



## Implications of Social Media Disinformation and False Narratives for Public Opinion among Nigerian Electorate

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** In recent years, the pervasive spread of disinformation and false narratives on social media has emerged as a significant societal challenge. Disinformation campaigns have increasingly distorted public perception, shaped political affiliations, and fueled divisions on critical societal issues. This phenomenon threatens to erode societal trust, compromise democratic values, and disrupt public cohesion.

**Objective:** This study aimed to examine the implications of social media disinformation on public opinion, focusing on how false narratives influence societal perceptions, political alignments, and collective actions.

**Method:** This paper employs a qualitative research methodology, examining various empirical studies and secondary data sources. Peer-reviewed journal articles, credible online publications, and theoretical sources published after 2000 were selected to provide relevant insights

**Results:** The findings revealed that social media disinformation poses a significant threat to societal cohesion by amplifying cognitive biases, fostering echo chambers, and distorting public opinion. Social media algorithms were identified as critical enablers of the rapid dissemination and persistence of sensationalized and false content, often undermining democratic processes.

**Conclusion:** The study concluded that the widespread presence of social media disinformation presents profound challenges to public trust and societal stability. Left unaddressed, these issues could further weaken the foundations of democratic governance and civil society.

**Unique Contribution:** This study provides a comprehensive understanding of how digital disinformation interacts with cognitive and technological factors to influence public opinion, offering actionable insights for mitigating its impact.

**Key Recommendations:** There is need for a more widespread digital and media literacy programmes to foster critical thinking and promote source verification, particularly among vulnerable demographics. It is also important to encourage social media platforms to disclose algorithmic operations, reduce the visibility of sensationalized content, and prioritize collaboration with independent fact-checkers to identify and flag false information. Again, it is desirable to introduce platform features designed to expose users to diverse viewpoints, thereby reducing the echo chamber effect. Finally, there is need to invest in further studies to develop and test effective fact-checking and intervention strategies, enabling evidence-based approaches to counter disinformation.

**Keywords** Social media, disinformation, false narratives, public opinion, media literacy



## **INTRODUCTION**

The influence of social media on public opinion has become one of the defining aspects of the modern digital age, with both positive and negative implications. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp have revolutionised communication, offering immediacy and accessibility that traditional media can seldom match. This shift has democratised information-sharing, enabling individuals to actively participate in public discourse by creating, sharing, and reshaping content. However, these platforms also allow for the rapid spread of disinformation and false narratives, often without adequate fact-checking or accountability (Farkas & Schou, 2020). In this context, disinformation—defined as deliberately misleading information intended to deceive audiences—has grown into a significant concern due to its potential to shape, distort, and influence public opinion on a massive scale.

The problem of social media disinformation is compounded by the reliance on algorithm-driven content recommendations. These algorithms prioritise engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and comments over content accuracy, favouring information that is likely to provoke strong reactions over that which is factually accurate. This design inadvertently favours sensationalist or polarising content, thus enhancing the visibility of false narratives (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). As a result, misinformation can be amplified at an unprecedented rate, reaching millions of users within hours and often outpacing efforts to fact-check or refute it. For instance, during political campaigns, disinformation has been shown to sway voter perceptions, ultimately affecting democratic processes (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Aligwe, Nwafor, & Alegu, 2018).

One of the most concerning aspects of disinformation on social media is its potential to alter public perception and create echo chambers. Echo chambers occur when users are exposed only to information that reinforces their pre-existing beliefs, fostering confirmation bias and polarised thinking. This phenomenon has been noted as a significant driver of disinformation's impact, as users become more entrenched in their views without encountering alternative perspectives (Pennycook & Rand, 2018). In these echo chambers, even blatantly false narratives can gain traction, especially when individuals lack the resources or motivation to verify the information they consume (Nwafor, et al., 2013; Odoemelam, & Nwafor, 2012).

False narratives on social media are not limited to political discourse but extend to issues of public health, climate change, and socio-economic policies, affecting various facets of public opinion. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, misinformation about virus transmission, treatment, and prevention proliferated across social media platforms, contributing to vaccine hesitancy and public distrust in healthcare systems. This spread of disinformation during a global crisis underscores the power of false narratives to shape societal responses to urgent issues, often with devastating consequences (Pennycook, McPhetres, Zhang, & Rand, 2020). In this way, disinformation has become a public health and safety issue as much as a media and political one.



The anonymity and rapid dissemination capabilities of social media also make it an attractive tool for malign actors. State-sponsored disinformation campaigns, cyber trolls, and other entities leverage these platforms to pursue specific agendas, destabilise societies, and undermine trust in democratic institutions. The spread of such narratives often goes undetected until considerable damage has been done, as these actors can exploit loopholes in platform moderation policies to evade detection and accountability. For instance, foreign interference in the 2016 US presidential election revealed how easily false information could be disseminated by actors with malicious intent, a scenario that has been replicated across various countries and elections (Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

Disinformation on social media not only influences public perception but also raises ethical and legal challenges. As platforms grapple with balancing free speech and information control, they often encounter resistance from users who oppose content moderation, viewing it as censorship. This debate over freedom of expression versus the need for reliable information has led to divided opinions on how best to regulate social media content. While some argue for stricter regulations and fact-checking measures to curb disinformation, others highlight the risks of limiting speech and the potential misuse of power by authorities (Fletcher et al., 2020). The lack of a unified approach to combating disinformation complicates efforts to address this issue effectively.

