

Social Media and Political Misinformation among Nigerian Youths during the 2023 General Election: A Systematic Review

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Abstract:

The proliferation of social media has transformed political communication in Nigeria, particularly among youths who increasingly depend on digital platforms for electoral information. However, this transformation has intensified concerns about political misinformation and its implications for informed political participation and electoral credibility. This study systematically reviews the relationship between social media and political misinformation among Nigerian youths during the 2023 general election. The study integrates the Information Disorder Framework, Selective Exposure and Confirmation Bias perspectives, and the Elaboration Likelihood Model to explain the production, circulation, exposure, processing, and acceptance of political misinformation. A systematic review approach guided by PRISMA principles was adopted. Relevant peer-reviewed studies and credible scholarly materials published between 2023 and 2026 were identified, screened, and synthesised thematically, with emphasis on Nigerian evidence complemented by relevant international literature. Findings reveal that social media platforms significantly facilitated the rapid circulation of misleading political claims, manipulated content, partisan narratives, and emotionally charged information during the election. Youth vulnerability was influenced by algorithmic amplification, partisan identity, selective exposure, confirmation bias, low verification practices, source familiarity, peer sharing, and reliance on peripheral information cues. Nevertheless, exposure to misinformation did not automatically produce belief or behavioural effects, as outcomes varied according to political predispositions, digital literacy, source credibility, and information-processing patterns. The study contributes an integrated explanatory framework demonstrating that political misinformation operates through interconnected technological, psychological, social, and political mechanisms. It recommends strengthened digital and media literacy, institutional fact-checking, platform accountability, transparent political communication, and youth-focused verification initiatives to mitigate misinformation and strengthen Nigeria's democratic communication environment.

Keywords: Social Media; Political Misinformation; Nigerian Youths; 2023 General Election; Information Disorder

I. Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has significantly transformed the nature of political communication, citizen participation and electoral campaigns across contemporary democracies. Social media platforms have become important arenas through which political actors communicate with citizens, parties mobilise supporters, voters debate public issues, and individuals obtain and circulate election-related information. Unlike traditional mass media, where professional journalists and media organisations largely determine the production and distribution of political information, social media enable ordinary citizens to simultaneously function as consumers, producers and distributors of political content. Consequently, platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube have become increasingly influential within the political information ecosystem (Aondover & Yusuf-Audu, 2026).

The democratisation of political communication through social media has produced important benefits for political participation, particularly among young people, whose everyday communication practices are increasingly embedded within digital and social networking environments (Msughter, 2023). In Nigeria, social media have progressively become important channels for youth political expression, mobilisation and participation. Egbunike (2023) observes that social media networks have expanded opportunities for more inclusive youth political participation by connecting online political discourse with offline political engagement, while Michael et al. (2021) found that Facebook and WhatsApp played significant roles in exposing Nigerian youths to political messages and mobilising them towards political engagement.

However, the same structural characteristics that make social media effective instruments of political communication, speed, interactivity, user-generated content, extensive networks and relatively unrestricted information sharing also create favourable conditions for the production and circulation of inaccurate and misleading political information (Msughter, 2021). Although the concepts are sometimes used interchangeably, misinformation generally refers to false or inaccurate information circulated without necessarily having a deliberate intention to deceive, whereas disinformation involves false or manipulated information intentionally created or disseminated to deceive audiences or achieve particular political, ideological or strategic objectives. Within electoral contexts, both phenomena can distort citizens' understanding of candidates and issues, reinforce existing prejudices, undermine trust in democratic institutions and potentially affect electoral decision-making.

Ahmed and Msughter (2022) are of the view that political misinformation typically appears in forms such as fabricated stories, manipulated photographs and videos, false endorsements, impersonation of candidates or institutions, and deliberately distorted claims about political opponents. Algorithmic distribution, interpersonal sharing and emotionally provocative content can further amplify such material, making it difficult for citizens to distinguish verified political information from false or misleading narratives.

Nigeria provides an important context within which to examine these developments. Social media have increasingly complemented traditional media as channels for political campaigning, citizen mobilisation and electoral debate, becoming an important alternative public sphere in which Nigerians obtain political information and participate in debates concerning candidates, parties, governance and national development (Aondover et al., 2025). The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD, 2023) observed that Nigeria's active social media population had increased considerably compared with the 2019 election period, and warned that greater access to digital information did not necessarily produce a better-informed electorate, since misinformation, disinformation and malinformation were increasingly embedded within online political communication.

Young Nigerians were especially visible within this digital political environment, reflected not only in electoral mobilisation but also in online discussion, political content creation, digital advocacy and interaction with political campaigns. Ohaja, Eze and Ali (2023) found that social media platforms were extensively deployed by political parties and candidates for content sharing, voter interaction, campaign communication and directing supporters during the 2023 general elections, and that this contributed positively to youth political engagement while simultaneously raising concerns about fake news and disinformation (Aondover et al., 2025).

This points to the dual character of social media in democratic communication. On one hand, greater exposure to diverse online information sources can enhance political awareness

and provide young citizens with opportunities to participate in democratic discourse a relationship Akeusola (2023) demonstrates in examining online activism and political knowledge among Nigerian youths during the 2023 elections. On the other hand, the quality and credibility of such information is crucial, because increased exposure does not automatically guarantee accurate political knowledge; the same platforms that enable political empowerment can just as readily facilitate information disorder. Digital platforms do, however, provide mechanisms through which misinformation can be challenged: fact-checkers, journalists, electoral institutions, civil society groups and individual users increasingly use these same platforms to identify, verify and debunk misleading claims.

Research on Nigerian youth political participation during the 2023 election further illustrates this complexity. Osamwonyi, Tayo and Oluwasewa (2025) found that social media provided Nigerian youths with substantial access to political information and discourse, but that much of this engagement remained relatively passive political-content consumption and informal discussion rather than deeper participation such as joining political organisations, campaigning or contacting public officials. High levels of social media exposure, in other words, should not automatically be interpreted as equivalent to substantive political participation.

