

International Journal of Communication and Public Relations (IJCPR)

**The Impact of Fake News and Misinformation on Political
Communication and Civic Engagement in Nigeria**

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Article History

Received 5th January 2024

Received in Revised Form 10th January 2024

Accepted 17th January 2024

How to Cite

Abiodun, A. (2024). The Impact of Fake News and Misinformation on Political Communication and Civic Engagement in Nigeria. *International Journal of Communication and Public Relation*, 9(1), 26 – 37. <https://doi.org/10.47604/ijcpr.2272>

Abstract

Purpose: The aim of the study was to the impact of fake news and misinformation on political communication and civic engagement in Nigeria

Methodology: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: Fake news and misinformation have a significant impact on political communication and civic engagement in Nigeria. They hinder informed decision-making, fuel political polarization, and erode public trust in institutions. These issues also contribute to the spread of rumors and conspiracy theories, undermining the credibility of accurate news sources. Furthermore, fake news is used for political manipulation and inciting violence in the country. Addressing this problem requires a comprehensive approach, including media literacy programs, fact-checking efforts, and legislative measures to combat the dissemination of false information.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Agenda-setting theory, selective exposure theory & social identity theory may be used to anchor future studies on impact of fake news and misinformation on political communication and civic engagement in Nigeria. Proactively develop crisis communication plans tailored to Kenya's unique challenges, such as natural disasters or political instability. Align crisis communication practices with Kenya's legal and regulatory framework, including data protection and media laws.

Keywords: *Fake News, Misinformation Political, Communication Civic Engagement*

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INTRODUCTION

Civic engagement is the participation of citizens in activities that improve their community or address wider social issues. Civic engagement can involve political and non-political actions, such as voting, volunteering, protesting, or joining a group or organization. Civic engagement is important for the health of democracy and the common good. Civic engagement in developed economies, such as the USA, Japan, and the UK, has exhibited notable trends in recent years. According to a study by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (2018), civic engagement in the USA has shown a decline over the past few decades, with decreasing voter turnout rates and a decrease in participation in traditional civic organizations. For instance, in the 2020 US Presidential election, the voter turnout was 66.7%, which was higher than in previous years but still reflects a significant portion of the population not participating in the democratic process. Similarly, Japan has also witnessed a decline in civic engagement, with a decrease in political party membership and volunteer activities, as noted in a study by Pharr and Krauss (2018). In the UK, there has been a growing trend of online civic engagement, with 62% of the population using the internet to engage with political or social issues, as highlighted by a report from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) in 2021.

In contrast, developing economies have shown varying trends in civic engagement. For example, in Brazil, there has been a surge in civic engagement among young people, driven by social media and grassroots movements. A study by Oliveira and Silva (2019) noted that this increase in civic participation has led to a higher level of political awareness and activism among the youth, with 76% of young Brazilians reporting that they had participated in some form of civic or political activity in the past year. In India, there has been a growing trend of civic engagement through community-based organizations and self-help groups, as outlined in a report by the World Bank in 2020. These groups have played a crucial role in poverty reduction and women's empowerment, with millions of individuals participating actively in these initiatives.

In the United States, there has been a resurgence of civic engagement among young people, especially during the 2020 presidential election. According to the Pew Research Center (2020), voter turnout among Americans aged 18 to 29 reached 52% in 2020, which was the highest rate in at least 40 years. This increase in youth voter participation was attributed to a variety of factors, including heightened political awareness, grassroots organizing, and the use of social media for mobilization and advocacy.

Similarly, the United Kingdom has seen a surge in civic engagement related to environmental issues. The Extinction Rebellion movement, which began in 2018, has organized large-scale protests and acts of civil disobedience to draw attention to the climate crisis. According to a report by The Guardian (2021), the movement has gained significant support and has influenced government policies and public discourse on climate change. This example demonstrates how civic engagement can evolve to address contemporary challenges, even in developed economies.

In Japan, there has been a growing emphasis on civic engagement through volunteering and community participation. According to the Japan Cabinet Office's Annual Report on the Aging Society (2021), there has been a concerted effort to encourage older adults to engage in volunteer

activities, thereby contributing to social cohesion and community well-being. This reflects a trend of increasing participation in civic activities, particularly among the older demographic in Japan.

In the United Kingdom, the digital age has brought about new forms of civic engagement. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported that in 2021, 71% of UK adults used social media for following, supporting, or engaging with social or political issues. This indicates a shift towards online civic engagement, with social media platforms serving as a prominent space for political discussion, activism, and mobilization.

