

## Measuring Social Media Misinformation and Disinformation As Driver for Political Polarization in South-West, Nigeria

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### Abstract

*Social media misinformation determines political polarization of some followers, making them accept disinformation for political participation. This paper ascertained the influence of social media misinformation on political polarization in South-west, Nigeria. This study was anchored on Conspiracy Theory. Survey research design was adopted. Sample size of 385 was purposively drawn from the population of 28,514,235. It was found that (54.2%) respondents were exposed to social media political misinformation at a very high level, (28.3%) respondents were exposed to social media political misinformation on monthly basis, (55.8%) respondents said that they accept social media political misinformation for political polarisation at a very high level, (39.9%) respondents said that political misinformation on social media is an indication of a candidate's popularity, (36.5%) respondents said that social media political misinformation makes voters to elect mediocre into electoral positions, (41.8%) respondents were of the opinion that social media political misinformation causes conflict between the two major religions groups in Nigeria. Some of the recommendations are: Those who use social media for political polarization should look for credible political stories and not misinformation. The social media political followers in Nigeria should learn to support candidates and not political parties. Nigerian government should make laws prohibiting political misinformation on social media, and therefore state the punishment for any offender.*

**Keywords:** Measurement, Social-media, Misinformation and Disinformation, Driver, Political Polarization.

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### Introduction

Social media are part of the emerging information and communication technologies that are used in modern political processes to engage the public, especially the youths, in the democratic debates. Social media have become global phenomena, and their importance in spreading political messages cannot be understated. However, this is not without the ancillary challenges brought to politics by social media, such as bogus news and misinformation. These have had some impacts on the political system and citizens'

voting behavior, especially young people, who make up the majority of social media users (Adegunle, Odoemelam & Odoemelam, 2019).

Social media misinformation has been identified and recognized over the past few years as the hostile proprietors act as its sources. Disinformation detection research and related subjects are gaining speed, and different parts of the issues are being studied from various angles by researchers (Kai et al, 2020). Despite the lengthy history of false information and incorrect views in the political process, misinformation on social media has recently raised a great deal of concern (Flynn, Nyhan & Reifler, 2017; Lazer et al, 2018). While there has been name-calling, fake news, and other forms of low-level speech and unethical political communication, social media has clearly amplified these issues to a greater extent. Observers have bemoaned how the nation's political discourse has fallen to new depths, with mudslinging, insults, and misinformation becoming the norm, even among seasoned and prominent political figures. Political misinformation has become routine in an era of social media, where statements are produced, disseminated, and copied among populations with little to no critical digital literacy (Dakuku, 2022).

Popular social media sites like: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and others turned and became effective tools for almost demonic attacks on political rivals. The 2015 general elections in Nigeria were converted into a theater of hate speeches and campaigns colored in a way that defied logic and common sense, in the name of defending one's choice for a party on social media. Politically motivated fake comments concerning a variety of politicians, particularly the two front-runners for president were definitely above the pale. Due to the prevalence of hate speeches and misinformation during that election, many heavy users expressed concern about impending post-election violence after the events (Hadiza, 2016).

Social media were heavily utilized by the opposition All Progressives Congress APC in the 2015 presidential election to discredit the People's Democratic Party PDP. Exploratory research conducted in Nigeria during the 2015 elections showed that social media significantly contributed to the swing of young voters' support away from the Federal Government, which was in power at the time. By the 2019 presidential election, social media had matured, and instead of young millennials and young adults dominating that arena, we saw that even older people were turning to it for political news and discussions, accepting the propaganda (Dakuku, 2022).