In addition, the design of social media platforms contributes to the spread of disinformation by encouraging rapid, surface-level engagement rather than in-depth exploration of topics. Features like “share” buttons and character-limited posts encourage users to spread information without fully processing or verifying it, favouring immediate, emotional reactions over critical thinking. This environment nurtures the spread of misinformation, as users are less likely to verify content that appeals to their emotions or pre-existing biases (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018). Consequently, the public's ability to critically assess information is diminished, further increasing susceptibility to disinformation.

The widespread impact of disinformation on public opinion also raises questions about media literacy and the role of education in preparing individuals to navigate complex information ecosystems (Nwafor, Odoemelam, & Chibuwe, 2014). As traditional sources of information, such as newspapers and television news, decline in influence, individuals increasingly rely on digital media to inform their perspectives. This shift necessitates a greater emphasis on media literacy skills, empowering users to assess information critically and identify potential sources of misinformation. Without these skills, the public remains vulnerable to manipulation by those who exploit social media's weaknesses (Pennycook & Rand, 2021).

Disinformation threatens societal cohesion by exploiting existing social and political divides, deepening polarisation, and undermining collective identity. In diverse societies like Nigeria, false narratives often inflame ethnic and religious tensions, escalating conflicts and weakening national unity (Farkas & Schou, 2020). The rapid proliferation of false information on social media



amplifies these effects, as disinformation spreads faster than verified facts, leaving little room for correction before it shapes public opinion. This is particularly evident in political contexts, where fabricated stories or manipulated statistics distort voter perceptions, compromise democratic processes, and erode trust in political institutions (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). Beyond politics, disinformation also impacts public health and safety, as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, where misinformation fostered vaccine hesitancy and resistance to public health measures, highlighting the urgent need to address its harmful effects (Pennycook et al., 2020).

The challenges posed by disinformation demand a multidisciplinary approach involving regulatory frameworks, technological interventions, and educational initiatives. Social media algorithms often reinforce false beliefs by creating echo chambers that limit exposure to diverse perspectives, fostering polarisation and reducing societal consensus (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Efforts to counteract disinformation, such as fact-checking measures, are often insufficient due to the volume of false content and the challenge of balancing freedom of expression with regulation (Farkas & Schou, 2020). Addressing these issues requires tackling the root causes of false narratives and promoting media literacy to build public resilience against disinformation. By understanding how disinformation influences public perception and the mechanisms driving its spread, policymakers, educators, and social media platforms can work together to mitigate its negative impact, preserve democratic discourse, and strengthen social cohesion.

## **CONCEPTUAL REVIEW**

To fully understand the implications of social media disinformation and false narratives for public opinion, it is essential to explore each concept individually: social media, disinformation, false narratives, and public opinion. Each concept contributes to a nuanced understanding of how information flows and influences perceptions in the digital age.

### **Social Media**

Social media platforms are digital spaces where individuals share information, engage in discourse, and connect with others globally. These platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, have transformed communication by providing instant access to diverse sources of information and enabling real-time interactions (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Unlike traditional media, where content is controlled and moderated by journalists and editors, social media allows virtually anyone to become an information creator or distributor, leading to an unprecedented level of information flow. This democratic nature of social media means users can share personal experiences, report on local events, and engage with others' content, creating a dynamic and multifaceted communication environment.

The open structure of social media also enables rapid information dissemination and engagement, allowing messages to "go viral" within minutes. Algorithms that prioritise highly engaging content contribute to this, ensuring that popular topics reach a broader audience, often regardless of the information's accuracy or origin. These features have made social media a powerful tool for



amplifying voices, including those of marginalised groups who may lack access to mainstream media channels. However, the viral potential also allows for the rapid spread of disinformation and false narratives, as sensationalist or emotionally charged posts gain traction more quickly than measured, fact-based content (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).

Moreover, social media platforms influence the visibility of content through sophisticated algorithms designed to prioritise content likely to engage users. This process inadvertently fosters echo chambers and filter bubbles, where users are predominantly exposed to information that aligns with their existing beliefs and preferences (Pariser, 2011). As a result, individuals are less likely to encounter information that challenges their viewpoints, leading to the reinforcement of biases and potentially inaccurate beliefs. This mechanism allows disinformation to flourish, as false narratives that fit within a user's beliefs are more likely to be engaged with and spread within their network, shaping their perceptions and attitudes.