The 2023 electoral environment also demonstrated that this growing political relevance of social media was accompanied by considerable information-integrity challenges. International observers and social media companies both recognised this: the EU Election Observation Mission flagged misinformation and disinformation as a significant concern despite civil-society and platform countermeasures, and Meta announced election-specific interventions including partnerships with fact-checking organisations to reduce the distribution of false electoral content (EU EOM, 2023; Meta, 2023; Mohammed et al., 2025). That platforms themselves felt compelled to intervene underscores that misinformation was not a peripheral issue but a recognised threat to electoral information integrity. Recent scholarship (Adedayo & Asonibare, 2026) has since identified the ideological and pragmatic strategies underlying fact-checked fake news from the election, situating such content within the broader political struggles surrounding electoral communication.

Political misinformation in Nigeria must also be understood within the country's broader sociopolitical environment, where electoral competition often intersects with ethnicity, religion, regional identity and economic concerns. The CDD (2023) observed that organised disinformation surrounding the 2023 election frequently sought either to promote or delegitimise candidates and, in some instances, to undermine confidence in the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) raising concerns about electoral trust, political tolerance and democratic legitimacy that extend well beyond individual misunderstanding.

This duality makes a systematic assessment of existing scholarship particularly necessary. Although a growing body of research has examined social media and Nigerian elections, the available evidence is dispersed across studies dealing with youth political participation, online activism, political campaigning, fake news, disinformation, hate speech, electoral credibility, media literacy and voting behaviour. Individual studies provide valuable insights but tend to focus on particular locations, platforms, candidates or dimensions of participation meaning findings from isolated studies do not, on their own, provide an integrated understanding of how social media and political misinformation intersected among Nigerian youths during the 2023 election.

A systematic review provides an appropriate approach for addressing this fragmentation. Rather than collecting new primary data, it applies transparent and replicable procedures to identify, screen, evaluate and synthesise existing research relating to a clearly defined problem revealing dominant themes, areas of convergence and disagreement, methodological patterns, theoretical orientations, and gaps requiring further investigation. Accordingly, this study systematically reviews scholarly literature published between 2023 and 2026 on social media and political misinformation among Nigerian youths within the context of the 2023 general election. It examines patterns of youth exposure, the platforms implicated in dissemination, the forms and sources of misleading political information, and the consequences of such exposure for political knowledge, participation, electoral behaviour and perceptions of electoral credibility alongside the mechanisms employed by citizens, fact-checkers, electoral stakeholders and digital platforms to counter misinformation.

By synthesising recent Nigerian scholarship alongside relevant international evidence, the study seeks to clarify the opportunities and vulnerabilities associated with youth-oriented digital political communication insights relevant not only to political communication and digital media scholarship, but to electoral management bodies, journalists, political parties, civil society organisations, fact-checkers, social media companies and policymakers seeking to strengthen information integrity and democratic participation in Nigeria (Msughter, 2022).

The significance of examining political misinformation extends beyond determining whether individual social media claims are true or false. It concerns the broader quality of the political information environment within which young citizens develop political knowledge, evaluate candidates, discuss public affairs, make electoral choices and form perceptions of democratic institutions. Systematically examining the existing evidence on social media and political misinformation among Nigerian youths during the 2023 general election is therefore necessary for understanding the evolving relationship between digital communication, youth political participation and electoral democracy in Nigeria.

II. Review of Literature

2.1 Problem Statement

The increasing integration of social media into political communication has created unprecedented opportunities for citizens to access political information, interact with candidates, participate in political debates and mobilise around electoral issues. In Nigeria, these opportunities became particularly evident during the 2023 general election, when platforms such as Facebook, X, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube became important channels for campaigning, voter mobilisation, election monitoring and citizen engagement with Nigerian youths especially active given their comparatively high engagement with internet-enabled communication. However, this increased reliance on social media for political information simultaneously created significant concerns about the credibility, accuracy and integrity of election-related information available to young citizens.

The central challenge is the proliferation of political misinformation and disinformation. During highly competitive elections, misleading information may be produced and circulated to influence perceptions of candidates, undermine opponents, reinforce social divisions, manipulate voter behaviour or weaken confidence in electoral institutions. The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD, 2023) identified misinformation, disinformation and other forms of information disorder as significant features of Nigeria's 2023 digital election environment including narratives concerning candidates, parties, electoral processes and the credibility of the

Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) raising serious concerns about the quality of political information available during an election widely regarded as important to Nigeria's democratic development.

This problem is particularly significant among Nigerian youths, who constituted an important segment of the electorate and were highly visible in online political conversations surrounding the election (Akeusola, 2023; Osamwonyi, Tayo & Oluwasewa, 2025). Yet greater access to political information does not necessarily imply greater access to accurate political information. The relatively open architecture of social media allows verified and unverified content to circulate within the same environment, so young users may encounter legitimate news reports alongside fabricated stories, misleading headlines, manipulated images, false quotations and impersonated accounts often shared repeatedly by friends, family, political supporters or apparently credible accounts, which makes authenticity harder to judge.

This was not a hypothetical concern during the 2023 election. The European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM, 2023) identified misinformation and disinformation as important challenges within Nigeria's electoral information ecosystem, noting limitations in efforts to identify and counter problematic content particularly information communicated in some Nigerian languages, and content that sometimes remained accessible even after being reported. These limitations illustrate the difficulty of managing misinformation within a multilingual, culturally diverse country where political information circulates through both public networks and relatively closed messaging applications such as WhatsApp.

The stakes are heightened by Nigeria's broader sociopolitical environment, where electoral competition intersects with ethnicity, religion, regional identity and partisan affiliation. Hassan (2023) found that electoral disinformation circulating through WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter could reinforce ethnic and religious divisions within Nigerian politics meaning misinformation's implications extend beyond individual misunderstanding to interpersonal relations, political tolerance and confidence in democratic institutions. At a more localised level, Akinsulire et al. (2024), studying the 2023 Lagos State gubernatorial election, reported substantial exposure to misleading political content originating from political-party accounts, news-related accounts and user-generated comments alike illustrating how difficult it is to isolate misinformation's source within a contemporary digital environment where misleading claims can be amplified by multiple actors simultaneously.