Prior to the 2016 election of United States of America, many American adults were exposed to bogus news, and post-election surveys revealed that many of those who read these articles thought they were factual (Allcott & Gentzkow 2017; Guess, Nyhan & Reifler, 2018). Many contend that incorrect information significantly influenced the 2016 presidential election of United States (Parkinson 2016; Gunther, Beck & Nisbet, 2018). Concern has been raised about the rise in the dissemination of misleading information on social media, especially during elections in several nations. According to Gelfert (2018) and Shu, Sliva, Wang, Tang, and Liu (2016), misinformation has a reputation for significantly influencing political outcomes and has the potential to upset the ecosystem's delicate balance of authenticity. Social media and digital platforms in particular are linked to fake news rather than traditional broadcast. Satire, parody, fabrication, deception, native advertising, and propaganda are all examples of phenomena that fall under this umbrella category (Venturini 2018). Social media, especially around election time, boost young people's social capital and political engagement (Mustapha et al., 2016). Using social media only for news and political updates could lead people to consume and act on information from shady sources (Curry 2018). Social media misleading posts regarding the two front-runners for the presidency of Nigeria in 2019 went viral. However, many individuals received and consumed the posts without questioning the accuracy of the material, which could have an impact on their political polarization (Karimah & Kobloue, 2022).

A good example of such cases include: charges of corruption against Atiku Abubakaron Twitter. Lauretta Onochie said that Atiku intended to end the Buhari administration's initiatives to combat poverty. Her 105,100 followers on Twitter viewed her post, which has been liked by 1520 users and retweeted by 1800 users. The image that Onochie used, according to Reality Check Nigeria (2019), was

reused and contextualized incorrectly. The picture originally surfaced online in February 2017 when a charitable foundation based in Lagos published images from an outreach (Karimah & Koblowe, 2022). This misinformation could make voters to take voting decision against Atiku in 2019 elections.

Another allegation against Atiku Abubakar on social media stated that in exchange for oil and land in Borno State, Atiku has reached a cease-fire agreement with Boko Haram. According to a 44-seconds video uploaded on Facebook by "Make Nigeria Worse Again," Atiku Abubakar and the Boko Haram insurgents agreed to a truce. Narrating the video, the agreement would grant Boko Haram some portions of land, autonomy, and oil fields in the state of Borno's North-eastern region, in exchange for a cease-fire. The video was published on January 8, 2019, with the caption "we must stop Atiku's hellish plan to give away parts of Borno State and oil to Boko Haram in exchange for a cease fire". It featured a picture of Atiku and a Boko Haram member and reads, "Atiku's new terrible idea". The source was <http://m.facebook.com>. More than 190,000 people watched the video, 1,200 people liked it, 1000 people commented on it, and 994 people shared it. Over 10,000 people followed the Facebook page that published the video. Eventually, there was no proof that Atiku's campaign disclosed such a strategy. Atiku Abubakar's spokesperson, Segun Showunmi claimed that the video included high-level criminal misinformation. This misinformation might have made people not to support Atiku Abubakar.

A number of misinformation were also floated on social media against President Buhari during the 2019 electioneering campaigns. For instance, an article on social media stated: Buhari has finished fighting corruption, let Atiku fight hunger and poverty. On social media, Professor Wole Soyinka was wrongly quoted as making the claim. His photograph was included to verify the information. "Naija Must Work Again," a personal blog with 148,000 followers, posted the article on Facebook with the assertion that the statement against Buhari was made by this Nobel laureate. 500 persons liked the post, which was shared 3087 times and had 1365 comments. Reality Check Nigeria claimed that the material was a misinformation and had been incorrectly ascribed to Soyinka. This article of misinformation on social media might have shaped the political polarization of some viewers.

Similarly, another misinformation on social media said "if the current INEC chairman can emulate me and conduct free and fair elections, nothing will stop Atiku Abubakar from winning 2019 election-Prof. Attahiru Jega". The statement above was attributed to the former chairman of Independent National Electoral Commission. The source of the message was <https://twitter.com/dadiyata>. The story was posted on Twitter by "Dadiyata" on 1<sup>st</sup> January, 2019. The Twitter account was followed by 381,000 people who viewed the post. It was retweeted and shared by 710 Twitter users, and liked by 860 users. However, Reality Check Nigeria later revealed that the post was a disinformation. Therefore, disinformation is the deliberate circulation of information that is partially or fully false, for the purpose of influencing opinion, attitude or to stir controversy. It is a fabricated and deceptive message presented as real. Though attractive and structured to attract online readership, sharing and internet revenue, disinformation is intended to mislead audience, and tarnish the reputation of rivals (Niclewicz, 2017).

