



Propaganda and Disinformation in the Digital Age: The Nigerian Experience

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Abstract

This study aimed to identify and categorise the dominant forms of digital propaganda on Nigerian social media platforms, investigate the techniques employed by political actors to disseminate disinformation during major national events, and examine the socio-political implications of these phenomena for national unity, public trust, and democratic stability in Nigeria. Employing a qualitative research design, the study relied on secondary data from books, peer-reviewed journals, policy reports, and reputable digital sources, analysed thematically to uncover recurring patterns and impacts within Nigeria's evolving media landscape. The findings revealed that digital propaganda predominantly manifests through manipulated narratives, fake news, and emotive framing, with political actors using sophisticated strategies such as framing, astroturfing, and viral misinformation during elections and crises. The socio-political consequences included erosion of public trust, heightened ethnic tensions, and threats to democratic processes. The study concluded that Nigeria's democracy remains fragile amid these challenges, necessitating urgent interventions. The study therefore recommends the expansion of nationwide digital literacy initiatives focusing on critical thinking and fact-checking, particularly among youth and vulnerable communities, alongside policy reforms and enhanced platform accountability. This multi-sectoral approach is vital to mitigate the pervasive effects of digital disinformation and safeguard Nigeria's democratic integrity.

Keywords: Digital Propaganda, Disinformation, Social Media, Democratic Stability, Public Trust



1.1 Introduction

In contemporary society, the nature of information flow has undergone a profound revolution. It is no longer tethered to institutional gatekeepers but is shaped by algorithms, user networks, and instantaneous digital engagement. The digital age has redefined communication, enabling individuals to access, disseminate, and interact with content at unprecedented speed and scale.

In Nigeria, where over half the population is online, digital platforms now serve as critical sites of both enlightenment and exploitation. While they offer tools for civic participation and collective awareness, they equally provide fertile ground for misinformation and ideological manipulation. This duality presents a significant paradox: the same environment that empowers can just as easily deceive.

This evolving communication landscape is characterised by three interwoven attributes: speed, reach, and decentralisation. Firstly, the velocity of digital communication renders traditional editorial processes almost obsolete. Secondly, its global reach ensures that even locally generated falsehoods can achieve national or international prominence within hours. Thirdly, the decentralisation of content creation has shifted power away from institutional actors to individual users, many of whom operate without accountability or verification. In theory, this democratisation of voice is commendable. In practice, however, it introduces new vulnerabilities, particularly in societies like Nigeria, where digital literacy remains uneven and trust in traditional institutions is rapidly eroding.

Nigeria's digital ecosystem reflects this global paradox with acute intensity. On one hand, digital media have enabled grassroots mobilisation, expanded political discourse, and exposed institutional failures. On the other hand, they have facilitated a rise in targeted propaganda, ethnic stereotyping, and politically motivated disinformation. During elections, crises, and protests, digital spaces often become battlegrounds for narrative dominance. Political operatives, influencers, and anonymous trolls alike deploy sophisticated tactics such as memes, deepfakes, and fake endorsements to sway public opinion and destabilise trust. Thus, the digital sphere becomes not merely a medium of communication but a contested arena of ideological warfare and psychological influence.

The consequences of this dynamic are deeply consequential for national cohesion and democratic stability. In Nigeria, disinformation has fuelled electoral violence, inflamed ethno-religious tensions, and fostered widespread mistrust in public health messaging. The youth, who form the bulk of Nigeria's online population, are especially susceptible to digital manipulation, often consuming content with limited critical evaluation. This information disorder threatens not only informed citizenship but also national security.

It raises urgent questions about how societies can safeguard public discourse when information flows are fragmented, unregulated, and often deliberately misleading. The challenge, therefore, lies not only in access to information but in ensuring its reliability. This study thus seeks to interrogate the patterns, mechanisms, and consequences of propaganda and disinformation in Nigeria's digital communication landscape. It explores how digital technologies are utilised by various actors (such as state institutions, political parties, private interest groups, and individual users) to influence perceptions, control narratives, and undermine democratic engagement. Drawing upon key incidents and emergent academic literature, the study aims to deepen understanding of the socio-political impacts of digital misinformation. Ultimately, it contributes to the broader discourse on digital ethics, media regulation, and civic education, offering critical insight into Nigeria's evolving relationship between technology, truth, and public life.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to:

- i. identify and categorise the dominant forms of digital propaganda on Nigerian social media platforms in contemporary Nigeria
- ii. find out the techniques political actors use to disseminate disinformation during major national events in contemporary Nigeria.
- iii. examine the socio-political implications of digital propaganda and disinformation for national unity, public trust, and democratic stability in Nigeria.

