

# Public Perception of Political Disinformation and Trust in Mainstream Media during Electoral Campaigns in Nigeria



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## Abstract

This study examines public perception of political disinformation and trust in traditional media during electoral campaigns in Nigeria. Using a descriptive survey design, data were gathered from 394 respondents in Asaba, Delta State, through a structured 20-item Likert-scale questionnaire. The results reveal that 92.64% of respondents recognized the widespread occurrence of disinformation during elections, with 71.07% identifying alternative media platforms as significant contributors. Despite this high level of awareness, trust in traditional media remains weak, as only 59.65% of participants expressed confidence in their accuracy for political reporting, yielding a mean score of 3.41, falling below the acceptable threshold of 3.5. Additionally, the study shows that 68.53% of respondents believe that certain traditional media outlets are complicit in disseminating false information. These findings are analyzed through the theoretical lenses of Media Dependency and Spiral of Silence, which explore reliance on media for political information and the suppression of dissenting voices in an environment rife with disinformation. The dual role of media as both a provider of information and a potential propagator of false narratives is a central theme of this research. The implications are significant, highlighting the need for measures to address the challenges posed by disinformation and declining trust in media institutions. The study recommends improving public awareness through targeted media literacy programs to equip citizens with skills to discern credible information. It also advocates for robust fact-checking mechanisms within media organizations and regulatory reforms to enhance accountability. These steps are critical for restoring trust in traditional media and ensuring the integrity of electoral processes. This research contributes to the broader discourse on the media's role in shaping public opinion and managing the flow of information during elections, emphasizing the importance of reliable and responsible reporting in democratic societies.

**Keywords:** *Political Disinformation, Media Trust, Electoral Integrity, Nigerian Elections, Public Perception*

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### **Background of Study**

Political disinformation has emerged as a pervasive challenge in contemporary society, significantly altering the landscape of democratic processes worldwide. Defined as “false or misleading information intentionally spread to deceive the public” (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 5), disinformation has become a critical tool in the arsenal of political actors. Globally, the phenomenon has been instrumental in influencing electoral outcomes, swaying public opinion, and undermining democratic institutions. Instances such as the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the Brexit referendum have highlighted the extent to which disinformation can penetrate political discourse, eroding public trust in democratic systems (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018, p. 11). In the African context, including Nigeria, the implications of political disinformation are even more pronounced given the fragile democratic structures and limited media literacy among the populace (Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017, p. 35).

The role of media in shaping public opinion during electoral campaigns cannot be overstated. As the primary conduit for political communication, both traditional and digital media serve as platforms for candidates and parties to disseminate their agendas. However, this dual role as an informer and influencer makes the media susceptible to exploitation by those spreading disinformation. McQuail (2010) notes that “media have the power to frame political narratives in ways that significantly impact public perception” (p. 64). In Nigeria, the mainstream media, often seen as a gatekeeper of information, has faced challenges in maintaining credibility amidst the proliferation of fake news. During electoral campaigns, where competition is intense, disinformation is often weaponized to discredit opponents or manipulate voter behavior, exacerbating political polarization and public distrust in media institutions (Adegbola & Gearhart, 2019, p. 289).

The Nigerian experience reflects a complex interplay between political disinformation and media trust. Given the country’s vibrant yet polarized media landscape, disinformation during elections has disrupted the flow of accurate information and deepened skepticism toward mainstream media. Scholars such as Omojola and Attah (2021, p. 134) argue that the inability of traditional media to effectively counter disinformation has diminished their role as credible sources of information. This erosion of trust poses a significant threat to Nigeria’s democratic consolidation, as an informed electorate is essential for the proper functioning of democratic processes. Understanding public perception of political disinformation and its impact on media trust is therefore crucial. As Allcott and Gentzkow (2017, p. 213) aptly state, “The fight against disinformation is not just about technology but also about rebuilding trust in the institutions that uphold democratic values.”

The Nigerian electoral context has long faced complex challenges, with misinformation playing a significant role in shaping political narratives and outcomes. Historically, election misinformation has been tied to socio-political dynamics such as ethnic tensions, partisan divides, and power struggles. During military and early democratic eras, state-controlled media disseminated propaganda, while opposition groups relied on informal channels to counter these narratives (Pate, 2019, p. 56). This created a culture where information became a weapon in political contests.

In contemporary times, the rise of digital platforms has amplified the spread of misinformation during elections. As Okoro and Nwafor (2013, p. 91) note, “The advent of social media in Nigeria has created new avenues for political engagement, but it has also

increased the susceptibility of the public to misinformation." This was evident during the 2015 and 2019 general elections, where false reports, fabricated election results, and manipulated images spread rapidly across platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp.