### **Statement of problem**

Social media are part of the emerging information and communication technologies that are used in modern political processes to engage the public, especially the youths, in the democratic elections. Social media have become global phenomena, and their importance in spreading political messages cannot be understated. However, this is not without the ancillary challenges brought by social media, such as misinformation and disinformation. This misinformation and disinformation on social media has created an impact on the political system and citizens' political polarization, especially young people, who make up the majority of social media users. Popular social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and others turned and became effective tools for demonic attacks on political rivals. They are the sources through which people post misinformation and disinformation about political issues. Thus, the kernel of this study is to ascertain the influence of social media misinformation and disinformation on audience political polarization in South-west, Nigeria.

### **Objectives of the study**

The objectives of this study are:

1. To ascertain audience level of exposure to social media political misinformation in South-west Nigeria.
2. To find out influence of social media political misinformation on audience in South-west, Nigeria.
- 3 To determine the effect of social media political misinformation on the outcome of elections in South-west Nigeria.

### **Literature review**

The social media carry out conventional media functions promoted by libertarian theory and modern press theory. These duties include assisting the political system by disseminating information, engaging in discussion, and debate; educating the populace to enable self-governance; and defending individual rights by acting as a watchdog against excessive government activity. Political interaction has expanded in both time and geography as a result of increased usage of social media. Despite being popular among the elites at the moment, social media are becoming more common in Nigerian politics. For the elites, social media allow for unrestricted communication with Internet users nearly instantly, anywhere, and at any time (Oyebode, 2014).

Election candidates, according to Enberg (2020), are increasingly using social media influencers to convey their messages and rally support for their campaigns. This enables them to connect with a younger audience that is becoming less receptive to conventional advertising strategies. Wabara (2015) contends that Buhari wouldn't have a chance to defeat President Goodluck Jonathan in 2015 without the assistance of branding specialists and social media influencers. In contrast to his previous failed elections, when most Nigerians viewed Buhari as a religious zealot, a military dictator, and someone without empathy, "the professionals polished his image and converted him from a no-nonsense general into a likeable person by all tribes in Nigeria.

Egbunike (2019) asserts that rather than decreasing in Nigeria, the practice of instigating electoral violence through social media has persisted. Misinformation, internet propaganda, and more alarmingly, ethnic hate speech, were ubiquitous in the run-up to the 2019 elections and contributed to a climate of mistrust, as shown by the never-ending social media banter that served as a key arena for political campaigns. As a result of the widespread social media disinformation, accusations, and denials, President Buhari was reportedly thought to have passed away and been replaced by a duplicate or clone.

Akinyetun, Odeyemi, and Alausa (2021) claim that despite social media's clear benefits for communication and, of course, its importance in the political sphere, there is a chance that its misinformation is used maliciously for political gains. This is caused in part by inadequate surveillance and an unchecked influx. The vast amount of materials being shared on social media are mostly unrestricted, not entirely regulated, and frequently misinformation. These guide the political decisions of the audience especially the youths. Politicians have actively and consciously changed their attention away from using traditional and electronic media in favour of social media for electioneering (Ekwueme & Folarin 2017). The 2019 General Elections in Nigeria, where the two leading candidates, President Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressive Congress and former Vice President Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party, used social media as the major component of their campaigns, aptly illustrate the point that social media are seriously used for political polarization.

