



INVESTIGATING THE PROLIFERATION AND SOCIO-POLITICAL RAMIFICATIONS OF MISINFORMATION IN CROSS RIVER STATE: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF ITS IMPACT ON CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION

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Abstract

This study investigates the proliferation of misinformation in Cross River State, Nigeria, and its socio-political ramifications on civic engagement and electoral participation. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, primary data were collected through surveys and focus group discussions with 500 participants across urban and rural demographics. Findings reveal that misinformation, primarily disseminated through social media platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook, significantly undermines trust in electoral institutions, fuels ethnic and religious tensions, and suppresses voter turnout. Approximately 68% of respondents reported encountering false information during the 2023 elections, with 45% indicating it influenced their voting decisions. Young voters (18–35 years) and those with lower educational attainment were most susceptible. The study highlights how misinformation exacerbates political apathy, discourages civic participation, and threatens democratic integrity. Recommendations include enhancing digital literacy programs, strengthening regulatory frameworks for social media, and fostering inclusive civic education to bolster electoral trust and participation. This research contributes to understanding misinformation's role in shaping democratic processes in Nigeria's diverse socio-political landscape.

Keywords: Misinformation, Civic Engagement, Electoral Participation, social media, Democracy, Digital Literacy

Background

In the digital age, misinformation has emerged as a formidable challenge to democratic processes worldwide, particularly in nascent democracies like Nigeria. Cross River State, a culturally diverse region in Nigeria's South-South geopolitical zone, provides a unique context for examining how false information shapes civic engagement and electoral participation. With a population of approximately 4.2 million (National Population Commission, 2023) and a history of vibrant political activity, the state has experienced significant electoral challenges, including violence, voter apathy, and distrust in institutions, often amplified by misinformation. The 2023 general elections, marked by widespread circulation of fake election results and inflammatory narratives, underscored the urgency of addressing this issue.

Misinformation, defined as false or misleading information spread regardless of intent (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), thrives in environments with low media literacy and polarized socio-political landscapes. In Nigeria, social media platforms like WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook have become primary conduits for misinformation, shaping public opinion and exacerbating ethnic and religious divides (Uwalaka, 2021). Studies indicate that misinformation can delegitimize electoral processes, discourage voter turnout, and incite violence (Birch et al., 2020). For instance, during Nigeria's 2019 elections, false claims of electoral fraud circulated widely, sowing distrust and reducing voter participation to 27% nationwide (Hassan, 2023). In Cross River State, local dynamics such as ethnic diversity and economic disparities amplify these effects, making it a critical case study.



This study adopts the participatory democracy theory, which posits that active citizen engagement strengthens democratic institutions (Pateman, 1970). Misinformation disrupts this framework by distorting information flows, undermining trust, and discouraging participation. The theory provides a lens to analyze how false narratives weaken the deliberative processes essential for informed voting and civic activism.

This research seeks to fill a gap in the literature by focusing on Cross River State, an understudied region in electoral integrity research. While global studies on misinformation often center on Western democracies (Norris et al., 2014), African contexts like Nigeria remain underexplored. Drawing on participatory democracy theory, which emphasizes active citizen involvement in governance (Pateman, 1970), this study examines how misinformation disrupts civic engagement and electoral participation. The research questions are: (1) What is the prevalence and nature of misinformation in Cross River State? (2) How does misinformation impact civic engagement and electoral participation? (3) What demographic factors influence susceptibility to misinformation?

Overview of pertinent Literature

The proliferation of misinformation in political contexts has been extensively documented. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) found that social media amplifies false narratives, particularly during elections, by enabling rapid dissemination and targeting vulnerable demographics. In Nigeria, Uwalaka (2021) noted that social media platforms have spurred both political participation and misinformation, with WhatsApp being a primary vector due to its encrypted, peer-to-peer nature. This dual role of social media empowering and disruptive complicates its impact on democracy.

Misinformation's socio-political ramifications are profound. Birch et al. (2020) argue that false information undermines electoral integrity by eroding trust in institutions like the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). In Nigeria, misinformation has fueled ethnic and religious tensions, as seen in the 2019 elections, where fake news amplified communal conflicts (Krause, 2020). This is particularly relevant in Cross River State, where ethnic groups like the Efik, Ejagham, and Bekwarra coexist with historical rivalries. Moreover, misinformation can lead to voter apathy, as citizens perceive participation as futile in a rigged system (Adejumobi, 2002).

Demographic factors also play a critical role. Young people, who constitute 60% of Nigeria's population, are both active social media users and highly susceptible to misinformation due to limited critical literacy (Davis & Turnbull, 2024). Gender and education levels further influence vulnerability, with women and less-educated individuals often less equipped to discern false information (Al-Mohammad, 2017). These findings underscore the need for targeted interventions to enhance civic engagement and electoral participation.



Methods

Research Design

A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative focus group discussions (FGDs) to capture both statistical trends and nuanced perspectives. This design aligns with exploratory studies on misinformation in African contexts (Uwalaka, 2021).