The anonymity afforded by social media can also enable users to spread disinformation without accountability. Many platforms allow for anonymous accounts, making it challenging to trace the origin of false narratives. Troll farms and bots often exploit this anonymity to disseminate disinformation widely, further distorting public discourse. Additionally, anonymity allows users to avoid social consequences for spreading misleading content, which can embolden them to engage in this behaviour without regard for its impact on others. Thus, while social media has redefined communication, it also introduces risks for information integrity.

### **Disinformation**

Disinformation is defined as the intentional spread of false information with the purpose of deceiving or manipulating audiences. Unlike misinformation, which refers to incorrect information shared without harmful intent, disinformation is a deliberate effort to mislead, often for political, financial, or ideological reasons (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Disinformation can be highly sophisticated, employing partial truths, misleading contexts, and emotionally charged narratives to influence public perception. This deceptive practice has existed throughout history, but social media has amplified its reach and impact, making it a prominent issue in contemporary digital communication.

The intent behind disinformation often varies depending on the objective of those who disseminate it. Political actors may use disinformation to discredit opponents, sway public opinion, or incite division among voters. This tactic has become especially prominent in election periods, where false stories or exaggerated claims are strategically shared to manipulate voter perceptions and affect electoral outcomes (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Similarly, financial motives drive disinformation in cases where individuals or organisations profit from high web traffic through sensationalist and misleading stories, often in clickbait-style content. This financially motivated disinformation can distort public understanding of issues ranging from health to the economy.



Disinformation campaigns are increasingly sophisticated, utilising advanced technologies and data analytics to target specific audiences effectively. Techniques such as deepfakes and doctored images allow for the creation of seemingly credible content that distorts reality in subtle ways. For instance, altered videos or fabricated images can create false impressions of public figures or events, fuelling public misconceptions. Social media platforms often struggle to keep pace with these technological advancements, as the detection of disinformation requires resources and expertise that platforms do not always deploy sufficiently.

The consequences of disinformation are wide-ranging, influencing public discourse, public trust, and social cohesion. As disinformation becomes embedded in social media, it has the potential to erode trust in institutions, particularly when the false narratives target government, health organisations, or the media itself. Prolonged exposure to disinformation can also create cynicism and confusion, as individuals become uncertain about what is true. This erosion of trust can weaken democratic structures, as citizens who no longer believe in reliable sources are less likely to engage in informed civic activities. The effects of disinformation thus extend far beyond individual users, influencing societal stability and governance.

### **False Narratives**

False narratives are coherent and seemingly logical stories created around distorted facts or outright falsehoods. These narratives, unlike random pieces of misinformation, are constructed in a way that resonates with people's emotions, ideologies, or biases, making them more persuasive and memorable (Polletta, Chen, Gardner, & Motes, 2011). False narratives can exploit pre-existing social tensions or controversies, positioning themselves within a familiar cultural or ideological context. For instance, during public health crises, false narratives may emerge to frame medical advice as part of a conspiracy, influencing individuals to reject scientifically supported health measures.

False narratives are often appealing because they simplify complex issues into easily digestible stories that reinforce pre-existing beliefs. For example, narratives around vaccine hesitancy or climate change denial often simplify scientific uncertainty to suggest a grand conspiracy, making it easier for individuals to rationalise their scepticism. These narratives are particularly potent on social media, where they are shared in short, and impactful formats such as memes, quotes, and short videos. This simplicity and emotive appeal give false narratives an advantage over factually complex information, making them more likely to be consumed and shared.

Furthermore, false narratives are resistant to correction due to their alignment with cognitive biases. When individuals encounter information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs (confirmation bias), they are more likely to accept it without scrutiny. False narratives exploit this bias, as they are often crafted to resonate with particular ideological stances, rendering them more persuasive to those who hold similar views (Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook, 2017). This





entrenchment of belief can make it challenging for corrective information to dismantle the narrative once it has taken root.

The persistence of false narratives also demonstrates their social impact, as these stories often become ingrained in collective consciousness. Over time, individuals exposed to a false narrative repeatedly may come to accept it as fact, regardless of contradictory evidence. This phenomenon, known as the “illusory truth effect,” highlights how repetition alone can render false information believable. When social media perpetuates false narratives over extended periods, they influence not just individual opinions but also community perceptions, affecting public consensus on major societal issues.

### **Public Opinion**

Public opinion refers to the aggregation of individuals' attitudes and beliefs on specific issues or topics within a society. Traditionally shaped by public discourse, media, and interpersonal communication, public opinion reflects collective attitudes that can influence policymaking, societal norms, and cultural attitudes (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). In democratic societies, public opinion is seen as a foundation for representative governance, with politicians and decision-makers often taking public attitudes into account. With the rise of social media, the formation and measurement of public opinion have evolved, as social media platforms have become spaces where public sentiment is both expressed and shaped.