2.1 Review of Related Literature

2.1.1 Propaganda

Propaganda, as a concept, continues to evolve in both theory and practice, reflecting shifts in media technology, political contexts, and public consciousness. At its core, propaganda involves the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2019). It is not merely about persuasion but about the orchestration of messages to elicit conformity, loyalty, or action, often bypassing critical reasoning. In modern settings, propaganda transcends wartime leaflets or state-run broadcasts; it now thrives in algorithm-driven platforms where ideologies are packaged as entertainment and virality supersedes truth. This complex reality demands a re-examination of how propaganda is conceptualised and confronted.

The roots of propaganda are deeply embedded in historical practices of mass communication and political control. From religious crusades to nationalist campaigns, its mechanisms have long been used to legitimise power and suppress dissent. As Auerbach and Castronovo (2013) argue, propaganda is inseparable from modernity,



deeply woven into the cultural and political fabric of nation-states. They trace its evolution through various epochs – from Enlightenment-era rational appeals to emotionally charged messaging in the 20th century – highlighting its centrality in shaping public ideologies. The historical lens reveals that propaganda has always been less about truth and more about narrative domination, a reality still relevant in today's polarised media environments.

In today's digital ecosystem, propaganda has adopted more nuanced and decentralised forms, often masquerading as grassroots content or citizen-led commentary. Baines, O'Shaughnessy, and Snow (2019) note that contemporary propaganda is marked by its strategic sophistication, employing tools such as data analytics, influencer partnerships, and emotionally resonant imagery to craft persuasive content that appears organic. Organisational and political actors alike exploit these tools to disseminate tailored messages that reinforce ideological frames or discredit opponents. The internet, particularly social media, has effectively flattened traditional communication hierarchies, giving propaganda unprecedented reach and speed. Yet, its pervasiveness often escapes scrutiny, cloaked in the language of freedom of expression or digital democracy.

Despite its increasing relevance, some scholars argue that academic discourse around propaganda has inadequately addressed its political-economic underpinnings. Abhishek (2021) critiques much of the contemporary research for overlooking the structural conditions, such as media ownership, platform governance, and state-capitalist interests, that enable propaganda to flourish. He advocates for a more grounded analysis that considers the power relations and institutional interests behind propagandist content. This perspective shifts attention from individual susceptibility or misinformation alone to the broader systemic forces that shape the media ecosystem. Understanding propaganda, therefore, requires not just media literacy but also a critical awareness of the institutional and economic frameworks within which information is produced and circulated.

In contexts such as Nigeria, where media systems are increasingly digital yet regulation remains porous, the concept of propaganda takes on pressing socio-political implications. As propaganda blends seamlessly with entertainment, activism, or even news, citizens, particularly the youth, are left navigating a terrain where intent is often obscured and verification is minimal. Jowett and O'Donnell (2019) emphasise the need to differentiate between advocacy, persuasion, and propaganda, warning that the latter is often cloaked in the language of the former. For Nigeria, this distinction is critical, especially amid electoral cycles, ethnic tensions, and political instability. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of propaganda is not just an academic exercise but a democratic imperative, vital for fostering critical engagement and safeguarding national cohesion.

2.1.2 Disinformation

Disinformation, distinct from misinformation, involves the deliberate creation and dissemination of false or misleading information with the intent to deceive. It is a potent tool, often exploited to manipulate public opinion, destabilise democratic institutions, and exacerbate social tensions (Marwick & Lewis, 2021). In today's digital world, disinformation thrives across social media platforms, amplified by algorithms that prioritise engagement over accuracy. Unlike misinformation, which may be unintentional, disinformation is calculated and strategic, frequently deployed by political actors, interest groups, or hostile states. The line between fact and fiction blurs, creating an "information disorder" where truth becomes contested and civic trust increasingly fragile (Neudert & Howard, 2021).

The rise of disinformation is inseparable from the digital media revolution. Platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and WhatsApp have enabled ordinary users to become powerful disseminators of information, but this democratisation has also opened the floodgates to coordinated manipulation (Cambridge University Press, 2025). Disinformation is no longer a tool reserved for propaganda agencies; it now proliferates through memes, doctored videos, and coordinated troll campaigns. Osborne and Dutta (2024) note that this "information pandemic" poses significant risks to state resilience, with implications for electoral integrity, public health, and national security. In fragile democracies like Nigeria, the danger is particularly acute.\.