The implications of misinformation in Nigerian elections are profound, undermining public trust in electoral processes and institutions. Uwalaka and Watkins (2018, p. 198) emphasize that "the persistent spread of false information during elections not only distorts public perception but also erodes confidence in the democratic process." For instance, in the 2019 elections, false claims about voter suppression and electoral violence heightened tensions and fueled disputes. Such campaigns often exploit societal divisions, further polarizing the electorate and diminishing prospects for peaceful and credible elections.

Mainstream media, traditionally seen as a counterbalance to misinformation, has also faced challenges in maintaining credibility. Sensational reporting, reliance on unverified sources, and partisan affiliations have sometimes compromised its role as a watchdog. As Adesoji (2010, p. 71) observes, "the Nigerian media, while vibrant, is not immune to the pressures of political and economic interests, which can influence the dissemination of information during critical periods like elections." Addressing misinformation in Nigeria's electoral context requires a multifaceted approach, including robust fact-checking mechanisms, enhanced media literacy, and regulatory frameworks that balance freedom of expression with accountability. This study explores public perceptions of political disinformation and trust in mainstream media within this complex landscape, offering insights into the broader interplay between misinformation and democratic governance in Nigeria.

### **Statement of the Problem**

In democratic societies, the dissemination of accurate information plays a critical role in shaping public opinion, particularly during electoral campaigns. However, the rise of political disinformation has emerged as a significant threat to democratic processes. Political disinformation, defined as "the deliberate spread of false or misleading information with the intent to influence public perception or manipulate electoral outcomes," undermines the credibility of information sources, including mainstream media (Lazer *et al.*, 2018, p. 1094). This issue is even more pronounced in contexts with fragile democratic institutions, such as Nigeria, where "political actors exploit weak regulatory frameworks and a highly polarized media landscape to disseminate falsehoods" (Ojebode *et al.*, 2019, p. 73).

Trust in mainstream media is a cornerstone of informed electoral decision-making. However, the proliferation of disinformation during campaigns has fostered growing skepticism among citizens toward traditional news outlets, which are "often accused of bias or complicity in spreading false narratives" (Kreiss & McGregor, 2019, p. 214). This erosion of trust carries significant implications for voter behavior, political engagement, and the integrity of the electoral process. In Nigeria, where media consumption is influenced by socio-cultural factors, understanding public perceptions of political disinformation and the credibility of mainstream media is critical for addressing the challenges of information disorder (Uwalaka & Watkins, 2018, p. 198).

Despite the increasing global focus on political disinformation, limited empirical research has been conducted on its impact on public trust in mainstream media within

the Nigerian context. Existing studies have largely emphasized the role of social media in spreading fake news, leaving a gap in understanding how these dynamics affect perceptions of traditional media during elections (Adeleke & Olayemi, 2020, p. 56). Furthermore, while global studies suggest that “exposure to disinformation diminishes trust in media institutions” (Tsfati *et al.*, 2020, p. 105), the extent to which this applies to Nigeria’s unique socio-political landscape remains underexplored.

This study addresses this gap by examining how political disinformation influences public trust in mainstream media during electoral campaigns in Nigeria. By exploring citizens’ perceptions, the research provides insights into the broader implications of disinformation for democratic governance and media credibility, contributing to strategies for mitigating its impact in future elections.

### **Objectives of the Study**

This study aims to explore how Nigerian audiences perceive political disinformation during election periods and the role of mainstream journalists in either mitigating or amplifying such false narratives, while the objectives are to:

1. examine the public’s awareness of political disinformation during electoral campaigns in Nigeria.
2. assess the level of trust Nigerian audiences place in mainstream media as a source of political information.
3. investigate the role of mainstream media in either countering or amplifying political disinformation.
4. explore demographic factors (age, education, location, etc.) that influence perceptions of political disinformation and trust in the media.
5. evaluate the impact of political disinformation on public confidence in the electoral process and political actors.

### **Research Questions**

1. How aware are Nigerians of the presence of political disinformation during electoral campaigns?
2. What is the level of trust Nigerian audiences have in mainstream media for accurate political reporting?
3. How do Nigerians perceive the role of mainstream media in mitigating or propagating political disinformation?
4. What demographic factors (e.g., age, education, location) influence public perception of political disinformation and trust in mainstream media?
5. How does exposure to political disinformation affect public trust in the electoral process and political candidates?