Despite this growing evidence, the central research problem is not simply the existence of political misinformation on social media during Nigeria's 2023 general election it is the fragmentation of contemporary evidence concerning its nature, sources, platforms, patterns of youth exposure, reported consequences and countermeasures. Studies on the 2023 election have examined social media campaigning, youth participation, online activism, political knowledge, fake news, disinformation, fact-checking and voting behaviour from different disciplinary and methodological perspectives (Ohaja, Eze & Ali, 2023; Akeusola, 2023; Osamwonyi et al., 2025). Individually valuable, these studies address different facets of the same broader problem without providing an integrated account of how social media and political misinformation intersected among Nigerian youths.

This fragmentation takes several specific forms. Methodologically, existing studies employ different research designs, sampling procedures, geographical scopes and measures of social media exposure or political participation some restricted to particular states, cities or universities, others examining broader populations without isolating youths as a distinct analytical category

making it difficult to judge how far individual findings generalise. Across platforms, Facebook, WhatsApp, X, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube differ considerably in their affordances, audience structures and patterns of dissemination; misinformation circulated through a public X post likely behaves differently from misinformation shared within a private WhatsApp group, yet studies rarely distinguish how platform characteristics shape the production, circulation and reception of misleading political information (Aondover et al., 2024). Conceptually, existing evidence does not always clearly distinguish misinformation from disinformation, fake news, propaganda and rumour, complicating comparisons across studies and creating uncertainty about precisely what phenomenon is being measured. And critically, there remains a gap between exposure and effect: that young people encounter political misinformation does not, on its own, demonstrate that it changes their attitudes or voting decisions some individuals believe misinformation, others reject it, others encounter corrective information from fact-checkers or their social networks so establishing what the literature actually demonstrates about susceptibility, knowledge, participation and electoral trust is essential, rather than treating the mere existence of misinformation as equivalent to demonstrated behavioural influence.

Post-election scholarship continues to accumulate, reinforcing the need for synthesis. Adedayo and Asonibare (2026), for instance, examined the ideological and pragmatic strategies underlying fact-checked fake news associated with the election, while other emerging work has considered differences in misinformation exposure and susceptibility across geographical contexts (Msughter, 2025). Meanwhile, fact-checking organisations, civil society groups, electoral institutions and platforms themselves implemented interventions intended to reduce misinformation Meta (2023), for example, announced partnerships with independent fact-checkers such as Africa Check, AFP, Dubawa and Reuters, alongside mechanisms for reducing the distribution of flagged content yet the continued circulation of misleading narratives raises open questions about the effectiveness of platform moderation, fact-checking and institutional communication that the existing literature has not been sufficiently consolidated to answer.

Consequently, there is a need for a systematic review that identifies, evaluates and synthesises relevant studies published between 2023 and 2026 on social media and political misinformation among Nigerian youths within the context of the 2023 general election consolidating fragmented evidence on the platforms through which misinformation circulated, its forms and sources, young people's exposure and responses, its reported implications for political knowledge and electoral behaviour, and the mechanisms employed to counter it.

Addressing this problem matters for both scholarship and democratic practice. A clearer synthesis can strengthen political communication and digital media scholarship while offering practical insight for INEC, journalists, fact-checkers, civil society organisations, political parties, social media platforms and policymakers working to strengthen electoral information integrity and, more broadly, for developing evidence-based approaches to media and information literacy and informed youth participation in future Nigerian elections.

III. Research Methods

3.1 Social Media and Contemporary Political Communication

Political communication concerns the creation, transmission, reception and interpretation of messages relating to politics, governance, public policy, political actors and institutions. Digital technologies have significantly altered this process by reducing political actors' dependence on traditional media organisations: candidates increasingly use social media for agenda building, branding, mobilisation, fundraising and attacks against opponents, while citizens use the same platforms to scrutinise officials, organise collective action and participate in public debate.

This was particularly visible during the 2023 Nigerian election. Political candidates maintained substantial online campaign networks of official accounts, support groups, influencers and partisan communities. The European Union Election Observation Mission's systematic monitoring covered Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and TikTok, analysing 20,451 posts or tweets and identifying hundreds of candidate, party, support-group and influencer accounts within the electoral information ecosystem (EU EOM, 2023). Contemporary Nigerian electoral communication can therefore no longer be adequately understood solely through traditional campaign channels but increased political communication does not necessarily mean increased deliberative quality, since online political information may be emotional, partisan, polarising or misleading. The democratic implications of social media consequently depend partly on the credibility of the information circulating through these networks (Aondover et al., 2024).

3.2 Political Misinformation, Disinformation and Fake News

As noted in the Introduction, misinformation is false information circulated without necessarily intending to deceive, while disinformation involves false or manipulated information deliberately produced or circulated to deceive audiences, damage opponents or achieve political objectives. "Fake news" is often used more broadly still, but is conceptually problematic because political actors sometimes deploy the term strategically to delegitimise accurate but unfavourable journalism making "misinformation" and "disinformation" the more precise terms for this review.

Electoral misinformation can manifest as fabricated claims about candidates, manipulated photographs and videos, impersonated accounts, fabricated opinion polls, misleading endorsements, false electoral results, decontextualised historical material, and false claims concerning voting procedures (Aondover et al., 2024). The Nigerian 2023 election supplied numerous examples: CDD's Election War Room described the election as heavily affected by misinformation, conducting more than 100 fact-checks over roughly three months surrounding the polls examining manipulated videos, false statements attributed to candidates, and fabricated institutional announcements (CDD Election War Room, 2023). Political misinformation, in short, should not be regarded as a single homogeneous category; its content, motivation, format, source and mode of circulation differ considerably.

3.3 Social Media and Electoral Politics in Nigeria

Social media use in Nigerian electoral politics predates 2023, but the growing diffusion of smartphones and mobile internet has expanded its political importance. By the 2023 cycle, digital communication was deeply integrated into campaigning: candidates and parties used social media to disseminate messages, publicise rallies, attack opponents, mobilise supporters and shape interpretations of electoral events. Bassey et al. (2024), examining social media strategies during the 2023 presidential campaign, identified social networking as central to heightened political

engagement, while also flagging its negative dimensions misinformation, cyberbullying and political polarisation (Aondover, 2024).

Social media therefore performed competing political functions during the election: expanding citizen participation while simultaneously enabling partisan networks to circulate advantageous narratives without the verification procedures associated with professional journalism. The EU EOM (2023) concluded that platforms were misused to disseminate harmful content and judged platform protective measures insufficient in some respects, while also recognising positive collaboration between media organisations, civil society groups and fact-checkers evidence of the fundamentally ambivalent relationship between social media and electoral democracy in Nigeria.

