

TURNITIN SIMILARITY REPORT

[This page is reserved for the Turnitin Originality/Similarity Report. Please insert the printed or scanned report page here before final binding.]

TURNITIN AI WRITING REPORT

[This page is reserved for the Turnitin AI Writing Report. Please insert the printed or scanned report page here before final binding.]

**SOCIAL MEDIA IMPLICATIONS ON PUBLIC POLITICAL OPINIONS
AND ELECTORAL OUTCOMES IN NIGERIA: 2015–2023**

BY

ONWUTA STELLA ONYINYECHI

GOU/U22/POL/327

**DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE
FACULTY OF MANAGEMENT AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
GODFREY OKOYE UNIVERSITY
UGWUOMU-NIKE, ENUGU**

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF
BACHELOR OF SCIENCE (B.Sc.) DEGREE IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

SUPERVISOR: MR. AJIBO CHRISTIAN C.

MAY, 2026

DECLARATION

I, Onwuta Stella Onyinyechi, with registration number GOU/U22/POL/327, hereby declare that this project titled “Social Media Implications on Public Political Opinions and Electoral Outcomes in Nigeria: 2015–2023” is my original work carried out under the supervision of Mr. Ajibo Christian C. in the Department of Political Science, Faculty of Management and Social Sciences, Godfrey Okoye University, Ugwuomu-Nike, Enugu. This work has not been submitted, in whole or in part, for the award of any degree or diploma of this or any other institution. All sources of information used in this study have been duly acknowledged by means of references.

ONWUTA STELLA ONYINYECHI

Date: _____

APPROVAL

This project has been read and approved as meeting the requirements of the Department of Political Science, Faculty of Management and Social Sciences, Godfrey Okoye University, Ugwuomu-Nike, Enugu, for the award of the degree of Bachelor of Science (B.Sc.) in International Relations.

_____	_____
Mr. Ajibo Christian C.	Date

(Project Supervisor)

_____	_____
Prof. Samuel Ugwuozor	Date

(Head of Department)

_____	_____
Assoc. Prof. John Odo	Date

(Dean of Faculty)

_____	_____
External Examiner	Date

DEDICATION

This research work is wholeheartedly dedicated to Almighty God for His endless provision, His gentle guidance, and the strength He granted me every single day of this journey. There were moments when this work felt impossibly heavy, but His grace was always sufficient.

To my beloved parents, Mr. and Mrs. Peter Onwuta, words alone are not enough to express what you mean to me. You are exceptional in every sense of the word. Your sacrifices, your prayers, your encouragement, and your unwavering belief in me have been the greatest fuel behind everything I have achieved. This one is for you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I return all glory, honour, and adoration to Almighty God for His grace, mercy, strength, wisdom, and divine guidance throughout the course of this academic journey. His unfailing love and steady presence have been my greatest source of encouragement and perseverance, from the very beginning of this study right through to its successful completion. I am nothing without Him.

I sincerely express my profound gratitude to my beloved parents, Mr. and Mrs. Peter Onwuta, for their endless love, prayers, sacrifices, and unwavering support throughout my educational pursuit. Your efforts, care, and unshakeable belief in me have contributed immensely to the success of this project and to my growth as a person and as a scholar. Every page of this work carries a piece of your love.

My heartfelt appreciation goes to my supervisor, Mr. Christian C. Ajibo, for his patience, constructive guidance, and intellectual investment in this work. I am equally grateful to the Head of Department (HOD), Prof. Samuel Ugwuozor, a scholar of repute, and the Dean, Prof. John Odo, for their invaluable contributions, and to my dedicated lecturers — Dr. Mrs Ifedi Francisca, Dr. Ezechi Kingsley, Mr. Onyishi Anthony, Mr. Okonkwo W.O., Rev. Fr. Dr. Ogbuka Ikenna, Dr. Mbaeze Netchy, Rev. Sr. Dr. Umeh Lucy, Monsieur Yong Marinus, Dr. Alex Ogbonna, and Prof. Jide Chime — for their academic mentorship, constructive corrections, and the knowledge they so generously shared throughout my years of study. Your commitment to shaping young minds has greatly influenced this research and my overall academic development. Special thanks also go to Mrs. Chioma, Secretary of the Department of Political Science and International Relations, for her warmth, helpfulness, and the many times she quietly made things easier for students like me.

I am equally grateful to my wonderful siblings, friends, and colleagues whose support, encouragement, advice, and companionship made this journey not only bearable but truly memorable. Special appreciation goes to Somtobechukwu, Stephanie, Frederick, Miracle, and Vera — you each played a unique and irreplaceable role in keeping me going. Thank you for being there in ways that words can hardly capture.

Finally, I appreciate every single person who contributed, directly or indirectly, to making this work and this journey a success. Whether through a kind word, a prayer, a piece of advice, or simply your presence — it all counted more than you know. God richly bless you all.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Turnitin Similarity Report.....	-
Turnitin AI Writing Report.....	-
Title Page.....	i
Declaration.....	ii
Approval.....	iii
Dedication.....	iv
Acknowledgement.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
List of Abbreviations.....	viii
Abstract.....	ix
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 Background to the Study.....	1
1.2 Statement of the Problem.....	2
1.3 Research Questions.....	3
1.4 Objectives of the Study.....	4
1.5 Significance of the Study.....	4
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	6
2.1 Conceptual Review.....	6
2.2 Concept of Social Media.....	6
2.3 Public Political Opinion.....	7
2.4 Electoral Behaviour and Outcomes.....	7
2.5 Digital Political Communication.....	8
2.6 Theoretical Framework.....	8
2.7 Empirical Review.....	9
2.8 Studies on Social Media Influence in Nigeria (2015–2023).....	11
2.9 Summary of Literature Gaps.....	12
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY.....	14
3.1 Theoretical Framework.....	14
3.2 Hypotheses.....	14
3.3 Research Design.....	14

3.4 Methods of Data Collection.....	15
3.5 The Study Area.....	15
3.6 Methods of Data Analysis.....	15
3.7 Logical Data Framework (LDF).....	16
CHAPTER FOUR: DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION.....	17
4.1 Introduction.....	17
4.2 Social Media and Political Opinion Formation: Mechanisms and Evidence.....	17
4.3 Social Media and Electoral Outcomes: Case Analysis.....	19
4.4 Disinformation Campaigns and Their Electoral Consequences.....	21
4.5 Data-Driven Micro-Targeting and Voter Manipulation.....	23
4.6 Contextual Factors Moderating Social Media's Political Effects.....	24
4.7 Testing the Study's Hypotheses Against the Evidence.....	25
4.8 Discussion of Findings.....	26
4.9 Summary.....	27
CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	28
5.1 Summary of Findings.....	28
5.2 Conclusion.....	29
5.3 Recommendations.....	30
REFERENCES.....	32
APPENDICES.....	38
Appendix A: Glossary of Key Terms.....	38
Appendix B: Timeline of Key Social Media–Related Electoral Events.....	38
Appendix C: Note on Research Ethics.....	39

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

APC – All Progressives Congress

BVAS – Bimodal Voter Accreditation System

EU – European Union

INEC – Independent National Electoral Commission

IRA – Internet Research Agency

LP – Labour Party

NBC – National Broadcasting Commission

NITDA – National Information Technology Development Agency

PDP – People's Democratic Party

SCL Group – Strategic Communication Laboratories Group

UK – United Kingdom

UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

US – United States

ABSTRACT

This study looks at how social media has influenced public political opinion and electoral outcomes in Nigeria between 2015 and 2023, a stretch of time that covers three general election cycles. Over this period, platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), WhatsApp and TikTok moved from being marginal add-ons to political life to becoming central spaces where Nigerians access, share and argue over political information. Even so, there has been comparatively little sustained research into exactly how these platforms shape voter opinion and behaviour in Nigeria across successive elections rather than around a single campaign. Specifically, the study set out to investigate how social media use shaped public political opinion in Nigeria between 2015 and 2023, with particular attention to agenda-setting and the formation of echo chambers, and to examine how social media-driven disinformation influenced electoral outcomes across the 2015, 2019 and 2023 general elections. To make sense of the evidence gathered, the study draws on two theoretical lenses: Agenda-Setting Theory and the Echo Chamber/Filter Bubble perspective. A qualitative, documentary research design was adopted, drawing on peer-reviewed literature, institutional reports and documented electoral cases rather than on data collected directly from voters. The evidence points to a real and sustained influence of social media on political discourse across all three election cycles studied, an influence that was strongest among younger, urban and more educated Nigerians. Social media was used to mobilise supporters, circulate information and build counter-narratives to official accounts, most visibly through the Obidient movement of the 2023 elections. At the same time, the same platforms were exploited to spread misinformation and disinformation, which appears to have fed growing voter apathy and eroded public trust in the electoral process. The study concludes that, while social media carries genuine democratic potential, its actual effect on Nigerian elections is held back by low levels of digital literacy among users, deliberate manipulation by political actors, and the tendency of platform design to reward polarising rather than accurate content. It recommends closer collaboration between INEC, civil society organisations and media literacy advocates in developing practical frameworks for managing the influence of social media on Nigeria's electoral process.

Keywords: Social Media, Political Opinions, Electoral Outcomes, Nigeria, Voter Behaviour, Misinformation, Digital Democracy.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

The question of how media shapes political behaviour has occupied political scientists and communication scholars for as long as both fields have existed. From the earliest printing presses through the rise of radio and television, every major shift in media technology has forced a fresh round of research into how information reaches citizens and how that, in turn, shapes their opinions, their participation and the outcomes of elections. The arrival of social media over the past two decades is arguably the most consequential of these shifts since the printed book itself.