Efforts to counter disinformation have been complicated by the speed, scale, and complexity of digital communication. Unlike traditional media, digital platforms lack uniform editorial oversight and often operate without stringent regulatory frameworks (Kaun, Dányi, & Krzyżanowski, 2025). While some platforms have implemented fact-checking initiatives, these measures are often too slow to combat viral falsehoods. Furthermore, those who engage in disinformation often exploit legal loopholes and operate from anonymous accounts or transnational networks. The European Commission (2024) underscores the urgent need for coordinated, transnational strategies that involve governments, civil society, and technology firms in the fight against disinformation.

One of the most alarming aspects of disinformation is its psychological and emotional potency. Disinformation is frequently designed to trigger strong emotional responses such as anger, fear, outrage, which significantly increase its likelihood of being shared (Friggeri & Hosseini, 2024). By weaponising emotion, disinformation can manipulate public discourse, create echo chambers, and incite real-world violence. This tactic has been observed globally, from anti-vaccine narratives to ethno-political propaganda. In Nigeria, disinformation surrounding elections, protests, and religious tensions has intensified division and undermined national unity. The impact on young digital natives, who often lack critical media literacy skills, is especially concerning.

Moreover, the use of artificial intelligence (AI) and deep learning technologies in disinformation campaigns adds another layer of complexity. Neudert and Howard (2021) warn that AI-generated content, including deepfakes and synthetic media, can convincingly mimic authentic sources, making detection increasingly difficult. These technologies are being weaponised not just to mislead but to erode confidence in all information, creating a post-truth environment where trust in journalism, science, and public institutions diminishes. In such a landscape, citizens become disoriented, unable to discern truth from fabrication, thus becoming more susceptible to manipulation and polarisation.

In response, scholars and policymakers have called for comprehensive approaches to building information resilience. This includes media literacy education, ethical AI governance, and platform accountability (Cambridge University Press, 2025; Osborne & Dutta, 2024). Combatting disinformation is not merely a technical or legal task; it is a societal imperative that demands civic awareness, institutional reform, and international cooperation. As Kaun et al. (2025) argue, cultivating societal resilience requires more than countering lies; it involves strengthening public trust and promoting a culture of critical engagement. In Nigeria and beyond, the future of democracy may depend on our collective ability to meet this challenge.

2.1.3 Propaganda in the Digital Era

In the digital age, propaganda has evolved into a more pervasive, decentralised, and algorithmically amplified force. No longer limited to state broadcasters or leaflets, it now takes the form of emotionally charged content, memes, fake news, and influencer-driven narratives. As Bakir and McStay (2018) argue, digital propaganda thrives on the “economy of emotions”, where rage and fear are more viral than reason. Platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp, with minimal moderation and rapid dissemination features, have become fertile grounds for manipulation. The 2019 rumour that Nigeria's President Buhari had died and been replaced by a Sudanese clone exemplifies the absurd yet potent nature of viral propaganda in the country's online ecosystem.

Digital propaganda functions through the systemic distortion of truth, often under the guise of patriotism, religious morality, or ethnic identity. In Nigeria's 2023 elections, fake videos allegedly showing ethnic attacks in Lagos went viral on TikTok and Twitter, deepening divisions and suppressing voter turnout. Ojebuyi and Salawu (2021) highlight that such misinformation is often weaponised by political actors and their online surrogates to target ethnic minorities or political opponents. These tactics mirror global trends identified by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), where “information disorder” is used not just to deceive, but to divide, destabilise, and discredit.



The sophistication of modern propaganda is best illustrated by its embedding in everyday content, where lifestyle influencers, pop culture memes, and entertainment figures become unwilling or deliberate agents of disinformation. During Nigeria's presidential campaigns, influencers covertly promoted candidates while dismissing opposition narratives as “fake news”. As noted by the Centre for Democracy and Development (2022), these hybrid strategies blend entertainment with manipulation, masking propaganda as authentic opinion. This has made detection harder, especially among Nigeria's youthful and digital-savvy electorate, who increasingly rely on peer-shared content rather than traditional news outlets for information.

What makes digital propaganda dangerously effective is its alignment with algorithms designed to maximise engagement. These platforms prioritise content that elicits strong emotional reactions, rewarding outrage, sensationalism, and tribal narratives over nuance. According to Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018), the blending of satire, misinformation, and propaganda into “fake news” categories blurs epistemological lines. Consequently, even legitimate journalism suffers reputational damage. The BBC Africa Eye (2020) investigation into Nigeria's disinformation factories reveals how political operatives pay young content creators to produce anti-opposition content disguised as grassroots activism. This underscores the dangerous fusion of propaganda, profit, and platform mechanics.

