



Exposure and Trust in Online Political Messages in the Age of Social Media Algorithms among Voters in South-South, Nigeria

¹Isah Abdulazeez, ²Ofunne Ubaka Anthony, & ³Godwin Ukwuaniamaka Iwegbue

¹<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1994-5525>

²<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-1607-7929>

³<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-2227-4071>

*Correspondence Author: isahabdulazeez234@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Background: The increasing reliance on social media platforms for political communication has amplified the role of algorithmic curation in shaping voters' exposure to political messages. In South-South Nigeria, social media algorithms increasingly determine the visibility and frequency of political content, with implications for voter trust, belief formation and democratic participation.

Objective: This study examined the influence of social media algorithms on voters' exposure to online political messages and the level of trust such messages command among registered voters in South-South Nigeria.

Method: Anchored on the Uses and Gratifications Theory, the study adopted a descriptive survey design. The population comprised registered voters in South-South Nigeria, with Edo, Delta and Rivers States purposively selected due to their large voter populations, high urbanisation levels, active political engagement and widespread use of social media platforms. According to the Independent National Electoral Commission final voter register for the 2023 general elections, Edo State had 2,501,081 registered voters, Delta State 3,221,697 and Rivers State 3,537,190, giving a combined total of approximately 9,259,968 registered voters. A sample of 400 respondents was selected using a multistage purposive sampling technique. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire and analysed using frequency distributions, percentages and mean scores.

Result: Findings indicate a high level of exposure to algorithm curated political messages among voters (mean = 3.94), as well as substantial awareness of algorithmic recommendations (mean = 3.82). Trust in online political messages was moderate (mean = 3.24); however, repeated exposure significantly enhanced confidence and belief in political content (means ranging from 3.30 to 3.61). Demographic variables, particularly age (mean = 3.39) and educational attainment (mean = 3.80), significantly influenced trust in online political messages.

Conclusion: The study concludes that social media algorithms play a central role in contemporary political communication by shaping selective exposure patterns and influencing voter trust in political messages.

Unique Contribution: The study provides empirical insight into how algorithm driven content curation affects voter exposure and trust within the Nigerian electoral context, with specific evidence from South South Nigeria.

Key Recommendation: The study recommends enhanced media literacy initiatives, improved algorithmic transparency by social media platforms and the promotion of critical engagement with online political content to curb misinformation and strengthen democratic participation.

Keywords: Social media, Algorithms, Political communication, Voter trust, Nigeria



INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of social media platforms has fundamentally transformed political communication across the globe, redefining how political actors, institutions, and citizens interact within democratic systems. Unlike traditional mass media, social media enables direct, real-time, and interactive communication between politicians and voters, reducing gatekeeping and amplifying political messages beyond geographical boundaries (Kreiss, 2016; Chadwick, 2017; Aligwe & Nwafor, 2016). In Nigeria, platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and YouTube have become central to political campaigning, voter mobilisation, agenda-setting, and political discourse, particularly during election periods (Ufuophu-Biri & Duru, 2021; Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2020; Nwafor & Nwabuzor, 2021).

A defining feature of contemporary social media platforms is the use of algorithmic curation, whereby automated systems prioritise and personalise content based on users' online behaviour, preferences, social networks, and engagement patterns (Bucher, 2018; Pariser, 2011). These algorithms determine what political information users see, how often they see it, and in what form, thereby shaping political exposure and potentially influencing political attitudes and behaviour. Scholars argue that algorithmic filtering has profound implications for political communication, as it may reinforce selective exposure, create echo chambers, and amplify emotionally charged or polarising political messages (Sunstein, 2018; Bakshy et al., 2015).

In Nigeria's evolving democratic landscape, social media algorithms have become particularly influential in shaping political communication. Studies indicate that Nigerian voters increasingly rely on social media as primary sources of political information, especially in contexts where trust in traditional media is contested (Oso & Pate, 2017; Edegoh, Ezeh & Anunike, 2022; Aligwe & Nwafor, 2016). The South-South geopolitical zone characterised by political pluralism, ethnic diversity, and high digital media usage has witnessed intense online political activity during recent election cycles, with social media serving as a battleground for political persuasion, mobilisation, and counter-messaging (Uwa & Adeyefa, 2023; Okoro & Nwafor 2013).