### **Literature Review**

A robust conceptual framework is essential for understanding the intricate relationship between political disinformation and trust in mainstream media during electoral campaigns in Nigeria. This section defines key terms and provides an overview of media trust and its determinants to establish a foundation for the research.

Political disinformation is defined as “false or misleading information spread with the deliberate intent to deceive or manipulate public opinion” (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 5). Unlike misinformation, which arises from unintentional errors,

disinformation is intentionally used to achieve political objectives, such as discrediting opponents or swaying voter behavior. In Nigeria, political disinformation often exploits the country's ethnic and religious divisions, intensifying tensions during elections (Omojola & Attah, 2021, p. 132).

Media trust refers to "the degree to which individuals perceive media sources as credible, reliable, and capable of providing accurate information" (McQuail, 2010, p. 64). It is a multidimensional concept that includes trust in media institutions, journalistic integrity, and the accuracy of content. In the digital age, mainstream media faces challenges to its credibility due to the proliferation of alternative information sources, including independent blogs and online platforms, which can either complement or compete with traditional outlets.

Electoral campaigns are defined as "organized efforts by political candidates and parties to communicate with voters, influence their preferences, and secure electoral victory" (Norris, 2000, p. 113). These campaigns heavily rely on media to disseminate messages, shape political debates, and mobilize support. In Nigeria, electoral campaigns are high-stakes events marked by intense competition and the use of both factual information and disinformation to influence public opinion.

Understanding media trust requires examining its determinants. Strömbäck et al. (2020, p. 98) identify factors such as perceived impartiality, accuracy of reporting, transparency in journalistic practices, and alignment between audience values and media content as critical influences. Trust is also shaped by socio-political contexts, including partisanship, media ownership, and historical experiences with media during pivotal events like elections.

In Nigeria, trust in mainstream media has been undermined by perceptions of bias and sensationalism. As Adegbola and Gearhart (2019, p. 289) note, "the credibility of the Nigerian media has been compromised by political affiliations and commercial pressures, leading to a decline in public confidence." This erosion of trust is particularly troubling during electoral campaigns, where access to accurate and impartial information is essential for informed decision-making.

This conceptual framework underscores the central role of political disinformation in influencing public trust in mainstream media during electoral campaigns. By examining these dynamics, the study seeks to provide insights into how Nigerians perceive and respond to disinformation and how these perceptions shape their trust in media institutions.

### **Political Disinformation**

Political disinformation has become a global phenomenon, significantly impacting democratic processes worldwide. Defined as "deliberately false or misleading information aimed at influencing public opinion for political gain" (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 5), it has been weaponized during elections in numerous regions. Notable examples include the 2016 U.S. presidential election, where Russian-backed actors spread fake news to influence voter sentiment (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018, p. 21), and the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, which was marked by a flood of misleading claims about the European Union (Bastos & Mercea, 2019, p. 46). In these cases, disinformation campaigns leveraged both traditional and digital media platforms to amplify their reach, exploiting audiences' trust in established outlets and the viral nature of digital content.

In Nigeria, the evolution of political disinformation mirrors global trends but reflects the country's unique political, social, and technological context. Historically, the use of propaganda and misinformation in Nigerian politics dates back to the military era, when state-controlled media disseminated biased information to legitimize authoritarian regimes (Pate, 2019, p. 56). With the transition to democracy, political actors adapted these strategies, incorporating private press and, more recently, digital platforms to spread disinformation. As Uwalaka and Watkins (2018, p. 198) explain, "disinformation in Nigeria has evolved from rudimentary smear campaigns to sophisticated narratives designed to exploit ethnic and religious divisions." This trend is particularly evident in electoral campaigns, where false claims, manipulated images, and fabricated endorsements are widespread.

The mechanisms of disinformation in Nigeria involve both traditional and digital strategies. On one hand, mainstream media, such as newspapers and television, have occasionally been complicit in spreading false information due to political affiliations or inadequate fact-checking processes. On the other hand, platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp serve as primary channels for disseminating political disinformation. These platforms enable rapid, large-scale dissemination of content, often without the editorial oversight typical of traditional media. As Okoro and Nwafor (2013, p. 91) note, "the participatory nature of social media makes it a fertile ground for the spread of disinformation, particularly during high-stakes periods such as elections."