The stakes are not just informational but deeply democratic. Disinformation distorts electoral processes, erodes civic trust, and inflames ethno-religious tensions. McKay, Tenove, and Haggart (2021) warn that sustained exposure to propaganda undermines deliberative democracy by polarising public discourse. In Nigeria, the consequences are visible: voter apathy, political violence, and the delegitimisation of democratic institutions. Uche (2021) observed that digital propaganda in Nigeria often leverages existing mistrust in institutions, creating a cycle of cynicism that benefits authoritarian tendencies. Thus, propaganda in the digital age is not merely a communication challenge; it is an existential threat to national cohesion and democratic stability.

Regulatory and civic responses to this threat remain uneven. UNESCO (2021) and the ITU (2022) highlight the importance of media and information literacy (MIL) policies in fostering digital resilience. However, the implementation in Nigeria has been slow and fragmented. Platforms continue to profit from divisive content, and regulatory bodies lack the capacity or political will to act decisively. Initiatives like Dubawa and CDD offer promising counter-narratives, yet they struggle against the scale of disinformation flooding encrypted platforms like WhatsApp. The Centre for Countering Digital Hate (2021) shows that a small number of actors often produce the majority of viral falsehoods, calling for targeted interventions.

Ultimately, the fight against digital propaganda must move beyond firefighting disinformation to building long-term civic immunity. Ireton and Posetti (2018) argue that journalism education, critical thinking, and public accountability are essential to defending truth in the digital sphere. Nigeria, with its young, tech-savvy population, holds the potential to counter propaganda through local innovation and participatory governance. However, without strategic investment in digital literacy, platform accountability, and a resilient media ecosystem, propaganda will continue to mutate, exploiting our deepest fears, divisions, and desires. The battle for Nigeria's democratic future will not be won in ballot boxes alone, but on screens, timelines, and search bars.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Information Disorder Framework

The Information Disorder Framework, proposed by Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan in a seminal 2017 report for the Council of Europe, provides a typology for understanding the various forms of information manipulation in the digital age. The framework categorises harmful information into misinformation (false but not intended to cause harm), disinformation (false and deliberately harmful), and malinformation (genuine information used to cause harm). The model was developed in response to growing concerns over digital media's role in spreading falsehoods, particularly during significant events like elections and public health crises.

The central assumption of the framework is that information in the digital ecosystem is vulnerable to distortion due to technological affordances, weak regulatory controls, algorithmic amplification, and emotional manipulation. It also posits that disinformation is often strategically produced and circulated by actors, including state officials, political campaigners, bots, trolls, and influencers, to disrupt public discourse, undermine trust, and achieve political or financial gain. In the Nigerian context, where disinformation often targets ethnic, religious, and political fault lines, the Information Disorder Framework is apt for explaining how and why disinformation is designed, spread, and consumed.

However, the framework has been criticised for being more descriptive than predictive, offering categories but lacking a strong theoretical foundation for analysing power dynamics and audience agency. Critics argue that it focuses heavily on Western paradigms of media consumption, potentially overlooking contextual factors in countries like Nigeria, where digital literacy, access, and media trust are unique. Furthermore, the framework's emphasis on typology does not fully address how audiences interpret or resist disinformation, a limitation that calls for its integration with audience-centred theories like framing or schema theory.

2.2.2 Framing Theory

Framing theory is most notably developed by Robert Entman in his 1993 article, “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm.” Drawing from earlier works in sociology and psychology, Entman conceptualised framing as the process by which elements of a perceived reality are selected and made more salient in communication texts. The goal is to promote particular problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations. In essence, framing shapes how issues are understood by audiences and is especially relevant in media and political communication.

The theory assumes that frames are powerful tools for influencing perception and opinion. It posits that by highlighting some aspects of reality and downplaying others, communicators, especially political actors and media outlets, can manipulate how audiences interpret events or ideas. In Nigeria, where digital propaganda often exploits ethnic and religious divisions, framing theory helps explain how issues such as elections, security, or public health are constructed to sway public perception. The theory is instrumental for analysing social media content, memes, hashtags, and even fake news headlines that carry strategic emotional and political frames.

Despite its usefulness, framing theory has faced significant criticism for its lack of conceptual clarity and methodological standardisation. Scholars disagree on what constitutes a frame and how to reliably identify one, which complicates empirical research. Additionally, critics argue that the theory understates the role of audience agency, implying that media frames are passively accepted rather than actively negotiated. In highly literate or politically conscious societies, audiences may resist or reinterpret frames, making outcomes less predictable. Nonetheless, its ability to link message construction with public interpretation makes it a valuable tool for studying digital propaganda in Nigeria.