However, the growing reliance on algorithm-driven political communication raises critical concerns about the accuracy, bias, and credibility of online political messages. Algorithmic systems may privilege sensational, misleading, or partisan content because such messages generate higher engagement, thereby increasing the visibility of misinformation and political propaganda (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018). In the Nigerian context, where electoral politics are often contentious, the unchecked spread of algorithmically amplified political messages poses risks to informed citizenship, electoral integrity, and democratic trust (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; International IDEA, 2022). Consequently, while social media algorithms offer new opportunities for political participation and inclusion, they also present significant challenges for democratic engagement and public trust.

Despite the central role of social media in contemporary Nigerian politics, there remains a significant gap in empirical understanding of how algorithmic processes influence voters' exposure to political messages and their trust in such messages. Existing studies on political



communication in Nigeria have largely focused on social media usage, political participation, and campaign strategies, with limited attention paid to the underlying algorithmic mechanisms that shape information flows and visibility (Ufuophu-Biri & Duru, 2021; Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2020). This omission is critical, given that algorithms increasingly determine what political content voters encounter and how frequently they encounter it.

Furthermore, Nigerian elections have been marked by rising concerns over misinformation, disinformation, and targeted political propaganda disseminated through social media platforms (CDD, 2019; Uwa & Adeyefa, 2023; Nwafor et al., 2014). Algorithmic amplification of such content may distort political realities, manipulate voter perceptions, and erode trust in online political communication. While global studies suggest that algorithmic exposure can shape political attitudes and trust in democratic institutions (Guess, Nyhan & Reifler, 2020; Sunstein, 2018), there is limited region-specific evidence examining these dynamics within Nigeria, particularly in the South-South geopolitical zone.

The absence of empirical data on voters' exposure to algorithm-curated political messages and their trust in such messages undermines a comprehensive understanding of voter behaviour in digitally mediated political environments. This gap is especially problematic in a region characterised by active political engagement and high social media penetration. Without such knowledge, policymakers, electoral bodies, media regulators, and civil society organisations lack the empirical basis to design effective interventions aimed at promoting credible political communication and safeguarding democratic processes. This study therefore seeks to address this gap by examining voters' exposure to and trust in online political messages shaped by social media algorithms in South-South Nigeria.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study pursued the following objectives:

1. To determine the level of exposure of voters to political messages on social media algorithms.
2. To assess voters' trust in algorithm-curated online political messages.
3. To examine the relationship between exposure and trust in political communication.
4. To identify demographic factors (age, education) influencing trust in online political messages.

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Political Communication

Political communication broadly refers to the processes through which information, ideas, and meanings related to public affairs, governance, policies, political actors, and civic responsibilities are produced, transmitted, and interpreted within society. It encompasses interactions among political institutions, the media, and citizens, shaping political awareness, attitudes, and participation (McNair, 2018; Perloff, 2021). Traditionally, political communication operated largely through mass media such as newspapers, radio, and television, where professional journalists acted as gatekeepers, determining the selection, framing, and dissemination of



political information (Schudson, 2011). These conventional channels provided a relatively shared political information environment, fostering common public agendas and collective political discourse. Algorithmic political communication has implications for trust, credibility, and democratic accountability. Because algorithms often prioritise content that generates high engagement, sensational, emotionally charged, or misleading political messages may receive disproportionate visibility (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018). In contexts with limited regulatory oversight and varying levels of media literacy, such as Nigeria, this dynamic can facilitate the spread of misinformation and propaganda, undermining public trust in online political communication (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Consequently, while social media algorithms enhance the reach and efficiency of political communication, they also pose significant challenges to informed citizenship and democratic deliberation.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Scholarly literature consistently demonstrates that social media has become central to political communication in Nigeria, significantly reshaping how political actors engage voters and how citizens encounter political information. Unlike traditional mass media, social media platforms provide alternative and less regulated channels for political messaging, allowing politicians, parties, and supporters to bypass institutional gatekeepers and communicate directly with the electorate. This transformation has been particularly evident during election periods, where platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (X), WhatsApp, and YouTube are widely used for campaign messaging, mobilisation, and political debate (Ojebuyi & Salawu, 2020; Chadwick, 2017).