Social media has transformed the way public opinion is formed by enabling users to voice their views widely and engage with others, creating a feedback loop that can quickly shift collective attitudes. Platforms such as Twitter and Facebook serve as “public squares” where discussions about social, political, and economic issues take place in real time. However, the dynamics of these discussions can skew public opinion, as the most visible opinions are not always representative of the broader population. Viral content and trending topics often create the illusion of widespread agreement or controversy, shaping perceptions of public consensus even if the views represented are from a minority.

The influence of disinformation and false narratives on public opinion is significant, as these narratives can sway individuals' views by presenting misleading information as fact. Public opinion can be influenced not only by what issues people are exposed to but also by how these issues are framed and contextualised. When false narratives become mainstream on social media, they can distort public opinion by presenting inaccurate interpretations as widely held beliefs. This distorted perception of consensus can prompt individuals to adopt these false views as their own, believing them to be more widely accepted than they actually are.

Finally, the polarisation of public opinion due to social media disinformation and false narratives raises concerns for social cohesion and informed civic engagement. Exposure to false narratives



can deepen ideological divides, as individuals may adopt extreme views or become more entrenched in their biases. This polarisation of opinion has far-reaching implications for democracy, as consensus on critical issues becomes more difficult to achieve. In the long term, the shaping of public opinion through disinformation threatens the foundation of informed debate, ultimately impacting the quality of democratic decision-making and public trust in governance.

### **Opinion Review**

The spread of disinformation and false narratives on social media has prompted diverse opinions among scholars, policymakers, and the general public. These opinions reflect concerns about the effects of false information on public opinion, democracy, and social stability, as well as discussions on potential solutions. In this section, the differing views on social media's role, accountability, user responsibility, and the broader implications of disinformation on society are examined.

Firstly, some scholars argue that social media has democratized information by providing platforms for a multitude of voices, especially from groups historically marginalised in mainstream media (Merrill, 2018). In this view, social media serves as an equaliser, giving ordinary citizens a voice in public discourse. However, this democratic benefit also comes with risks. Critics argue that the unrestricted flow of information on social media has led to the propagation of false narratives, making it difficult for users to distinguish between credible information and deliberate disinformation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). This dichotomy between freedom of expression and the spread of misinformation fuels a contentious debate over social media's role in public opinion formation.

Another critical viewpoint is that social media platforms should be held accountable for the disinformation spread on their networks. Advocates of this stance argue that platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have created and profited from systems that amplify false information, thus bearing responsibility for the consequences. They assert that platforms' algorithms, designed to prioritise engaging content, often favour sensational or misleading information because it generates more interaction, whether positive or negative (Gillespie, 2018). Consequently, calls for platform accountability include demands for better moderation practices, transparent algorithms, and the development of technology to identify and flag disinformation effectively.

On the other hand, some policymakers and tech industry representatives argue that imposing strict regulations on social media would infringe upon free speech and limit the platforms' ability to foster open discussion. They believe that censorship or algorithmic regulation could inadvertently suppress legitimate voices, especially those of activists and minority groups. This opinion highlights the tension between regulating false narratives to protect public opinion and preserving a digital space where diverse opinions can be freely expressed. These policymakers argue that





instead of content suppression, platforms should focus on educating users on critical thinking and media literacy, equipping them with skills to discern credible sources from misinformation (West, 2019).

A further opinion within the public discourse is the question of individual responsibility in countering disinformation. This viewpoint argues that while social media platforms have a role to play, users themselves should be accountable for verifying the accuracy of information before sharing it. Proponents of this view emphasize the need for personal digital literacy and critical thinking skills, suggesting that informed and vigilant users are key to reducing the spread of false narratives. They contend that while platforms can implement moderation policies, disinformation will persist if users remain unaware of the techniques used in crafting persuasive falsehoods. However, critics of this approach note that placing responsibility solely on users overlooks the structural issues within social media that encourage engagement with sensationalist content.

Public opinion research indicates a growing distrust in information shared on social media, with individuals often sceptical of content originating from unfamiliar sources or viral stories (Pew Research Center, 2021). Some argue that this scepticism is beneficial, as it indicates users are increasingly aware of the potential for misinformation. However, this distrust can also have adverse effects, leading to cynicism towards all information sources, including credible ones. Such scepticism may erode trust in genuine news sources and weaken public consensus, complicating collective decision-making on critical societal issues like public health and elections.

In academic circles, some scholars argue that disinformation and false narratives exploit cognitive biases, such as confirmation bias, to solidify pre-existing beliefs, which then contribute to public opinion polarisation. Individuals tend to engage with content that aligns with their views and reject information that contradicts their beliefs, thus forming echo chambers that reinforce false narratives. This polarisation of opinions around specific issues contributes to ideological divides and hampers constructive dialogue (Sunstein, 2017). Critics of this viewpoint contend that although cognitive biases play a role, social media algorithms are the primary drivers of echo chambers and should therefore be a focal point for intervention.