A critical distinction between these channels lies in their modes of operation and impact. Mainstream media, though more regulated, can lend credibility to disinformation when such content is aired or published, while social media thrives on user-generated content, making it more challenging to control. The virality of social media disinformation, often amplified by algorithms and echo chambers, presents significant challenges. For instance, during the 2019 Nigerian general elections, false reports about results were widely circulated on WhatsApp, leading to confusion and unrest in certain regions (Omojola & Attah, 2021, p. 132).

### **Trust in Mainstream Media**

Trust in mainstream media is a critical component of democratic societies, as it influences public reliance on media as a credible source of information. Trust is defined as the "belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of media organizations to provide accurate and unbiased information" (McQuail, 2010, p. 64). However, this trust is not static; it is shaped by factors such as the perceived accuracy of content, transparency in journalistic practices, and alignment of media content with audience values. According to Strömbäck *et al.* (2020, p. 98), trust in media also depends on audiences' prior experiences with media, the handling of controversial issues, and the broader political environment in which media operate.

In Nigeria, trust in mainstream media has historically fluctuated due to political and economic influences. During the military era, state-controlled media were widely perceived as propaganda tools, disseminating government narratives while suppressing dissenting voices (Pate, 2019, p. 56). This period significantly eroded public trust in mainstream media, prompting citizens to turn to alternative sources, such as clandestine publications and foreign broadcasts, for unbiased information. With the return to democratic governance in 1999, privately owned media became more prominent, offering diverse perspectives. However, even in this democratic era, media credibility

has often been questioned. As Akinfeleye (2011, p. 45) observes, "the Nigerian media landscape is vibrant but fraught with challenges that undermine public confidence, including political interference and inadequate adherence to ethical standards."

A comparative analysis of trust in mainstream media versus social media reveals interesting dynamics. While mainstream media traditionally commanded higher trust due to their established reputation and professional standards, the rise of social media has disrupted this dynamic. Social platforms now play a key role in information dissemination, offering immediacy and diverse voices but also presenting significant challenges due to misinformation and disinformation. As Allcott and Gentzkow (2017, p. 212) note, "social media platforms are rife with misinformation, complicating the public's trust in them." In Nigeria, this tension is evident during electoral campaigns, where both mainstream and social media disseminate political messages. According to Omojola and Attah (2021, p. 132), "social media users in Nigeria often view mainstream media with skepticism, citing biases and slow response times, yet they remain cautious of the unverified nature of content on social platforms."

This comparative trust is also shaped by demographic factors such as age, education, and political affiliation. Younger, tech-savvy populations often lean toward social media for its participatory nature, while older audiences prefer the perceived reliability of mainstream outlets (Adegbola & Gearhart, 2019, p. 289). This interplay highlights Nigeria's complex media ecosystem, where trust in information sources is continuously negotiated.

### **Impact of Disinformation on Electoral Processes**

Disinformation has become a critical challenge to the integrity of electoral processes worldwide, and Nigeria is no exception. During electoral campaigns, disinformation is strategically deployed to mislead voters, discredit opponents, and manipulate public opinion. The impact of these practices on Nigeria's democratic processes can be analyzed through case studies, public reactions, and broader implications for democratic consolidation.

Case studies of Nigerian electoral campaigns reveal the pervasive role of disinformation. During the 2015 general elections, false narratives about candidates, such as claims linking then-candidate Muhammadu Buhari to extremist groups, were widely circulated on both traditional and digital platforms. Similarly, in the 2019 elections, disinformation campaigns targeted opposition figures, including Atiku Abubakar, with fabricated stories of corruption and electoral malpractice (Omojola & Attah, 2021, p. 132). These campaigns often exploit Nigeria's socio-political complexities, leveraging ethnic and religious divides to further polarize the electorate. As Pate and Idris (2017, p. 76) observe, "the use of disinformation in Nigerian elections is not only aimed at influencing voter choices but also at delegitimizing electoral outcomes."

Public reactions to political disinformation in Nigeria have been mixed. While some segments of the population dismiss such content as false, others, particularly those with limited media literacy, are more susceptible to believing and spreading it. According to Uwalaka and Watkins (2018, p. 198), "the spread of political disinformation in Nigeria often incites public fear and distrust, leading to heightened tensions and, in some cases, electoral violence." For example, during the 2019 elections, misinformation about the operations of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) led to widespread

skepticism about the credibility of the results. Such reactions highlight the destabilizing effect of disinformation on public confidence in electoral institutions and processes.

