INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS ON THE VOTING DECISIONS OF THE ELECTORATE IN EDO STATE DURING THE 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Social media disinformation campaigns are now constituting a threat to the consolidation of democracy globally, including Nigeria. This has been exacerbated by the easy access to, and decentralised nature of the platforms. The focus of this research was on the evaluation of the influence of social media disinformation campaigns on the electorate in Edo State, in the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria. The research design was survey, while the population of the study was drawn from the major towns in each of the Senatorial Districts in Edo State- Ekpoma (Edo Central); Auchi (Edo North); and Benin City (Edo South). The sample size for the research was 384, while the sampling techniques were multi-stage sampling and purposive sampling techniques. The instrument for collecting data was the questionnaire. One of the key findings was that X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube, were used greatly in the disinformation campaigns during the election. The researcher recommended, among others that, owners of social media platforms, especially Facebook, WhatsApp, X, and YouTube, among others, should set stringent rules for the use of their platforms during elections, and should also monitor the content, so that they can detect and take down fake news.
Keywords: Influence, Social Media Disinformation Campaigns, Electorate, Voting Decisions, Edo State, 2023 Presidential Election, Nigeria

Introduction

Although fake news, manifesting in the forms of either misinformation (non-deliberate spreading of false information) or disinformation (deliberate spreading of false information), is not entirely a new phenomenon, its frontiers became expanded with the emergence and wide use of the social media. And this has gained a lot of attention in media scholarship (See: Nnaane, 2019; Mehta and Guzman, 2018; Alcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Spohr, 2017; Allcott, Gentzkow, and Yu, 2019; as well as Nnaane, 2020). The architecture of the social media, coupled with their affordances, such as connection, creation, collaboration, and conversation, among others, have engendered an untrammeled creation and dissemination of deliberately distorted piece of information just to achieve ulterior motives (Carlos, 2023). Social media

disinformation, it is imperative to note is a well-coordinated and orchestrated activity whereby avid social media users deploy strategic deceptive and manipulative tactics to advance mainly political ends. This kind of information disorder can either be subtle or openly daring in the sense that several rhetorical strategies are weaponised, which include outright lies, and half-truths (Ireton and Posetti, 2018).

The rampant dissemination of disinformation, especially during elections, not only in Nigeria, but globally, attest to the fact that while the conventional media such as newspaper, radio, and television still stand on a moral high ground in terms of credibility, the same cannot be said about the social media. The indiscriminate and rampant dissemination of fake news pose a challenge to democratic consolidation, especially in Africa, where democracy is still relatively

fragile. In spite of the fact that access to new communication technologies has been seen a boost of promoting healthy democratic discourse and the democratisation of the public sphere, social media misinformation and disinformation are constituting a drawback to this phenomenon. The situation is not helped by the gullibility of social media users who in most cases, "share" whatever information comes their way without any form of verification, thereby challenging their level of media literacy. Strauss (2018:9), buttresses the above by noting that "disinformation strategically spread by political campaigns can become misinformation when it is picked up and spread by individual supporters". According to Marchal and Neudert (2019), the major objectives of social media disinformation campaign during elections are to influence the public opinion climate, induce the polarisation of the citizens, spread conspiracy theories, convert undecided voters to vote for their own candidate/party, and confuse the opposition.

Since politics is war by other means in Africa, the social media have become veritable battlegrounds for supporters of political parties to battle for the electorates' minds, hearts, and souls through every means, either fair or foul. One of the fallouts of the phenomenon of social disinformation campaign is the emergence of fact-checking desks and tools in major media organisations in Nigeria, and also globally. Even some civil society organisations concerned with elections in Nigeria have also acquired fact-checking software just to ensure the fidelity of online information about the electioneering process in the country. There is no disputing the fact that the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria was a keen-contest. For the first time since the return of democracy in 1999, there was a scenario where some political analysts and watchers could not say who would win the election,

because this time around, there was the emergence of a formidable Third Force in the person of Mr. Peter Obi of the Labour Party (LP). Backed by a militant and technology-savvy youth across the country, this group coalesced and formed what today has been known in Nigeria's political lexicon as the "Obidient Movement" (Nnaane, 2023). This group dominated the social media space to the extent that it became almost a do-or-die affair. The supporters of the candidate of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Alhaji Atiku Abubakar were not spared. But that of the incumbent President, the then candidate of the All Progressives Congress (APC), Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu was the worst. All manner of information, both truth and untruth swirled around him. According to Olatunji (2023), even after the presidential election, the social media disinformation campaign did not stop. It was extended to the Presidential Election Petition Tribunal (PEPT), where several unfounded and misleading pieces of information were peddled. It took the fact-checking skills of some credible news organisations in Nigeria, especially *TheCable* (an online newspaper) to detect these fake news stories during the electioneering process. Arising from the above, the focus of this research is to evaluate the influence of social media disinformation campaigns on the electorate in Edo State, during the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria

Statement of the Problem
Although fake news (misinformation and disinformation) has been an attendant feature of politics all over the world, the technological revolution which birthed the social media, with their decentralised architecture has now it possible for series of disinformation campaign to be well-organised and coordinated (Flynn, Nyhan, and Reifler, 2017; as well as Lazer, Baum, and Benkler, 2018). With just a mobile phone in the hands of a political influencer with

ulterior political motives, fake news can be created and made to go viral very fast, especially on X (formerly Twitter). The electioneering process which includes debates, selling of ideas, especially the manifestoes of the political parties has become very toxic with all manner of unsubstantiated and deliberately-distorted information aimed at hoodwinking the undiscerning voter. One worrisome dimension is that even some journalists are not immune from the susceptibility of disinformation, in spite of their level of media literacy. When social media disinformation campaigns pollute the electioneering process, then some voters could be confused, and may not be able to make informed decisions. Salako (2023), notes that social media disinformation campaigns during the 2023 Presidential Election in the country, made some first time voters especially, to be confused about who to vote for. So in the light of the above, it is pertinent to examine if and how social media disinformation campaigns could have translated to the influence of the voting decisions of the electorate in Edo State, during the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study
The major objective of this study is to evaluate the influence of social media disinformation campaigns on the electorate in Edo State, Nigeria, but specifically, it is to:
1. Determine the extent of awareness of social media disinformation campaign by the electorate in Edo State, during the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria.
2. Find out the extent of influence of the social media disinformation campaigns on their voting decisions during the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria.
3. Ascertain the social media platforms used the most for disinformation campaigns during the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria.
4. Determine how the electorate in Edo State perceive social media disinformation campaigns in the electioneering process in Nigeria.

Research Questions
The following research questions guided the study:
1. What is the extent of awareness of social media disinformation campaigns by the electorate in Edo State, during the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria?
2. What is the extent of influence of social media disinformation campaigns during the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria?
3. Which social media platforms were used most in disinformation campaigns during the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria?
4. How do the electorate in Edo State perceive social media disinformation campaigns in the electioneering process in Nigeria?

Literature Review
This research carried out the clarifications of such concepts as social media, and disinformation campaigns. It also carried out a review of empirical studies.

Social Media
The social media are Web-based and Internet-enabled interactive technologies that promote creation, connection, sharing, aggregation, collaboration, conversation and linkage, among others through virtual communities and networks. According to Kietzmann and Hermkens (2021), supported by Obar and Wildman (2023), the common characteristics of the social media include sites that help users to create and share

content and also participate in social networking; User-Generated Contents (UGCs), like comments and posts, digital pictures and videos, as well as data generated through virtual interactions. Examples of these social media platforms have well over 100 million users each are: Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), WeChat, Instagram, Weibo, LinkedIn, Tumblr, Telegram, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Pinterest, Reddit, Vibber, Tik Tok, and YouTube, among others.

Disinformation Campaigns

The Shorenstein Center at Harvard University in the United States of America defines disinformation as an academic body of study which involves the spreading of well-coordinated and distorted falsehood to advance basically a political cause. The Center also notes that disinformation spreads through both online and offline channels; and that these disinformation campaign can be implemented in various ways, such as: "astroturfing", "conspiracy theories", "clickbait", "culture wars", "echo chambers", "hoaxes", "fake news", "pseudoscience", and "rumours" (www.shorensteincenter.org). According to Vargas, Emami, and Traynor (2020), disinformation campaigns play on human influence, political messaging, and platform manipulation. They argue that unlike misinformation, disinformation is a deliberate attempt to spread misleading or inaccurate news with focus on deception and manipulation of a narrative.