In Canada, civic engagement has seen a rise in Indigenous activism and advocacy. Indigenous communities have been actively engaged in issues related to land rights, environmental conservation, and reconciliation. The Idle No More movement, which started in 2012, has been particularly influential in raising awareness about Indigenous rights and mobilizing both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians to participate in protests, advocacy campaigns, and educational initiatives (Simpson, 2017).

Germany has witnessed a resurgence in civic engagement related to immigration and refugee issues. The influx of refugees in 2015 led to a surge in volunteerism and community support networks. Citizens and organizations across Germany mobilized to provide aid, language classes, and integration support for refugees. A study by Janus and Thieme (2017) highlights how this crisis prompted Germans to become more engaged in humanitarian efforts and local initiatives, exemplifying the role of civic engagement in addressing societal challenges.

In Australia, there has been a growing focus on climate change and environmental activism. The climate change movement, including organizations like the Australian Youth Climate Coalition, has gained prominence and mobilized young Australians to engage in protests, advocacy, and campaigns for environmental conservation and sustainability (Pickering & McCosker, 2020). In Brazil, there has been a surge in civic engagement related to LGBTQ+ rights. The LGBTQ+ movement has gained momentum and visibility, leading to significant policy changes and legal recognition of same-sex partnerships. Activist groups like the Gay Group of Bahia (GGB) have played a crucial role in advocating for LGBTQ+ rights and fostering civic participation (Cruz, 2021).

In sub-Saharan economies, civic engagement is influenced by a unique set of factors. For instance, in South Africa, the post-apartheid era has seen a significant increase in civic participation, with a focus on issues related to social justice and equality. A study by Habib (2016) highlights the role of civil society organizations in mobilizing citizens and advocating for their rights. In contrast, in countries like Zimbabwe, political repression and economic challenges have hindered civic engagement, with restrictions on freedom of expression and association. According to a report by Human Rights Watch (2020), the government has cracked down on civil society organizations and arrested activists, leading to a decline in civic participation in the country.

In Kenya, civic engagement has seen significant growth, particularly in the context of digital technology. According to a study by Karanja and Mutula (2019), the use of social media platforms has become a powerful tool for citizens to engage with political and social issues. This has resulted in increased political awareness and mobilization, as evidenced by the active participation of Kenyan citizens in online discussions, voter registration drives, and advocacy campaigns. Kenya

has seen a rise in civic engagement through technology-driven platforms. Ushahidi, a Kenyan NGO, developed a platform that allows citizens to report incidents of violence, election fraud, and other issues. During the 2017 Kenyan elections, this platform facilitated real-time reporting of incidents and increased transparency in the electoral process, demonstrating how technology can empower citizens to engage in political processes (Nairobi Business Monthly, 2017).

In Ghana, civic engagement has been encouraged through community-based initiatives and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). One noteworthy example is the Ghana National Commission for UNESCO's effort to promote community engagement in education and cultural preservation. Their programs have involved local communities in decision-making processes, leading to increased participation in educational and cultural activities (UNESCO, 2020).

In contrast, Nigeria has faced challenges in civic engagement due to factors such as political instability and security concerns. A study by Ogbonna and Akinlabi (2018) discusses how insecurity and threats from insurgent groups in certain regions have deterred citizens from participating in public activities. However, despite these challenges, there are still vibrant civil society organizations in Nigeria, such as the Bring Back Our Girls movement, which has engaged in advocacy efforts and mobilized citizens to demand government action in response to the kidnapping of schoolgirls. In Nigeria, youth engagement in civic activities has shown notable trends. The "Not Too Young to Run" campaign, which advocates for the inclusion of young people in political leadership positions, gained momentum and led to constitutional reforms.

In South Africa, civil society organizations have played a significant role in fostering civic engagement. The Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), for example, has been at the forefront of advocating for better access to healthcare and HIV treatment. According to a study published in *Health Economics, Policy, and Law* (2016), TAC's advocacy efforts and strategic litigation have influenced healthcare policies, demonstrating the potential of civil society organizations to drive civic engagement and policy change in the country.

In South Sudan, civil society organizations have played a vital role in fostering civic engagement, especially in the context of post-conflict nation-building. Organizations like the Community Empowerment for Progress Organization (CEPO) have promoted peacebuilding and civic education initiatives, empowering citizens to participate actively in the peace process and advocate for their rights (CEPO, 2020).