Empirical evidence from Nigeria's South-South region highlights high voter exposure to political content on social media. Ufuophu-Biri (2020), in a study conducted in Delta State, found that a substantial proportion of voters regularly accessed political information via social media platforms and perceived them as useful tools for political awareness and participation. Respondents reported that social media enhanced access to campaign messages, political discussions, and election-related updates, reinforcing the platforms' relevance in contemporary political communication. These findings suggest that social media has become deeply embedded in voters' political information routines, particularly among younger and urban populations.

However, scholars caution that the growing centrality of social media in political communication presents significant challenges alongside its benefits. Osimen & Adeyefa (2024) as well as Uwa & Adeyefa (2023) describe social media as a "double-edged sword," capable of enhancing political participation while simultaneously facilitating the spread of propaganda, misinformation, and emotionally manipulative content. Their studies indicate that political actors increasingly exploit the affordances of social media such as virality, anonymity, and algorithmic amplification to disseminate misleading narratives designed to influence voter perception and behaviour. This dual character complicates the democratic value of social media in Nigeria's electoral process.

Recent studies further underscore the role of social media algorithms in shaping political exposure and public opinion. Chukwu (2025) observes that platforms such as Facebook and X have become instrumental in agenda-setting and voter mobilisation during Nigerian elections,



largely because algorithmic systems prioritise content that generates high engagement. While this increases the visibility of political messages, it also raises concerns about selective exposure, echo chambers, and the disproportionate circulation of sensational or polarising content. Consequently, voters may be repeatedly exposed to similar viewpoints, limiting exposure to diverse political perspectives and undermining deliberative democracy.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Empirical investigations into social media and political communication in Nigeria have largely focused on voter exposure, political participation, mobilisation, and the spread of political information during election periods. One of the earliest region-specific studies is that of Ufuophu-Biri (2020), who examined social media use among voters in Delta State. Using a survey design, the study established that voters were highly exposed to political messages on platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp. The findings revealed that frequent exposure enhanced political awareness, encouraged participation in political discussions, and increased engagement with electoral issues. However, while the study confirmed high exposure levels, it did not interrogate the role of algorithmic curation in determining what political messages voters encountered, nor did it assess trust in algorithm-filtered content. This limitation creates a gap addressed by the present study's first objective, which focuses on voters' exposure to political messages shaped by social media algorithms.

Similarly, Chukwu (2025) investigated the role of social media in shaping political discourse and voter mobilisation during Nigerian election campaigns. The study found that algorithm-driven platforms amplified campaign messages, hashtags, and political narratives, thereby influencing voter turnout and public opinion formation. Although Chukwu's work demonstrated that online visibility and engagement metrics played a role in political mobilisation, it did not empirically assess how voters evaluated the credibility of algorithm-curated messages. As such, while the study speaks to exposure and mobilisation, it leaves unanswered questions regarding voter trust—an issue directly examined in the present study's second objective.

More recent empirical work has begun to explore the influence of online political visibility on electoral dynamics in the South-South region. Chiadika, Egielewa, & Akpor (2025) employed sentiment analysis to examine politicians' engagement on X (formerly Twitter) during election periods. Their findings indicated that algorithm-amplified online visibility significantly influenced political discourse, candidate popularity, and electoral outcomes. Positive sentiment and high engagement were associated with increased political relevance, while negative sentiment shaped public scepticism. Despite these insights, the study focused primarily on politicians' online performance rather than voters' perceptions, and it did not explicitly analyse how algorithmic curation affects voters' trust in political messages. This reinforces the need for voter-centred empirical inquiry into exposure and trust.