Population and Sampling

The study targeted residents of Cross River State aged 18 and above, registered to vote in the 2023 elections. A stratified random sampling technique was used to select 500 participants from three senatorial districts (Northern, Central, and Southern), ensuring representation across urban (Calabar) and rural (Obudu, Ogoja) areas. The sample was balanced by gender, age, and education level to reflect the state's demographic diversity.

Table 1

Demographic Profile of Participants

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	260	52
	Female	240	48
Age Group	18–25	150	30
	26–35	180	36
	36–50	120	24
	51+	50	10
Education Level	No Formal Education	40	8
	Primary	60	12
	Secondary	200	40
	Tertiary	200	40
Location	Urban (Calabar)	250	50
	Rural (Obudu, Ogoja)	250	50



Data Collection

Primary data were collected through:

- **Surveys:** A structured questionnaire assessed exposure to misinformation, sources (e.g., WhatsApp, Facebook), and its perceived impact on voting behavior and civic engagement. The questionnaire used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) and was administered in English and pidgin English for accessibility.
- **Focus Group Discussions:** Six FGDs (three urban, three rural) with 8–10 participants each explored qualitative insights on misinformation’s socio-political effects. Discussions were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed thematically.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) and inferential statistics (chi-square tests) to identify correlations between misinformation exposure and demographic variables. Qualitative data were coded and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns, such as distrust in INEC or ethnic polarization.

Ethical Considerations

Participants provided informed consent, and anonymity was ensured through coded identifiers. The study adhered to ethical guidelines outlined by the American Psychological Association (2020).

Results

Prevalence and Sources of Misinformation

Of the 500 respondents, 68% (340) reported encountering misinformation during the 2023 elections, primarily via WhatsApp (45%) and Facebook (30%). Common forms included fake election results (35%), inflammatory ethnic narratives (25%), and false claims of voter suppression (20%).

Table 2

Sources of Misinformation

Source	Frequency	Percentage (%)
WhatsApp	225	45
Facebook	150	30
Twitter	75	15
Traditional Media	50	10



Impact on Civic Engagement and Electoral Participation

Misinformation significantly impacted civic engagement. Approximately 45% of respondents agreed that false information influenced their voting decisions, with 30% reporting reduced trust in INEC. FGDs revealed that misinformation fueled perceptions of electoral fraud, discouraging participation. Voter turnout in Cross River State was 25% in 2023, lower than the national average of 27% (Hassan, 2023).

Table 3

Perceived Impact of Misinformation

Statement	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
Misinformation influenced my voting decision	45	55
Misinformation reduced trust in INEC	30	70
Misinformation discouraged civic participation	40	60

Demographic Influences

Chi-square tests revealed significant associations between misinformation susceptibility and age ($\chi^2 = 12.45$, $p < .05$) and education level ($\chi^2 = 15.67$, $p < .01$). Younger respondents (18–35) and those with secondary education or less were more likely to believe false information. Gender showed no significant effect ($\chi^2 = 2.34$, $p > .05$).

Table 4

Misinformation Susceptibility by Demographics

Variable	High Susceptibility (%)	Low Susceptibility (%)
Age		
18–25	65	35
26–35	60	40
36–50	45	55
51+	30	70
Education		
No Formal	70	30
Primary	65	35
Secondary	55	45
Tertiary	40	60



Qualitative Insights

FGDs highlighted three themes:

- **Distrust in Institutions:** Participants cited misinformation about INEC's operations as a key factor in voter apathy. One respondent noted, "Fake results on WhatsApp made me think my vote wouldn't count."
- **Ethnic Polarization:** Misinformation targeting ethnic groups (e.g., false claims of Efik dominance in state politics) deepened communal tensions.
- **Political Apathy:** Young participants expressed frustration, feeling that online misinformation made political engagement futile.

Discussion

The findings align with existing literature on misinformation's disruptive effects (Birch et al., 2020; Uwalaka, 2021). The high prevalence of misinformation via WhatsApp underscores its role as a private, trusted platform, making it a potent vector for false narratives. The significant impact on voter trust and participation reflects broader challenges in Nigeria's democracy, where weak institutional frameworks amplify misinformation's effects (Adejumobi, 2002). Demographic vulnerabilities, particularly among youth and less-educated individuals, highlight the need for targeted interventions. The participatory democracy framework explains how misinformation undermines informed decision-making, weakening the democratic process.

Conclusion

This study confirms that misinformation in Cross River State significantly undermines civic engagement and electoral participation, particularly through social media platforms. By eroding trust in institutions and exacerbating ethnic tensions, misinformation threatens democratic integrity. The findings underscore the urgency of addressing this issue in Nigeria's diverse socio-political context.

Recommendations

- **Digital Literacy Programs:** Implement community-based initiatives to enhance critical media literacy, targeting youth and low-education groups.
- **Regulatory Frameworks:** Strengthen policies to monitor and curb misinformation on social media platforms, balancing free speech and accountability.
- **Civic Education:** Integrate comprehensive civic education into school curricula to foster political awareness and democratic values.
- **INEC Transparency:** Enhance INEC's communication strategies to counter misinformation and rebuild public trust.



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