In Nigeria, the repulsive reliance on godfatherism is progressively giving way to the deliberate coercion of Nigerians to support political parties' and candidates through the smart structuring of campaign slogans and festering of misinformation on social media (Ezebuenyi & Ejezieh, 2012). This is because social media websites like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and even blogs are effective instruments for disseminating information, advancing free speech, strengthening democratic principles, enabling public participation in politics and government, and improving brand awareness (Akinyetun et al, 2021). Democracy depends on the ability of the populace to learn about, comprehend, and deliberate on public issues. While social media gives people new ways to obtain information, express their opinions,

and take part in democratic processes, it can also undermine democracy by falsifying information, encouraging fake stories, and making it easier to manipulate the political system (Costica, 2021).

Social media's rise in Nigeria has made it easier to spread political information throughout the nation, but it has also made it easier to spread political misinformation. This is apparent during presidential elections, when politicians distort the truth to harm their rivals' reputations. Social media are now frequently used to inform or misinform the public about political issues. In the words of Smith and Anderson (2018), social media's support for online content production, posting, access, and replication makes it possible for political misinformation to propagate. This is not to say that social media are bad; rather, it just means that it can occasionally be utilized to hurt particular politicians during an election. For instance, incorrect information that affects how democracies function has been disseminated through Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other internet platforms. Marcos (2015) argues that social media may unite different political parties or politicians to advertise their messages and political potentials, and their power has caused a remarkable improvement on the method of political mobilization formerly used. Kristina and Ernesto (2022) states that social media misinformation has been used to incite violence, support the development of political unrest, and encourage instability.

Even if they are not directly to blame, social media misinformation may also play a role in citizens' declining levels of interest in politics. The ability of people to create and express political opinions might be harmed by the dissemination of misleading information on social media (distortion of political views and preferences). Despite mounting evidence that people are regularly exposed to political misinformation online, it is challenging to determine how misinformation actually affects people's opinions and preferences. Although it appears that disinformation's reach and impact have been overstated, there is evidence that it has harmful impacts in particular situations and on particular populations. Disinformation can be used to persuade or mislead voters and to mobilize or demobilize persons to vote, which, under some circumstances, may determine the results of elections, this is known as distortion of electoral outcomes (Costica, 2021).

The moral implication of social media use in politics is obvious. The pervasiveness of fake news, misinformation, and systematic disregard for ethical standard governing political communication make them stand out as new lows in public and political debates. Fake news, partial truths, and malicious lies come in all shapes and sizes on social media. It was occasionally difficult to tell bogus news from true news during recent elections. Character slander and vulgar words were commonplace. As an illustration, one of the most notable pieces of false information spread during the 2019 election campaigns was that President Buhari was actually a Sudanese impostor named Jibril, despite the president's numerous and vehement denials to the information (Dakuku, 2022).

Given that developed democracies are also involved in spreading false information, disinformation on social media is neither a recent phenomenon nor peculiar to the Nigerian political sphere (Vosoughi, Roy & Alan, 2018, Alcott & Gentzow, 2016). Social media misinformation supported the 2016 US presidential elections, which helped Donald Trump win the presidency (Vosoughi, Roy & Alan, 2018, Alcott & Gentzow, 2016). Studies have been done to examine how misinformation affects elections. Some of these studies revealed that a sizable portion of American adults were exposed to false rumors before the 2016 presidential election, and a number of those who read such rumors had a significant impact on that election.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical foundation of this study is Conspiracy Theory. The academic interest in Conspiracy Theory first emerged in the 1930s as part of psycho-historical examinations into the emergence of authoritarianism. This line of research was continued throughout the 1950s and had an effect on the public's view of the issues since it received a lot of media coverage. All of these early researches share the common attribute of pathologizing Conspiracy Theories and their proponents. In *American Politics* (1965), Hofstadter argued in a paranoid manner that this condition is not an individual pathology but rather has its roots in social struggle, which heightens worries and anxieties and feeds status disputes between opposing factions.