Many commentators also discuss the broader societal implications of disinformation for democracy and social cohesion. Disinformation campaigns, particularly those related to political processes, have been shown to weaken trust in democratic institutions by sowing doubt about election legitimacy and public institutions' credibility. For instance, false narratives around elections or government decisions can result in widespread public disillusionment, with individuals distrusting the very institutions meant to serve them (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). This distrust has long-term implications for democracy, as citizens may withdraw from civic participation or become more susceptible to extremist viewpoints, believing that mainstream institutions no longer represent their interests.



Finally, some opinions focus on potential solutions, such as enhancing cooperation between governments, social media companies, and non-governmental organisations to combat disinformation. Advocates for this collaborative approach argue that solutions cannot rest solely with any single party; instead, a coordinated strategy involving education, policy reform, and technological innovation is essential. This perspective emphasises the importance of public-private partnerships in developing technological tools to identify disinformation, alongside government efforts to establish legal frameworks that balance free speech with accountability. Critics of this approach, however, warn that over-reliance on governmental interventions could lead to state overreach, censorship, and the potential misuse of disinformation regulation for political gain.

These diverse opinions reflect the complexity surrounding the issue of social media disinformation and its impact on public opinion. While there is a consensus on the need to address the consequences of disinformation, the varied perspectives underscore the challenges of finding effective and equitable solutions in a landscape marked by rapid technological change and shifting societal norms.

## **REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL STUDIES**

Empirical studies on social media disinformation and its effects on public opinion are vast and varied, reflecting the evolving challenges posed by digital misinformation in different societal contexts. Many studies reveal the correlation between social media exposure and the likelihood of encountering disinformation, as well as its impact on users' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour. For instance, a study by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) examined the prevalence of disinformation during the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, revealing how the spread of false stories significantly shaped public opinion. The study demonstrated that fabricated news stories had considerable engagement, with thousands of shares and interactions on social media platforms. This finding suggests a strong link between social media activity and exposure to false information, especially when stories align with existing political biases.

Another study conducted by Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018) explored the dissemination patterns of true and false information on Twitter. The researchers found that false information spreads more rapidly and broadly than truthful news, especially when related to sensational topics such as politics and natural disasters. According to the study, falsehoods were 70% more likely to be retweeted than factual stories, highlighting social media's vulnerability to disinformation. This phenomenon is attributed to the novelty and emotional appeal of sensationalised information, which captures user attention and encourages sharing, thereby reinforcing the spread of misinformation on public platforms.

A study by Guess, Nagler, and Tucker (2019) focused on understanding disinformation's influence on different demographic groups. They observed that older adults were particularly susceptible to sharing false news stories, a trend partly attributed to limited digital literacy and a lack of



familiarity with online verification techniques. The study's findings underscore the importance of digital literacy programs as a countermeasure to disinformation, particularly for demographics that may be more vulnerable to believing and spreading unverified information. The researchers also suggested targeted awareness campaigns to help mitigate disinformation among older populations, who may disproportionately shape public opinion on critical societal issues through their online activity.

Research by Pennycook and Rand (2019) examined the role of cognitive factors in the spread of disinformation, finding that individuals with lower cognitive reflection scores were more likely to believe false headlines. The study posited that susceptibility to disinformation is not merely a function of exposure but also hinges on individual differences in reasoning abilities. These findings imply that interventions focused on enhancing cognitive reflection and critical thinking skills could reduce the likelihood of disinformation's acceptance and spread. Consequently, the study recommended that educational initiatives incorporate critical thinking elements to improve resistance to false narratives on social media.

In a comparative study, Shu et al. (2020) analysed the differences in disinformation impact across various social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Their findings indicated that while disinformation thrives on all platforms, the manner of dissemination differs depending on each platform's user engagement dynamics. For example, Instagram's image-focused content may lead to rapid emotional reactions, making it an effective medium for visually-driven false narratives. Meanwhile, Twitter's retweeting and trending algorithms facilitate the rapid spread of sensational political disinformation. The study concluded that platform-specific strategies are necessary to combat misinformation effectively, as each social media network presents unique challenges in managing disinformation.

Further research by Cinelli et al. (2020) explored the impact of echo chambers on the persistence of disinformation. Their study showed that echo chambers—online spaces where users are exposed primarily to opinions that align with their own—intensify the effects of disinformation by reinforcing individuals' existing beliefs. Users within echo chambers are less likely to encounter corrective information, thus creating an environment in which false narratives flourish unchallenged. This research highlights the need for interventions that can break down echo chambers and expose users to a wider range of perspectives, thereby fostering a more balanced understanding of contentious issues.

Finally, a study by Bode and Vraga (2018) examined the effectiveness of fact-checking as a corrective measure against social media disinformation. They found that fact-checks, when timely and well-circulated, can significantly reduce the belief in and spread of false information. However, the study also noted the limitations of fact-checking, such as user distrust of fact-checking organisations or cognitive biases that make people resistant to corrections. Bode and



Vraga recommended that fact-checking initiatives be paired with media literacy campaigns to enhance their effectiveness, suggesting that correcting disinformation requires a multifaceted approach involving both technological and educational interventions.