3 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design, relying on secondary data to examine digital propaganda and disinformation in Nigeria. The data was derived from published resources such as books, journals and trusted websites, selected for relevance and analysed thematically. The approach enabled the identification of key patterns, techniques, and socio-political implications shaping Nigeria's digital information environment within its contemporary media and governance context.

4 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Dominant Forms of Digital Propaganda on Nigerian Social Media Platforms

In recent years, social media have become a strong battleground for influence, notably during election cycles, civil unrest, and public health emergencies in Nigeria. The virality of material, coupled with limited or a lack of gatekeeping, has made platforms such as Facebook, X (previously Twitter), WhatsApp, and YouTube fertile ground for digital propaganda. Scholars such as Uche (2021), Bakir and McStay (2018), and Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018) have proven that digital settings not only magnify misinformation but also emotionalise and personalise it in ways that conventional media seldom achieve. Drawing on this body of research, the following discussion categorises and discusses the primary kinds of digital propaganda shaping Nigeria's public discourse today.

i. Political Propaganda through Influencer Networks

One of the most prevalent forms of propaganda in Nigeria involves paid influencers and partisan content creators who subtly or overtly promote political ideologies. During the 2023 general elections, political actors contracted Twitter influencers to trend hashtags such as #JagabanArmy or #ObidientMovement, thereby reinforcing political narratives among youth demographics. These campaigns blur the line between grassroots advocacy and orchestrated manipulation. According to Ojebuyi and Salawu (2021), such influencer networks are instrumental in “digitally laundering” propaganda, making it appear organic. They often use memes, emotionally charged language, and video snippets to galvanise support or demonise opponents, shaping public perception far beyond conventional campaign tactics.

ii. Ethno-Religious Polarisation

Digital propaganda in Nigeria often exploits ethnic and religious divides to incite discord and strengthen group loyalty. This form of propaganda became particularly pronounced during the #EndSARS protests in 2020, when some content framed the movement as a Yoruba or Christian conspiracy, rather than a national youth-led uprising. Uche (2021) observes that such narratives are deliberately crafted to delegitimise movements and sow distrust among ethnic groups. For example, fabricated WhatsApp broadcasts alleging plans of ethnic cleansing or church bombings circulated widely during election periods. These tactics trigger fear and division.

iii. Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour (CIB)

Another dominant technique is the use of fake accounts or bots to manipulate public opinion, a phenomenon referred to as coordinated inauthentic behaviour. The Centre for Democracy and Development (2022) identified multiple CIB networks on Facebook during Nigeria's 2019 and 2023 elections, many of which were linked to foreign actors or local political consultants. These accounts mass-produce content, simulate public

support, and drown out dissenting views through sheer volume. McKay, Tenove, and Haggart (2021) assert that such practices undermine deliberative democracy by distorting the appearance of consensus, creating echo chambers where misinformation is endlessly reinforced.

iv. Conspiracy Narratives and Anti-Establishment Messaging

Conspiratorial propaganda, particularly around health and governance, has also surged in Nigeria's digital space. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a prominent example was the viral video of a Nigerian-born US doctor claiming that hydroxychloroquine cures COVID-19 — a clip widely shared and endorsed by local actors. The CCDH (2021) calls such figures “disinformation superspreaders”, whose messaging is amplified by distrust in governmental institutions. These narratives typically combine kernels of truth with exaggerated claims, appealing to citizens' scepticism of state authority. Bakir and McStay (2018) argue that emotional resonance, rather than factual coherence, is what gives such content persuasive power.

v. Visual and Memetic Propaganda

Visual propaganda, especially memes, manipulated videos, and infographics, dominates Nigerian social media due to its accessibility and virality. These visuals are often used to satirise, ridicule, or mythologise political actors. For instance, images depicting President Buhari as a clone (“Jubril from Sudan”) circulated heavily in 2018, feeding into conspiracy theories that eroded public trust. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) warn that such “information disorder” is more potent in visual forms because they can bypass rational scrutiny. Memes, though humorous, serve as ideological weapons, simplifying complex issues into emotionally resonant and easily shareable content.

vi. Selective Framing and Algorithmic Amplification

Selective framing, where information is cherry-picked or framed to support a particular agenda, is compounded by social media algorithms that reward engagement over accuracy. Platforms like YouTube and TikTok recommend content based on watch history and reactions, leading users deeper into ideological silos. Ireton and Posetti (2018) caution that this algorithmic bias not only polarises societies but also provides fertile ground for propaganda. In Nigeria, channels promoting sensational political commentary often go viral, while nuanced discussions remain marginalised. Thus, even legitimate content can become propagandistic when selectively framed and amplified to push a singular narrative.

vii. Pseudo-Journalistic Platforms and Clickbait Outlets

The rise of pseudo-news websites and blogs masquerading as legitimate journalism has further complicated the information ecosystem. These platforms mimic the appearance of credible news sources but publish unverified or slanted content designed for virality.