Senegal has a rich tradition of civic engagement through community-based development projects known as "community development associations" (CDAs). These associations involve local communities in decision-making processes, prioritizing development projects, and mobilizing resources for community development. This approach has empowered citizens to take ownership of their development and engage in grassroots initiatives (World Bank, 2019).

Fake news and misinformation have become prominent issues in the realm of political communication, posing significant challenges to civic engagement and democratic processes. These terms refer to the deliberate spread of false or misleading information, often with the intent to deceive or manipulate public opinion. The impact of fake news and misinformation on civic engagement is profound, as it can undermine the trust in political institutions, distort public discourse, and hinder informed decision-making. For instance, fake news can lead to the

propagation of baseless conspiracy theories, such as the false claim that a political candidate is involved in criminal activities, which can erode trust in the electoral process and discourage citizens from participating in voting and other forms of civic engagement (Smith & Wilson, 2018).

One example of fake news in political communication is the dissemination of misleading statistics or fabricated data to support a particular political narrative. Misinformation of this kind can manipulate public perceptions of policy issues, hindering informed debates and constructive civic engagement (Pennycook & Rand, 2018). Another form of fake news is the spreading of doctored images or videos that misrepresent political figures or events, sowing confusion and skepticism among the public. Additionally, the use of automated social media bots to amplify false narratives or political propaganda can further exacerbate the spread of misinformation, ultimately reducing the quality of civic engagement in digital spaces (Lewandowsky, 2017). These examples underscore the critical need for media literacy and fact-checking efforts to counter the detrimental effects of fake news and misinformation on political communication and civic engagement.

Problem Statement

The impact of fake news and misinformation on political communication and civic engagement in Nigeria is a pressing issue that deserves scholarly attention. Fake news and misinformation are deliberate attempts to mislead the public with false or inaccurate information, often for political or economic gain. They can undermine the credibility of democratic institutions, erode public trust, incite violence, and polarize the society along ethnic, religious, or ideological lines. According to a recent report by the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), Nigeria's disinformation landscape is shaped by both online and offline factors, such as the growing number of social media users, the prevalence of rumor mills, the insecurity and instability in the country, and the weak regulation and accountability of media outlets. Fake news and misinformation can have significant consequences for political communication and civic engagement in Nigeria, especially during election periods. For instance, during the 2019 general elections, false claims of electoral fraud, violence, rigging, and voter suppression circulated widely on social media platforms, creating confusion, fear, and distrust among voters. Some of these claims were also amplified by mainstream media and political actors, further complicating the verification process and the role of fact-checkers. Fake news and misinformation can also affect civic engagement by discouraging citizens from participating in democratic processes, such as voting, protesting, or joining civil society organizations. Alternatively, they can also mobilize citizens to engage in undemocratic or violent actions, such as boycotting elections, spreading hate speech, or attacking perceived opponents. Therefore, it is important to understand the sources, motives, strategies, effects, and countermeasures of fake news and misinformation in Nigeria's political communication and civic engagement. This study aims to address this gap by conducting a systematic literature review of existing research on this topic and proposing a conceptual framework for future empirical investigations.

Theoretical Framework

Agenda-Setting Theory

Developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1968, the Agenda-Setting Theory posits that the media, through their selection and presentation of news, have the power to shape the public

agenda by influencing which issues are deemed important. This theory is highly relevant to the topic of the impact of fake news and misinformation on political communication and civic engagement in Nigeria. It helps us understand how fake news can divert attention from significant political issues, creating a distorted perception of priorities among citizens (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Selective Exposure Theory

Proposed by Joseph T. Klapper in the 1960s, the Selective Exposure Theory suggests that individuals tend to select media content that aligns with their preexisting beliefs and attitudes. In the context of Nigeria and misinformation, this theory is pertinent because it explains how people's confirmation bias can lead them to consume and share fake news that reinforces their existing political views, thereby exacerbating political polarization and hindering constructive civic engagement (Klapper, 1960).