3.4 Nigerian Youths and Digital Political Engagement

Youth constitute an especially important population for this review because social media are embedded in young people's everyday communication, making digital platforms central to political socialisation, information acquisition and expression. Nigerian youths were particularly visible in the mobilisation preceding the 2023 election following candidates, commenting on issues, sharing content, joining campaign communities and encouraging voter registration partly because social media reduce the transaction costs of political participation: young people can obtain information and express preferences without joining formal political organisations.

Digital participation nevertheless varies considerably in depth, from low-cost actions such as liking or commenting to sustained campaigning and offline participation, so social media exposure should not automatically be read as meaningful political participation a distinction Osamwonyi et al. (2025) demonstrate empirically in finding that much youth engagement during the 2023 election remained relatively passive (Kurfi et al., 2021). This matters directly for misinformation: frequent social media use increases opportunities to encounter political information, but equally increases exposure to inaccurate content, making the central questions not merely whether young people encounter misinformation but how they evaluate, believe, reject and redistribute it.

3.5 Political Misinformation during Nigeria's 2023 General Election

The 2023 election was a particularly important context for studying misinformation because intense political competition coincided with an extensively networked digital communication environment. Empirical Nigerian research reinforces this: Akinsulire, Ayorinde, Yekinni and Ilesanmi (2024), surveying 366 respondents on the 2023 Lagos State gubernatorial election, found 40.7% reporting moderate misinformation exposure, 28.1% large-extent exposure and 17.8% very-large-extent exposure, with political-party accounts, news outlets and user comments identified as key sources. This multiplicity of sources is significant in itself misinformation cannot be attributed exclusively to anonymous users; political organisations and media-like sources participate in the same interconnected environment.

More recent scholarship has examined the content of misinformation itself. Adedayo and Asonibare (2026), qualitatively analysing 37 fact-checked fake-news items from the 2023 election, found that electoral fake news contained ideological and pragmatic strategies capable of constructing particular representations of candidates and events an important reminder that misinformation functions as strategic political discourse, not merely inaccurate information.

3.6 Political Misinformation and Electoral Behaviour

Whether misinformation affects electoral behaviour is among the most consequential questions in this literature, and claims about such effects require care, since exposure, belief and behavioural change are distinct analytical stages. Misinformation may influence candidate evaluations, attitudes, willingness to participate, voting preferences and perceptions of electoral credibility but demonstrating actual behavioural influence requires stronger evidence than demonstrating exposure. Azeez et al.'s (2026) exposure/susceptibility distinction is instructive here too: it challenges the simplistic assumption that those encountering the most misinformation necessarily experiences the greatest behavioural effects.

Misinformation may also affect behaviour indirectly by undermining institutional trust. False claims about election administration or vote manipulation can shape perceptions of INEC's credibility and the legitimacy of results an effect compounded during 2023 because genuine shortcomings in electoral administration and communication had already affected institutional trust. The EU EOM (2023) reported that operational failures and inadequate transparency reduced trust in parts of the process, making false narratives harder to distinguish from legitimate criticism within an already-strained information environment (Aondover et al., 2025).

IV. Result and Discussion

4.1 Literature Review and Emerging Gaps

The literature reviewed shows broad agreement on several points: social media were a significant component of Nigeria's 2023 electoral communication environment; misleading political information circulated through multiple platforms and actors; Nigerian youths were an important digitally engaged constituency; exposure to misinformation does not automatically translate into belief or behavioural change; and fact-checking and platform interventions provided important, if structurally limited, corrective mechanisms.

Several gaps nonetheless remain. Geographically, much Nigerian literature focuses on individual states, local government areas or universities, potentially missing differences across the six geopolitical zones. Across platforms, public networks such as X operate differently from private channels such as WhatsApp, while TikTok introduces distinct audiovisual and algorithmic dynamics that remain under-examined. Conceptually, the boundaries among misinformation, disinformation, propaganda and fake news remain inconsistently applied across studies. Methodologically, many studies establish exposure without sufficiently demonstrating belief, persuasion or behavioural effect a distinction this review treats as crucial rather than incidental. Linguistically, relatively limited attention has been paid to misinformation communicated in indigenous Nigerian languages. Finally, more research is needed on the actual effectiveness of fact-checking, prebunking and media-literacy interventions specifically among Nigerian youths.

Taken together, although individual studies have examined components of the 2023 electoral information environment, this evidence remains dispersed across political communication, journalism, youth studies, digital activism and fact-checking research. The present systematic review's principal contribution is to integrate these fragmented strands into a coherent account of what is currently known about social media and political misinformation among Nigerian youths during the 2023 general election.

This synthesis also suggests that political misinformation should not be conceptualised as a simple linear process in which exposure automatically produces political influence. The emerging evidence instead points to a more complex relationship involving platform characteristics, exposure frequency, source credibility, prior political attitudes, identity, interpersonal and institutional trust, media literacy, and the wider sociopolitical environment interacting dimensions that provide an important foundation for the study's theoretical framework.

4.2 Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework provides the explanatory foundation through which the relationships among the major concepts of a study can be understood. In a systematic review of social media and political misinformation, theory is particularly important because misinformation is not simply a matter of exposure to false information it involves processes of production, dissemination, reception, interpretation, belief, rejection, correction and, potentially, behavioural influence, occurring within social, technological and political environments that shape how individuals encounter and respond to information.

For this review, the Information Disorder Framework provides the principal theoretical lens. Because it primarily explains the *nature, production and circulation* of problematic information rather than *why individuals accept or reject it*, it is complemented by Selective Exposure and Confirmation Bias and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM). Together, these three perspectives explain, respectively: what misinformation is and how it moved through Nigeria's 2023 social media environment, why some Nigerian youths were more receptive to it than others, and how they cognitively processed it once encountered.

The Information Disorder Framework distinguishes among three related categories of problematic information: misinformation (false information shared without necessarily intending harm), disinformation (false information deliberately created or distributed to deceive), and malinformation a category not yet introduced elsewhere in this review, referring to information that is *grounded in reality* but strategically removed from its original context, selectively disclosed, or manipulated to cause harm. Political actors circulating authentic historical photographs or statements without proper context, to create a misleading impression of a contemporary event, is a clear example.