The long-term implications of disinformation for Nigeria's democratic consolidation are significant. Persistent exposure to false information erodes trust in democratic institutions, including electoral bodies and the media. As Adekunle (2020, p. 47) argues, "A democracy thrives on informed participation, but disinformation undermines this by distorting reality and reducing the electorate's ability to make rational choices." Over time, this erosion of trust can lead to voter apathy, as citizens lose faith in the electoral system's capacity to deliver fair and credible outcomes. Furthermore, the normalization of disinformation campaigns risks institutionalizing deceit as a political strategy, further undermining Nigeria's democratic fabric.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical foundation for this study rests on two key theories: Media Dependency Theory and the Spiral of Silence Theory. These frameworks help to explain how individuals rely on media for political information and how public opinion is shaped and influenced in the context of political disinformation.

Media Dependency Theory, proposed by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976), posits that the extent of an individual's reliance on media is directly related to the media's ability to satisfy specific information needs. This theory suggests that in politically charged environments, such as electoral campaigns, individuals turn to media as a primary source for understanding political developments. According to Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, "The more a person depends on media to meet their needs, the more influence the media will have on their beliefs and behaviors." In the Nigerian context, where political disinformation is rampant, the reliance on both mainstream and social media for electoral information becomes crucial. However, this dependency also makes audiences vulnerable to the manipulative effects of disinformation, which can shape perceptions of candidates and influence voting behavior (Omojola & Attah, 2021).

The Spiral of Silence Theory, introduced by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1974), provides further insight into how disinformation affects public opinion dynamics. This theory asserts that individuals are less likely to express opinions perceived as being in the minority due to fear of social isolation. In environments saturated with disinformation, this fear can be exacerbated, as false narratives often gain traction and appear to represent the majority view. Noelle-Neumann explains that "the media plays a critical role in shaping the perception of public opinion, often amplifying certain voices while marginalizing others." During Nigerian electoral campaigns, disinformation can create a distorted public discourse, leading individuals to either conform to prevailing false narratives or retreat from public political discussions altogether (Uwalaka & Watkins, 2018).

These theories together underscore the dual role of media as both an enabler of informed political engagement and a potential vector for disinformation. Media Dependency Theory highlights the critical role of media in providing political information, especially during elections, while the Spiral of Silence Theory explains how disinformation can suppress dissenting opinions and distort public perception. By applying these theoretical frameworks, this study seeks to explore how political disinformation shapes public trust in mainstream media and influences public opinion during electoral campaigns in Nigeria.

### Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey design to investigate public perceptions of political disinformation and trust in mainstream media during electoral campaigns in Nigeria. The research was conducted in Asaba, the capital city of Delta State. According to the 2023 projected population figure from the National Bureau of Statistics, Asaba had an estimated population of 205,600 people. This population provided a diverse demographic base, including individuals from different socio-economic and educational backgrounds, which was essential for capturing varied perspectives on the subject matter. The target population comprised residents of Asaba aged 18 and above, as they were more likely to have been exposed to political campaigns and media content. A sample size of 394 respondents was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's formula, ensuring an adequate and representative sample for reliable generalizations. The sampling technique employed a combination of random and stratified sampling methods to ensure the inclusion of diverse demographic groups.

Data were collected using a 20-item Likert scale questionnaire, which was structured into five sections, each aligned with the study's objectives. The sections covered awareness of political disinformation, trust in mainstream media, the role of media in mitigating or propagating disinformation, the influence of demographic factors on perceptions, and the impact of disinformation on trust in the electoral process. Respondents rated their agreement with each statement on a four-point scale: Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). The researcher personally administered the copies of the questionnaire, with assistance from two trained field assistants. This ensured consistent guidance for respondents and helped reduce errors such as incomplete or incorrectly filled questionnaires. Data collection was conducted over a two-week period, during which the researcher and field assistants visited various residential and public areas in Asaba to achieve broad participation.

The data collected were coded and analyzed using weighted mean scores. This analytical approach was used to determine the level of agreement or disagreement with each statement, providing insights into the central tendencies of the respondents' perceptions. The results were interpreted in line with the research objectives, offering a comprehensive understanding of public attitudes toward political disinformation and trust in mainstream media during electoral campaigns.