Review of Empirical Studies

Although most of the studies on social media disinformation are mainly conceptual/theoretical, there are still some empirical studies which have been done as well as. Allcott, Genzkow, and Yu (2019:1), studied "Trends in the Diffusion of Misinformation on Social Media". Through a

content analysis of "569 fake news Websites and 9540 fake news stories on Facebook and Twitter" (now X) between January 2015 and July 2018), the researchers discovered that the interactions of users with false content have reduced drastically on Facebook, while it rose considerably on Twitter. They reveal further that the ratio of Facebook engagements in relation to Twitter decreased by 60%. They noted that in comparative terms, interactions with other business, culture, or news Websites also followed the same trends on both platforms; and that the relative dimension of fake news on Facebook has reduced since its peak. But the researchers did not say if political allegiances play any role in this. This research will fill the gap in this regard. They however concluded that the diffusion of fake news on the social media constitutes a real threat to democracy and the larger society. Obono and Diyo (2019), studied "Social Media Disinformation and Voting Decisions During 2019 Presidential Elections in Nigeria". Using both content analysis and survey as research designs, they discovered that despite the widespread use of the social media in disinformation campaigns, this had little influence on the voting decision of the electorate. They also revealed that a content analysis of Twitter (now X), Facebook, and YouTube content showed that 10 viral pieces of disinformation about the two major contestants then- former President Muhammadu Buhari of the APC, and Alhaji Atiku Abubakar of the PDP were found to be false, even though they looked genuine because of attribution. They noted further that while Facebook was the most used social media platform during the election, with 48.6%; Twitter, was the most used social media platform for political disinformation, with 60%.

In a report by Bradshaw, Bailey, and Howard (2020), entitled: "Industrial Disinformation: 2020 Global Inventory of

Organized Social Media Manipulation", the researchers found out that 90% of the countries studied have carried out disinformation campaigns that involved pro-government and pro-party propaganda; 94% of the countries have carried out disinformation campaigns that attack the opposition and mount smear campaigns; 73% of the countries have used disinformation campaigns that suppress participation through trolling or harassment; 59% of the countries have used state-sponsored trolling to target political opponents, activists, and journalists; while 48% of the countries have used disinformation campaigns to drive division and polarise the citizens. From the empirical studies reviewed so far, no study has been done in Edo State on social media disinformation campaigns and elections.

Theoretical Framework
This research is anchored on the Cascade Theory of Misinformation and Disinformation. This theory explains the imitation patterns of human behaviour; that is how human beings follow the actions of others, just because the person has observed the behaviour of the observed person, instead of following his/her own intuition. Rooted in "Behavioural Economics and Network Theory", it explains how people make the same decisions in a sequential manner, similar to "herd behaviour". An information cascade follows a two-step procedure: firstly, an individual must encounter a scenario with a decision; secondly, outside factors can influence the person's decision, such as observing the choices of others. This theory is believed to have started in the 1990s (Barton, 2009), and believed to have been enunciated by Walden and Glenn, who believe that information flows on the social media in the form of a cascade. Sethi, Sethi, Jeyaraj, Duffy, and Sethi (2023), also note

that the Cascade Theory of Misinformation and Disinformation is crucial to understanding the nature of the spread of misinformation and disinformation, in order to know how to control it. They argue further that the theory explains the complex nature of the spread of fake news on the social media. It follows that those who use the social media for disinformation campaign are fully aware of how the platforms can diffuse information whether true or false in a matter of minutes; that is why most people engage in liking and sharing these patently false and distorted information.

Methodology
The study used survey, which according to Wimmer and Dominick (2015) is one of the most commonly used research designs in mass communication. The aim of survey is to gather a large pool of data from a sample of respondents that are generalisable to the population. The population of the study is 2, 413, 788, drawn from the three major towns across the three Senatorial Districts in Edo State- Ekpoma (Edo Central); Auchi (Edo North); and Benin City (Edo South). The 2024 estimated population of Ekpoma is 290, 618; that of Auchi is 150, 612; while Benin City is 1, 972, 558 (www.worldpopulationreport.com). The Sample size for the study is 384, based on Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination table, which states that when the population is 1,000,000 and above, the sample size should be 384. Further, the sampling techniques were multi-stage and purposive sampling techniques. The instrument for collecting data was the questionnaire, while the techniques of data analysis were frequency tables, percentages, Likert Scale, and charts.