Empirical evidence on misinformation and trust provides further context. Isah, Omale, & Florence (2024) conducted a qualitative study on the implications of social media disinformation and false narratives for public opinion among Nigerian electorates. The study revealed that social media disinformation significantly distorts public opinion by amplifying cognitive biases,



reinforcing echo chambers, and polarising political attitudes. Importantly, the authors identified social media algorithms as critical enablers of the rapid dissemination and persistence of false and sensationalised political content. Their findings directly relate to the present study's second and third objectives, as they demonstrate how algorithmic exposure can undermine trust and reshape voter attitudes toward political communication.

Earlier election-focused research also supports these findings. Isah, Nelson, & Kadiri (2021) examined the implications of fake news during the 2019 Nigerian electioneering using a survey of Nigerian voters. The study found that awareness of fake news was high and that social media was the dominant channel for its dissemination. Respondents reported diminished trust in political information encountered online, with many indicating confusion and scepticism regarding the authenticity of political messages. While this study did not explicitly analyse algorithmic processes, its findings underscore the relationship between exposure to online political content and declining trust, thereby informing the present study's third objective on the exposure–trust relationship.

Beyond voter-focused studies, empirical research on media practice and digital technologies offers relevant insights into algorithmic influence. Isah et al. (2025) examined the prospects and challenges of media practice in an era of artificial intelligence among journalists in Benin City. The study found that algorithm-driven systems, while improving efficiency and content distribution, also heightened concerns about bias, misinformation, and ethical accountability. Although journalist-centred, these findings are relevant to political communication, as the same algorithmic systems that shape news distribution also curate political content for voters. The study highlights structural and ethical challenges that indirectly affect audience trust in algorithm-curated information.

Taken together, existing empirical studies demonstrate that Nigerian voters, particularly in the South-South region are highly exposed to political messages on social media and that such exposure influences political participation, mobilisation, and opinion formation. However, most studies either prioritise political actors' strategies or journalists' professional experiences, with limited empirical attention given to how voters interpret, trust, and respond to algorithm-curated political messages. Moreover, demographic moderators such as age and education central to the present study's fourth objective are often mentioned descriptively rather than systematically analysed. This gap underscores the empirical significance of the current study, which integrates exposure, trust, algorithmic mediation, and demographic factors to provide a more comprehensive understanding of political communication in the age of social media algorithms in South-South Nigeria.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored on the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), a prominent audience-centred communication theory that explains why and how individuals actively select media content to satisfy specific needs. The theory was formally propounded in the early 1970s, with its intellectual roots traceable to Elihu Katz, Jay G. Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch. Although earlier foundations were laid by Herta Herzog in the 1940s, UGT was systematised by Katz,



Blumler, and Gurevitch in 1973–1974 as a response to earlier media effects theories that portrayed audiences as passive recipients of media messages (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974).

The central assumption of UGT is that media users are active, goal-oriented, and selective in their media choices. Rather than being influenced uniformly by media content, individuals consciously choose media platforms and messages that meet their cognitive, affective, personal integrative, social integrative, and tension-release needs (McQuail, 2010). In the context of political communication, this means that voters deliberately engage with media sources that provide political information, reinforce beliefs, enable participation, or offer a sense of political belonging.

Within algorithmic political communication, UGT helps explain how exposure to curated political messages is not accidental but selective. Voters are more likely to engage with algorithm-generated content that affirms their political interests or ideological leanings. This selective exposure can enhance trust when users perceive the messages as useful and relevant; however, it may also contribute to echo chambers, where repeated exposure reinforces existing beliefs while limiting exposure to alternative viewpoints (Pariser, 2011). Thus, UGT provides insight into the complex relationship between exposure and trust in algorithm-curated political communication.