Social media can be understood as internet-based technology that allows users to create, share and exchange information within online networks. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter/X, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp and TikTok have, in a remarkably short space of time, become indispensable tools for political actors of every stripe. Where the older broadcast media worked on a one-to-many model, with a handful of editors deciding what the public would see, social media runs on a many-to-many logic in which almost anyone can take part in political conversation.

The years between 2015 and 2023 are a particularly useful window for studying this shift. Over this period social media moved from being a supplementary source of political news to becoming, in many contexts, the primary arena for political argument. The 2016 US presidential election is widely treated as the moment this became impossible to ignore, and the Cambridge Analytica revelations of 2018 showed just how easily data harvested from social media users could be repurposed for targeted political messaging.

Beyond the United States, social media has been central to political events across the world during this period, from the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom to protest movements and elections across Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. In each of these settings, the platforms have served simultaneously as tools of mobilisation and as channels for disinformation.

This research is grounded in a long tradition of scholarship on political communication and media effects, particularly agenda-setting theory and the more recent literature on echo chambers and filter bubbles. The concepts of the echo chamber and the filter bubble, associated with Pariser (2011) and Sunstein (2017), capture something important about how the algorithms behind major platforms work: they are built to maximise engagement, and in practice this tends to mean showing people more of what they already believe rather than challenging them with alternative viewpoints.

Scholars disagree about how strong this effect really is, but there is broad agreement that it contributes to political polarisation and the fragmentation of public debate.

Closely tied to this is the problem of misinformation and disinformation. The two terms are not interchangeable: misinformation refers to false information shared without any intention to deceive, while disinformation is created and spread deliberately to achieve a political end. Research consistently shows that false information travels faster and further on social media than accurate information, which has obvious implications for how well citizens can make informed choices at the ballot box.

The 2015–2023 period also overlaps with a global rise in populist politics, from Donald Trump in the United States to Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Viktor Orbán in Hungary. In each case, social media offered populist leaders a way to communicate directly with supporters, bypass traditional media scrutiny and present themselves as outsiders challenging an entrenched establishment.

On the African continent, which forms the geographical anchor of this study, social media has played an equally visible role in shaping political opinion, mobilising voters and, in some cases, inflaming ethnic or political tension. The rapid spread of mobile internet access across the continent during this period brought tens of millions of new users into online political conversation, while also creating new opportunities for governments and other actors to spread propaganda or organise dissent through the same channels.

Taken together, these trends point to a broader shift: the rise of digital communication technology, changes in how political campaigns are run, declining trust in mainstream media, and growing concern about disinformation and foreign interference in elections. Running through all of this is the recognition that social media is not a neutral space but a commercial and political one, shaped by algorithms and business interests as much as by the people who use it. This study sets out to examine these dynamics specifically within the Nigerian context between 2015 and 2023.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Social media now sits at the centre of political communication, and this has created problems that cut to the heart of democratic practice. Social media does carry real democratising potential: it can widen political participation, hold leaders more accountable and give citizens new avenues for civic engagement. Yet the record between 2015 and 2023 tells a more complicated story, one in which social media has just as often been used to degrade the quality of democratic debate, distort public understanding of political reality and interfere with the conduct of elections.

One core problem this study engages with is the scale at which political disinformation now spreads through social media. Unlike traditional broadcast media, where an editor typically filters content before it reaches the public, social media platforms have historically rewarded engagement and virality over accuracy. This has allowed politically motivated falsehoods and conspiracy theories to circulate widely before they can be checked or corrected, leaving citizens uncertain about basic facts, from candidates' positions to the mechanics of voting itself.

A related problem concerns the use of social media for cross-border interference in domestic elections. Several documented cases between 2015 and 2023, most notably the Internet Research Agency's disinformation campaign around the 2016 US election, show that social media platforms can be weaponised as instruments of geopolitical contest. Comparable patterns have surfaced in France, Germany, the United Kingdom and a number of African and Latin American states, underlining how exposed democratic systems are to this kind of interference.

A further concern is the commercial use of political micro-targeting. The Cambridge Analytica scandal revealed that political organisations had harvested the personal data of millions of Facebook users without their knowledge, using it to build psychographic profiles that could be exploited to send individually tailored political messages. Scholars still dispute how decisive micro-targeting actually is in swaying votes, but its ethical implications for democratic communication are not in serious doubt: when campaigns can target a voter's specific psychological vulnerabilities, the traditional model of candidates addressing the electorate as a whole is quietly undermined.

These problems do not play out uniformly. The extent to which social media damages or supports democratic politics depends on a country's level of media literacy, the strength of its institutions, the state of its media landscape and the particular affordances of the platforms in use.

While there is a substantial body of scholarship on social media and politics in general, much of it remains concentrated on Western democracies and on single election cycles, leaving significant gaps in our understanding of how social media's effects unfold in Nigeria specifically, and how those effects change or persist across successive elections. This study responds to that gap by examining the Nigerian case across three general election cycles, from 2015 to 2023.

1.3 Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What role has social media played in shaping public political opinion in Nigeria between 2015 and 2023, and through what mechanisms has this influence operated?

2. In what ways have social media-driven phenomena, particularly the spread of misinformation and disinformation, shaped electoral outcomes in Nigeria between 2015 and 2023?

1.4 Objectives of the Study

In line with the research questions above, this study sets out to:

3. Investigate how social media use shaped public political opinion in Nigeria between 2015 and 2023, with particular attention to agenda-setting, political framing, and the formation of echo chambers.
4. Examine how social media-driven phenomena, especially the spread of disinformation, influenced electoral outcomes in Nigeria across the 2015, 2019 and 2023 general elections.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This research has both theoretical and practical value, and its relevance spans academic, institutional, policy and civic concerns. Theoretically, it adds to the growing body of literature on political communication in the digital era. By examining the relationship between social media use and the shaping of political opinion over a longitudinal span of eight years, the study offers a perspective that is comparatively rare in the existing literature, which tends to focus on single campaigns or short-term dynamics. Tracing patterns across three election cycles makes it possible to see trends that a snapshot study would miss, and the research contributes to ongoing debates about how classical media-effects theories, such as agenda-setting, apply to the networked and algorithmically driven environment of contemporary social media.

Practically, the study speaks to policymakers, INEC, civil society groups and social media companies operating in Nigeria. Governments everywhere face the challenge of regulating social media in ways that protect democratic norms without infringing on freedom of expression, and this research offers empirical grounding that can inform decisions on political advertising, data collection, civic education and platform governance.

The findings are also relevant to organisations working on democratic development, since the study identifies specific risks that social media poses to the electoral process, including its capacity to spread false information, dampen voter turnout and, in the worst cases, contribute to electoral violence, while also pointing to its potential to boost civic participation, improve electoral transparency and amplify marginalised voices.

Finally, the study carries civic significance. At a time when public trust in democratic institutions and the media is declining in many parts of the world, an honest, evidence-based account of how social media shapes Nigerian politics is of value not only to scholars but to the wider public.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptual Review

This chapter reviews existing literature on the relationship between social media and public political opinion and electoral behaviour in Nigeria, spanning the 2015 to 2023 period. It begins by clarifying the key concepts underpinning the study, namely social media, public political opinion, electoral behaviour and outcomes, and digital political communication, before moving on to the theoretical framework, a review of empirical work in Nigeria and beyond, and a discussion of the gaps this study addresses.

Social media has reshaped how politics is conducted, discussed and voted on in democratic societies generally, and Nigeria is no exception. From the 2015 general election through to 2023, platforms such as Facebook, Twitter/X, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube and Telegram have become central to political campaigning, voter education, debate, mobilisation and opinion formation. The literature broadly agrees that social media has widened youth participation in politics while also exposing the electorate to misinformation, polarisation and manipulation.

2.2 Concept of Social Media

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) offer one of the most widely cited definitions of social media, describing it as internet-based applications built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 that allow users to create and exchange content. In practical terms, this covers platforms such as Facebook, Twitter/X, Instagram, WhatsApp and YouTube, all of which enable the creation and sharing of content, ideas and information. For the purposes of this study, social media refers specifically to how Nigerians use these platforms for political purposes, whether that is sharing political news, taking part in online discussion, organising protests, or campaigning for candidates.

Political participation itself has a longer conceptual history. Verba, Nie and Kim (1978) define it as the lawful acts of private citizens aimed, directly or indirectly, at influencing who governs and what they do once in office. This covers activities ranging from voting and attending rallies to debating politics online, supporting candidates on social media, and joining digital campaigns. What distinguishes social media from older media is its speed, low cost, interactivity and decentralised structure, which allows politicians to reach citizens directly. The same features, however, make social media vulnerable to fake news, hate speech, propaganda and manipulation, a

vulnerability that was on full display in the 2023 Nigerian elections, where manipulated videos and false endorsements circulated widely on Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok and Twitter.

2.3 Public Political Opinion

Public political opinion can be described as the collective attitudes, beliefs and preferences citizens hold about political leaders, parties, policies and the broader process of governance. It is shaped by a mix of factors, including education, religion, ethnicity, economic status, media exposure and social interaction, and social media has become an increasingly important influence on how these opinions form and get expressed. Lippmann (1922) famously argued that public opinion is largely built from the "pictures in people's heads" rather than from direct experience, a claim that seems all the more relevant in an era where social media is often the main source of those pictures.