This three-way distinction is particularly useful for Nigeria's 2023 election because problematic political content did not originate from identical intentions: some false claims resulted from users unknowingly sharing inaccurate information, while others were deliberately produced to influence political perceptions. The framework therefore prevents this review from treating every inaccurate political message simply as "fake news," instead encouraging closer examination of the information's accuracy, the communicator's intention, the context of dissemination, and the potential harm involved.

The framework's key analytical strength lies in distinguishing three interconnected components. The agent is the individual, organisation or network producing, modifying or distributing information in Nigeria's 2023 environment, this ranged from political candidates and parties to partisan supporters, influencers, media organisations and ordinary citizens; Akinsulire et al.'s (2024) finding that misinformation reached respondents through party accounts, news outlets *and* user comments alike confirms that no single actor type dominates this role.

The message is the information itself text, photographs, videos, memes, fabricated news reports or screenshots whose format shapes perceived authenticity; Adedayo and Asonibare

(2026) illustrate this well, showing that fact-checked electoral fake news often embeds deliberate ideological and rhetorical strategies rather than simply stating falsehoods outright. The interpreter is the individual or audience making sense of the message the dimension most relevant here, since Nigerian youths are this review's principal population of interest. The same message may be read differently depending on political affiliation, education, media literacy, religious or ethnic identity, prior political knowledge and trust in the source. Together, these three components let the review move beyond simply asking *whether* misinformation existed, toward examining who produced it, what form it took, which platforms carried it, who encountered it, and what consequences followed.

Information disorder is best understood as a process, not an isolated event, unfolding across three stages. Creation is where the underlying claim or narrative originates, often with a politically motivated actor. Production transforms that claim into a communicative artefact a fabricated article, manipulated photograph, edited video or misleading post. Distribution is where content moves through networks and critically, those redistributing it may have different motivations from its original creator: a message that began as deliberate disinformation can subsequently spread as misinformation once believed and shared in good faith by others.

This matters for social media specifically because content travels rapidly and losslessly across platforms a misleading post originating on X can be screenshotted and redistributed via WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram or TikTok, often losing contextual information about its original source along the way. This review therefore treats misinformation as a dynamic communication process, not merely a static collection of false statements. This sequence is not a deterministic causal chain: exposure does not automatically produce belief, and belief does not automatically produce behavioural change. Individual and social factors intervene between exposure and outcome which is exactly why complementary theoretical perspectives are needed to explain why some individuals accept or circulate misinformation while others challenge or reject it.

Selective exposure holds that individuals favour information consistent with their existing attitudes and beliefs while avoiding or challenging contradictory information, a tendency social media can intensify, since users can follow candidates, commentators and communities that reinforce their existing preferences. Closely related, confirmation bias is the tendency to interpret, evaluate or remember information in ways that reinforce prior beliefs. Both are especially relevant to electoral misinformation: a candidate's supporter may readily believe negative claims about an opponent while applying far greater scepticism to negative claims about their preferred candidate, so the factual quality of information can become secondary to its consistency with partisan identity. Given Nigeria's 2023 election intersected with party loyalty, ethnicity, religion and regional identity these processes carry substantial weight and help explain why simply correcting misinformation does not always eliminate its influence: individuals may reject corrective information when the correction threatens a strongly held political identity.

Selective exposure is amplified within algorithmically curated environments, where platforms recommend content based on prior interactions and engagement patterns. A user who regularly engages with content supporting a particular candidate receives progressively more of it a process that can produce homogeneous information environments, sometimes called echo chambers or filter bubbles, in which repeated exposure to similar narratives creates a perception of social consensus. A claim can come to seem credible not because it has been independently verified, but because it has been repeatedly encountered across trusted or politically compatible networks. This is why misinformation cannot be analysed as a content problem alone its

influence also depends on the architecture of the platforms and networks through which it circulates.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) explains how individuals process persuasive information, distinguishing central-route processing where individuals carefully evaluate arguments, evidence and credibility (e.g., a voter verifying a controversial claim against multiple sources before sharing it) from peripheral-route processing, which relies on cues requiring little cognitive effort: emotional language, source popularity, celebrity endorsement, like/share counts, visual appeal, or simply the perceived trustworthiness of whoever forwarded the message. This distinction matters enormously on social media, where users encounter vast quantities of information under conditions of limited attention, often while simultaneously exposed to entertainment and interpersonal content. A dramatic video, an emotionally charged headline, or a claim forwarded by a trusted contact can consequently be accepted with little to no verification. The ELM helps explain variation in how Nigerian youths responded to misinformation. Those with strong political interest, higher political knowledge and stronger media-literacy skills are more likely to process electoral information centrally comparing claims against credible reporting or professional fact-checkers while those with limited interest, insufficient context or high information overload lean more heavily on peripheral cues. Crucially, digital fluency should not be mistaken for information literacy: frequent social media use can make a young user technologically proficient without making them skilled at assessing political-information credibility. This is precisely the distinction Azeez et al.'s (2026) urban–rural findings illustrate: greater *exposure* among urban youths did not translate into greater *susceptibility* if anything, the reverse held for rural youths. The Information Disorder Framework explains the circulation and encounter; the ELM explains the cognitive processing that follows, and together they clarify why exposure and persuasion remain analytically distinct.