These empirical studies collectively illustrate the multifaceted nature of social media disinformation and its profound effects on public opinion. They underscore the importance of tailored interventions—ranging from platform-specific solutions and cognitive training to media literacy and fact-checking initiatives—in mitigating the spread and influence of false narratives in today's digital society. The findings contribute to an evolving understanding of how social media disinformation shapes public discourse, stressing the need for ongoing research and proactive strategies to address this complex and dynamic issue.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study was anchored on the agenda-setting theory as propounded by McCombs and Shaw (1972). The theory posits that the media has significant influence over public opinion by determining the issues that receive the most attention. Although the theory was originally developed in the context of traditional media, it has gained new relevance in the age of social media. In a digital environment where information is abundant and constantly updating, social media platforms play a crucial role in setting the public agenda by amplifying certain topics over others. Disinformation can exploit this power, as topics receiving higher visibility on social media often align with individuals' perceptions of importance (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). When false narratives gain traction through repeated exposure, they have the power to influence public opinion on a massive scale, making agenda-setting an important framework for examining the role of disinformation on social media.

On social media, agenda-setting operates in tandem with algorithms that prioritise engaging content, which often includes sensationalist or emotionally charged disinformation. Unlike traditional media, where editorial boards determine the issues that appear in news cycles, social media agenda-setting is driven by user engagement, with algorithms amplifying topics that generate more likes, shares, or comments. This system creates an ideal environment for false narratives to take root and gain visibility, often before corrective information can reach the public. For instance, disinformation about political events or public health crises may receive more attention than verified information, simply because it is shared widely within social networks that value attention-grabbing content. Consequently, social media users may come to view these false narratives as critical issues, shaping their perceptions and priorities.

Agenda-setting theory also helps explain the power of "fake news" to shift public attention and influence what individuals consider pressing concerns. In the context of social media disinformation, the repeated presentation of misleading stories about events, people, or policies has the potential to skew public perception of reality. When disinformation about a particular issue consistently appears in users' feeds, the topic becomes more salient in the public mind, shaping



their sense of what issues are most important. This distorted view can lead to misplaced concerns, influencing public attitudes and sometimes even the focus of political debate and policy-making (Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

In terms of public opinion, the agenda-setting effect of disinformation on social media can have significant consequences for societal consensus. When social media consistently amplifies certain false narratives, these narratives can reshape individuals' beliefs and perceptions, often leading to polarisation. Users who consume similar disinformation over time may adopt more extreme or inaccurate views, ultimately altering public consensus on critical issues such as immigration, elections, and health policies. This effect of agenda-setting through social media thus not only influences individual opinions but can also lead to wider social divisions.

Lastly, agenda-setting theory illustrates the ways in which social media platforms contribute to the perceived legitimacy of false narratives. When users see disinformation gaining high engagement or visibility, they may assume the topic is credible or widely accepted, thus adopting it as part of their worldview. This leads to a "reinforcing spiral," where disinformation becomes increasingly difficult to dislodge from public opinion. In this context, agenda-setting underscores the need for interventions that disrupt the prominence of false narratives on social media platforms.

### **Framing Theory**

Framing theory, pioneered by Erving Goffman (1974) and later expanded by scholars such as Entman (1993), explores how media not only tells audiences *what* to think about but also *how* to interpret it. In the digital age, framing plays an essential role in the spread and impact of disinformation on social media. Framing occurs through the selective presentation of information, where particular aspects of an event or issue are highlighted to shape public perception. False narratives on social media often use framing techniques to influence how individuals interpret events, manipulate emotions, and instill specific biases. For example, disinformation surrounding political events may frame certain groups or ideologies as inherently problematic, shaping the narrative in a way that influences users' opinions and reinforces stereotypes (Entman, 1993).

In the context of social media disinformation, framing theory is particularly relevant due to the highly visual and narrative-driven nature of social media content. False narratives on social media are often framed through attention-grabbing images, memes, or videos that simplify complex issues, making them more accessible and emotionally resonant for users. This process of framing not only distorts the reality of the issue but also intensifies users' emotional responses, making them more likely to accept and share the disinformation without question. As a result, users may form opinions based on emotional appeals rather than factual understanding, furthering the spread and impact of false narratives.



Social media platforms amplify framing effects by allowing users to share and interact with content that reinforces specific frames, creating a form of collective reinforcement. When false information is framed in a way that aligns with users' pre-existing beliefs or biases, they are more likely to engage with and disseminate the content within their social networks. This selective exposure reinforces the framed narrative, creating an echo chamber effect where the disinformation is accepted as fact, regardless of its accuracy. This ability of framing to leverage individuals' cognitive biases and existing beliefs highlights why disinformation is so persuasive on social media, as it becomes a self-reinforcing cycle of misinformation.