Conspiracy Theories stem from a generalized impression of harm to one's society, culture, way of life, etc. Conspiracy Theory is an explanation for an occurrence or circumstance that suggests a plot by evil and powerful organizations, frequently with political motivations. The phrase has a pejorative meaning that suggests the argument for a conspiracy is based on bias or insufficient data. Conspiracy Theory refers to a hypothetical conspiracy having particular characteristics, frequently those that differ from the accepted wisdom among knowledgeable historians, scientists, and journalists. Studies have connected political cynicism and authority mistrust with believing in conspiracies.

Conspiracy Theories have a long history of being associated with prejudice, deceit, witch hunts, wars, and genocides. They were cited as justification by Timothy McVeigh and Anders Breivik as well as by governments like Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and Turkey, and are frequently held in high regard by those who carry out terrorist attacks. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, conspiracy theories once reserved for niche audiences became widely accepted in mainstream media, the internet, and social media. They are prevalent and often held beliefs around the world, with some even being shared by the majority of people. Conspiracy Theory is suitable for this study because those who deliberately accept misinformation for political polarization have conspired to give the society a bad leader. Meanwhile, any political or candidate who wants to be favoured through misinformation is not in the right position to win election, and if he eventually wins, he will continue with corruption.

**Methodology**

This study adopted survey research design and the data were gathered through questionnaire. Out of 28,514,235 population of study, sample of 385 respondents was selected through Australian Calculator. Firstly, simple random technique was used in selecting three states from the six states of South-west, Nigeria. The reason for using simple random technique was to avail every state the chance of being selected as part of the sample. Thus, Lagos, Ogun and Oyo States were selected. One Local Government Area (LGA) was further selected from each of the selected states, making it three Local Government Areas. Simple random technique was also used to give every LGA the chance of being selected as a sample member. At this point, Amuwo-Odofin was selected from Lagos State, Obafemi-Owode from Ogun State and Ona-Ara from Oyo State. Two communities were purposively selected from each of the selected LGA making it six communities. The rationale behind using purposive sampling was to select communities where social media users could be found in large numbers. Copies of the Questionnaire were administered thus: Alakija=64, Abule-Ado=64, both in Amuwo-Odofin LGA, Lagos State; Ibafo=64, Mowe=64 both in Obafemi-Owode LGA, Ogun State; Agugu=64, Oremeji=65 both in Ona-Ara LGA, Oyo State. However, 378 copies of the questionnaire were retrieved from respondents.

**Data Presentation and Analysis**

**Table 1: Audience level of exposure to social media political misinformation**

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Very high level	205	54.2%
High level	103	27.2%
Average level	37	9.8%
Low level	18	4.8%
Very low level	15	3.10%
Can't say	0	0%
Total	378	100

Source: Field survey

The data presented on table 1 above portray that 205 (54.2%) respondents which is the majority said that they were exposed to social media political misinformation at a very high level, 103 (27.2%) of

them reported that they were exposed to social media political misinformation at high level, 37 (9.8%) respondents ticked that they were exposed to social media political misinformation at average level, 18 (4.8%) respondents said that they were exposed to social media political misinformation at low level and 15 (3.10%) respondents maintained that they were exposed to social media political misinformation at a very low.

**Table 2: Frequency of exposure to social media political misinformation**

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Daily	32	8.4%
Weekly	64	16.9%
Biweekly	68	17.10%
Monthly	107	28.3%
Bimonthly	42	11.1%
Occasionally	47	12.4%
Seldomly	18	4.8%
Can't say	0	0%
Total	378	100

Source: Field survey

The data recorded on table 2 above depict that 32 (8.4%) respondents said that they were exposed to social media political misinformation on daily basis, 64 (16.9%) of them ticked that they were exposed to social media political misinformation on weekly basis, 68 (17.10%) respondents were of the opinion that they were exposed to social media political misinformation biweekly, 107 (28.3%) respondents which is the majority answered that they were exposed to social media political misinformation on monthly basis, 42 (11.1%) respondents said that they were exposed to social media political misinformation bimonthly, 47 (12.4%) respondents maintained that they were exposed to social media political misinformation occasionally, and 18 (4.8%) respondents said that they were exposed to social media political misinformation seldomly.