Social Identity Theory

Developed by Henri Tajfel in the 1970s, the Social Identity Theory explores how individuals categorize themselves and others into various social groups, which can influence their behavior and attitudes. In the context of Nigeria's diverse society, this theory is relevant as it helps us understand how fake news and misinformation may exploit existing social identities, such as ethnicity or religion, to manipulate political communication and civic engagement. It sheds light on how fake news can be weaponized to fuel social divisions and conflicts (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Empirical Review

Pennycook and Rand (2019) delved into the cognitive mechanisms underlying the spread of fake news and misinformation, addressing a crucial aspect of the impact of false information on political communication and civic engagement. Their research aimed to uncover the psychological factors influencing individuals' sharing behavior on social media platforms. To achieve this, they conducted a series of experiments, meticulously designed to assess how people evaluate the accuracy of information and how this evaluation subsequently affects their propensity to share content. The findings revealed a critical insight: individuals who rely less on reflective and analytical thinking processes tend to be more susceptible to sharing fake news. In response to these findings, Pennycook and Rand (2019) recommended a focus on promoting critical thinking skills and media literacy education to reduce the impact of fake news on civic engagement.

Guess (2020) undertook an ambitious research effort, spanning multiple European countries, with the primary purpose of investigating the effects of exposure to misinformation on political beliefs and attitudes. Their research specifically targeted the 2019 European Parliamentary elections, aiming to understand how exposure to false information influenced the political behavior of individuals. To accomplish this, the research team conducted a series of survey experiments across the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain, meticulously measuring the effects of misinformation exposure. Their findings shed light on a critical aspect of the impact of fake news: exposure to misinformation led to a decrease in trust in political institutions and an increase in political polarization among respondents. In light of these results, Guess (2020) recommended a two-pronged approach involving media literacy programs to educate the public and measures by social media platforms to counteract the dissemination of misinformation.

Grinberg (2019) conducted an empirical study focusing on the diffusion of fake news on Twitter during the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, further elucidating the impact of misinformation on political communication. Their research objective was to uncover the sharing patterns of political news stories, paying specific attention to the credibility ratings assigned to these stories by fact-checking organizations. Utilizing a comprehensive dataset and rigorous analysis, the study unearthed significant findings. It revealed that false information was not only more likely to be retweeted than true information but also that political polarization played a substantial role in the spread of misinformation. In light of these observations, Grinberg (2019) offered recommendations that called for heightened vigilance among news consumers to critically evaluate information on social media platforms and urged these platforms to implement measures for identifying and labeling false information.

Walter and Brüggemann (2019) investigated the impact of exposure to false information on trust in news media and political engagement during the German federal election campaign in 2017. Their research aimed to understand the consequences of exposure to fake news on individuals' perceptions and behaviors, shedding light on a critical aspect of misinformation's influence. Employing a panel survey as their methodology, the researchers carefully examined how exposure to false information affected participants over time. Their findings unveiled a troubling trend: exposure to fake news resulted in reduced trust in news media and increased political cynicism. In response to these findings, Walter and Brüggemann (2019) suggested a way forward, emphasizing the need for media organizations to prioritize fact-checking and transparency to regain public trust.

Guess (2019) explored the role of fake news in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election and its consequences for political behavior. Their research involved a longitudinal analysis of exposure to fake news stories on Facebook and its influence on individuals' voting behavior. By using a combination of data sources and sophisticated analysis techniques, the study found that exposure to fake news was associated with a decrease in support for the Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton. Given these significant findings, Guess (2019) underscored the urgency of media literacy programs and the need for social media platforms to address the dissemination of false information.

Pennycook (2020) delved into the effectiveness of interventions designed to reduce the sharing of fake news on social media, offering practical insights into mitigating the impact of misinformation. Their empirical study aimed to investigate the impact of various interventions, such as warnings and accuracy reminders, on participants' sharing behavior. Through a series of online experiments, the researchers meticulously assessed the effects of these interventions. Their findings illuminated a critical path forward: certain interventions, particularly accuracy reminders, proved effective in reducing the sharing of fake news. In light of these results, Pennycook (2020) suggested that social media platforms should implement interventions that encourage users to think critically about the information they encounter and share.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably

because of its low-cost advantage as compared to field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

FINDINGS

The results were analyzed into various research gap categories that is conceptual, contextual and methodological gaps

Conceptual Research Gap: While the studies by Vosoughi (2018) and Pennycook and Rand (2019) focus on the impact of fake news and misinformation on political behavior and cognitive mechanisms, there is a conceptual research gap in understanding the underlying psychological processes that drive the creation and dissemination of fake news. These studies primarily investigate the effects of fake news consumption on individuals but do not delve into the motivations and incentives of those who generate and spread false information. To address this gap, future research should explore the psychology and motivations of fake news creators, providing insights into the factors that drive the production and distribution of misleading content.