Data Analysis

Out of the 384 copies of copies of questionnaire distributed, 376 copies representing 97.9% were returned and found useful. However, the demographic data of the respondents are presented below:

Table 1: Demographic Data of the Respondents

Items	Respondents	Percentage
Sex		
Male	200	53.2%
Female	176	46.8%
Total	**376**	**100%**
Age-range		
18-22	66	17.5%
23-27	98	26.1%
28-32	144	38.3%
33 & above	68	18.1%
Total	**376**	**100%**
Education		
Undergraduate	169	44.9%
BA/B.Sc	107	28.5%
MA/M.Sc	54	14.4%
PhD	14	3.7%
Others	32	8.5%
Total	**376**	**100%**

From Table 1 above, the male respondents are clearly more than the female; this justifies the findings of the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics (www.nigerianstat.gov.ng), where it stated in its 2023 estimated report on the population of Edo State that the population of men is 1, 640, 461, while the population of women is 1, 577, 871. The Table also shows that there are more youth among the population, which justifies the findings of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) during the publication of the national voters register that over 60% of the voters were youth; and the Table equally shows that more people are either undergraduate or holders of first degree. Edo State boast of a federal university (University of Benin); a federal polytechnic (Federal Polytechnic Auchi); two state universities (Ambrose Ali University, Ekpoma); and (Edo State University, Uzairue), among others.

Research Question 1: What is the extent of awareness of social media disinformation campaign by the electorate in Edo State, during the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria?

The respondents first of all affirmed that they all voted during the 2023 Presidential Election in the country. They were further asked if they were aware of the disinformation campaigns on the social media. Their views are presented in the chart below:

Chart 1: Respondents Awareness of Social Media Disinformation Campaign During the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria

From Chart 1 above, an overwhelming majority of the respondents were aware of the use of the social media for disinformation campaigns during the Presidential Election. This shows how pervasive the social media disinformation campaigns were; and it also attest to the level of media literacy of the respondents. For the respondents who answered in the affirmative, their views were sought about the extent of the social media disinformation campaigns. Their views are presented below:

Chart 2: Respondents' Views on Extent of Social Media Disinformation Campaigns During the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria
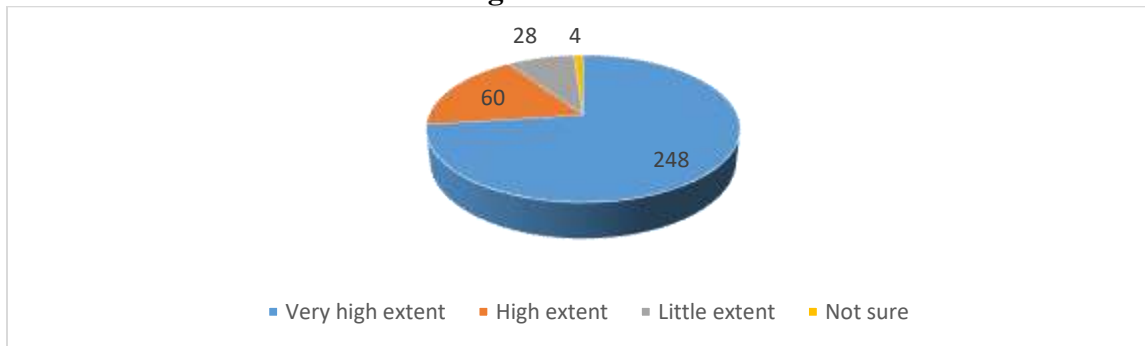

Chart 2 above underscores how toxic the 2023 Presidential Election campaigns were. This is because absolute majority of the respondents stated that social media disinformation campaigns were of a very high magnitude. It also showed that since the return of democracy to Nigeria in 1999, the 2023 Presidential Election was perhaps the most contentious, because of the entrance of a formidable Third Force.

Research Question 2: What is the extent of influence of social media disinformation campaigns during the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria?