The theory is also relevant for examining demographic influences, such as age and education, on political media use. Younger voters, who are typically more digitally literate, may derive gratifications related to interaction, participation, and immediacy from social media, while older or more educated voters may prioritise informational accuracy and credibility. These varying gratification needs help explain differences in trust levels across demographic groups, making UGT particularly suitable for analysing how age and education shape trust in online political messages (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design, which is appropriate for examining attitudes, perceptions, and behavioural patterns of a large population at a single point in time. This design enabled the researcher to systematically assess voters' exposure to algorithm-driven political messages on social media, their level of trust in such messages, and the demographic factors influencing this trust. The population of this study comprised registered voters in South South Nigeria, drawn from three purposively selected states, namely Edo, Delta and Rivers. These states were selected due to their large voter populations, high levels of urbanisation, active political engagement and widespread use of social media platforms. According to the final voter register published by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) for the 2023 general elections, Edo State had 2,501,081 registered voters, Delta State recorded 3,221,697 registered voters and Rivers State had 3,537,190 registered voters, giving a combined total of approximately 9,259,968 registered voters across the three states from which the study sample was drawn. To determine the sample size, the study employed Taro Yamane's (1967) sample size determination formula, which is suitable for large and finite populations:



$$n = N \left(1 + \frac{N(e)^2}{n} \right) \Rightarrow n = \frac{N}{1 - N(e)^2}$$

Where:

n = sample size

N = population size

e = margin of error (0.05)

Given the large population of registered voters (9,259,968) across the selected states and a 5% margin of error, the formula produced a minimum sample size that was approximated and rounded up to 400 respondents to ensure adequate representation and improve statistical reliability. A multi-stage purposive sampling technique was adopted in selecting respondents. In the first stage, the three states (Edo, Delta, and Rivers) were purposively selected from the South-South zone. In the second stage, major urban centres within each state—such as Benin City, Asaba/Warri, and Port Harcourt were purposively chosen because of higher internet penetration, political activity, and social media usage. In the third stage, registered voters within these urban centres were purposively approached at community centres, public gathering points, and voter-dense neighbourhoods, based on their eligibility to vote and active use of social media. This approach ensured that respondents were information-rich and relevant to the objectives of the study.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire, which was divided into sections covering respondents' demographic characteristics, level of exposure to algorithm-curated political messages on social media, and trust in such messages. The questionnaire items were measured using a Likert-type scale, allowing for systematic assessment of perceptions and attitudes. The validity and reliability of the research instrument were systematically ensured. Face and content validity were established through expert review by specialists in mass communication and research methodology, who assessed the instrument for clarity, relevance and adequacy of coverage of the study variables. Their observations informed necessary modifications to the questionnaire items. To ensure reliability, a pilot study was conducted among a subset of respondents who shared similar characteristics with the study population but were excluded from the main study. The data from the pilot test were subjected to reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which confirmed the internal consistency of the instrument and its suitability for the main data collection.

For data presentation and analysis, completed copies of questionnaire were coded and analysed using descriptive statistical tools. Data were presented in tables and simple percentages. Analysis involved the use of frequency distributions, percentages, mean scores, and cross-tabulations, which enabled the researcher to address the study objectives relating to exposure levels, trust, relationships between exposure and trust, and demographic influences such as age and education.

RESULT

The researchers administered 400 copies of questionnaire based on the information below:

A 5-point Likert scale was used and coded as follows:

- Strongly Agree (SA) = 5
- Agree (A) = 4



- Undecided (U) = 3
- Disagree (D) = 2
- Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1

Decision Rule (Mean):

- ≥ 3.00 = Accepted
- < 3.00 = Rejected

Table 1: Frequency of Exposure to Political Messages on Social Media

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very Often	158	39.5
Often	121	30.3
Sometimes	73	18.2
Rarely	34	8.5
Never	14	3.5
Total	400	100

Mean Score = 3.94

Table 1 shows that 69.8% of respondents reported being *often or very often* exposed to political messages on social media platforms. The mean score of 3.94 indicates a high level of exposure among voters in South-South Nigeria.