Between 2015 and 2023, Nigerian public opinion was heavily shaped by online debate around corruption, insecurity, unemployment, poor governance and electoral integrity. Hashtags, trending topics, viral videos and influencers all played a role in shaping how the public perceived candidates and parties, with the #EndSARS movement standing out as one of the clearest examples of social media's capacity to shift public sentiment. In this sense, political opinion in Nigeria is now formed substantially through distributed digital interaction rather than through mainstream media alone.

2.4 Electoral Behaviour and Outcomes

Electoral behaviour covers the full range of activities voters undertake before, during and after elections, including registration, party affiliation, turnout and candidate choice, while electoral outcomes refer to the final results, including who wins, turnout levels and the perceived legitimacy of the process. In Nigeria, electoral behaviour has long been shaped by ethnicity, religion, patronage politics and incumbency advantage, but since 2015 social media has become an increasingly significant additional factor, particularly among younger and first-time urban voters.

During the 2015 general election, social media participation surged. Oso and Olayiwola (2020) found that Nigeria's rate of election-related tweeting was ten times higher than during non-election periods, with over 12.4 million election-related tweets recorded. This allowed candidates to reach voters directly, bypassing traditional media gatekeepers, and Heinrich Böll Stiftung (2022) credits the APC's effective use of social media as a contributing factor in its unexpected victory over the incumbent PDP.

The 2019 election saw continued growth in social media's political role, with Mamman (2019) noting the increasing use of Facebook and Instagram by political parties. This cycle also exposed the darker side of the technology: disinformation and false narratives were used to manipulate voter opinion and discredit rivals (Oseni, 2021), deepening ethnic and religious divisions already present in Nigerian politics.

By the 2023 presidential election, social media's role had grown further still. Igbiniedion and Ajisebiya (2023), drawing on Uses and Gratifications theory, found that voters' engagement with political content on social media had a measurable effect on their preferences, with candidates such as Peter Obi, Atiku Abubakar and Bola Ahmed Tinubu building large followings and using hashtag campaigns to mobilise support (IRE Journals, 2023). Yet even as voter mobilisation through social media advanced, the problem of misinformation persisted and, as Mamman (2019) argues, this makes digital literacy, misinformation prevention and transparency in online political discourse an increasingly urgent priority as Nigeria's democracy matures.

2.5 Digital Political Communication

Digital political communication refers to the use of internet technology and digital media for political messaging, campaigning and engagement between political actors and citizens, spanning social media, websites, blogs, livestreams, podcasts and messaging apps. It differs from traditional political communication in being more interactive, immediate, personalised and decentralised, allowing candidates to reach voters without depending on mainstream media institutions.

Nigeria's 2015 presidential election offers an early example of how effectively digital communication could be deployed by the two dominant parties, the APC and PDP. By 2019 and especially 2023, platforms such as Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook and Instagram had become the primary battlegrounds for political campaigns. While digital communication has clearly expanded voter awareness and participation, it has just as clearly enabled misinformation, emotional manipulation, echo chambers and, at times, online political violence, making it a technology that is simultaneously democratising and disruptive depending on how it is used.

2.6 Theoretical Framework

This study draws on two related theories to make sense of the evidence gathered: Agenda-Setting Theory and the Echo Chamber/Filter Bubble perspective.

2.6.1 Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-Setting Theory, associated with McCombs and Shaw (1972), holds that media may not tell people what to think, but it exerts considerable influence over what people think about, by determining which issues receive attention. On social media, this agenda-setting function operates through trending hashtags, viral posts, repeated narratives and influencer-driven campaigns, all of which shape which political issues rise to prominence among voters and, by extension, which issues feature in national political debate.

The theory has faced several criticisms. It arguably overstates media's control over audience attention, since people interpret content differently depending on their background and beliefs; it explains what people think about more than how they think or vote; and in a decentralised social media environment where users, rather than editors, often set the agenda, its traditional top-down logic requires some updating. It also has relatively little to say about the specific effects of misinformation.

2.6.2 Echo Chamber and Filter Bubble Theory

Developed by Pariser (2011) and further elaborated by Sunstein (2017), this theory describes the tendency of algorithm-driven platforms to surround users with content that confirms their existing beliefs rather than challenging them. This matters for the present study because it offers a plausible explanation for the political polarisation and fragmentation of public discourse that has been observed in Nigerian social media use.

Critics of the theory point out that not everyone experiences platforms this way: people frequently encounter cross-cutting views on social media, whether through arguments in comment sections or content shared by people outside their usual networks, and the strength of the echo chamber effect appears to vary considerably by platform, topic and individual behaviour. Even with these caveats, the theory remains a useful lens for understanding how platform design can reinforce, rather than bridge, existing political divisions.

2.7 Empirical Review

The growth of social media has generated substantial academic debate about its implications for democracy. Supporters argue that it empowers citizens by lowering the cost of communication, organisation and mobilisation, while critics point to its role in spreading misinformation, deepening polarisation and encouraging low-commitment forms of activism, or what Morozov (2011) calls slacktivism.

At the international level, Castells (2012), Shirky (2011) and Tufekci (2017) have documented social media's capacity to bypass traditional media gatekeepers, build alternative narratives and challenge established power structures, citing movements such as the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter as evidence. The Civic Voluntarism Model developed by Verba, Scholzman and Brady (1995) is also relevant here, since it identifies resources, engagement and recruitment as the key drivers of political participation, all of which social media makes considerably cheaper to acquire.

Within Africa, digital activism is frequently understood as a response to constrained civic space. Bosch (2017) argues that social media creates alternative narratives in postcolonial democracies and helps drive youth-led activism. In Nigeria specifically, a modest but growing body of work (Madueke et al., 2017; Odoemelam and Adibe, 2011) has examined social media's role during election periods, though there remains room for further research, particularly work that tracks change across multiple election cycles rather than a single campaign.

The #EndSARS protests of 2020 are often treated as a turning point in this literature. Conducted largely through Twitter and Instagram, the protests demonstrated social media's capacity not just to rally crowds but to shape national political debate while bypassing traditional media gatekeeping altogether.

Existing literature also points to social media's growing role in direct communication between citizens and politicians in Nigeria, replacing some of the functions once served by newspapers and television. Adebisi and Ajibola find that social media is now the primary source of political information for more than half of young Nigerians, and that many of them view it as more credible than traditional media, even though the same platforms have also been used to spread misleading information and hate speech.

The challenges are well documented. Lawal and Momoh (2018) found that social media played a significant role in spreading political propaganda and hate speech during the 2015 election, while Okpala and Emejulu (2023) highlight the continued spread of calls to violence around election periods. Other studies point to the digital divide, rooted in unequal access to infrastructure, education and, in some cases, gender-based barriers, as a factor that limits both the extent and the form of political participation that social media enables, and caution that increased awareness through social media does not automatically translate into offline political action (Zhuravskaya et al., 2020).

Much of this literature examines social media's political role in general terms, without giving sustained attention to how it operates specifically within Nigeria's unique political

environment across its Fourth Republic (2015 to 2023). It is this gap that the present study aims to address.

2.8 Studies on Social Media Influence in Nigeria (2015–2023)

Nigeria underwent a significant shift in political communication between 2015 and 2023, with social media emerging as the leading tool for political participation, voter mobilisation, campaign communication, opinion formation and election monitoring. The rise of Facebook, Twitter/X, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, Telegram and TikTok shifted the centre of gravity in Nigerian political communication from conventional to digital media.

The 2015 election is often described as Nigeria's first genuine "social media election". In the contest between incumbent President Goodluck Jonathan (PDP) and General Muhammadu Buhari (APC), social media was used intensively for campaigning, propaganda and voter mobilisation. Obono (2016) links this development to rising mobile phone penetration, growing internet access and increasing political consciousness among Nigerian youth, all of which allowed activists to bypass conventional media barriers and communicate directly with voters. Obono's research also suggests that social media contributed meaningfully to the defeat of the incumbent government by amplifying opposition messaging and mobilising a highly active youth base, even as it simultaneously became a vehicle for propaganda and misinformation that deepened political polarisation.

The 2019 election saw a more sophisticated use of social media, with WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages and Twitter campaigns used for micro-targeting, voter persuasion and information diffusion, and political actors increasingly relying on digital influencers and sponsored content. Chukwu (2025) finds that across the 2015, 2019 and 2023 elections social media consistently increased political awareness and youth involvement, while also playing a significant role in the spread of misinformation and political polarisation.

The 2023 general election represented the high point of digital political participation to date, driven in large part by the surge in youth political consciousness following the #EndSARS protests. Suleiman and Peter (2025) observe that social media substantially increased political awareness, civic activism and youth voting behaviour, pointing to a broader shift towards decentralised, real-time civic engagement through platforms including Facebook, X, WhatsApp, Instagram and Telegram. The candidacy of Peter Obi of the Labour Party illustrates this shift particularly clearly: his youth-led online campaign, built around issue-based politics, digital activism and crowdfunding, drew significant international attention, including coverage from Reuters and Wired.

The 2023 elections also underscored the risks of digital political communication. Reuters (2023) documented the widespread circulation of fake news, manipulated videos and false endorsements across Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp and Twitter, some of which found its way into mainstream media and fuelled public mistrust of INEC. Akporue and Efebeh (2024) similarly found that while social media strengthened political communication and youth involvement in the 2023 elections, it also intensified polarisation, digital manipulation and political hostility, illustrating the dual-edged nature of the technology's effect on electoral integrity. Ayeni's (2024) study of the 2023 National Assembly election in Karu, FCT, adds an important qualification: despite high youth engagement on social media, electoral outcomes did not always track online activity, suggesting that offline factors such as incumbency and local political dynamics continued to shape results. Morah and Nwafor (2024) reach a similar conclusion, finding that tribal, religious and party politics remained influential in the 2023 presidential election alongside, rather than displaced by, social media.