**Table 3: Social media political misinformation and level of acceptance**

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Very high level	211	55.8%
High level	93	24.6%
Average level	41	10.8%
Very low level	19	5.0%
Low level	14	3.7%
Can't say	0	0%
Total	378	100

Source: Field survey

The data presented on table 3 above express that majority, 211 (55.8%) respondents said that they accept social media political misinformation for political polarisation at a very high level, 93 (24.6%) respondents reported that they accept social media political misinformation for political polarisation at

high level, 41 (10.8%) respondents believed that they accept social media political misinformation for political polarisation at average level, 19 (5.0%) respondents held that they accept social media political misinformation for political polarisation at a very low level, and 142 (3.7%) respondents ticked that they accept social media political misinformation for political polarisation at low level.

**Table 4: Perceived relevance of social media political misinformation**

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Readiness to win	133	35.2%
Party popularity	56	14.8%
Massive support	21	5.6%
Candidate's credibility	17	4.5%
Candidate's popularity	151	39.9%
Can't say	0	0%
Total	378	100

Source: Field survey

The data recorded on table 4 express that 133 (35.2%) respondents were of the opinion that political misinformation on social media shows readiness to win election by a candidate or political party which a particular misinformation favours, 56 (14.8%) respondents maintained that political misinformation on social media shows a party's popularity, 21 (5.6%) respondents ticked that political misinformation on social media depicts a massive support for the person or party which the story favours, 17 (4.5%) respondents said that political misinformation on social media shows candidate's credibility and 151 (39.9%) respondents which is the majority ticked that political misinformation on social media is an indication of a candidate's popularity.

**Table 5: Social media political misinformation and its effect on election**

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Electoral violence	61	16.1%
Apathy	23	6.1%
Electing mediocre into office	138	36.5%
Electoral rigging	27	7.1%
Cancelation of election	42	11.1%
Postponement of election date	24	6.3%
Tension on polling day	63	16.7%
Can't say	0	0%
Total	378	100

Source: Field survey

The data recorded on table 5 above show that 61 (16.1%) respondents said that social media political misinformation always causes electoral violence, 23 (6.1%) of them said that social media political misinformation causes voter apathy, 138 (36.5%) respondents said that social media political misinformation makes voters to elect mediocre into electoral positions, 27 (7.1%) respondents chose that social media political misinformation results to rigging, 42 (11.1%) of them ticked that social media

political misinformation leads to cancellation of election, 24 (6.3%) respondents were of the opinion that social media political misinformation causes postponement of election date, and 63 (16.7%) respondents said that social media political misinformation generates tension on the polling day.

**Table 6: Socialmedia political misinformation and electoral conflicts**

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Conflict amongst politicians	47	12.4%
Conflict amongst political parties	18	4.8%
Conflict amongst supporters	11	2.9%
Conflict amongst ethnic groups	67	17.7%
Conflict between the two religions	158	41.8%
Conflict amongst candidates	77	20.4%
Can't say	0	0%
Total	378	100

Source: Field survey

The content of table 6 above express that 47 (12.4%) respondents reported that social media political misinformation causes conflict amongst politicians, 18 (4.8%) of the respondents said that social media political misinformation causes conflict amongst political parties, 11 (2.9%) respondents were of the opinion that social media political misinformation causes conflict amongst political supporters, 67 (17.7%) respondents said that social media political misinformation causes conflict amongst the ethnic groups, majority of the respondents 158 (41.8%) said that social media political misinformation causes conflict between the two major religions groups in Nigeria, 77 (20.4%) respondents were of the opinion that social media political misinformation causes conflict amongst party candidates.

