and civic advocacy. However, these same platforms became breeding grounds for online political disinformation a phenomenon that significantly challenged the integrity of Nigeria's democratic process.

Anambra State provides a particularly relevant context for this study. With approximately 2.6 million registered voters and one of the highest internet penetration rates in the southeastern region (46% as of 2022, according to the National Bureau of Statistics), the state represents a digitally active electorate susceptible to the influence of online disinformation. Given its history of political engagement and social media adoption, Anambra voters serve as an ideal population for assessing how exposure to disinformation shapes political attitudes and decision-making.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Nigeria's democratic experience has been punctuated by periodic electoral cycles since the return to civil rule in 1999. Over the years, elections have evolved from traditional campaign strategies centered on mass rallies and

print media to increasingly digitalized contests shaped by social media narratives. The 2023 general elections were especially notable for the proliferation of online disinformation, which included doctored videos, fabricated news stories, and manipulated images designed to influence public perception and voter behavior.

According to Idayat and Hitchen (2023), the exponential growth of internet access—rising from 105 million users in 2017 to over 125 million by the end of 2019—has made the dissemination of false information faster and more complex. Social media's interactive nature enables both accurate and deceptive content to spread virally, with memes, short videos, and provocative headlines often outperforming verified news in terms of reach and engagement.

High-profile instances during the 2023 election cycle illustrate the scope of this phenomenon. For example, the All Progressives Congress (APC) presidential candidate, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, faced widespread online speculation about his health, including viral videos and manipulated photos alleging he was gravely ill (Bakare-Majeed, 2022; Bankole, 2022). Similarly, the Labour Party candidate, Peter Obi, was targeted through a leaked and doctored audio recording purportedly involving a religious conversation with a cleric, which was amplified by political influencers to undermine his campaign credibility. In another case, disinformation about Tinubu's academic credentials at Chicago State University dominated online discussions, further polarizing public opinion (Egbobiambu, 2023).

The European Union Election Observation Mission (EU-EOM, 2023) documented several examples of deliberate disinformation propagated by political actors during the elections. Notably, individuals such as Femi Fani-Kayode and Festus Keyamo, both members of the APC presidential campaign council were identified as key disseminators of unverified claims targeting opposition candidates. These coordinated campaigns significantly shaped online discourse, illustrating how disinformation has become an institutionalized tool in Nigeria's political communication landscape.

Statement of the Problem

The digital revolution has democratized access to information but has also created an environment ripe for manipulation. Nigeria's high internet penetration and active social media use have provided fertile ground for political disinformation to thrive. Studies by Olafusi (2023) and the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies (2024) reveal that Nigeria ranks among the top ten African countries most affected by online political disinformation, a trend that undermines electoral integrity and public trust in democratic institutions.

Anambra State's digitally literate and politically active electorate makes it especially vulnerable to this challenge. With over four million internet users and significant youth participation, the state represents a microcosm of Nigeria's digital political landscape. Yet, despite growing scholarly interest in disinformation, there remains limited empirical evidence on how voters in Anambra specifically encounter, interpret, and respond to online political falsehoods. This study addresses this gap by analyzing both the exposure levels and behavioral responses of Anambra voters to online political disinformation during the 2023 general elections.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the exposure and responsiveness of Anambra State voters to online political disinformation during the 2023 general elections. The specific objectives are to:

1.   Investigate the level of exposure to online political disinformation among Anambra State voters.

2.   Identify the sources and channels through which voters encountered political disinformation.

3.   Examine the factors influencing voters' responsiveness to online political disinformation.

4.   Assess the influence of online disinformation on voters' political decisions and behaviors.

5.   Suggest strategies and interventions to mitigate the impact of online disinformation among voters in Anambra State.

Research Questions

In line with the Objectives, the following Research questions were posed:

1. To what extent were Anambra State voters exposed to online political disinformation in the 2023 general elections?

2. What were the main sources and channels of exposure?

3. What factors influenced voters' responsiveness to online disinformation?

4. How did exposure affect voters' political decisions and behaviors?

5. What strategies can mitigate the influence of disinformation in future elections?

Significance of the Study

This study provides valuable insights for multiple stakeholders. For voters, it enhances awareness of manipulative online tactics and encourages critical evaluation of digital political content. For INEC, it identifies information vulnerabilities that can inform voter education and digital transparency frameworks. Political parties can use these findings to adopt more ethical communication strategies, while media organizations and fact-checking platforms can refine counter-disinformation measures. Academically, this research contributes to the growing literature on digital political communication and electoral integrity in Nigeria, offering empirical evidence from a state-level perspective

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The global rise of digital communication technologies has fundamentally transformed how citizens engage with politics. Social media platforms now serve as both spaces for democratic participation and conduits for disinformation. In Nigeria, the 2023 general elections represented a turning point where the influence of online narratives on political behavior became undeniable. This section synthesizes extant scholarship on political disinformation, situates it within Nigeria's electoral evolution, and outlines the theoretical foundations that guide this study.