Table 2: Algorithmic Recommendation of Political Content

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	141	35.3
Agree	132	33.0
Undecided	61	15.2
Disagree	44	11.0
Strongly Disagree	22	5.5
Total	400	100

Mean Score = 3.82

A combined 68.3% agreed that social media algorithms recommend political content based on their online behaviour. The mean score of 3.82 confirms respondents' awareness of algorithmic curation.



Table 3: Trust in Algorithm-Curated Political Messages

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	87	21.8
Agree	104	26.0
Undecided	79	19.8
Disagree	81	20.2
Strongly Disagree	49	12.2
Total	400	100

Mean Score = 3.24

Although 47.8% expressed trust, a sizable 32.4% disagreed, while 19.8% remained undecided. The mean score of 3.24 shows moderate trust.

Table 4: Trust Due to Repetition of Political Messages

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	92	23.0
Agree	113	28.2
Undecided	65	16.3
Disagree	81	20.2
Strongly Disagree	49	12.3
Total	400	100

Mean Score = 3.30

A majority (51.2%) agreed that repeated exposure increases trust. The mean score of 3.30 supports this position.

Table 5: Exposure Increasing Confidence in Political Messages

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	111	27.8
Agree	124	31.0
Undecided	64	16.0
Disagree	63	15.8
Strongly Disagree	38	9.4
Total	400	100

Mean Score = 3.52

With 58.8% agreement and a mean score of 3.52, respondents acknowledged that exposure enhances confidence.



Table 6: Belief Due to Repeated Similar Messages

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	119	29.8
Agree	131	32.7
Undecided	58	14.5
Disagree	61	15.3
Strongly Disagree	31	7.7
Total	400	100

Mean Score = 3.61

About **62.5%** agreed that repeated similar messages increase belief. The mean score of **3.61** indicates strong acceptance.

Table 7: Influence of Age on Trust in Political Messages

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	98	24.5
Agree	117	29.3
Undecided	73	18.2
Disagree	67	16.8
Strongly Disagree	45	11.2
Total	400	100

Mean Score = 3.39

A majority (53.8%) agreed that age influences trust, with a mean score of 3.39. Age plays a significant role in media literacy and trust disposition, with younger voters likely more exposed but more sceptical.

Table 8: Influence of Education on Trust in Algorithmic Messages

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	137	34.3
Agree	142	35.5
Undecided	51	12.7
Disagree	46	11.5
Strongly Disagree	24	6.0
Total	400	100

Mean Score = 3.80

A strong 69.8% agreed that education influences trust. The mean score of 3.80 indicates high acceptance.



DISCUSSION

This section discusses the findings of the study in relation to the research objectives and answers the research questions, drawing connections with existing empirical studies and the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT).

Research Question One: What is the level of exposure of voters to political messages on social media algorithms?

Findings from Tables 1 and 2 indicate that voters in South-South Nigeria are highly exposed to political messages on social media platforms, largely due to algorithmic curation. The mean score of 3.94 in Table 1 reveals frequent exposure to political content, while the mean score of 3.82 in Table 2 confirms that a significant proportion of respondents are aware that such exposure is influenced by social media algorithms that recommend content based on users' online behaviour. This finding suggests that social media has become a dominant channel for political communication, reinforcing voters' continuous interaction with politically relevant content. These results align with Ufuophu-Biri (2020), who reported high exposure to political messages on social media among voters in Delta State, and Chukwu (2025), who observed that algorithm-driven platforms amplified political discourse during election campaigns. From the perspective of the Uses and Gratifications Theory, voters' sustained exposure reflects active media selection driven by informational and participatory needs, which social media platforms readily satisfy through personalised content delivery.

Research Question Two: What is the level of voters' trust in algorithm-curated online political messages?