For example, sites like NaijaLive or TrendGist frequently post politically motivated stories with misleading headlines, fuelling disinformation cycles. Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018) categorise such sources under the broader umbrella of “fake news”, noting that their content often draws higher engagement than factual news. These outlets exploit the public's hunger for instant information, often bypassing editorial scrutiny altogether.

Each of these forms of propaganda represents a distinct yet interconnected strategy in Nigeria's digital disinformation landscape. Together, they reveal how social media platforms have become both arenas of political engagement and instruments of manipulation. By identifying and categorising these forms, we gain critical insight into the architecture of digital propaganda — a necessary step toward mitigating its corrosive impact on Nigerian democracy, public trust, and national cohesion.

Information Disorder Framework provides a comprehensive lens for understanding the typologies of disinformation: misinformation (false but not intended to harm), disinformation (false and deliberately harmful), and malinformation (genuine information used maliciously). The findings of this study align with these categories, revealing a complex ecosystem where politically motivated actors exploit digital platforms to circulate doctored images, manipulated videos, and misleading narratives. During Nigeria's 2023 general elections, for instance, several political influencers disseminated deepfake videos portraying opponents as violent or incompetent — a textbook example of disinformation. The framework illuminates how the intentionality and context behind content dissemination contribute to its harmful impact on public trust and social cohesion.

Framing theory, rooted in the works of Goffman (1974) and expanded by Entman (1993), explains how media and communicators shape how audiences perceive and interpret events by selecting certain aspects of a perceived reality. This study found that Nigerian digital propaganda is often embedded in emotionally charged frames, such as “ethnic betrayal”, “failed leadership”, or “youth empowerment”, to mobilise support or incite resentment. For example, during the #EndSARS movement, government-aligned narratives framed protestors as foreign-funded anarchists, diverting attention from the legitimate grievances they raised. This framing shaped public interpretation and policy response, demonstrating how digital propaganda can skew perception through selective emphasis and strategic language.

4.2 The Strategic Deployment of Digital Disinformation by Nigerian Political Actors

In modern Nigeria, internet misinformation has become a significant political tool, especially during elections, mass rallies, and political crises. Political actors utilise a number of strategies to manipulate public opinion, stifle dissent, and promote polarising

narratives (McKay, Tenove & Haggart, 2021; Uche, 2021; Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2021). These approaches are not random; they are generally deliberate, emotionally motivated, and aimed to bypass reasonable debate through viral, misleading material. This section investigates some of the primary strategies political players engage in this disinformation economy, noting how each contributes to misinformation's entrenchment in Nigeria's digital and socio-political scene.

i. Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour and Bot Networks

One of the most effective techniques is the use of coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB), often involving bot networks or troll farms. Political actors create fake accounts to simulate public support or to attack critics. During Nigeria's 2023 general elections, researchers uncovered Twitter networks amplifying disinformation about electoral malpractice, portraying candidates like Peter Obi as foreign puppets or religious extremists (CDD, 2022). These activities were not organic; they were coordinated, utilising hundreds of automated or paid accounts to create a false sense of consensus, a tactic noted by the Centre for Countering Digital Hate (2021) as common in politically polarised environments.

ii. Use of Deepfakes and Doctored Visual Content

Visual manipulation has become a potent tool for disinformation. Political actors increasingly deploy deepfake videos, photoshopped images, and out-of-context visuals to mislead the public. For instance, during the #EndSARS protests, a deepfake video circulated purporting to show protesters looting hospitals, later proven to be unrelated footage from another country (BBC Africa Eye, 2020). These visual strategies exploit the emotional weight of images, making them more shareable and believable (Bakir & McStay, 2018). Such techniques are particularly dangerous in a context where media literacy remains low and visual content is often consumed without verification.

iii. Emotive Framing and Selective Narratives

Framing plays a central role in political disinformation. Politicians and their affiliates often manipulate how issues are presented, invoking fear, anger, or tribal sentiment. This emotive framing is evident in campaign rhetoric and social media hashtags. For example, disinformation during elections is often framed in ethnoreligious terms—casting opponents as threats to a specific tribe or religion (Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2021). During the 2019 elections, WhatsApp messages circulated with false claims of ethnic cleansing plans by rival groups, manipulating voter sentiments in the North and South. These tactics resonate deeply in a nation with a history of identity-based conflicts.