This research question was at the core of this study. This is because while some studies have discovered troves of evidence of social media disinformation campaigns during elections, only a few studies have been able to draw a nexus between the influence of social media disinformation

campaigns and the voting decisions of the electorate. The Likert Scale below was used to answer the above research question:

Table 2: Respondents' Views on Extent of Influence of Social Media Disinformation Campaigns During the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria

S/N	Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean
A	Social media disinformation campaigns made me to be confused about the choice of presidential candidate/party.	76	97	44	122	33	3.13
B	Social media disinformation campaigns made me to vote for the presidential candidate/party I did not want to vote for.	66	76	65	97	72	2.91
C	Social media disinformation campaigns made me to vote for the presidential candidate/party I wanted to vote for.	97	72	65	66	76	3.12
D	I was happy when the social media disinformation campaigns were directed at the presidential candidates/parties that I did not want to vote for.	188	164	24	-	-	4.5
E	I was angry when the social media disinformation campaigns were directed at the presidential candidate/party I wanted to vote for.	188	164	24	-	-	4.5

Key: if mean ≤ 1.49= Undecided; 1.5-2.49=Strongly Disagree: 2.5-3.49=Disagree: 3.5-4.49= Agree; while 4.5-5=Strongly Agree.

Results from the Likert Scale presented in Table 2 above showed that while the social media disinformation campaigns had some subtle influence on the electorate during the 2023 Presidential Election, most of the voters had already made up their minds on which presidential candidate/party to vote for, irrespective of the disinformation campaigns on the social media. That is why they strongly agreed that they were happy when the social media disinformation campaigns were targeted at the opposition presidential candidates/parties, and angry when the reverse was the case.

Research Question 3: Which social media platforms were used most in disinformation campaigns during the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria?

Based on the fact that the architecture and algorithms of specific platforms enable social media disinformation campaigns more than others, the above research question became pertinent. The respondents were asked to choose more than one option if applicable, and in order of degree. Below is the presentation of the result:

Chart 3: Most Used Social Media Platforms for Disinformation Campaigns in the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria
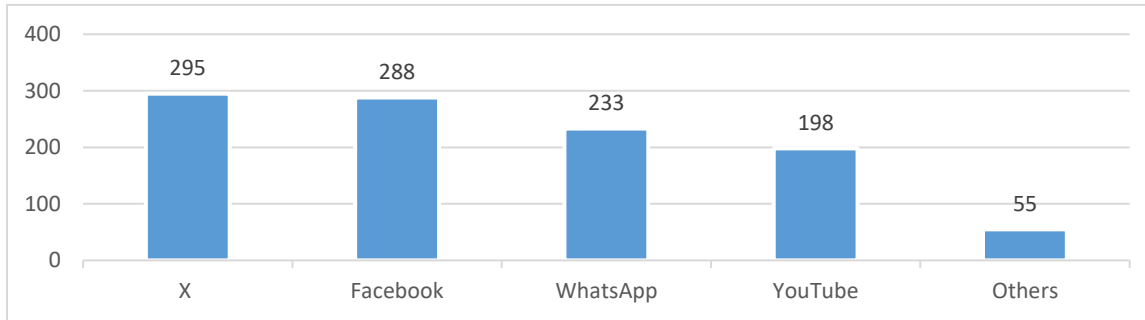
From Chart 3 above, the major social media platforms were deployed one way or another in the disinformation campaigns that attended the 2023 Presidential Election. However, the architecture and algorithm of X made it to be more amenable to manipulation. Although Facebook has had its fair share of criticisms globally for being used for disinformation campaigns, the choice of WhatsApp is also an insight. YouTube, which was a subject of fact-checking by most national media houses in Nigeria, as well as the international media, including some civil society organisations, became a platform for deepfakes (an audio, video, or even picture of an individual whose face has been digitally-altered and manipulated to replace another person's likeness, usually done with artificial intelligence to make it look real. Deepfakes are used mainly to spread information).

Research Question 4: How do the electorate in Edo State perceive social media disinformation campaigns in the electioneering process in Nigeria?

The basis of the above research question was to gauge the perception of the respondents on social media disinformation campaigns during elections. Again, the Likert Scale was used to get their views thus:

Table 3: Respondents' Perception of Social Media Disinformation Campaigns in the Electioneering Process in Nigeria

S/N	Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean
A	Social media disinformation campaigns during elections is unhealthy for Nigeria's democracy.	198	178	-	-	-	4.52
B	Politicians and their respective political parties are part of the social media disinformation campaigns network.	192	184	-	-	-	4.51
C	Political parties and their candidates pay influencers to attack their opponents with social media disinformation campaigns.	165	142	69	-	-	4.25

D	Social media platform owners should do more to curtail the spread of disinformation campaigns during elections.	177	149	50	-	-	4.33
E	The media should continue to use fact-checking tools to expose fake news during elections.	197	179		-	-	4.52

Key: if mean ≤ 1.49= Undecided; 1.5-2.49=Strongly Disagree: 2.5-3.49=Disagree: 3.5-4.49= Agree; while 4.5-5=Strongly Agree.