Results from Table 3 reveal a moderate level of trust in algorithm-curated political messages, with a mean score of 3.24. While a substantial proportion of respondents expressed trust, a notable percentage either disagreed or remained undecided, indicating scepticism toward the credibility of online political content. This cautious trust may be attributed to widespread concerns about misinformation, fake news, and propaganda associated with social media use in Nigerian elections. These findings are consistent with Isah, Nelson, and Kadiri (2021), who found that exposure to fake news during the 2019 electioneering reduced public trust in political information encountered online. Similarly, Isah, Omale, and Florence (2024) identified social media algorithms as facilitators of sensationalised and misleading political content, which undermines public trust. Within the UGT framework, this suggests that although voters engage with algorithm-curated messages for gratification, trust is conditional on perceived credibility and satisfaction.

Research Question Three: What is the relationship between exposure and trust in political communication?

Findings from Tables 4, 5, and 6 demonstrate a positive relationship between exposure and trust in political communication. The mean scores of 3.30, 3.52, and 3.61 respectively indicate that repeated exposure to political messages increases trust, confidence, and belief among voters. This supports the "mere exposure effect," whereby familiarity generated through repeated



encounters enhances perceived credibility. However, while increased exposure strengthens trust, it also raises concerns about echo chambers and reinforcement of existing beliefs. These findings resonate with Chiadika, Egielewa, and Akpor (2025), who observed that algorithm-amplified visibility shapes political relevance and public opinion. Isah et al. (2024) further caution that such algorithmic amplification may distort public opinion by reinforcing cognitive biases. From the Uses and Gratifications perspective, repeated exposure satisfies voters' informational needs, but excessive personalisation may limit exposure to diverse viewpoints, creating a complex interaction between gratification, exposure, and trust.

Research Question Four: What demographic factors (age and education) influence trust in online political messages?

Tables 7 and 8 reveal that demographic factors significantly influence trust in algorithm-curated political messages. The mean score of 3.39 indicates that age plays a role in shaping trust, while the higher mean score of 3.80 confirms that education has a stronger influence. Younger voters are generally more exposed to social media content due to higher digital engagement, yet they tend to be more sceptical, possibly due to greater awareness of misinformation risks. Conversely, higher levels of education enhance critical thinking and media literacy, enabling voters to evaluate political messages more carefully. These findings align with Quan-Haase and Young (2010), who observed that demographic characteristics influence digital media use and trust. They also complement Isah et al. (2025), who highlighted how awareness of technological and ethical challenges affects attitudes toward algorithm-driven content. UGT explains these variations by suggesting that different demographic groups seek distinct gratifications from media use, which in turn shape their levels of trust and acceptance.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results, the study concludes that social media algorithms have fundamentally reshaped political communication in South South Nigeria by mediating not only voters' exposure to political messages but also the conditions under which trust in such messages is formed. The increasing dominance of algorithm curated platforms as sources of political information means that voters' political knowledge and attitudes are increasingly filtered through automated systems that prioritise engagement over deliberative balance. Although repeated exposure to political content can enhance familiarity and acceptance, trust in algorithm driven messages remains conditional, influenced by users' awareness of misinformation risks and manipulative targeting practices.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the study makes the following recommendations:

1. Government agencies, electoral bodies, and civil society organisations should implement sustained digital and media literacy initiatives to equip voters with skills for evaluating the credibility of algorithm-curated political messages and identifying misinformation.



2. Policymakers should engage social media platforms to enhance transparency in political content curation and recommendation processes, ensuring accountability and reducing undue algorithmic influence on voter perception.
3. Social media platforms should be encouraged to design systems that reduce excessive content homogenisation and promote exposure to diverse political viewpoints to support informed democratic deliberation.
4. Civic and voter education programmes should be tailored to age and educational differences to address varying trust dispositions and levels of digital literacy among voters.

Ethical Clearance

Ethical approval was obtained from all respondents participating in this study. They were informed that the research was conducted purely for academic purposes, and assured that all responses would remain confidential.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks are also extended to the Students of HND 2 Mass Communication Department of Auchi Polytechnic, Auchi for their support and cooperation throughout the research process.

Sources of Funding

This research received no external funding.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest associated with this study.