Conceptual Review

Disinformation

Disinformation refers to false or misleading information deliberately produced and disseminated to deceive audiences or manipulate public perception. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) describe it as the intentional creation and spread of falsehoods to achieve political or strategic aims. Similarly, Lazer et al. (2018) emphasize that disinformation differs from misinformation because of its deliberate intent to mislead. In political contexts, disinformation is used to manipulate electoral outcomes, weaken trust in democratic institutions, and polarize the electorate (McGonagle, 2017).

This study focuses specifically on online political disinformation, false content shared via digital platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter (now X), Instagram, and blogs to influence voters' decisions during elections.

Political Manipulation

Political manipulation involves deliberate strategies designed to shape political processes or outcomes, often through deceptive communication (Kreiss, 2021). Dowding and Oprea (2024) argue that manipulation may not always change behavior directly but can alter decision outcomes by reframing issues or sequencing political agendas. Noggle (2020) adds that manipulation "tricks the target into adopting a faulty mental state," thereby distorting perceptions and emotions. In electoral contexts, political manipulation and disinformation are intertwined: disinformation acts as a primary tool through which political actors influence voter cognition and attitudes (Tarrow, 1998). Nigerian electoral campaigns have frequently weaponized identity politics, tribal sentiment, and emotional appeals to achieve these manipulative outcomes.

Information Disorder

Wardle (2020) defines information disorder as the spectrum of false or harmful information—misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation circulating in digital ecosystems. Misinformation is false but not intended

to harm; disinformation is false and maliciously intended; and malinformation involves genuine information shared to cause harm. Hivemind (2022) expands this taxonomy, identifying seven specific forms of disinformation: satire or parody, false connection, misleading content, false context, impostor content, manipulated content, and fabricated content. Understanding these categories helps analyze the varied ways Nigerian voters encounter and interpret false online content.

Exposure

Exposure refers to the degree to which individuals encounter certain messages or content within a media environment. Bennett and Iyengar (2008) define it as the extent of audience contact with specific issues or ideas, while Van Dijck and Poell (2013) link exposure to the shaping of perceptions and behaviors. In this study, exposure denotes how frequently Anambra voters engaged with online political disinformation during the 2023 general elections.

Responsiveness

Responsiveness reflects how individuals react cognitively or behaviorally to information stimuli. Druckman and Lupia (2016) describe it as the process through which messages influence attitudes and decision-making. In electoral contexts, responsiveness captures how exposure to online political disinformation shaped Anambra voters' opinions, trust, and electoral choices.

The 2011 Elections

Anyanwu (2014) and Awa (2011) note that the 2011 general elections marked Nigeria's first significant use of online platforms for political messaging. Early mobile internet adoption enabled politicians to experiment with text broadcasts and social networks for outreach and propaganda. Nwafor (2012) observed that limited digital literacy allowed false claims about candidates' ethnicity and health to circulate unchecked. Okoro and Tsyngu (2017) found that early online rumor networks exploited ethnic divides, sowing mistrust across communities. This foundational period established enduring patterns of digital manipulation that evolved in subsequent elections.

The 2015 and 2019 Elections

By 2015 and 2019, smartphone penetration and social media engagement had increased dramatically (Adibe et al., 2022). Ibrahim and Aliyu (2023) show that platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram became battlefields for orchestrated political disinformation. These campaigns often drew on ethnic and religious polarization—fault lines that Iwuoha and Obi (2019) describe as deeply embedded in Nigeria's sociopolitical fabric. Ogundimu (2023) highlights that WhatsApp groups, due to their closed and trusted networks, served as hotspots for misinformation. Okoye (2021) further emphasizes that inadequate digital literacy among voters, even in relatively educated regions like Anambra, left citizens vulnerable to persuasive false narratives.