The three perspectives are complementary, not competing. The Information Disorder Framework explains *what* problematic information is, who creates and disseminates it, what forms it takes, and how it changes as it circulates. Selective Exposure and Confirmation Bias explain *why* individuals prefer politically congenial information, how partisan identity shapes credibility judgements, and why corrective information is sometimes resisted. The ELM explains *how* individuals cognitively process political information why some scrutinise evidence while others rely on heuristic cues, and how motivation and ability shape that choice. Integrated, the framework can be represented as:

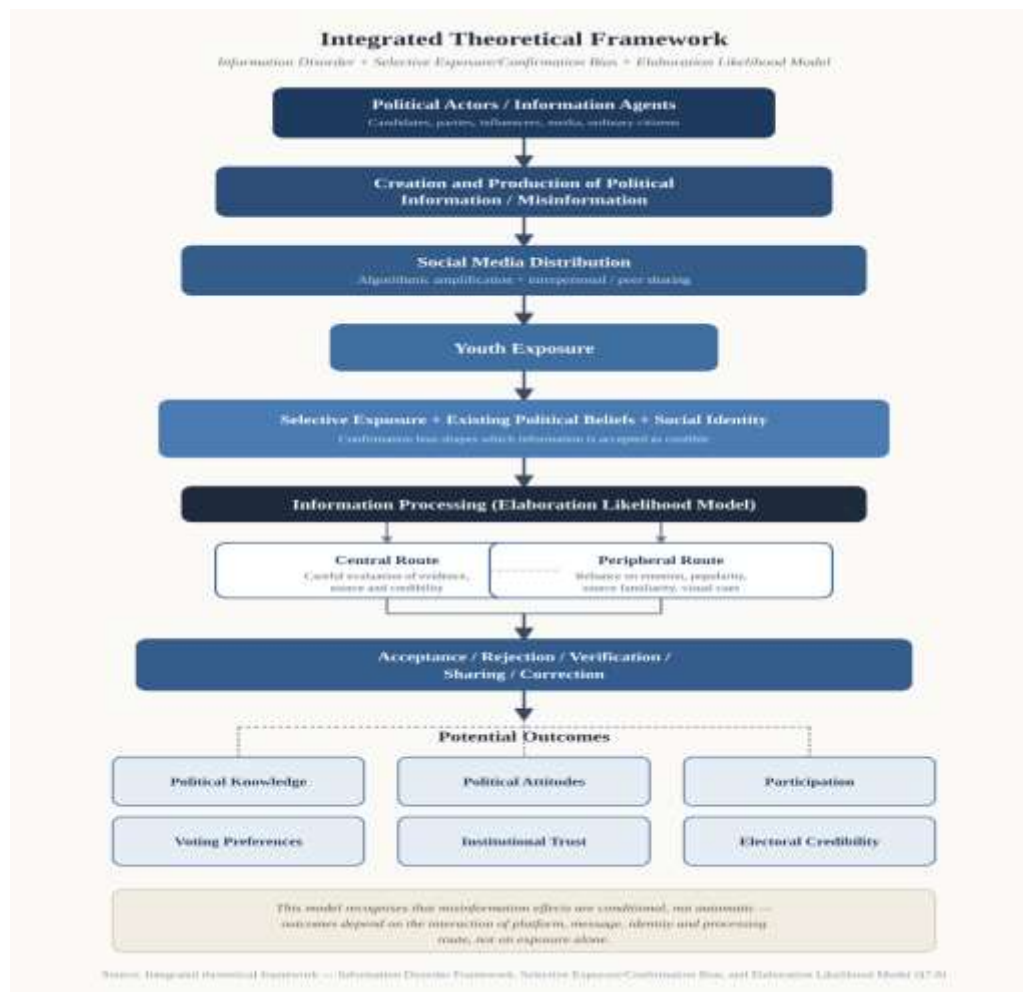


Figure 1.1 – Theoretical framework

This integrated model recognises that misinformation effects are conditional, not automatic.

4.3 Relevance of the Framework to the Research Questions

The framework maps directly onto the study's research questions. The Information Disorder Framework supports RQ1–3 (patterns of exposure, platforms involved, and the forms, sources and themes of misinformation). Selective Exposure and Confirmation Bias are most relevant to RQ4 (factors associated with susceptibility, acceptance, sharing and resistance). The ELM contributes to RQ4 and RQ5, explaining how processing pathways may shape political knowledge, attitudes and behaviour. The combined framework also informs RQ6, since fact-checking and media-literacy interventions can be understood as mechanisms designed to interrupt the misinformation process and encourage more central, critical processing. Finally, RQ7 and RQ8 let the review assess whether existing Nigerian studies have adequately incorporated theoretical explanations of misinformation, and identify theoretical gaps for future research.

Based on this integrated framework, the review proceeds from the proposition that the relationship between social media exposure and the effects of political misinformation among Nigerian youths is neither direct nor uniform. Existing evidence is expected to show that misinformation outcomes are instead shaped by interactions among platform characteristics, source credibility, exposure frequency, political predispositions, partisan and social identity, interpersonal trust, political knowledge, media and information literacy, motivation to verify, algorithmic amplification, and exposure to corrective information.

A Nigerian youth encountering a misleading political claim, in other words, does not automatically believe or act on it they may accept it, reject it, verify it, ignore it, share it unverified, or actively correct it, with the eventual response depending on the interaction between the nature of the misinformation, the communication environment, and the recipient's own characteristics. This framework therefore provides an appropriate analytical foundation for synthesising the literature on social media and political misinformation among Nigerian youths during the 2023 general election enabling the review to examine not only the presence and circulation of misinformation, but the fuller process through which it is encountered, interpreted, amplified, challenged and potentially translated into political consequences.

4.4 Research Method

This study adopted a systematic literature review design to identify, evaluate and synthesise existing evidence on social media and political misinformation among Nigerian youths during the 2023 general election. A systematic approach was appropriate because relevant evidence is dispersed across studies addressing misinformation, disinformation, fake news, social media use, youth political participation, electoral communication, fact-checking and voting behaviour so a transparent, replicable procedure was needed to consolidate this evidence and identify patterns, inconsistencies and gaps. The review was guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) principles, which provide updated guidance for transparent reporting of the identification, screening, eligibility assessment and inclusion stages of a systematic review (Page et al., 2021).

Given the expected heterogeneity of the literature in research designs, populations, sampling procedures, geographical coverage, conceptualisations of misinformation, platforms and outcome measures the review adopted narrative and thematic synthesis rather than statistical meta-analysis; combining effect sizes statistically would be inappropriate where underlying studies do not measure sufficiently comparable constructs. The review focused on literature relevant to social media and political misinformation among Nigerian youths during the 2023 general election, with a temporal scope covering studies published between 2023 and 2026 capturing research conducted during the election period itself as well as the substantial body of empirical analysis that has continued to appear in the years since, as data collected around the election has been progressively analysed and published.