Additionally, framing theory highlights the role of influencers and opinion leaders in shaping the interpretation of disinformation on social media. Certain figures, such as celebrities, politicians, or social media influencers, can frame narratives in ways that resonate with large audiences. When these figures endorse a particular narrative—whether accurate or false—their followers are likely to adopt the same frame, amplifying the disinformation's reach and influence. This phenomenon was particularly notable during the COVID-19 pandemic, where some public figures framed the virus as exaggerated or the vaccine as unsafe, leading to widespread public misconceptions (Pennycook et al., 2020). Such framing by influential figures can thus shape the overall discourse on critical issues, impacting public opinion at large.

Furthermore, framing theory reveals the power of language and terminology in shaping disinformation. The use of specific language to frame a narrative—such as “hoax,” “scandal,” or “freedom”—influences how users interpret the information, often imbuing it with ideological connotations. Disinformation on social media frequently uses charged language to appeal to users' emotions, creating a sense of urgency or moral outrage. This approach not only attracts attention but also fosters emotional investment, making users more likely to share the disinformation within their networks. Framing in this way shifts public opinion by aligning users' views with specific ideological or emotional frames, rather than objective analysis.

Lastly, framing theory underscores the difficulty in countering disinformation once it has taken hold in public opinion. Corrective information often lacks the same emotional appeal or simplicity as disinformation, making it less effective in reversing entrenched false beliefs. This creates a persistent challenge in combating disinformation, as attempts to correct it may be viewed as biased or less credible. The framing effect thus highlights a critical aspect of the disinformation problem: not only does social media facilitate the spread of false narratives, but it also frames them in ways that make them more resilient to correction, entrenching their impact on public opinion over time. In conclusion, agenda-setting and framing theories both offer essential insights into how social media disinformation and false narratives shape public opinion. While agenda-setting highlights the power of visibility and repetition in determining issue salience, framing theory focuses on the interpretive angles that make disinformation compelling and difficult to counter. Together, these theories underscore the complex dynamics through which social media platforms influence public perception, illustrating why false narratives have such a lasting impact on societal beliefs and attitudes.





## **METHOD**

This paper employs a qualitative research methodology, examining various empirical studies and secondary data sources. Peer-reviewed journal articles, credible online publications, and theoretical sources published after 2000 were selected to provide relevant insights.

## **DISCUSSION**

Social media disinformation and false narratives have substantial implications for shaping public opinion, as highlighted by the empirical studies reviewed. These findings demonstrate that the widespread accessibility and engagement-driven algorithms of social media amplify the dissemination and impact of false information across diverse demographic groups. The ramifications are profound, including the potential to mislead the public, distort democratic processes, and erode trust in credible sources. These outcomes align with prior studies, such as those by Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018), which emphasise the role of social media in creating informational echo chambers. This convergence underscores the urgent need to address disinformation to safeguard the integrity of public discourse and prevent long-term societal harm. One critical issue highlighted by these studies is the role of social media algorithms in promoting disinformation. Algorithms prioritise content likely to generate high engagement, which inadvertently favours sensationalised and emotionally charged falsehoods over less provocative, factual content (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). This trend is consistent with the findings of Bakshy et al. (2015), who observed that such algorithmic dynamics exacerbate exposure to disinformation while suppressing credible sources, ultimately skewing public opinion. The implications of these findings are significant, as they reveal a systematic bias inherent in content delivery systems, further entrenching the spread of falsehoods. Addressing this issue requires rethinking the design of social media algorithms to prioritise factual content and reduce the amplification of sensational disinformation. This strategy, however, must balance mitigating disinformation with concerns about free speech, as other studies, including Gillespie (2018), have warned of potential overreach by platforms.

Psychological and cognitive biases also play a pivotal role in the spread of disinformation. Cognitive factors such as confirmation bias and limited cognitive reflection predispose individuals to accept and share false information, particularly when it aligns with their pre-existing beliefs (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). This finding resonates with the work of Nyhan and Reifler (2010), who noted the persistence of false beliefs in polarised environments. The implications of these biases are far-reaching, as they exacerbate ideological divides and make efforts to correct misinformation increasingly difficult. However, unlike previous studies that focus predominantly on identifying biases, Pennycook and Rand propose educational interventions to enhance critical thinking and cognitive reflection. This approach aligns with findings by Roozenbeek and van der Linden (2019), who demonstrated the effectiveness of "prebunking" strategies in inoculating individuals against disinformation.



The reviewed studies also highlight demographic vulnerabilities to disinformation, particularly among older adults. Research by Guess, Nagler, and Tucker (2019) shows that older users are disproportionately more likely to share disinformation, often due to lower digital literacy and limited familiarity with verification techniques. These findings mirror those of Hargittai et al. (2010), who found similar trends in digital disparities among older populations. The implications are significant, as they suggest that generic interventions may fail to address the unique needs of this demographic. Instead, targeted initiatives, such as digital literacy training tailored for older users, could help reduce the spread of disinformation within this group. This finding is consistent with previous work by Schreurs et al. (2017), which advocates for age-specific digital education programmes to bridge gaps in digital competence.