### Data Presentation/Analysis and Discussion of Findings

**Table 1: Responses on Awareness of Political Disinformation During Electoral Campaigns in Nigeria**

Awareness Statements	SA (%)	A (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	X	Decision
I am aware that false information is often spread during electoral campaigns in Nigeria.	287 (72.84)	78 (19.80)	16 (4.06)	13 (3.30)	3.62	Accepted
I can easily identify political disinformation when I come across it.	244 (61.93)	101 (25.63)	36 (9.14)	13 (3.30)	3.46	Accepted
Political disinformation is a common strategy used by politicians to manipulate public opinion.	269 (68.27)	87 (22.08)	27 (6.85)	11 (2.79)	3.56	Accepted
Social media platforms are major sources of political disinformation during elections.	280 (71.07)	83 (21.07)	19 (4.82)	12 (3.04)	3.60	Accepted

Source: Field Data (2024)

The table reveals that respondents are highly cognizant of the prevalence, sources, and strategic use of disinformation in political contexts. Across the four statements, a substantial majority of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed, as reflected by the consistently high percentages for the SA (Strongly Agree) and A (Agree) categories. Mean scores ( $\bar{X}$ ) for all statements are above 3.5, with three out of four statements receiving a decision of Accepted, indicating a strong agreement with the assertions presented.

The first statement, regarding general awareness of disinformation during elections, had the highest level of agreement, with 92.64% of respondents (SA + A) acknowledging the widespread presence of false information in electoral campaigns. This suggests that the issue is well-recognized among the population. Similarly, the high acceptance of the role of social media as a key source of disinformation ( $\bar{X} = 3.60$ ) highlights the public's understanding of the digital ecosystem's influence on political narratives.

While the statement about the ease of identifying disinformation was also accepted ( $\bar{X} = 3.46$ ), its mean score, slightly below the others, implies some variability in respondents' confidence. This suggests that although many individuals believe they can recognize disinformation, a notable proportion may still struggle with discerning false information, which could be attributed to varying levels of media literacy.

The perception of disinformation as a deliberate strategy used by politicians ( $\bar{X} = 3.56$ ) reflects a nuanced understanding of political tactics aimed at manipulating public opinion. This recognition is critical as it indicates that the electorate is not only aware of disinformation but also its intentional deployment to influence voter behaviour and trust.

**Table 2: Responses on Trust in Mainstream Media for Accurate Political Reporting**

Trust Statements	SA (%)	A (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	$\bar{X}$	Decision
I trust mainstream media to provide accurate information during electoral campaigns.	235 (59.65)	102 (25.89)	40 (10.15)	17 (4.31)	3.41	Rejected
Mainstream media generally fact-checks political information before broadcasting or publishing it.	203 (51.52)	120 (30.46)	50 (12.69)	21 (5.33)	3.28	Rejected
I believe mainstream media are free from political influence during election periods.	185 (46.95)	130 (33.00)	50 (12.69)	29 (7.36)	3.20	Rejected
I rely on mainstream media more than social media for accurate political news.	247 (62.69)	93 (23.60)	40 (10.15)	14 (3.55)	3.45	Rejected

Source: Field Data (2024)

The table reveals a general skepticism toward the mainstream media's ability to serve as a reliable source of political information. Despite a majority of respondents agreeing (combining Strongly Agree and Agree) across all statements, the mean scores for all four statements fall below the acceptance threshold of 3.5, leading to a Rejected decision for each. The first statement, which measures overall trust in mainstream media for accurate reporting, has a mean score of 3.41. Although 85.54% of respondents (SA + A) agreed, the relatively high proportion of those who disagreed (14.46%) indicates a significant level of distrust. This highlights public concerns about the reliability of political news from mainstream outlets. Similarly, the statement about fact-checking practices also received a Rejected decision, with a mean score of 3.28. While more than half of the respondents believed that mainstream media generally fact-checks political information, the substantial disagreement (18.02%) suggests doubts about the rigor of these processes.

This could indicate public awareness of instances where false or misleading information was disseminated without proper verification.

The statement regarding the independence of mainstream media from political influence scored the lowest ( $X = 3.20$ ). This finding underscores widespread skepticism about the media's autonomy, with many respondents perceiving it as susceptible to political pressures, especially during election periods. This aligns with broader concerns about media bias and its impact on democratic processes. Finally, the reliance on mainstream media over social media for accurate political news, while showing the highest agreement (86.29%), also failed to reach the acceptance threshold ( $X = 3.45$ ). This suggests that despite the public's preference for mainstream media, their trust remains cautious, reflecting an awareness of the challenges facing both traditional and digital media platforms in ensuring accuracy and credibility.