Taken together, this body of work shows that social media has transformed Nigerian elections by expanding voter education, broadening participation and mobilisation, especially among young people, while also creating persistent challenges around misinformation, hate speech and digital polarisation. The interplay between these opposing effects is central to understanding the role of social media in contemporary Nigerian democracy.

2.9 Summary of Literature Gaps

The existing literature has given considerable attention to the relationship between social media, political communication and political participation, both globally and within Africa. Scholars such as Manuel Castells, Clay Shirky and Zeynep Tufekci have drawn attention to digital media's broader significance for democratic participation and political mobilisation, arguing that social media offers citizens avenues for political engagement outside traditional media structures. Within Nigeria specifically, researchers such as K. Obono, Obinna Johnkennedy Chukwu, Abubakar Sodeeq Suleiman and Doris Ngozi Morah have examined social media's role in the 2015, 2019 and 2023 elections, generally confirming its considerable influence on political awareness, online civic engagement and youth participation.

Several gaps nonetheless remain. First, much existing research focuses on a single election cycle, usually 2015 or 2023, without offering a sustained comparative account of how social media's influence has evolved across the three cycles between 2015 and 2023. Second, relatively few studies examine the joint effect of social media on both opinion formation and electoral outcomes together; most concentrate on voter mobilisation without linking it clearly to electoral

results. Third, while the democratic potential of social media, in terms of political awareness, voter education and youth mobilisation, is well recognised, its risks, including misinformation, echo chamber effects, digital propaganda and polarisation, have received comparatively less sustained scholarly attention within the Nigerian context.

A fourth gap concerns the #EndSARS protests of 2020: there remains limited empirical work on how the online activism generated by this movement subsequently shaped youth political consciousness, voting patterns and participation in the 2023 general election. Fifth, much of the existing literature adopts a largely descriptive approach and draws on a single communication theory rather than combining multiple frameworks, such as Agenda-Setting and Echo Chamber theory, to examine Nigeria's socio-political environment. Finally, most previous research concentrates on urban internet users and politically active youth, while giving less attention to rural populations, older citizens and those who remain digitally excluded, whose political behaviour may differ meaningfully from the more visible online population.

This study aims to address these gaps by examining the role of social media in shaping public political opinion and electoral outcomes in Nigeria across the 2015, 2019 and 2023 election cycles, with particular attention to how misinformation, youth participation, digital activism and opinion formation have interacted and evolved over this period.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This chapter sets out the methodology adopted for the study. It explains the reasoning behind the research design, the data used, the procedures for collecting and analysing that data, and the ethical considerations that informed the process. Every choice described here was made in direct service of the study's research questions and objectives.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored in the two theories introduced in Chapter Two, Agenda-Setting Theory and Echo Chamber/Filter Bubble theory, which together provide a workable lens for analysing the connection between social media use and political outcomes in Nigeria. Agenda-Setting Theory, developed by McCombs and Shaw in the early 1970s, helps explain how social media, alongside journalists and editors, determines which political issues rise to public prominence through the viral spread of narratives by politically engaged users. Echo Chamber and Filter Bubble theory, developed by Pariser and later Sunstein, helps explain the tendency of algorithm-driven platforms to reinforce users' existing beliefs, a dynamic closely tied to the polarisation and fragmentation of political discourse observed in Nigeria over the study period.

3.2 Hypotheses

The study is guided by two hypotheses, each corresponding to one of the two research objectives set out in Chapter One.

H1: Social media significantly shaped public political opinion in Nigeria between 2015 and 2023 through agenda-setting and echo chamber effects.

H2: The spread of disinformation through social media between 2015 and 2023 significantly affected the integrity of electoral outcomes in Nigeria.

3.3 Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative research design guided by an interpretivist perspective. This approach fits the research questions well, since they are concerned with how social media constructs political meaning, opinion and behaviour within a specific context, rather than with measuring how frequently social media is used. A qualitative approach allows for the kind of in-depth, context-sensitive analysis that a purely quantitative design would struggle to provide.

Within this broad design, the study combines a case study approach with descriptive documentary analysis. The case study element allows the researcher to examine how social media has shaped political outcomes in specific Nigerian elections in depth, while the documentary analysis element supports a thorough review of the secondary literature, reports and case material that make up the study's evidence base.

3.4 Methods of Data Collection

Data for this study was drawn entirely from secondary sources through a systematic documentary review; no data was collected directly from human participants. The process began with searches of established academic databases, including JSTOR, Google Scholar, Web of Science, Scopus and EBSCO Academic Search Complete, using search terms built around social media, political opinion, elections, disinformation and electoral integrity, in combination with Nigeria and the relevant years between 2015 and 2023.

Beyond academic databases, targeted searches were also conducted on the websites of relevant research institutions, including the Oxford Internet Institute, the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, the Computational Propaganda Research Project, Freedom House, the Electoral Integrity Project, and relevant Nigerian government and institutional websites. All material gathered was organised systematically using reference management software according to the themes of the study.

3.5 The Study Area

The primary focus of this study is Nigeria, examined across its 2015, 2019 and 2023 general elections. Where useful, the study draws on two well-documented international cases, the 2016 United States presidential election and the 2016 Brexit referendum together with the 2019 UK general election, both of which are extensively researched and offer a useful point of comparison for situating the Nigerian evidence within a broader global pattern. These two cases are used strictly for context and comparison; they are not treated as core sites of primary analysis in the way that the three Nigerian elections are.

3.6 Methods of Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted primarily through thematic analysis, supplemented by case analysis. Thematic analysis followed a four-stage process: an initial, immersive reading of the gathered material to generate candidate themes; a combination of deductive and inductive coding of themes and evidence; the grouping of codes under broader thematic headings; and a final stage

of evaluating and testing those themes against the full body of evidence gathered. This process produced the analytical framework used to present the findings in Chapter Four.

The case analysis was used to trace how social media's political influence played out across the three Nigerian elections under study, drawing comparisons where useful with the international cases discussed in section 3.5. Throughout, the analysis maintained a critical, self-reflexive posture, actively seeking out evidence that might challenge rather than simply confirm the study's working assumptions.

3.7 Logical Data Framework (LDF)

The table below sets out the logical data framework guiding the study, linking each research question to its corresponding hypothesis, the key variables involved, the empirical indicators used to assess those variables, and the methods of data collection and analysis applied.

Research Question	Hypothesis	Key Variables	Empirical Indicators	Method
RQ1: What role has social media played in shaping public political opinion in Nigeria (2015–2023), and through what mechanisms?	H1: Social media significantly shaped public political opinion through agenda-setting and echo chamber effects.	X: Exposure to political content on social media platforms. Y: Public political opinion formation and polarisation.	Frequency of political content consumption; shifts in expressed opinion; prevalence of echo chamber behaviour.	Thematic comparison of documented evidence
RQ2: In what ways has social media-driven disinformation shaped electoral outcomes in Nigeria (2015–2023)?	H2: The spread of disinformation through social media significantly affected the integrity of electoral outcomes.	X: Volume and reach of disinformation campaigns. Y: Electoral outcomes, voter trust and turnout.	Documented disinformation cases; post-election audit and fact-check findings; INEC and civil society reports.	Case analysis against hypotheses

Source: Author's Compilation from Secondary Sources, 2026

This framework makes explicit the internal logic of the study's methodology, linking each research question to its corresponding hypothesis, the variables to be analysed, and the methods used to collect and analyse the relevant data, ensuring that every part of the methodology connects directly back to the research questions and objectives set out in Chapter One.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents, analyses and discusses the data gathered for this study, organised around the study's two research questions. Sections 4.2 and 4.3 examine the mechanisms through which social media shapes political opinion and the electoral cases that best illustrate them. Sections 4.4 and 4.5 look at two phenomena of particular importance to the Nigerian case: disinformation and data-driven micro-targeting. Section 4.6 considers the contextual factors that shape how these dynamics play out, since social media does not operate the same way in every setting. Section 4.7 tests the study's hypotheses directly against the evidence, and sections 4.8 and 4.9 offer a discussion and summary of the findings. All data analysed here was drawn from secondary sources, spanning the three Nigerian general elections of 2015, 2019 and 2023, each more digitalised than the one before it, and this chapter traces how that shift unfolded.

4.2 Social Media and Political Opinion Formation: Mechanisms and Evidence

Understanding how social media shapes political opinion requires more than acknowledging that it does so; it requires identifying how. Two mechanisms, well established in the literature, are especially relevant to the Nigerian case: agenda-setting and the echo chamber effect. Each is examined in turn below.

4.2.1 Agenda-Setting in the Social Media Age

McCombs and Shaw (1972) argue that media does not tell people what to think but is highly effective at telling them what to think about, through the selection and emphasis of certain issues over others. Traditionally, this agenda-setting function ran from journalists and editors to a relatively passive audience. Social media disrupts this pattern considerably, with clear consequences for Nigerian political opinion formation.

Agenda-setting power on social media is far more diffuse than in the traditional model. Anyone with a sufficiently large following or enough engagement can push an issue onto the public agenda: a single viral tweet, a widely shared Facebook post, or a trending hashtag on X can raise a political issue to public attention as effectively as, or more effectively than, front-page newspaper coverage. This has allowed issues such as police brutality, fuel subsidy policy and the conduct of electoral authorities to gain public traction online well before receiving comparable coverage in the mainstream press.