### Discussion of Findings

The data presented on table 1 portray that majority of the respondents (54.2%) said that they were exposed to social media political misinformation at a very high level, (27.2%) of them reported that they were exposed to social media political misinformation at high level, (9.8%) respondents believed that they were exposed to social media political misinformation at average level, (4.8%) respondents held that they were exposed to social media political misinformation at low level and (3.10%) respondents maintained that they were exposed to social media political misinformation at a very low. This result shows that the audience were always exposed to political misinformation on social media to large extent. These findings corroborate the assertions by (Flynn, Nyhan & Reifler, 2017; Lazer et al. 2018), which portray that despite the lengthy history of false information and incorrect views in the political process, misinformation on social media has recently raised a great deal of concern about politics.

The data recorded on table 2 depict that (8.4%) respondents said that they were exposed to social media political misinformation on daily basis, (16.9%) of them ticked that they were exposed to social media political misinformation on weekly basis, (17.10%) respondents were of the opinion that they were exposed to social media political misinformation biweekly, (28.3%) respondents said that they were exposed to social media political misinformation on monthly basis, (11.1%) respondents reported that they were exposed to social media political misinformation bimonthly, (12.4%) respondents maintained that they were exposed to social media political misinformation occasionally and (4.8%) respondents said that they were exposed to social media political misinformation seldomly. This shows that the audience received political misinformation on regular basis. This is in line with statements by Dakuku (2022), which avers that observers have bemoaned how the nation's political discourse has fallen to new depths, with mudslinging, insults, and misinformation becoming the norm, even among seasoned

and prominent political figures. Political misinformation has become routine in an era of social media, where statements are produced, disseminated, and copied among populations with little to no critical digital literacy.

According to the data presented on table 3, majority (55.8%) of the respondents accept social media political misinformation as a guide for political polarisation at a very high level, (24.6%) respondents reported that they accept social media political misinformation as a guide for political polarisation at high level, (10.8%) respondents believed that they accept social media political misinformation as a guide for political polarisation at average level, (5.0%) respondents said that they accept social media political misinformation as a guide for political polarisation at a very low level, (3.7%) respondents expressed that they accept social media political misinformation as a guide for political polarisation at low level. This result shows that audience deliberately accept social media political misinformation as a guide for political polarization. These findings also corroborate the assertion by Dakuku (2022), which express that by the 2019 presidential election, social media had matured, and instead of young millennials and young adults dominating that arena, we saw that even older people were turning to it for political news and discussions, accepting their propaganda.

The data recorded on table 4 express that (35.2%) respondents were of the opinion that political misinformation on social media shows readiness to win election by a candidate or political party which the story favours, (14.8%) respondents maintained that political misinformation on social media shows a party's popularity, (5.6%) respondents ticked that political misinformation on social media depicts a massive support for the person or party which the story favours, (4.5%) respondents said that political misinformation on social media shows a candidate's credibility, and (39.9%) respondents which is the majority ticked that political misinformation on social media is an indication of a candidate's popularity. The entire findings depict that people deliberately accept political misinformation on social media. Only (4.5%) respondents believed that political misinformation on social media is a sign of a candidate's credibility.

This means that there is no rational point in accepting social media political misinformation for political polarization rather than prejudice. This is in tandem with views of conspiracy theorists. The majority of conspiracy theorists, however, are not pathological, according to the current scientific consensus. This is because Conspiracy Theories have a long history of being associated with prejudice, deceit, witch hunts, wars, and genocides. They were cited as justification by Timothy McVeigh and Anders Breivik as well as by governments like Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and Turkey, and are frequently held in high regard by those who carry out terrorist attacks.

The data recorded on table 5 show that (16.1%) respondents said that social media political misinformation causes electoral violence, (6.1%) of them were of the opinion that social media political misinformation causes voter apathy, (36.5%) respondents ticked that social media political misinformation makes voters to elect mediocre into electoral positions, (7.1%) respondents chose that social media political misinformation results to rigging, (11.1%) of them ticked that social media political misinformation leads to cancellation of election, (6.3%) respondents were of the opinion that social media political misinformation causes postponement of election date, and (16.7%) respondents said that social media political misinformation generates tension on the polling day. These findings show that social media political misinformation causes different problems to electoral process.