The 2023 General Elections

The 2023 elections intensified these dynamics. Ojebuyi and Salawu (2021) report that political operatives strategically deployed social media influencers and automated bots to amplify partisan propaganda. Howard et al. (2023) found that bot-driven "astroturfing" created illusions of mass support for major candidates such as Bola Tinubu and Peter Obi. Disinformation narratives exploited ethno-religious divisions—portraying Obi as a secessionist sympathizer and Tinubu's ticket as anti-Christian (Okoye & Musa, 2023). The Centre for

Democracy and Development (2023) documented how fake result sheets and manipulated videos triggered public distrust in the electoral process. Despite interventions by fact-checking groups like Dubawa and Africa Check, corrections rarely achieved comparable reach (Ugwuanyi & Emeka, 2023).

The Anambra Experience

Anambra's 2021 gubernatorial election foreshadowed the disinformation patterns of 2023. According to Ezeudu et al. (2022), widespread rumors about violence and sit-at-home orders on WhatsApp reduced voter turnout.

Nwafor et al. (2023) found that Facebook and WhatsApp were the most influential sources of political communication, significantly shaping candidate perceptions. These findings align with CDD (2023), which observed that digital rumor networks in Anambra combined localized dialect messages with manipulative imagery—making fact-checking particularly difficult. Given this background, the 2023 national elections in Anambra represented the culmination of a decade-long evolution of digital political disinformation.

Regulatory Responses to Online Political Disinformation

Nigeria's response to digital disinformation has primarily been regulatory rather than preventive. The Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act of 2015 serves as the principal legal instrument against harmful online behavior. However, Ayo and Adebiyi (2019) criticize it for focusing on financial cybercrimes rather than political manipulation. Ajibola (2024) argues that its provisions against "false information" are too ambiguous to effectively prosecute political disinformation.

The National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy (2020–2030) emphasizes digital literacy and platform accountability but lacks enforcement mechanisms (Southey, 2021). During the 2023 elections, INEC partnered with social media companies to flag fake election results, yet studies show that many false claims remained online for hours before removal (Agbo, 2023).

Regionally, the African Union's Declaration on Internet Rights and Freedoms (2014; reaffirmed 2022) promotes rights-respecting approaches to combating disinformation. However, Chigudu and Tetteh (2021) note that implementation across member states, including Nigeria, remains inconsistent. Civil society groups such as CDD, Yiaga Africa, and Dubawa advocate co-regulatory frameworks that combine state oversight with independent fact-checking (Ugwuanyi & Emeka, 2020). Nevertheless, most interventions remain reactive, addressing false content only after it has gone viral (Ndubisi, 2023).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Two theories underpin this study: Agenda-Setting Theory and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM).

Agenda-Setting Theory

McCombs and Shaw (1972) propose that while media do not tell people what to think, they tell people what to think about. Issues emphasized in media coverage become salient in public discourse. In digital spaces, agenda-setting extends to algorithmic amplification, where trending hashtags and viral content determine which topics dominate political conversation. Within the 2023 elections, disinformation narratives framed the public agenda by prioritizing rumors over verified information. This theory explains how persistent exposure to specific online falsehoods can elevate their perceived importance among Anambra voters.

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

Davis (1989) and Venkatesh (1996) assert that individuals' adoption of technology depends on perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. Social media platforms' simplicity and immediacy make them attractive sources of political information. When false content aligns with users' beliefs, it is perceived as both useful and credible. TAM thus helps explain why Anambra voters embraced digital sources even when reliability was questionable—social media provided convenient, emotionally satisfying access to political discourse.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a quantitative research design anchored in the survey method. The design was chosen because it allows for systematic collection and statistical analysis of data from a large population to describe and interpret relationships among key variables.

The population of this study comprised all registered voters in Anambra State who participated in the 2023 general elections. According to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC, 2023), Anambra State had a total of 2,656,437 registered voters during the 2023 elections. The state consists of 21 Local Government Areas (LGAs), grouped into three senatorial districts Anambra North, Anambra Central, and Anambra South. o

ensure representativeness, the researcher employed the stratified probability sampling technique, which enhances the reliability and clarity of responses.