Substantively, the review covered studies addressing one or more of: social media and political communication; political misinformation and disinformation; fake news; youth political engagement; electoral communication; voting behaviour; political knowledge; electoral credibility; fact-checking; media and information literacy; and counter-misinformation strategies. Geographically, priority was given to Nigerian studies particularly those directly examining the 2023 election while international studies published within the same period were considered where they offered relevant conceptual, theoretical or comparative evidence. The search strategy was informed by a modified Population–Concept–Context (PCC) framework, appropriate here since the review addresses an interdisciplinary communication and social-science question rather than a clinical intervention:

PCC Component	Application to the Study
Population	Nigerian youths / young adults / young voters
Concept	Social media, political misinformation, disinformation, fake news, information disorder
Context	Nigeria's 2023 general election / electoral communication

This framework helped define the review's boundaries and guided the development of search-term combinations.

A structured search covered major scholarly search engines, databases and publishing platforms relevant to communication, political science, journalism and digital-media research, principally: Google Scholar; Crossref and publisher/journal databases; ResearchGate; African Journals Online (AJOL) and other African scholarly platforms; Taylor & Francis Online; SAGE Journals; SpringerLink; Wiley Online Library; ScienceDirect; and other relevant institutional repositories. Grey literature from highly credible institutions was considered selectively where it provided direct evidence on the 2023 electoral information environment including reports from the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM), the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), and recognised fact-checking organisations. ResearchGate and Google Scholar were treated as discovery tools rather than quality indicators; bibliographic details of articles identified through these services were cross-checked against journal or publisher records wherever possible.

Explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria were established before study selection began, to improve consistency and minimise arbitrary inclusion. A study was included where it: was published between 2023 and 2026; examined social media, misinformation, disinformation, fake news, information disorder or closely related phenomena; addressed elections, electoral communication, political participation, knowledge, voting behaviour or electoral credibility; focused on Nigeria or offered relevant international comparative evidence; addressed youths, young adults, students or young voters (for the core Nigerian evidence); provided sufficient methodological detail for assessment; was published in English as a peer-reviewed article, sufficiently rigorous conference publication, book chapter or credible institutional report; and carried verifiable bibliographic information.

A study was excluded where it: fell outside the 2023–2026 window; had no meaningful relationship to social media or digital political communication; addressed misinformation only in non-political contexts (e.g., health misinformation) without transferable relevance; concerned elections outside Nigeria without meaningful comparative value; was a purely journalistic commentary, blog post or unsupported opinion piece; lacked full bibliographic information or duplicated another retrieved publication; provided insufficient text to determine methodology or findings; or did not contribute evidence relevant to any research question.

Study selection followed the PRISMA 2020 identification, screening and inclusion logic (Page et al., 2021), in five stages: (1) Identification : potentially relevant records located through the databases, search engines and sources above; (2) Deduplication : records compared by author, year, title, journal and DOI, with duplicates removed; (3) Title and abstract screening : records clearly unrelated to social media, political misinformation, Nigerian elections or youth political communication removed; (4) Full-text eligibility assessment : surviving studies examined in detail for research objectives, geographical setting, population, platform, misinformation concept, methodology, findings and relevance to the 2023 election; (5) Final inclusion : studies meeting the eligibility criteria and contributing evidence to at least one research question retained for synthesis.

Records identified through database and scholarly searches, duplicate records removed, titles and abstracts screened, clearly irrelevant records excluded, full-text reports assessed for eligibility, reports excluded with documented reasons, studies included in the final systematic

review. The completed PRISMA flow diagram will report the actual numerical counts generated by this search and screening exercise, reflecting the results as they occurred.

4.5 Data Extraction

A structured extraction framework ensured comparable information was drawn from each included study:

Data Item	Information Extracted
Bibliographic information	Author(s), year, title, publication source
Geographical context	Nigeria/state/geopolitical zone/international
Study purpose	Principal objective or research question
Population	Youths, students, voters, social media users, etc.
Sample	Sample size and relevant participant characteristics
Platform	Facebook, WhatsApp, X, TikTok, Instagram, YouTube or multiple
Misinformation concept	Misinformation, disinformation, fake news, propaganda, information disorder
Theoretical framework	Theory or conceptual framework adopted
Methodology	Quantitative, qualitative, mixed-method, content analysis
Data collection	Survey, interview, FGD, content analysis, digital/secondary data
Main findings	Findings relevant to the review questions
Reported outcomes	Knowledge, attitudes, participation, voting behaviour, trust, susceptibility
Countermeasures	Fact-checking, platform moderation, media literacy, institutional communication
Limitations	Methodological and contextual limitations identified
Research gaps	Recommendations or unanswered questions

Methodological quality was assessed to avoid treating all retrieved studies as equally robust, with criteria tailored to each design: clarity of research objectives; appropriateness of research design and sampling (including sample size); validity and reliability of instruments where applicable; transparency of data-collection and analytical procedures; clarity and consistency between evidence and conclusions; acknowledgement of limitations; and relevance to the review questions. For qualitative studies, additional attention was given to participant selection, coding transparency and evidential support for interpretations. For content-analysis studies, sampling of content, coding procedures and coding reliability were considered. For institutional and grey-literature reports, emphasis was placed on organisational credibility, transparency of data sources, documented methodology and direct relevance to the 2023 Nigerian electoral environment.

4.6 Findings and Discussion

The systematic synthesis of the literature reveals that social media played a dual and sometimes contradictory role during Nigeria's 2023 general election. Digital platforms expanded access to political information, strengthened opportunities for youth political expression and facilitated electoral mobilisation while the same platforms provided an enabling environment for the rapid circulation of misinformation, disinformation, manipulated audiovisual material and partisan narratives. The evidence does not support a simplistic interpretation of social media as

either wholly democratizing or wholly detrimental. Rather, social media functioned as a contested political-information environment in which credible information, misinformation, political advocacy, citizen participation and fact-checking operated simultaneously. The findings are presented thematically in accordance with the eight research questions guiding the systematic review.

The reviewed evidence demonstrates that exposure to political information through social media was extensive among Nigerian youths. Akeusola (2023), studying 409 Nigerian youths aged 18–35, found that engagement in online activism was positively associated with political knowledge, with exposure to diverse online information sources significantly mediating this relationship, establishing that digital platforms were not peripheral to young people's political information environment but a central channel through which they acquired, exchanged and interpreted election-related information. Increased exposure to political information, however, simultaneously increased exposure to misinformation. Akinsulire et al. (2024), examining the 2023 Lagos State gubernatorial election, found substantial exposure to political misinformation and disinformation, with political-party accounts, news outlets and user comments identified as channels through which misleading content was encountered.