The results from Table above show how social media disinformation campaigns can constitute a threat to Nigeria's democracy, and what must be done to curtail the malaise. During the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria, international media organisations such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Aljazeera, and Deutsche Welle (the German public, and state-owned international broadcast organisation), among others, revealed how some social media influencers were paid heavily by political parties to carryout well-coordinated disinformation campaigns against their opponents.

Discussion of Findings
The focus of this research was to evaluate the influence of social disinformation campaigns on the voting decisions of the electorate in Edo State, during the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria. It is worthy to note however, that disinformation campaigns, a form of propaganda has never been a new phenomenon in the world, including Nigeria, but since the emergence of the social media, driven by the revolution in the area of digital technologies, coupled with the easy access to, and decentralised nature of these platforms, disinformation campaigns, especially during elections have been more audacious. Consequently, findings from this research indicated that a majority of the respondents were not only aware of the use of the social media campaigns during the 2023 Presidential Election in the country, but they equally noted that these disinformation campaigns were done to a very high extent.

Findings also showed that while the social media disinformation campaigns had some subtle influence on the electorate during the 2023 Presidential Election, most of the voters had already made up their minds on which presidential candidate/party to vote for, irrespective of the disinformation campaigns on the social media, justifying Obono and Diyo (2019), as well as Nnaane (2023). This means that those voters who have made up their minds on who to vote for can hardly be dissuaded by social media disinformation campaigns. The research also found out that Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube in order of degree of usage, were the most used social media platforms for disinformation during the elections. This lends credence to the findings of Sumartono (2017), Allcott, Genzkow, and Yu (2019), Obono and Diyo (2019), Nnaane, 2019, Nnaane, 2020, Bertrand, Natabaalo, and Hitchen (2021), as well as Olaniran (2022). It follows that the flexibility and algorithms of the aforementioned social media platforms, could have been responsible for their wide use during the 2023 Presidential Election, in addition to their popularity in Nigeria. Another key finding was that an aggregate of the opinions of the respondents showed that social media disinformation campaigns could pose a threat to Nigeria's democracy, and that something must be done to curtail the excesses by all stakeholders. This is quite real because even in the United States of America, conspiracy theories from the social media especially, led to the

invasion of the Capitol Hill on January 6, 2021, after the former President, Donald Trump lost the Presidential Election on Tuesday, November 3, 2020. Finally, the Cascade Theory of Misinformation and Disinformation was validated in the sense that the diffusion of disinformation on the social media during the Presidential Elections became viral due the way other users were "liking" and "sharing" the content without verification.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In every society, no matter how civilized they claim to be, politics is usually a high-stake drama, and at the same time a war by other means. In Africa especially, elections could lead to real crisis, and even war, if measures are not put in place because of the winner-takes-all approach to politics. As a result, in order to outdo one another, politicians, their political parties, as well as their supporters now weaponise the social media as a maximum platform of vicious disinformation campaigns, where nothing is spared. One of the implications of this development is that ideas and issues that should define healthy democratic debates are suppressed in the maze of disinformation, whereas distorted truths, half-truths, barefaced lies, and name-calling that do not add anything to the consolidation of a viable democratic culture are elevated. Again, the situation is not helped by the lack of a regulatory regime of the social media Nigeria; and so the political market place of ideas becomes polluted. The easy access to, decentralised, de-monopolised, and non-hierarchical nature of the social media, instead of being a big boost to the plurality of views in a democracy, has become a drawback. Arising from the above, below are the recommendations of this research:

1. The electorate should be able separate fake news from the genuine ones during elections, so that they can make informed choices.
2. Political Parties, their respective candidates, and supporters owe the country a duty, and also as a social responsibility to refrain from social media disinformation campaigns; and instead, should focus on issues.
3. The media and members of relevant civil society organisations should continue to bust fake news with sophisticated software so as to enlighten the electorate the more.
4. Owners of social media platforms, especially Facebook, WhatsApp, X, and YouTube, among others, should set stringent rules for the use of their platforms during elections, and should also monitor the content, so that they can detect and take down fake new

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