iv. Fake News Websites and Clickbait Headlines

Another disinformation method involves creating pseudo-news websites that publish misleading or entirely false stories, often picked up by unsuspecting readers. These sites use clickbait headlines to spread false narratives about opponents. In the run-up to major elections, headlines like “INEC Secretly Appoints PDP Loyalist as Returning Officer” were traced to unregistered sites designed to mimic legitimate outlets (Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2018). The goal is to deceive readers, amplify distrust in institutions, and manipulate voting behaviour. The anonymity of such websites makes them hard to trace, yet their impact is deeply corrosive to democratic discourse.

v. Manipulated Polls and Digital Data Distortion

Political actors also disseminate fake or manipulated opinion polls and statistics to shape perceptions of popularity or inevitability. These polls are often circulated on social media platforms or embedded in blogs with fabricated graphs and charts. During Nigeria's 2023 elections, partisan accounts widely circulated unverified polls suggesting certain candidates had an unbeatable lead, discouraging voters from supporting perceived underdogs. As noted by DataReportal (2024), the rise in mobile internet use makes the Nigerian public more vulnerable to such data-driven disinformation, especially when it appears to carry a veneer of empirical authority.

From bot networks to deepfakes and manipulated polls, Nigerian political actors have weaponised the digital space with sophisticated disinformation techniques. These strategies are not merely communication flaws—they are calculated tactics designed to distort democratic engagement and public trust. As scholars like Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) and McKay et al. (2021) argue, addressing these threats requires more than fact-checking; it demands systemic responses, including stronger platform accountability, robust civic education, and interdisciplinary digital literacy efforts. In the absence of such reforms, digital propaganda will continue to shape Nigeria's political trajectory in disturbing ways.

Framing theory offers critical insight into how political disinformation in Nigeria is constructed to manipulate perception. Political actors deliberately frame messages in emotive, identity-based, or fear-inducing ways to provoke polarisation and influence voter decisions. For instance, during the 2023 elections, opponents were framed as religious extremists or tribal threats through WhatsApp forwards, reinforcing inter-group distrust (Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2021). Such framing is not random; it aligns with Entman's (1993) view that to frame is to select “some aspects of perceived reality” and make them more salient. By emphasising specific angles while omitting others, political disinformation frames serve as cognitive shortcuts that distort rational evaluation.

The Information Disorder Framework, developed by Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), provides a robust lens for interpreting the findings of this study on digital propaganda in Nigeria. It categorises problematic content into misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation, each with distinct intent and impact. The study found that during events like the 2023 elections, political actors employed disinformation, deliberately false content such as fake election results or AI-generated videos to undermine opponents and manipulate public sentiment (Bakir & McStay, 2018; CDD, 2022). Misinformation also flourishes through emotionally charged WhatsApp forwards, often shared innocently. Malinformation appeared in real but decontextualised content, intensifying ethnic or political tensions. This framework helps clarify the layered complexity of Nigeria's digital information landscape.

4.3 Socio-political implications of digital propaganda and disinformation for national unity, public trust, and democratic stability in Nigeria.

The disruptive rise of digital propaganda and disinformation in Nigeria's social media ecosystem has led to far-reaching socio-political consequences. Scholars such as Bakir and McStay (2018), McKay et al. (2021), and Uche (2021) have established that the manipulation of information online now transcends mere political strategy; it is undermining core national values. This section critically explores the effects of such digital manipulation on three interlinked dimensions of Nigerian society: national unity, public trust, and democratic stability.

i. Fragmentation of National Unity

Digital propaganda often preys on Nigeria's long-standing ethnic and religious fault lines. Disinformation is weaponised to exacerbate divisions, often through misleading narratives portraying certain ethnic groups as enemies or threats. For instance, during the 2023 general elections, fake narratives circulated suggesting an "Igbo agenda" or "Fulani dominance", stoking mutual suspicion between communities (CDD, 2022). Such narratives, pushed via anonymous Twitter accounts and WhatsApp broadcasts, deepened existing tensions. The consistent framing of political discourse around identity rather than policy fuels polarisation, thus weakening the fragile sense of national cohesion (Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2021).

ii. Erosion of Public Trust in Institutions

Another grave consequence is the erosion of public trust in democratic and media institutions. Disinformation campaigns targeting the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) or the judiciary have portrayed these bodies as inherently biased or corrupt. Repeated exposure to such propaganda, even when baseless, has created public cynicism. For example, manipulated videos falsely alleging vote tampering in Lagos went viral, even after being debunked (BBC Africa Eye, 2020). This distrust, once internalised, delegitimises official communication and undermines national governance (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Ireton & Posetti, 2018).