The most direct and analytically important evidence comes from Azeez et al. (2026), whose mixed-method study of 1,200 respondents and 60 focus-group participants across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones found that misinformation exposure differed significantly between urban and rural youths: urban youths reported greater exposure, partly through intensive engagement with X and TikTok, while rural youths demonstrated greater susceptibility to changing their electoral preferences following exposure. This is one of the most significant findings in the systematic review because it establishes that high exposure does not necessarily produce greater persuasive effect individuals may encounter large quantities of misinformation but possess sufficient political knowledge, digital literacy or scepticism to resist it, while others with comparatively lower exposure may be more susceptible when misinformation reaches them through trusted interpersonal or community networks. This distinction between *exposure* and *susceptibility* recurs throughout the findings below.

Evidence from election monitoring confirms the scale of the problem: the EU Election Observation Mission monitored Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and TikTok between January and March 2023, analysing 20,451 posts or tweets and documenting a marked increase in misleading content around the election period. Collectively, the evidence suggests Nigerian youths operated within a high-exposure digital political environment, though exposure was unevenly distributed by location, platform preference, internet access and usage patterns.

The findings indicate a multi-platform misinformation environment spanning X/Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, YouTube and, to a lesser extent, Instagram. X/Twitter emerged as particularly important for real-time political discussion and election commentary: the Nigerian Fact-checkers' Coalition attributed 52 of 83 fact-checked claims during the presidential and National Assembly election period to Twitter, compared with 16 from Facebook and six from WhatsApp, with Twitter again dominant during the governorship and state assembly period. These figures require cautious interpretation, however. Twitter/X's prominence in fact-checking datasets may partly reflect its public, searchable architecture, which makes misleading claims easier for researchers to identify whereas WhatsApp operates largely through private, encrypted networks and is likely substantially underrepresented in monitoring data despite occupying a distinctive position in Nigerian interpersonal communication, where information gains credibility simply because a trusted contact forwarded it.

This platform differentiation aligns with the urban/rural distinction noted above: urban youths relied more on X and TikTok, rural youths more on WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, corresponding with differences in how misinformation was processed. Platform effects, in short, are not uniform X facilitates rapid public amplification, TikTok elevates audiovisual and algorithmically recommended content, Facebook combines interpersonal and public-page communication, and WhatsApp embeds claims within trusted networks meaning counter-misinformation interventions cannot adopt a one-platform-fits-all approach.

Building on the forms catalogued in the literature review, the reviewed evidence confirms fabricated statements, manipulated or decontextualised images, edited audiovisual material, false results, impersonation and ethnically or religiously divisive narratives as the dominant recurring categories during the 2023 election. CDD's Election War Room (2023) reported over 100 fact-checks during the roughly three months surrounding the election, examining manipulated audiovisual material, false candidate statements and misleading institutional claims. The EU EOM (2023) offers a valuable quantitative complement: of 140 suspicious messages captured by its monitoring team between 23 January and the end of March, 93 were assessed as false while 47 could not be conclusively verified within the mission's capacity.

Consistent with finding on sources, misinformation was generated and amplified by diverse actors rather than one homogeneous source, with election-monitoring evidence additionally indicating that individuals associated with political organisations sometimes contributed to amplifying false reports. Adedayo and Asonibare (2026), analysing 37 fact-checked fake-news items from the election, add analytical depth here: misleading electoral narratives performed ideological and pragmatic functions rather than functioning as merely accidental factual errors aligning closely with the Information Disorder Framework's distinction between information circulated unknowingly as misinformation and information strategically created as disinformation.

Susceptibility proved multidimensional, shaped by the interaction of political, psychological, social and technological factors. Prior political preference was significant: politically congenial misinformation supporting a preferred candidate or attacking an opponent was more readily accepted because it confirmed existing attitudes, consistent with selective exposure and confirmation-bias perspectives, since social media users rarely approach political claims as neutral evaluators. Source credibility and interpersonal trust mattered similarly: as noted in , rural youths could attribute substantial credibility to information transmitted through community and religious authorities, helping explain why misinformation from trusted networks can be persuasive even where the information itself lacks evidential support. Media and information literacy was central to resistance individuals able to verify sources, compare reports and consult fact-checkers were better positioned to identify questionable claims while platform characteristics also mattered, since visually compelling, short-form or emotionally provocative content reduced the likelihood of extensive scrutiny, particularly where political content appeared alongside entertainment.

V. Conclusion

These findings support the Elaboration Likelihood Model: some young users process political information centrally, through careful scrutiny, while others depend more on peripheral cues popularity, emotion, source familiarity, social endorsement. Misinformation susceptibility should therefore not be reduced to an assumption that young social media users are inherently gullible; it reflects the interaction among message characteristics, source credibility, political predisposition, platform affordances, social relationships and information-literacy capability. One of the clearest findings is that social media simultaneously supported political learning and misinformation exposure cautioning against conceptualising the digital environment exclusively through the lens of misinformation, since young Nigerians also used these platforms to learn about candidates and participate in electoral conversation. The quality of that information environment nonetheless remains crucial, since misinformation can distort candidate evaluations, reinforce partisan stereotypes and create inaccurate perceptions of electoral events.

Misinformation may also influence behaviour indirectly through institutional trust. The EU EOM (2023) found that operational failures and inadequate transparency including problems uploading presidential results to the IReV portal reduced public trust and created conditions in which rumours and competing interpretations could flourish; CDD similarly linked incomplete electoral information and technical problems to rumours of malpractice and declining trust. This interaction between genuine institutional shortcomings and false narratives is significant: misinformation is harder to counter when it circulates within an environment where citizens already have legitimate grounds for uncertainty. The 2023 election featured a relatively active counter-misinformation ecosystem. The Nigerian Fact-checkers' Coalition monitored, verified and debunked claims across both election phases; CDD's Election War Room published over 100 fact-checks; and INEC used social media particularly Twitter for institutional communication and correction of false claims. Platforms introduced further mechanisms, including flagging frequently forwarded WhatsApp messages and offering fact-checkers and state institutions escalation pathways for problematic TikTok and Meta content.

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