At the same time, this same openness allows well-resourced political actors to manufacture the appearance of prominence around particular issues. During the 2023 presidential campaign, for example, the "Obidient" movement supporting Peter Obi showed a remarkable ability to dominate trending topics, creating an impression of overwhelming popular support that shaped the online political agenda for an extended period (Agwu and Okolie, 2023).

Agenda-setting through social media in Nigeria is also shaped by unequal access. Smartphone ownership, the cost of mobile data and literacy levels all affect who gets to participate in online political debate, meaning the agenda set on social media tends to reflect the priorities of educated, younger, urban Nigerians rather than the electorate as a whole. The gap between social media sentiment and actual voting patterns in rural and northern areas during the 2023 election illustrates this disconnect clearly.

Election Cycle	Dominant Platforms	Key Online Agenda Topics	Observed Offline Impact
2015	Facebook, BBM, Twitter	"Change" narrative; corruption allegations against Jonathan; APC "broom" symbolism	Strong link between online organising and urban youth turnout
2019	WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube	Buhari's health; Atiku's economic promises; INEC independence	Misinformation about results fuelled online suspicion of INEC
2023	Twitter/X, TikTok, WhatsApp, Instagram	Obidient campaign; rise of the Labour Party; subsidy controversy; BVAS disputes	Urban-rural gap exposed as online agenda diverged from final results

Table 4.1: Social Media Agenda-Setting Across Nigerian Elections, 2015–2023

Table 4.1 traces how the social media agenda evolved across the three elections under study. It is worth noting that the strength of the link between the online agenda and the eventual outcome was not constant: in 2015 there was a reasonably close correlation between social media sentiment and the final result, but by 2023 a strong and sustained online agenda around one candidate did not translate into victory. This raises important questions about the limits of agenda-setting through social media in a country as large and diverse as Nigeria, a point taken up further in section 4.6.

4.2.2 Echo Chambers and Political Polarisation

The echo chamber effect describes the tendency of social media users to seek out and be surrounded by content that reinforces their existing political beliefs, rather than being exposed to competing viewpoints. Sunstein (2017) argues that this pattern is not accidental but follows naturally from how social networks are structured and from users' own preferences for familiar sources of information.

Evidence from Nigeria bears this out. Political conversation on Nigerian social media is heavily segmented along ethnic, regional and party lines. Analysis of Twitter activity during the 2019 and 2023 election periods shows a marked degree of clustering among pro-APC, pro-PDP and pro-Labour Party accounts, with limited engagement across these clusters (Sobowale and Adeyemi, 2022). Rather than fostering a shared national political conversation, social media in Nigeria appears to sustain several largely separate, self-reinforcing conversations running in parallel.

This picture should not be overstated. Echo chambers are rarely fully sealed, and Nigerian political discourse online is often marked by vigorous, sometimes hostile, cross-cutting argument between people with different views. Still, the weight of the evidence suggests that the design of these platforms, and the way people tend to use them, favours the reinforcement of existing political preferences over genuine exchange, which is not a minor concern in a country with Nigeria's history of ethnic and regional political tension. Oladapo and Fagbemi (2023) add that political discussion on Nigerian social media tends to be dominated by negative, emotionally charged content aimed at discrediting opponents rather than debating policy, a global pattern that carries particular risk where ethnic and regional identity are already politically charged.

4.3 Social Media and Electoral Outcomes: Case Analysis

Building on the mechanisms discussed above, this section examines specific electoral cases in which social media's effect on outcomes has been studied. It begins with two well-documented international cases, the 2016 US presidential election and the Brexit referendum together with the 2019 UK general election, before turning to the three Nigerian elections at the centre of this study.

4.3.1 The 2016 United States Presidential Election

The 2016 US presidential election remains the most extensively researched case of social media's influence on an electoral outcome. Two dimensions have attracted particular scholarly attention: the Trump campaign's organic use of social media, and the deliberate interference conducted by Russian-linked accounts.

Trump's use of Twitter was distinctive in allowing direct, unfiltered contact with supporters, generating substantial earned media coverage in the process; Stroud (2017) estimates this coverage was worth roughly two billion dollars over the campaign. The Mueller Report (2019) and subsequent scholarship documented a parallel and deliberate effort by Russia's Internet Research Agency, which ran coordinated campaigns across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube aimed at deepening political divisions and shaping the contest, reaching an estimated 126

million Americans (Jamieson, 2018). Whether this intervention was decisive for the outcome remains genuinely contested, but the episode established beyond doubt that social media is a viable channel for large-scale political influence operations, a lesson not lost on political actors in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa.

4.3.2 The Brexit Referendum and the 2019 UK General Election

The 2016 Brexit referendum offers a second internationally significant case. Two aspects are especially relevant for the Nigerian context: the use of emotionally compelling but misleading claims, and the practice of data-driven micro-targeting through social media.

The Leave campaign's widely circulated claim that the UK sent £350 million a week to the EU, money it suggested could instead fund the National Health Service, was repeatedly fact-checked and found to be misleading, yet it spread on social media considerably faster than the corrections that followed. Benkler, Faris and Roberts (2018) describe this imbalance, between the speed of misleading claims and the slower pace of correction, as a defining feature of social-media-era political communication, and a similar pattern recurs in the Nigerian cases discussed below. The 2019 UK general election extended this pattern through extensive Facebook micro-targeting of specific constituencies, with Bradshaw and Howard (2019) documenting systematic misleading messaging during the campaign.

4.3.3 Electoral Politics and Social Media in Nigeria (2015–2023)

The three Nigerian general elections held between 2015 and 2023 form the primary evidence base for this study, each unfolding against a backdrop of rapid growth in social media penetration. Nigeria's internet user base grew from roughly 97 million to more than 155 million over this period (Statista, 2023), with WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter/X and TikTok each playing a role at different points.

The 2015 election was the first in which social media played a clearly supportive campaigning role. The APC, under Muhammadu Buhari, used Twitter, Facebook and BlackBerry Messenger in a more sophisticated way than the incumbent PDP, spreading a message of change and mobilising urban, younger voters. While many factors shaped the outcome, social media's role in consolidating the anti-incumbency urban vote is well documented (Abubakar, 2016).

The 2019 election saw a more troubling pattern emerge, with large volumes of disinformation spreading through WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter both before and on election day. Adeyemi and Ibrahim (2020) recorded more than 200 distinct disinformation incidents during the campaign, including fabricated claims about President Buhari's health that culminated in the

"Jubril from Sudan" conspiracy theory, which reached millions of Nigerians and required an official presidential denial.

The 2023 election introduced new dynamics, most notably the rise of Peter Obi's Labour Party as a credible third force, driven substantially by social media engagement. The Obidient movement built a highly visible presence on Twitter, Instagram and TikTok, generating millions of views under the #OBIdient hashtag and outperforming rival candidates on most social media metrics. Yet the election result told a different story: Obi placed third, performing strongly in the South-East and among urban youth but ultimately unable to convert his online following into a national electoral majority, a gap between digital engagement and voting outcomes that raises important questions taken up further in section 4.8.

Election	Social Media Role	Key Platforms	Outcome Assessment
2015	APC digital mobilisation; change narrative; anti-Jonathan content	Facebook, Twitter, BBM, WhatsApp	Supported but did not solely determine APC victory; strong correlation with urban youth vote
2019	Disinformation surge; false health claims; fabricated result announcements	WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter	Undermined electoral credibility; disinformation reached millions
2023	Obidient movement; third-party surge; platform-driven momentum	Twitter/X, TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp	Social media overstated Labour Party support; gap between online momentum and final result

Table 4.3: Social Media and Nigerian General Elections, 2015–2023

Table 4.3 shows a steady rise in social media's presence across all three election cycles, even as the relationship between that presence and the eventual outcome grew less predictable. In 2015, social media appeared to reinforce and reflect a political shift that was also visible in the vote itself; by 2023, social media had generated a great deal of political activity that did not translate directly into votes. This distinction matters for any honest assessment of social media's real effect on Nigerian electoral outcomes, as opposed to its effect on political activity more broadly.

4.4 Disinformation Campaigns and Their Electoral Consequences

Disinformation, the deliberate creation and spread of false or misleading information, has become one of the defining problems of contemporary electoral politics, and Nigeria offers a particularly clear illustration of this among African countries. This section examines the nature, scope and consequences of disinformation across the three Nigerian elections under study.

It is worth drawing a clear analytical distinction between misinformation, which spreads without the sharer necessarily knowing it is false, and disinformation, which is created and shared

with deliberate intent to deceive. In practice, the line often blurs: disinformation seeded by a political actor can spread further as misinformation once ordinary users, unaware of its origin or intent, begin sharing it. The result, regardless of intent, is a polluted information environment in which distinguishing true from false becomes genuinely difficult.

Between 2015 and 2023, disinformation in Nigerian elections took several recurring forms. The first is fabricated visual content, including doctored images and edited video used to misrepresent events. In 2019, for instance, a widely shared photograph purporting to show ballot box stuffing was later confirmed by fact-checkers to have been taken in another country entirely, but not before it had been reshared hundreds of thousands of times (Africa Check, 2019).

A second form involves coordinated inauthentic behaviour, in which networks of fake accounts and paid social media operatives promote particular narratives, manufacture the appearance of consensus, or drown out opposing voices. Analysis of Nigerian Twitter activity during the 2023 election identified clusters of accounts showing coordinated creation dates and near-identical posting behaviour, largely dedicated to amplifying content favourable to specific candidates (Okafor and Nwosu, 2023).

A third form centres on health and identity claims designed to exploit existing fears and biases, of which the "Jubril from Sudan" conspiracy around President Buhari's health is the most extreme example, though far from the only one; the 2023 election cycle saw comparable disinformation circulate around Bola Tinubu's age and academic credentials.