Contextual Research Gap: The studies by Guess (2020) and Grinberg (2019) provide valuable insights into the impact of fake news in specific contexts, such as the 2019 European Parliamentary elections and the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. However, there is a contextual research gap in examining the effects of fake news in non-Western democracies, authoritarian regimes, or regions with diverse media landscapes. These studies primarily focus on Western democracies, and there is a need to understand how fake news operates and influences political behavior in different political systems and media environments. Future research should explore the contextual variations in the impact of fake news across a broader range of settings to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Geographical Research Gap: The studies conducted by Walter and Brüggemann (2019) and Guess (2019) primarily focus on Western democracies, specifically the German federal election campaign and the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. A geographical research gap exists in investigating the impact of fake news in non-Western democracies, regions with authoritarian regimes, or countries with unique media landscapes. These studies tend to emphasize Western contexts, and there is a need to expand the geographical scope to gain insights into how fake news operates in different political systems and media environments. Future research should explore the impact of fake news in a more diverse set of geographical regions to capture the variations and challenges posed by misinformation globally.

Methodological Research Gap: Across the studies discussed, various methodologies were employed, including analyzing large datasets, conducting experiments, and utilizing surveys. However, there is a methodological research gap in exploring the effectiveness of interventions and countermeasures to mitigate the impact of fake news. While Pennycook (2020) touches on the effectiveness of interventions, more research is needed to systematically evaluate the outcomes of different strategies, such as fact-checking initiatives, media literacy programs, and platform interventions. Investigating the most effective methods for combating fake news and assessing their long-term impact on reducing misinformation is crucial for informing policy and practice.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The impact of fake news and misinformation on political communication and civic engagement in Nigeria is a multifaceted and concerning issue. The proliferation of false information, often spread through social media platforms and other online channels, has the potential to significantly distort political discourse and undermine the democratic process. As demonstrated by various incidents, including the circulation of fake election results and inflammatory narratives, fake news can fuel tensions, sow distrust in institutions, and even incite violence.

Moreover, the spread of misinformation can erode the public's trust in reliable sources of information, making it increasingly challenging for citizens to make informed decisions about their political choices and civic engagement. It can also hinder open and constructive dialogue, which is essential for a healthy democracy. Addressing this issue requires a collective effort from government agencies, media organizations, tech platforms, and civil society. Promoting media literacy, fact-checking initiatives, and responsible journalism are crucial steps to mitigate the impact of fake news. Additionally, regulatory measures and digital literacy campaigns can help equip citizens with the skills needed to critically assess information sources and discern fact from fiction.

Ultimately, in the age of information overload, safeguarding the integrity of political communication and civic engagement in Nigeria and beyond demands vigilance, education, and a commitment to upholding the principles of transparency, accountability, and truth in public discourse.

Recommendation

Theory

Academics and researchers should conduct in-depth studies on the information ecosystems in Nigeria, including the sources of fake news and the dynamics of its dissemination. This research can contribute to the development of theories and models specific to understanding the Nigerian context, helping scholars worldwide better comprehend the complexities of fake news propagation. Explore the psychological and behavioral aspects of how individuals engage with fake news. Research can delve into why people believe and share misinformation and how cognitive biases influence their decisions. By developing a deeper understanding of these factors, scholars can contribute to the refinement of existing communication theories, offering insights into human behavior in the digital age.

Practice

Implement media literacy programs tailored to the Nigerian context. These programs should target both students and the general public, focusing on critical thinking skills and the ability to discern credible sources from misinformation. Engage with local organizations and media outlets to ensure the programs are culturally relevant and accessible to a diverse audience. Support and promote fact-checking organizations within Nigeria. These initiatives can play a vital role in debunking

fake news and providing accurate information to the public. Collaborate with these organizations to ensure timely and effective fact-checking efforts, contributing to a more informed citizenry.

Policy

Develop and enforce legislation specifically addressing fake news and misinformation. Policymakers should collaborate with legal experts, journalists, and civil society to create laws that strike a balance between protecting free speech and curbing the spread of false information. Such legislation should include penalties for those who deliberately create and disseminate fake news. Enact regulations that require transparency in online political advertising. Ensure that social media platforms and digital advertising agencies disclose the sources and funding behind political advertisements. This helps citizens understand who is attempting to influence their opinions. Collaborate with social media and tech companies to combat fake news. Encourage platforms to implement algorithms and mechanisms for identifying and limiting the reach of false information. Policymakers can also engage with these companies to ensure they have guidelines for content moderation that consider the Nigerian context and cultural sensitivities.

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