The instrument of quantitative data collection for the survey was questionnaire. The questionnaires comprise thirty seven (37) open and close ended questions spread across 2 sections. Section 1 comprising 7 questions, deals with the demographic variables of the respondents while section 2 comprising 30 questions spread cross 5 sub-sections, seeks to answer the five research questions posed in the study. Data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Overview

This section presents and discusses the major findings of the study on exposure and responsiveness to online political disinformation among voters in Anambra State during Nigeria's 2023 general elections. The analysis integrates descriptive and inferential results with theoretical and empirical perspectives drawn from the literature review. The goal is to illuminate how exposure to online disinformation shaped political perceptions, decision-making, and democratic engagement among the electorate.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

The analysis of demographic data revealed that respondents represented diverse age groups, gender, and educational backgrounds. A majority (56 percent) were aged 18–35 years, underscoring the dominance of young, digitally active voters in Anambra State. Males accounted for 52 percent and females 48 percent of respondents. Over 70 percent possessed tertiary education, reflecting a relatively literate electorate. These demographic characteristics align with National Bureau of Statistics (2023) data showing high internet and smartphone penetration among young, educated Nigerians, especially in southeastern states.

Level of Exposure to Online Political Disinformation

Findings show that exposure to online political disinformation during the 2023 elections was widespread. Approximately 86 percent of respondents reported receiving political information through WhatsApp, 74 percent through Facebook, and 59 percent through Twitter (X). Smaller proportions cited Instagram (37 percent) and YouTube (22 percent). A striking 68 percent of respondents indicated encountering political information they later verified to be false or misleading. Disinformation narratives most frequently targeted presidential candidates' health conditions, academic qualifications, ethnic identity, and religious affiliations. This pattern corroborates findings by Ibrahim and Aliyu (2023) and CDD (2023), which identified similar themes in the national digital discourse. The data also reveal that youths and urban-based voters were the most exposed demographic groups, consistent with Okoye (2021) who observed that younger voters are both the most active users of social media and the most vulnerable to digital manipulation.

Sources and Channels of Exposure

Respondents identified WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, and Twitter threads as the primary channels of exposure to political disinformation. WhatsApp's closed-group structure fostered high trust, which made false content appear credible. According to 64 percent of respondents, messages forwarded by friends, family, or church members were rarely questioned for authenticity. Facebook exposure often involved meme-based posts or fabricated news stories disguised as legitimate journalism. Twitter's influence was amplified by the activities of partisan influencers who employed coordinated hashtags to drive trends. These findings support Howard et al. (2023), who noted that digital "astroturfing" by political operatives created illusions of grassroots popularity and consensus. Traditional media (television, radio, and newspapers) were cited by less than 20 percent of respondents as major sources of disinformation, suggesting that online networks, rather than legacy outlets, were the principal vehicles for false political narratives.

Responsiveness to Online Political Disinformation

Responsiveness was assessed in terms of both cognitive and behavioral reactions. Cognitively, 47 percent of respondents admitted initially believing at least one false political story encountered online. Behaviorally, 31

percent reported sharing or forwarding such content before verifying its accuracy. However, 53 percent claimed they later deleted or corrected misinformation after discovering the truth, demonstrating some level of corrective behavior. Respondents with higher educational attainment and those who actively followed factchecking platforms such as Dubawa or Africa Check were significantly less likely to believe or share disinformation ($p < 0.05$). These findings align with the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). The perceived usefulness and ease of use of social media encouraged initial adoption and sharing (TAM), Notably, 62 percent of respondents expressed "decreased trust" in political information encountered online during the election, illustrating a growing public awareness of disinformation risks. Yet, diminished trust did not necessarily translate into disengagement; rather, it led to selective skepticism toward certain sources.

Influence of Disinformation on Political Attitudes and Behavior

The study found a statistically significant relationship ($\chi^2 = 21.63$, $p < 0.05$) between exposure to online disinformation and reported changes in political perception. Respondents who frequently encountered and believed disinformation were more likely to alter their support for specific candidates or parties. Key influence pathways included:

1. Character framing: False narratives about candidates' moral or religious standing shaped perceptions of credibility.

2. Issue framing: Manipulated stories about policy positions (e.g., fuel subsidy removal, insecurity) directed voter attention to selective issues, consistent with Agenda-Setting Theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

3. Emotional mobilization: Fear- or outrage-based disinformation heightened partisan engagement, particularly among youths.