Egbunike (2019) asserts that rather than decreasing in Nigeria, the practice of instigating electoral violence through social media has persisted. Misinformation, internet propaganda, and more alarmingly, ethnic hate speech, were ubiquitous in the run-up to the 2019 elections and contributed to a climate of mistrust, as shown by the never-ending social media banter that served as a key arena for political campaigns. As a result of the widespread social media disinformation, accusations, and denials, President Buhari was reportedly thought to have passed away and been replaced by a duplicate or clone, while his leading rival Alhaji Atiku Abubakar was allegedly planning to hand out food and cash at a

political rally in addition to purportedly brokering a deal with Boko Haram insurgents in exchange for land and oil. This kind of misinformation can lead to apathy or electoral violence.

In his own contributions, Costica (2021) adduce that, while social media gives people new ways to obtain information, express their opinions, and take part in democratic processes, it can also undermine democracy by falsifying information, encouraging fake stories, and making it easier to manipulate the political system. He further adumbrates that, even if they are not directly to blame, social media misinformation may also play a role in citizens' declining levels of interest in politics. The ability of people to create and express political opinions might be harmed by the dissemination of misleading information on social media. Disinformation can be used to persuade or mislead voters and to mobilize or demobilize persons to vote, which, under some circumstances, may determine the results of elections.

Vosoughi, Roy and Alan, 2018; Alcott and Gentzow (2016) found that social media supported the 2016 US presidential elections, which helped Donald Trump win the presidency. Studies have been done to examine how misinformation affects elections. Some of these studies indicate that a sizable portion of American adults were exposed to false rumors before the 2016 presidential election, and a number of those who read such rumors had a significant impact on that election. The contents of table 6 above express that (12.4%) respondents reported that social media political misinformation causes conflict amongst politicians, (4.8%) of the respondents said that social media political misinformation causes conflict amongst political parties, (2.9%) respondents were of the opinion that social media political misinformation causes conflict amongst political supporters, (17.7%) respondents said that social media political misinformation causes conflict amongst the ethnic groups, majority of the respondents (41.8%) said that social media political misinformation causes conflict between the two major religions groups in Nigeria, and (20.4%) respondents were of the opinion that social media political misinformation causes conflict amongst party candidates. These results show that social media misinformation causes different types of conflicts. Contrarily, Marcos (2015) avers that social media may unite different political parties or politicians to advertise their messages and political potentials, and their power has caused a remarkable improvement on the method of political mobilization formerly used. Challenging the concept above, Kristina and Ernesto (2022) bemoan that social media misinformation has been used to incite violence, support the development of political unrest, and encourage instability.

## Conclusion

In line with the data gathered, this study concludes that South-west residents are highly exposed to social media political misinformation. Some of them received social media political misinformation on daily basis but majority of them received social media political misinformation monthly. South-west residents highly accepted social media political misinformation for political polarization. The major reasons for such acceptance are: misinformation shows readiness to win election, and such misinformation in favour of a particular candidate or political party is an indication of popularity and wider supports.

## Recommendations

In line with the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

- Those who use social media for political polarization should look for credible political stories and not misinformation.
- Social media audience should stop accepting misinformation for political polarization as this would make them elect mediocre into political position
- The social media political followers in Nigeria should learn to support candidates and not political parties, this will make them vote wisely.
- Social media political influencers who campaign for candidates should always report credible stories of their candidates rather than misinformation. This will enable them sell their candidates.

- Nigerian government should make laws prohibiting political misinformation on social media, and therefore state the punishment for any offender.
- Social media users should learn not to take political misinformation as a sign of readiness to win election or popular support, because sometimes people deliberately want to use misinformation to cause problems.

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