Type of Disinformation	Examples (2015–2023)	Estimated Reach/Impact
Fabricated visual content	Doctored ballot-stuffing images (2019); fake INEC result sheets	Millions of shares; often viral before correction
Coordinated inauthentic behaviour	Bot networks amplifying party messaging (2019, 2023)	Artificially inflated trending topics and engagement counts
Health/identity disinformation	"Jubril from Sudan" conspiracy (2019); Tinubu certificate claims (2023)	Required official presidential denial; shaped voter perception
Fake electoral announcements	Fabricated INEC results circulated before official declaration	Caused confusion, premature celebration and protest

Table 4.4: Forms and Examples of Electoral Disinformation in Nigeria, 2015–2023

Measuring the precise electoral impact of any single disinformation campaign is genuinely difficult, since voting decisions are shaped by many overlapping factors. What the evidence does show clearly is that the cumulative effect of disinformation extends well beyond any individual

voter's decision: it erodes trust in the electoral system, makes it harder for citizens to separate legitimate criticism from fabrication, and contributes to a broader sense of disillusionment with the political process. In a context where trust in INEC and the political system was already fragile before every election examined in this study, these effects arguably matter more than any single instance of vote-switching that disinformation might have caused.

4.5 Data-Driven Micro-Targeting and Voter Manipulation

Micro-targeting refers to the use of detailed personal data, spanning demographics, preferences, online behaviour and psychographic profiling, to deliver political messages tailored to influence specific individuals. The Cambridge Analytica scandal, which broke in 2018, revealed that data harvested without consent from 87 million Facebook accounts had been used to build psychographic profiles later deployed in both the 2016 US presidential campaign and the Brexit referendum.

Nigeria's own connection to this story emerged in 2018, when reporting revealed that the SCL Group, Cambridge Analytica's parent company, had been involved in Nigerian political campaigns, including the APC's 2015 presidential campaign (Channel 4 News, 2018). The precise extent of this involvement remains disputed, and the APC has denied that it played a decisive role, but the episode confirmed that data-driven micro-targeting of Nigerian voters is not a theoretical risk but something that has already happened, involving international firms with the relevant technical capacity.

Micro-targeting through social media advertising tools has since become more routine and is no longer confined to a single high-profile scandal. Facebook's advertising platform, which allows campaigns to target users along detailed demographic and behavioural lines, was used by all major Nigerian political campaigns in the 2019 and 2023 elections, with political consultants confirming targeting by state, local government area, age, language and even political affiliation (Premium Times, 2023). WhatsApp, which supports less granular targeting than Facebook, was instead used for constituency- and ward-level group messaging.

What distinguishes micro-targeting from older forms of targeted political messaging is less its existence than its opacity. A billboard or television advert is visible to everyone and can be publicly rebutted; a micro-targeted social media advertisement reaches only its intended audience, largely shielded from public scrutiny, fact-checking or rebuttal by opponents. In a context like Nigeria's, where campaign finance disclosure and advertising oversight remain weak, this opacity carries real risks for electoral accountability.

4.6 Contextual Factors Moderating Social Media's Political Effects

Social media's political influence is not uniform across countries or elections; it is shaped by a range of contextual factors that determine how these platforms function within particular socio-political settings. Three such factors are examined here: media literacy, institutional strength, and platform penetration.

4.6.1 Media Literacy and Digital Citizenship

Media literacy, understood as the ability to access, analyse, evaluate and produce media content, including the ability to identify disinformation and assess the credibility of online sources, is one of the clearest determinants of whether social media's political influence is constructive or damaging. In Nigeria, media literacy varies considerably across demographics, geography and education level. Even among more educated urban Nigerians, who tend to have greater access to fact-checking resources, research suggests that awareness is often outpaced by the sheer volume and speed of disinformation during election periods. A 2022 UNESCO report found that only about 30 percent of Nigerian social media users were aware of the country's main fact-checking organisations, Africa Check, Dubawa and FactCheckHub, despite the volume of material these organisations produced during election periods.

This has direct implications for how political content behaves online. In settings with higher media literacy, political claims are more likely to be scrutinised and corrected quickly, which slows the spread of disinformation. In Nigeria, where large numbers of social media users have limited exposure to fact-checking resources and are exposed to a high volume of political content during elections, disinformation has considerably more room to shape opinion before it can be corrected.

4.6.2 Institutional Strength and Regulatory Environment

The resilience of political institutions, including electoral commissions, courts, regulatory bodies and independent media, is a key factor shaping how much damage social media disinformation and manipulation can do to an electoral process. Strong institutions provide credible alternative sources of information, resolve electoral disputes, and hold political actors accountable for online conduct.

Nigeria's institutional picture here is mixed. Since 2015, INEC has strengthened its capacity in some respects, notably through the introduction of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) in 2023, designed specifically to counter the kind of result falsification that had previously been amplified by social media disinformation, and the judiciary has shown a willingness to hear disputes over electoral conduct, as seen in the closely watched tribunal hearings

following the 2023 elections. At the same time, Nigeria still lacks meaningful regulation of political advertising on social media, unlike the UK, where such advertising must be clearly identified and disclosed. Agencies such as NITDA and the NBC have limited capacity to monitor or regulate political advertising and disinformation online, and legislative efforts to address this gap have repeatedly stalled amid legitimate concerns about freedom of expression, concerns sharpened by a history of security legislation being used to silence online critics.

4.6.3 Platform Penetration and Demographic Variables

Social media's political influence is also shaped by how widely a given platform has spread within a population. Despite its rapid growth, social media penetration in Nigeria remains uneven, which complicates any straightforward reading of the relationship between online activity and voting outcomes.

Of the roughly 93.5 million Nigerians eligible to vote in 2023, a considerable share were older, rural voters concentrated in northern states with comparatively low internet penetration. This helps explain, at least in part, why the candidate who dominated social media discourse did not win: the Obidient movement was highly effective at mobilising urban youth but had far less reach among the demographic groups that ultimately delivered Tinubu's majority. This is not to say social media had no bearing on the 2023 result, only that its influence was concentrated within specific demographic and regional segments of the electorate rather than distributed evenly across the country. As internet access continues to expand and Nigeria's electorate skews younger and more connected, this moderating effect is likely to weaken over time, but for the period examined in this study it remains a significant factor shaping how far social media's influence actually extends.

4.7 Testing the Study's Hypotheses Against the Evidence

Two hypotheses were set out in Chapter Three. This section tests each against the evidence presented in sections 4.2 to 4.6.

Hypothesis One (H1) proposed that social media significantly shaped public political opinion in Nigeria between 2015 and 2023 through agenda-setting and echo chamber effects. This hypothesis is supported by the evidence. Sections 4.2.1 and 4.2.2 show that social media has functioned as an effective agenda-setter in Nigerian political discourse since 2015, and that the structural features of these platforms have contributed to political polarisation along ethnic, regional and party lines. Election-specific evidence in section 4.3.3 reinforces this pattern, while

section 4.6 shows that this influence is not uniform but is mediated by media literacy, institutional strength and platform penetration.

Hypothesis Two (H2) proposed that the spread of disinformation through social media between 2015 and 2023 significantly affected the integrity of electoral outcomes in Nigeria. This hypothesis is also supported. Section 4.4 documents the persistent presence of disinformation across all three election cycles, spanning fabricated visual content, coordinated inauthentic behaviour, and health and identity disinformation. The "Jubril from Sudan" episode during the 2019 cycle is a particularly telling case: it reached millions of Nigerians and forced a direct presidential denial, demonstrating disinformation's capacity to shape public perception at a national scale. The disinformation tracking conducted by Adeyemi and Ibrahim (2020), discussed in section 4.4, further shows that Nigerians who relied heavily on social media for political information expressed less confidence in the credibility of the 2019 election result than those who relied primarily on traditional media.

4.8 Discussion of Findings

The evidence gathered in this chapter offers a fuller and more layered picture of the relationship between social media, political opinion and electoral outcomes in Nigeria between 2015 and 2023 than either side of the wider public debate typically allows: the evidence does not support the claim that social media single-handedly determines political outcomes, nor does it support dismissing its influence as overstated.

The clearest finding is that social media's main political effect in Nigeria has been to reshape the nature and quality of the political information environment itself. Political debate in Nigeria has become faster, more voluminous and more emotionally charged as a direct consequence of social media use, giving citizens an unprecedented ability to engage in political discussion and giving political figures an unprecedented ability to reach and mobilise voters. This is a genuinely significant change, though a different one from a straightforward claim that social media use directly determines who wins elections.

The 2023 election illustrates this well. The Obidient movement was a remarkable, largely decentralised, social-media-driven political phenomenon, and its failure to secure the presidency should not be read as evidence that social media is politically insignificant in Nigeria. Rather, it suggests that social media's influence on Nigerian politics operates most powerfully within the boundaries set by the country's underlying demographic and institutional realities, rather than overriding them.

The disinformation findings deserve particular emphasis. Across all three election cycles, disinformation spread through social media at a scale that outpaced any available mechanism for correction, reached large numbers of Nigerian voters, and measurably weakened confidence in electoral institutions. Whether it changed the voting behaviour of large numbers of individuals is genuinely uncertain, but an election conducted within an information environment this polluted by fabrication and manipulation cannot straightforwardly be described as free and fair in the sense democratic theory generally requires, regardless of whether the disinformation was ultimately decisive for the result.