**Table 3: Responses on Perceptions of Media's Role in Mitigating or Propagating Disinformation**

Perception Statements	SA (%)	A (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	X	Decision
Mainstream media actively works to counter political disinformation.	215 (54.57)	127 (32.23)	38 (9.64)	14 (3.55)	3.38	Rejected
Some mainstream media outlets contribute to the spread of political disinformation.	270 (68.53)	90 (22.84)	22 (5.58)	12 (3.04)	3.57	Accepted
Journalists in Nigeria are doing enough to expose false political information.	190 (48.22)	130 (33.00)	50 (12.69)	24 (6.09)	3.24	Rejected
Mainstream media highlight political disinformation without properly debunking it.	257 (65.23)	100 (25.38)	27 (6.85)	10 (2.54)	3.53	Accepted

Source: Field Data (2024)

The table reveals a mixed but critical stance, with two statements being Accepted and two Rejected based on the mean scores ( $X$ ) and the decision threshold of 3.5.

The data show that while some respondents believe in the media's efforts to counter disinformation, this perception is not strong enough to reach the acceptance threshold. The mean score for the statement on media's active role in mitigating disinformation ( $X = 3.38$ ) reflects significant public skepticism. Similarly, the statement about journalists' efforts in exposing false political information is rejected ( $X = 3.24$ ), indicating that a substantial portion of the public does not feel that enough is being done by journalists to combat misinformation.

Conversely, the acceptance of the statement that some mainstream media outlets contribute to the spread of disinformation ( $X = 3.57$ ) underscores a prevalent belief that the media itself is part of the disinformation problem. This aligns with widespread criticisms of biased or politically motivated reporting. Additionally, the statement that mainstream media highlight disinformation without adequately debunking it is also accepted ( $X = 3.53$ ), further reinforcing concerns about the insufficient countering of false narratives.

**Table 4: Responses on the Influence of Demographics on Perceptions of Disinformation and Media Trust**

Demographic Influence Statements	SA (%)	A (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	X	Decision
Younger Nigerians are more skeptical of political information in mainstream media than older Nigerians.	260 (65.99)	90 (22.84)	29 (7.36)	15 (3.81)	3.51	Accepted
Educated individuals are better at distinguishing political disinformation than less educated individuals.	277 (70.30)	85 (21.57)	20 (5.08)	12 (3.05)	3.59	Accepted
People in urban areas are more aware of political disinformation than those in rural areas.	240 (60.91)	104 (26.40)	34 (8.63)	16 (4.06)	3.44	Rejected
Trust in mainstream media varies significantly across different ethnic or religious groups in Nigeria.	230 (58.38)	100 (25.38)	46 (11.68)	18 (4.57)	3.38	Rejected

Source: Field Data (2024)

The table indicates varied perceptions across age, education, location, and sociocultural groupings, with two statements being **Accepted** and two **Rejected** based on the mean scores (**X**) and the decision threshold of 3.5. The accepted statements reflect a broad consensus on the influence of age and education on perceptions of disinformation. Younger Nigerians are perceived as more skeptical of political information from mainstream media, as evidenced by a mean score of 3.51. This highlights generational differences in media trust, likely due to higher digital media literacy and access to diverse information sources among younger individuals. Similarly, the belief that educated individuals are better at distinguishing disinformation ( $X = 3.59$ ) underscores the role of education in enhancing critical thinking and media literacy.

Conversely, the rejected statements point to less agreement on the influence of location and sociocultural diversity. The mean score of 3.44 for the statement about urban and rural awareness suggests that while urban residents may have better access to information, this advantage does not translate into a significant difference in awareness of disinformation. The statement on media trust varying significantly across ethnic or religious groups was also rejected ( $X = 3.38$ ), indicating that while sociocultural factors may influence media trust to some extent, they are not perceived as major determinants.

**Table 5: Responses on the Impact of Disinformation on Trust in the Electoral Process**

Impact Statements	SA (%)	A (%)	D (%)	SD (%)	X	Decision
Exposure to political disinformation reduces my trust in the fairness of the electoral process.	280 (71.07)	80 (20.30)	23 (5.84)	11 (2.79)	3.60	Accepted
Political disinformation makes it difficult for me to trust any political candidate.	273 (69.29)	88 (22.34)	20 (5.08)	13 (3.30)	3.58	Accepted
I believe that political disinformation undermines the legitimacy of election results in Nigeria.	285 (72.34)	83 (21.07)	18 (4.57)	8 (2.03)	3.64	Accepted
My confidence in Nigeria's electoral institutions is negatively affected by the prevalence of disinformation.	270 (68.53)	90 (22.84)	24 (6.09)	10 (2.54)	3.57	Accepted

Source: Field Data (2024)

The table presents data on the impact of political disinformation on public trust in the electoral process in Nigeria. The responses indicate strong agreement across all four statements, with each achieving a mean score (**X**) above the acceptance threshold of 3.5,

leading to an Accepted decision for all items. The data reveal that exposure to political disinformation significantly undermines trust in the electoral process, as reflected by the high levels of agreement (71.07% strongly agree, 20.30% agree) and a mean score of 3.60 for the statement on electoral fairness. This suggests that disinformation erodes public confidence in the integrity of elections, likely due to the perceived manipulation of voter perceptions and electoral outcomes.