The findings echo Aideloje et al. (2024), who found that emotional framing amplifies confirmation bias, causing individuals to seek information that reinforces pre-existing beliefs. Similarly, Ise Olorunkanmi et al. (2023) concluded that fake news narratives during the 2023 elections deepened polarization and reduced confidence in INEC's neutrality.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The results demonstrate that online political disinformation remains a potent force in shaping voter perception in Anambra State and, by extension, Nigeria's democratic process. The prevalence of WhatsApp and Facebook as disinformation channels underscores the shift from mass communication to networked interpersonal dissemination, where personal trust networks override institutional credibility.

This finding aligns with the argument of Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) that disinformation exploits social trust rather than undermines it. In Anambra's case, religious, ethnic, and communal networks served as amplifiers of deceptive content because messages were shared within trusted circles.

The observed correlation between media literacy and resistance to disinformation validates recommendations by Iwuoha and Obi (2019) that voter education is the most sustainable defense against digital manipulation. Similarly, the pattern of cognitive dissonance observed among respondents—initial belief followed by later skepticism—reflects the two-step flow of communication (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), in which opinion leaders act as gatekeepers of verification. Despite growing awareness, corrective exposure remains limited: once disinformation goes viral, fact-checking rarely reaches an equivalent audience. This mirrors Ugwuanyi and Emeka's (2020) observation that post-hoc verification efforts often fail to reverse initial belief due to emotional imprinting.

Overall, the findings confirm that online political disinformation in Anambra State influenced both attitudinal and behavioral aspects of voter engagement. However, voters with higher digital literacy levels exhibited greater resilience, suggesting that media education initiatives can significantly mitigate the problem.

Summary of Key Findings

1. A majority of Anambra voters were highly exposed to online political disinformation, primarily through WhatsApp and Facebook.

2. Disinformation centered on candidates' health, religion, ethnicity, and academic credentials.

3. Higher education and media literacy correlated negatively with belief in and sharing of false content.

4. There was a significant relationship between exposure to disinformation and voter attitude change.

5. Despite increased skepticism, the speed and reach of false information outpaced corrective interventions.

These findings collectively reveal a digital ecosystem where political communication is increasingly shaped by emotional and ideological appeal rather than factual accuracy.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study examined the exposure and responsiveness of voters in Anambra State to online political disinformation during Nigeria's 2023 general elections. Using a quantitative survey design, the research established that voters were substantially exposed to false or misleading political content disseminated primarily via WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter. The findings revealed that online disinformation significantly shaped political attitudes, often through emotional framing and character distortion of political candidates. However, the data also demonstrated that individuals with higher education and digital literacy levels exhibited greater resistance to deceptive content. This suggests that knowledge and critical media skills function as protective buffers against the effects of disinformation. The study confirmed the relevance of Agenda-Setting Theory, Social Learning Theory, and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) in explaining the dynamics of digital political communication. The agenda-setting role of disinformation determined the salience of issues, social learning mechanisms facilitated imitation of content-sharing behavior, and TAM explained users' preference for easily accessible digital information—even when unreliable.

Ultimately, the research concludes that online political disinformation remains a serious threat to electoral integrity and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The digital space, while enhancing political participation, also amplifies misinformation at a scale that can distort public reasoning and undermine trust in institutions. Unless proactive countermeasures are adopted, disinformation will continue to erode Nigeria's democratic culture.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Enhanced Media and Digital Literacy:

Civic education programs should incorporate digital literacy modules that train voters to identify, verify, and critically evaluate online political information. Schools, universities, and community organizations in Anambra State should partner with the National Orientation Agency (NOA) and civil society groups such as Dubawa and CDD to implement continuous awareness campaigns.

2. Strengthening Fact-Checking Networks:

Fact-checking platforms should receive institutional and financial support to increase the speed and reach of corrections. Integrating automated verification systems and collaborating directly with social media companies can help counter viral falsehoods before they gain momentum.

3. Regulatory and Co-Regulatory Frameworks:

The Nigerian government should refine existing legislation, such as the Cybercrimes Act (2015), to clearly address political disinformation without infringing on free speech. Co-regulatory mechanisms involving government, media, and civil society would ensure balanced oversight.

4. Political Party Accountability:

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should develop enforceable codes of conduct for political communication, mandating parties and candidates to avoid the deliberate spread of falsehoods.

Sanctions should be applied to violators during future elections.

5.   Platform Responsibility:

Social media companies should increase transparency in content moderation and provide country-specific factchecking support during election cycles. Algorithms that prioritize engagement should be recalibrated to reduce the amplification of false content.

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