iii. Undermining Democratic Stability

Democratic processes rely on informed citizen participation. However, the distortion of public debate through fake news, misleading visuals, and manipulated narratives hijacks public reasoning. McKay et al. (2021) argue that this creates an “anti-deliberative” culture, where citizens no longer debate based on facts but on emotionally charged disinformation. The spread of false claims about rigged elections, “foreign interference”, or conspiracy theories not only delegitimises outcomes but also creates fertile ground for civil unrest, as seen in post-election protests in 2023. Democracy suffers when disinformation drowns out genuine dialogue.

iv. Normalisation of Falsehood as Political Strategy

The constant use of propaganda by political elites to shape narratives has made dishonesty an accepted feature of Nigeria's political communication. Influencers on TikTok, sponsored Twitter handles, and coordinated Facebook pages are routinely used to spread strategic half-truths or outright lies. This not only distorts the information ecosystem but also signals to future political actors that deception is an effective campaign tool (Abhishek, 2021; Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2021). The result is a dangerous feedback loop where propaganda becomes entrenched in political culture.

v. Disempowerment of the Electorate

Digital disinformation distorts citizens' ability to make informed decisions. When voters are bombarded with conflicting or manipulative information, especially from seemingly credible sources, they become confused or apathetic. UNESCO (2021) stresses the role of media and information literacy, yet most Nigerians lack the tools to critically assess digital content. This knowledge gap ensures that disinformation disproportionately affects vulnerable groups, particularly rural or low-literacy communities. Disempowered voters cannot hold leaders accountable—a threat to electoral accountability and representative governance.

vi. Amplification through Algorithmic Bias

Finally, the architecture of social media platforms designed to prioritise sensational content amplifies the reach of digital propaganda. Emotional disinformation travels faster than factual corrections (Bakir & McStay, 2018). Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp have become breeding grounds for viral falsehoods, aided by echo chambers and bots. Without meaningful regulation or algorithmic transparency, the current digital landscape favours those who exploit outrage, fear, or identity-based triggers over reasoned discourse (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

In sum, the socio-political implications of digital propaganda and disinformation in Nigeria are both immediate and structural. They endanger national unity, corrode public trust, and imperil democratic stability. As the digital information ecosystem continues to evolve, so too must efforts to confront its manipulation through stronger regulation, media literacy, and a reinvigorated commitment to truth in public life.

5.1 Conclusion

Propaganda and disinformation, long-standing instruments of political manipulation, have taken on more insidious forms in Nigeria's digital media landscape. With the pervasive penetration of mobile internet and social media platforms, the scope, speed, and impact of falsehoods have grown exponentially. In Nigeria, a society profoundly characterised by ethnic, religious, and political cleavages, disinformation often exploits these divisions to destabilise public discourse, fuel identity-based hostility, and erode confidence in democratic institutions. The country's recent electoral cycles, for instance, reveal a troubling pattern where coordinated false narratives and emotional manipulation have replaced evidence-based political engagement, further diminishing national cohesion and civic trust.

This study focused on investigating the dominant forms, dissemination techniques, and socio-political implications of digital propaganda and disinformation in contemporary Nigeria, particularly during key national events. Drawing on secondary sources and analysed through the lenses of the Framing Theory and Information Disorder Framework, the findings reveal a highly coordinated and multi-dimensional use of digital spaces to disseminate strategic fallacies. The study concludes that Nigeria's fragile democracy is increasingly vulnerable to the noxious influence of manipulated content, which distorts public perception, undermines electoral credibility, and endangers unity. Urgent, multi-sectoral responses, including digital literacy, policy reform, and platform accountability, are needed to stem this tide.

5.2 Recommendations

- i. To empower Nigerian citizens against digital propaganda and disinformation, comprehensive digital literacy initiatives should be expanded nationwide. These programs must focus on critical thinking, fact-checking skills, and awareness of common disinformation tactics, especially targeting vulnerable groups such as youth and rural populations.
- ii. The Nigerian government and regulatory bodies should update and enforce laws addressing online disinformation and propaganda, ensuring accountability for political actors and platforms that facilitate the spread of false information during sensitive periods like elections.
- iii. Effective countermeasures require collaboration among government agencies, social media companies, civil society organisations, and media houses to monitor, flag, and rapidly respond to disinformation campaigns. Partnerships can foster transparency, improve fact-checking infrastructure, and build public trust in digital information sources.

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