Echo chambers on social media further complicate the disinformation landscape. These insular environments, where users are exposed only to content that aligns with their beliefs, reinforce false narratives by shielding individuals from opposing views or corrective information (Cinelli et al., 2020). This phenomenon aligns with Pariser's (2011) concept of the "filter bubble," which describes how algorithmic personalisation limits exposure to diverse perspectives. The implications are alarming, as these echo chambers foster polarisation and make it increasingly difficult to introduce corrective narratives. However, some studies, such as Bakshy et al. (2015), suggest that exposing users to diverse viewpoints can partially mitigate the effects of echo chambers. Strategies to achieve this include algorithmic adjustments to incorporate counterpoints into users' feeds, fostering a more balanced understanding of complex issues and reducing the grip of disinformation.

Fact-checking has emerged as a widely endorsed solution to combating disinformation, yet its limitations cannot be overlooked. While timely fact-checking has been shown to reduce belief in false narratives (Bode & Vraga, 2018), resistance to these efforts is widespread, with many perceiving fact-checking organisations as biased or politically motivated. This resistance aligns with findings by Garrett and Poulsen (2019), who noted similar distrust toward fact-checking initiatives. The implication here is that transparency in fact-checking processes is essential to enhance their credibility and efficacy. Moreover, integrating fact-checking with media literacy education, as suggested by Roozenbeek and van der Linden (2019), could strengthen public resilience against disinformation by equipping individuals with the skills to identify and verify information independently. Such approaches also align with the broader goals of fostering critical digital literacy in increasingly polarised societies.

Finally, platform accountability is critical in addressing the root causes of disinformation. Critics, including Gillespie (2018), argue that social media companies bear significant responsibility for amplifying false information through their platform designs. While some platforms have implemented content moderation measures, these efforts are often reactive rather than preventive, leaving significant gaps in the mitigation of disinformation. Recent studies, such as those by Napoli (2019), recommend proactive measures, including transparent algorithmic adjustments and



partnerships with fact-checking organisations. However, balancing these measures with freedom of speech remains a contentious issue. This tension is consistent with findings by Balkin (2018), who emphasises the need for nuanced regulatory frameworks that address platform accountability without infringing on users' rights.

In summary, the reviewed empirical studies underscore the multifaceted nature of social media disinformation and its profound implications for public opinion. From algorithmic dynamics to cognitive biases, demographic vulnerabilities, echo chambers, fact-checking, and platform accountability, each factor presents unique challenges and opportunities for intervention. While these findings align with existing literature on the subject, they also highlight critical gaps requiring further exploration. Addressing disinformation effectively will demand collaborative efforts from social media companies, policymakers, educators, and researchers to implement multi-pronged strategies. Such measures are essential not only to mitigate the spread of false narratives but also to preserve the integrity of public opinion and the democratic process in the digital age.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the prevalence of disinformation and false narratives on social media poses a serious threat to public opinion, societal stability, and democratic processes. Social media algorithms, cognitive biases, demographic vulnerabilities, and echo chambers accelerate the spread of false information, leading to distorted beliefs, attitudes, and actions. Combating these challenges requires a collective and systematic approach to safeguard the integrity of information and ensure a well-informed, resilient society.

1. Governments and educational institutions should prioritise nationwide digital literacy initiatives that focus on practical skills such as identifying credible sources, recognising bias, and critically analysing content. Tailored programmes for vulnerable groups, including older adults and young users, can significantly reduce susceptibility to false narratives.
2. Regulatory bodies should require social media companies to redesign algorithms that amplify misleading or sensational content. Platforms must ensure transparency in content ranking and actively collaborate with independent fact-checking organisations to flag and reduce the spread of disinformation.
3. Social media platforms should develop and implement features that promote exposure to diverse viewpoints, enabling users to engage with balanced content. Adjusting algorithms to prioritise a variety of perspectives on polarising issues can help weaken the stronghold of echo chambers and mitigate the entrenchment of false narratives.
4. Governments, universities, and private organisations should fund targeted research to identify effective strategies for fact-checking and disinformation mitigation. Evidence-based findings can support the creation of practical tools, guidelines, and campaigns to address the root causes and spread of false information.



### **Ethical Clearance**

This study did not involve human respondents or require direct data collection from participants. As a qualitative research paper, it relied solely on the analysis of secondary data and publicly available information. All sources used in the study were properly cited to ensure academic integrity.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest in the conduct or reporting of this study.

### **Authors' Contributions**

The study was conceptualised and designed by Isah Abdulazeez, while Zakari Omale was responsible for data collection. Chukwuebuni Oghenekome Florence carried out the data analysis and interpretation. The manuscript was initially prepared by Isah Abdulazeez. All authors actively contributed to revising the manuscript and provided their approval for the final version to be published.

### **Availability of Data and Materials**

The datasets generated and analysed during this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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