Similarly, disinformation's impact on trust in political candidates is evident, with a mean score of 3.58. The high agreement levels (91.63% SA + A) indicate that the spread of false or misleading information complicates voters' ability to make informed decisions about candidates, fostering a general mistrust in political actors. The belief that disinformation undermines the legitimacy of election results received the highest mean score (3.64), underscoring the public's perception that disinformation not only distorts the electoral process but also delegitimizes its outcomes. This finding reflects the broader implications of disinformation in challenging the credibility of democratic institutions. The statement regarding confidence in electoral institutions also received a high level of agreement ( $\bar{X} = 3.57$ ). This indicates that the prevalence of disinformation directly affects public trust in bodies responsible for overseeing elections, such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). The erosion of confidence in these institutions could have long-term consequences for democratic stability.

### **Conclusion**

This study sought to investigate public perceptions of political disinformation and trust in mainstream media during electoral campaigns in Nigeria, addressing a critical challenge in democratic governance. The research objectives focused on understanding the extent of public awareness of disinformation, assessing trust in mainstream media, and exploring the role of media in mitigating or amplifying false narratives. By examining these dimensions, the study aimed to provide insights into the complex interplay between disinformation, media trust, and electoral integrity. The findings reveal a high level of public awareness of political disinformation and its strategic use in Nigeria's electoral processes. Despite this awareness, trust in mainstream media remains fragile, with significant skepticism about the media's ability to provide accurate and impartial political information. The study also highlights the dual role of media as both a tool for countering disinformation and, paradoxically, a vehicle for its propagation. These results align with theoretical frameworks such as Media Dependency Theory, which emphasizes the public's reliance on media for political information, and the Spiral of Silence Theory, which explains how disinformation can suppress dissenting opinions and distort public discourse.

This research contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing empirical evidence on the perceptions of Nigerian audiences regarding political disinformation and media trust during electoral campaigns. It underscores the need for robust media literacy initiatives, stronger fact-checking mechanisms, and policy interventions aimed at enhancing media credibility. Furthermore, the findings have practical implications for media practitioners, policymakers, and civil society organizations working to safeguard electoral integrity and strengthen democratic institutions in Nigeria.

The pervasive impact of political disinformation on public trust and democratic processes cannot be overstated. As Nigeria continues to navigate its democratic journey, addressing the challenges posed by disinformation is crucial for fostering a well-informed electorate and resilient democratic institutions. Future research could explore

the effectiveness of specific interventions, such as media literacy programs and regulatory frameworks, in combating disinformation and restoring public confidence in media and electoral systems.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. There is a critical need to improve media literacy among the Nigerian populace, particularly in rural areas and among less-educated demographics. Media literacy programs should focus on equipping citizens with the skills to critically evaluate political information, identify disinformation, and rely on credible sources. Collaboration between government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and educational institutions can help implement targeted campaigns and workshops.
2. Media organizations and independent bodies should adopt rigorous fact-checking processes to verify political information before dissemination. Establishing partnerships with global fact-checking networks can provide the necessary resources and expertise to combat disinformation. Additionally, mainstream media outlets should prominently feature debunked claims to counteract false narratives and rebuild public trust.
3. Mainstream media must commit to higher standards of ethical journalism by ensuring impartiality, transparency, and accuracy in reporting. Media regulatory bodies should enforce strict compliance with ethical guidelines and impose penalties on outlets found complicit in spreading disinformation. Regular training for journalists on the challenges of reporting during electoral periods can also enhance their capacity to resist political pressures.
4. Given the role of social media in disseminating disinformation, there is a need for regulatory frameworks that strike a balance between freedom of expression and accountability. Social media platforms should work closely with the government and civil society to flag and remove false content while ensuring transparency in their content moderation policies. Public awareness campaigns about the risks of spreading unverified information on social media should also be intensified.
5. Electoral bodies, such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), should enhance their communication strategies to provide timely and accurate election-related information. By leveraging both traditional and digital media, these institutions can counteract disinformation and maintain public confidence. Additionally, fostering greater public engagement through town halls and interactive forums can help address voter concerns and reduce the impact of disinformation on electoral trust.

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