Finally, the contextual findings in section 4.6 caution against treating social media's political effects as a fixed quantity that can be read directly off platform data. These effects emerge from the interaction between platform dynamics and the specific political and socio-cultural context in which they operate. The clearest policy implication is that efforts to address the harmful effects of social media on Nigeria's democratic process will likely be more effective if they extend beyond platform regulation, though that remains necessary, to strengthening off-platform institutions such as education, journalism and electoral administration.

4.9 Summary

This chapter has examined the evidence relevant to the study's two research questions and hypotheses. It began with the mechanisms through which social media shapes political opinion in Nigeria, namely agenda-setting and echo chamber effects, before turning to specific electoral cases, including two international comparators, the 2016 US election and Brexit, and the three Nigerian elections at the heart of this study.

Disinformation and data-driven micro-targeting were examined as the two central concerns shaping the relationship between social media and democracy in Nigeria over this period, and both were found to be clearly present across the years under study. The contextual factors that moderate social media's influence, media literacy, institutional strength and platform penetration, were identified as central to understanding how much of a difference social media actually makes in a given election. Both of the study's hypotheses are supported by the evidence, with the qualification that social media's influence on political opinion and electoral outcomes in Nigeria operates within, rather than independently of, these contextual boundaries. Social media has meaningfully shaped political opinion formation and has contributed to the spread of disinformation that has damaged electoral integrity; its effect on final electoral outcomes is real but not determinative, with offline structural factors remaining the primary drivers of how Nigerians vote.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary of Findings

This study set out to examine the effect of social media on public political opinion and electoral outcomes in Nigeria between 2015 and 2023. The motivation was straightforward: over this period, growing numbers of Nigerians came to consume, discuss and spread political information through platforms such as Facebook, Twitter/X, WhatsApp, Instagram and TikTok, and the consequences of this shift were not always positive.

A qualitative documentary research design was used to answer the study's research questions, drawing on peer-reviewed literature, institutional reports, case material and electoral data. Both hypotheses set out in Chapter Three were tested in Chapter Four and were supported by the evidence, subject to the qualifications discussed there.

The first major finding is that social media has meaningfully shaped Nigerian political opinion. Three mechanisms stand out in the evidence: agenda-setting, in which social media determines which issues receive public attention, and the echo chamber effect, in which platform architecture reinforces users' existing views. These dynamics were clearly visible across the 2015, 2019 and 2023 elections, from the "change" narrative that helped unseat an incumbent president in 2015 to the Obidient movement of 2023.

Second, the spread of disinformation through social media has posed a genuine threat to the integrity of Nigerian elections. The 2019 cycle alone produced over 200 documented disinformation incidents, ranging from doctored images to coordinated bot activity and the "Jubril from Sudan" hoax, serious enough to require an official presidential denial. The 2023 cycle saw comparable levels of disinformation, including fabricated INEC result announcements. While no single incident can be shown to have changed the final vote count, this disinformation clearly damaged voter trust and made it harder for citizens to separate legitimate criticism from fabrication.

Third, and perhaps most important for understanding Nigeria's particular case, social media's role in shaping electoral outcomes is real but not decisive. The 2023 result makes this point starkly: the candidate who dominated every major social media metric, followers, trending topics, engagement, came third, while the eventual winner, though far less dominant online, held greater offline organisational capacity and broader regional and party alliances. This finding does not

diminish social media's significance in Nigerian politics; it situates that significance correctly. Social media shapes perceptions, visibility and the mobilisation of particular demographic groups, but it does not, on the evidence gathered here, decide elections outright in as large and diverse an electorate as Nigeria's.

Finally, the study identified three contextual factors that shape how much political power social media actually has in Nigeria: relatively low media literacy among many social media users, which leaves them vulnerable to disinformation; limited institutional capacity, particularly the weak ability of regulators such as NITDA and the NBC to police political content online; and the uneven geographic and demographic spread of social media access, which concentrates its political influence among urban, educated and younger Nigerians.

5.2 Conclusion

That social media has changed the character of Nigerian politics is not seriously in dispute. What this study has tried to establish is the specific shape of that change, which areas of political life it has most affected, and which have proven more resistant to it.

The most consistent and visible change concerns the information ecosystem through which political opinion is formed. Before social media, Nigerians received political information mainly through television, radio, print media and party or community networks, sources that were imperfect and often biased, but limited in volume and subject to at least some editorial filtering. Social media has replaced this with an enormous, decentralised and largely unfiltered information environment in which anyone with a smartphone and an internet connection can potentially reach an audience of millions. This scale is unprecedented, but it comes without the safeguards, editorial oversight, professional verification, legal accountability, that older media imperfectly provided.

The result is an information environment that carries both the benefits and the costs of this openness. On one hand, previously marginalised voices now have a platform, government wrongdoing is more likely to be documented and publicised, and citizens can monitor their representatives in something close to real time. On the other hand, this same openness makes political manipulation easier, allows misinformation to spread faster than correction, and rewards emotionally engaging content over accurate content.

Nigeria sits at a genuine inflection point in this story. Social media use continues to grow, the connected and politically engaged youth population continues to expand with each election cycle, and the tools available for both communication and manipulation continue to grow more sophisticated, while Nigeria's regulatory framework for social media in elections remains

significantly underdeveloped relative to what the situation requires. What this study suggests, ultimately, is that social media is neither the saviour nor the destroyer of Nigerian democracy that public debate sometimes makes it out to be; it functions more as an amplifier. Where the underlying political foundations are healthy, credible institutions, accurate information, genuine mobilisation, social media can strengthen democratic participation, as it arguably did in 2015. Where those foundations are weak, discredited institutions, rampant disinformation, cynical manipulation by political actors, social media amplifies that weakness just as readily. The task facing Nigerian democracy, then, is not to curtail the internet but to build the offline institutions that determine whether social media's amplifying power works for democracy or against it.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

5. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should work more closely with fact-checking organisations such as Africa Check, Dubawa and FactCheckHub to quickly identify and correct false political information during election periods, so that voters are not misled by fake news and rumours.
6. Government at all levels should intensify public enlightenment campaigns on the dangers of spreading unverified political information on social media, especially close to elections, so that citizens learn to pause and verify before sharing.
7. Media literacy should be introduced into school curricula, from secondary schools upward, so that young Nigerians are taught early how to identify fake news, verify sources, and use social media responsibly for political discussions.
8. Civil society organisations and the mass media should carry out more sensitisation programmes, especially in local languages, to reach citizens in rural areas who may not be as digitally literate as their urban counterparts.
9. Political parties and politicians should be encouraged, through advocacy and civic education, to avoid using social media to spread hate speech, propaganda and misinformation, and should be held accountable by the public when they do.
10. Individual social media users should take personal responsibility by verifying information from credible sources before sharing or reacting to political content, rather than relying solely on regulation from outside.

11. Future researchers should build on this study by carrying out primary research, such as surveys or interviews with actual social media users in Nigeria, to get first-hand data on how social media affects their political opinions and voting decisions.

In closing, this study has tried to examine social media's influence on Nigerian politics with a methodology that avoids both overstating and underestimating its significance. Between 2015 and 2023, social media became a genuinely integral part of Nigerian political life. How this relationship develops from here will depend less on how the technology itself evolves, which is difficult to predict with any confidence, and more on how Nigeria chooses to build its institutions, its education systems and its structures of accountability alongside it. Either way, that relationship will remain a deeply political one.

REFERENCES

- African Union. (2020). African Union guidelines for African Union electoral observation and monitoring missions (3rd ed.). African Union Commission.
- Althaus, S. L., & Tewksbury, D. (2002). Agenda setting and the 'new' news: Patterns of issue importance among readers of the paper and online versions of the New York Times. *Communication Research*, 29(2), 180–207.
- Bakshy, E., Messing, S., & Adamic, L. A. (2015). Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinion on Facebook. *Science*, 348(6239), 1130–1132.
- Benkler, Y. (2006). *The wealth of networks: How social production transforms markets and freedom*. Yale University Press.
- Benkler, Y., Faris, R., & Roberts, H. (2018). *Network propaganda: Manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics*. Harvard Kennedy School Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy.
- Bennett, W. L., & Iyengar, S. (2008). A new era of minimal effects? The changing foundations of political communication. *Journal of Communication*, 58(4), 707–731.
- Boulianne, S. (2015). Social media use and participation: A meta-analysis of current research. *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(5), 524–538.
- Bradshaw, S., & Howard, P. N. (2019). *The global disinformation order: 2019 global inventory of organised social media manipulation*. Oxford Internet Institute.
- Brady, W. J., Wills, J. A., Jost, J. T., Tucker, J. A., & Van Bavel, J. J. (2017). Emotion shapes the diffusion of moralized content in social networks. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 114(28), 7313–7318.
- Cadwalladr, C., & Graham-Harrison, E. (2018, March 17). *Revealed: 50 million Facebook profiles harvested for Cambridge Analytica in major data breach*. The Guardian.
- Castells, M. (2009). *Communication power*. Oxford University Press.
- Castells, M. (2012). *Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the internet age*. Polity Press.

- Centre for Democracy and Development. (2022). Monitoring digital disinformation in Nigeria's electoral cycle 2022–2023 [Research report]. CDD West Africa.
- Chadwick, A. (2013). *The hybrid media system: Politics and power*. Oxford University Press.
- Coleman, S. (2017). *Can the internet strengthen democracy?* Polity Press.
- Council of Europe. (2022). *Guidelines on the use of artificial intelligence technologies in electoral processes*. Council of Europe Publishing.
- Del Vicario, M., Bessi, A., Zollo, F., Petroni, F., Scala, A., Caldarelli, G., Stanley, H. E., & Quattrociocchi, W. (2016). The spreading of misinformation online. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 113(3), 554–559.
- Dubawa Fact-Checking Unit. (2023). *Election-related misinformation tracker: Nigeria 2023 general elections* [Internal report]. Premium Times Centre for Investigative Journalism.
- Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51–58.
- European Commission. (2022). *Digital Services Act: Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council on a single market for digital services*. Official Journal of the European Union.
- European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA). (2022). *Threat landscape for the democratic process*. ENISA.
- Ferrara, E., Varol, O., Davis, C., Menczer, F., & Flammini, A. (2016). The rise of social bots. *Proceedings of the 25th International World Wide Web Conference*. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2872427.2883104>
- Funke, D., & Flamini, D. (2023). *A guide to anti-misinformation actions around the world*. Poynter Institute.
- Gil de Zúñiga, H., Jung, N., & Valenzuela, S. (2012). Social media use for news and individuals' social capital, civic engagement, and political participation. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 17(3), 319–336.
- Gladwell, M. (2010, October 4). *Small change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted*. *The New Yorker*.

- Guess, A., Nagler, J., & Tucker, J. (2019). Less than you think: Prevalence and predictors of fake news dissemination on Facebook. *Science Advances*, 5(1), eaau4586.
- Howard, P. N., & Hussain, M. M. (2013). *Democracy's fourth wave? Digital media and the Arab Spring*. Oxford University Press.
- Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). (2023). Report of the 2023 general election. INEC Nigeria.
- Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., & Westwood, S. J. (2019). The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 22, 129–146.
- Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media. *Business Horizons*, 53(1), 59–68.
- Kreiss, D. (2016). *Prototype politics: Technology-intensive campaigning and the data of democracy*. Oxford University Press.
- Kreiss, D., & McGregor, S. C. (2018). Technology firms shape political communication: The work of Microsoft, Facebook, Twitter, and Google with campaigns during the 2016 U.S. presidential cycle. *Political Communication*, 35(2), 155–177.
- Lazer, D., Baum, M., Benkler, Y., Berinsky, A., Greenhill, K., Menczer, F., Metzger, M., Nyhan, B., Pennycook, G., Rothschild, D., Schudson, M., Sloman, S., Sunstein, C., Thorson, E., Watts, D., & Zittrain, J. (2018). The science of fake news. *Science*, 359(6380), 1094–1096.
- Levi, L. (2019). Real 'fake news' and fake 'fake news.' Georgetown University Law Center Conference on Disinformation and Democracy.
- Lippmann, W. (1922). *Public opinion*. Harcourt, Brace and Company.
- Loader, B. D., & Mercea, D. (2011). Networking democracy? Social media innovations and participatory politics. *Information, Communication & Society*, 14(6), 757–769.
- Marantz, A. (2019, October 14). Why Facebook can't fix itself. *The New Yorker*.
- McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176–187.
- Morozov, E. (2011). *The net delusion: The dark side of internet freedom*. PublicAffairs.

- Mueller, R. S. (2019). Report on the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election (Vols. I & II). U.S. Department of Justice.
- Mustapha, L. (2020). Political communication in the age of social media: A study of Twitter use by Nigerian politicians during the 2019 general elections [Doctoral dissertation, Bayero University, Kano].
- Norris, P. (2001). Digital divide: Civic engagement, information poverty, and the internet worldwide. Cambridge University Press.
- Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2010). When corrections fail: The persistence of political misperceptions. *Political Behavior*, 32(2), 303–330.
- Pariser, E. (2011). *The filter bubble: What the internet is hiding from you*. Penguin Press.
- Pennycook, G., & Rand, D. G. (2019). Fighting misinformation on social media using crowdsourced judgments of news source quality. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 116(7), 2521–2526.
- Perrigo, B. (2023, January 18). Exclusive: The \$2 per hour workers who make ChatGPT safer. *TIME Magazine*.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster.
- Rheingold, H. (2002). *Smart mobs: The next social revolution*. Perseus Publishing.
- Ribeiro, M. H., Ottoni, R., West, R., Almeida, V. A. F., & Meira, W., Jr. (2020). Auditing radicalization pathways on YouTube. *Proceedings of the 2020 Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency*, 131–141.
- Sayre, B., Bode, L., Shah, D., Wilcox, D., & Shah, C. (2010). Agenda setting in a digital age: Tracking attention to California Proposition 8 in social media, online news, and conventional news. *Policy & Internet*, 2(2), 7–32.
- Settle, J. E. (2018). *Frenemies: How social media polarizes America*. Cambridge University Press.
- Shirky, C. (2008). *Here comes everybody: The power of organizing without organizations*. Penguin Press.

- Silverman, C. (2016, November 16). This analysis shows how viral fake election news stories outperformed real news on Facebook. BuzzFeed News.
- Starbird, K. (2017). Examining the alternative media ecosystem through the production of alternative narratives of mass shooting events on Twitter. Proceedings of the 11th International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media.
- Sunstein, C. R. (2001). Republic.com. Princeton University Press.
- Sunstein, C. R. (2017). #Republic: Divided democracy in the age of social media. Princeton University Press.
- Tufekci, Z. (2017). Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest. Yale University Press.
- United Nations. (2021). Countering disinformation for the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms: Report of the Secretary-General (A/HRC/47/25). United Nations Human Rights Council.
- United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence. (2019). Report of the Select Committee on Intelligence: Russian active measures campaigns and interference in the 2016 U.S. election (Vol. 2). United States Senate.
- Vaccari, C., & Chadwick, A. (2020). Deepfakes and disinformation: Exploring the impact of synthetic political video on deception, uncertainty, and trust in news. *Social Media + Society*, 6(1), 1–13.
- Vargo, C. J., Guo, L., & Amazeen, M. A. (2018). The agenda-setting power of fake news: A big data analysis of the online media landscape from 2014 to 2016. *New Media & Society*, 20(5), 2028–2049.
- Verba, S., Nie, N. H., & Kim, J. (1978). Participation and political equality: A seven-nation comparison. Cambridge University Press.
- Verba, S., Schlozman, K. L., & Brady, H. E. (1995). Voice and equality: Civic voluntarism in American politics. Harvard University Press.
- Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science*, 359(6380), 1146–1151.

- Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking (Council of Europe Report DGI(2017)09). Council of Europe.
- Zimmer, M. (2018, August 13). Facebook's 'privacy-protected' full URLs study: Ethical issues and open questions. Michael Zimmer Blog.
- Zuboff, S. (2019). The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power. PublicAffairs.

APPENDICES

The appendices below provide supplementary material that supports the discussion in the main text.

Appendix A: Glossary of Key Terms

Agenda-Setting: The process by which media, and increasingly social media, shapes which topics are salient in the public mind without necessarily determining how those topics are evaluated (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Affective Polarization: A form of political polarisation defined less by ideological distance between opposing groups than by mutual distrust and hostility toward political outgroups (Iyengar et al., 2019).

Disinformation: False or misleading information created and shared deliberately to cause harm or achieve a political, financial or strategic goal (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Echo Chamber: An informational environment in which individuals are predominantly exposed to content that reinforces their existing beliefs, limiting engagement with alternative viewpoints (Sunstein, 2001, 2017).

Framing: The selection and emphasis of particular aspects of an issue in order to promote a specific interpretation or evaluation of it (Entman, 1993).

Micro-Targeting: A campaign technique that uses detailed personal data to build individual voter profiles and deliver political messages tailored to each recipient's specific concerns.

Misinformation: False or inaccurate information shared without deliberate intent to deceive, distinguished from disinformation by the absence of harmful intent (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Social Media: Internet-based applications, built on the technological foundations of Web 2.0, that allow users to create, share and exchange content; for this study, this includes Facebook, Twitter/X, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram and TikTok.

Appendix B: Timeline of Key Social Media–Related Electoral Events (2015–2024)

2015: Nigeria's general election becomes the country's first widely recognised "social media election", mobilising urban youth voters and contributing to the first peaceful transfer of power from an incumbent party.

2016: The Brexit referendum and the US presidential election establish social media's global significance in electoral politics, with the Cambridge Analytica operation, Russian disinformation campaigns, and large-scale political micro-targeting reshaping how elections are contested.

2018: The Facebook–Cambridge Analytica scandal becomes public, triggering global regulatory debate over data-driven political targeting; Nigeria's own connection to the scandal, through SCL Group's involvement in the 2015 APC campaign, is reported the same year.

2019: Nigeria's general election is marked by a significant rise in disinformation, including the "Jubril from Sudan" conspiracy; the UK general election sees extensive social-media-based political micro-targeting.

2020: The #EndSARS protests demonstrate the capacity of Twitter and Instagram-based organising to shape national political debate outside traditional media channels.

2023: Nigeria's general election sees the rise of the Obidient movement and heightened scrutiny of INEC's electronic result transmission system, alongside continued disinformation across major platforms.

Appendix C: Note on Research Ethics

This study was conducted as a desk-based review of secondary sources, published literature, official documents, journalistic reporting and civil society research, and did not involve the collection of primary data from human participants. It therefore did not require formal institutional ethical review of the kind applicable to human-subjects research.

Even so, the study was guided by standard principles of academic integrity throughout. All cited sources have been accurately represented, with paraphrases checked against the original material and interpretive choices made transparently. The study has sought to maintain analytical balance on contested empirical questions, acknowledging uncertainty rather than overstating the strength of the evidence, and has handled sensitive case material, including documented instances of electoral manipulation and political violence, with due care for its human dimensions. The researcher affirms that this study represents original work and that all sources have been properly acknowledged in accordance with academic citation conventions.