Authors' Contributions

Isah Abdulazeez, PhD, conceptualised and designed the study and prepared the initial draft of the manuscript. Ofunne Ubaka Anthony, PhD, contributed to data collection and provided scholarly input during the revision of the manuscript. Godwin Ukwuaniamaka Iwegbue undertook data analysis and interpretation of the results. All authors participated in the critical revision of the manuscript, approved the final version for publication, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Availability of Data and Materials

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

Citation

Isah, A., Ofunne, U. A., & Iwegbue, G. U. (2026). South-South voters' exposure and trust in online political messages in the age of social media algorithms. *International Journal of Sub-Saharan African Research*, 4(1), 511-527. doi:10.5281/zenodo.18935253



REFERENCES

- Aligwe, H.N., Nwafor, K. A. Nweze, S. (2016). Youths, Social Media and the 2015 General Elections in South East Nigeria. *World Applied Sciences Journal* 34 (12): 1909-1914. Available online at: [https://www.idosi.org/wasj/wasj34\(12\)16/45.pdf](https://www.idosi.org/wasj/wasj34(12)16/45.pdf)
- Aligwe, H.N. & Nwafor, K. A. (2016). ICTS, Social Media and Participatory Politics in Africa: Mutual Friends or Man-Made Foes. *Middle-East Journal of Scientific Research* 24 (12): 3932-3940. [https://idosi.org/mejsr/mejsr24\(12\)16/34.pdf](https://idosi.org/mejsr/mejsr24(12)16/34.pdf)
- Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(2), 211–236. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.31.2.211>
- Bakshy, E., Messing, S., & Adamic, L. A. (2015). Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinion on Facebook. *Science*, 348(6239), 1130–1132. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aaa1160>
- Bucher, T. (2018). *If... then: Algorithmic power and politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD). (2019). *Fake news and Nigeria's 2019 elections*. CDD West Africa.
- Chadwick, A. (2017). *The hybrid media system: Politics and power* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Chiadika, C., Egielewa, P., & Akpor, E. (2025). Sentiment analysis of politicians' engagement on X and electoral dynamics in South-South Nigeria. *Journal of African Political Communication*, 6(1), 44–63.
- Chukwu, D. (2025). Social media and voter mobilisation in Nigerian elections. *Journal of Political Communication in Africa*, 4(1), 55–72.
- Chukwu, O. J. (2025). Impact of social media on political communication in Nigeria: Comparative review of elections. *Journal of Management and Science*, 15(2), 57–62.
- Edegoh, L. O. N., Ezeh, N. C., & Anunike, O. W. (2022). Social media and political participation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. *Journal of African Media Studies*, 14(1), 67–84.
- Guess, A. M., Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2020). Exposure to untrustworthy websites in the 2016 U.S. election. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 4, 472–480. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-020-0833-x>



International IDEA. (2022). *Social media, disinformation and elections in Africa*. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.

Isah, A., Omale, Z., & Florence, C. O. (2024). Implications of social media disinformation and false narratives for public opinion among Nigerian electorate. *International Journal of Sub-Saharan African Research (IJSSAR)*, 2(4), 306–324. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14567537>

Isah, A. A., Aleogho, N. J., Ehiagwina, V., Usman, M., & Emmanuel, S. D. (2025). Prospects and challenges of media practice in an era of artificial intelligence. *Journal of Media and Communication Studies*. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/391867133>

Isah, A., Nelson, L. N., & Kadiri, A. H. (2021). Implication of fake news on the 2019 Nigeria electioneering. *SAU Journal of Management and Social Sciences*, 6(1), 1–20. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/369357984>

Katz, E., Blumler, J. G., & Gurevitch, M. (1974). Utilization of mass communication by the individual. In J. G. Blumler & E. Katz (Eds.), *The uses of mass communications: Current perspectives on gratifications research* (pp. 19–32). Sage.

Kreiss, D. (2016). *Prototype politics: Technology-intensive campaigning and the data of democracy*. Oxford University Press.

McQuail, D. (2010). *McQuail's mass communication theory* (6th ed.). Sage.

Nwafor, K. A. & Nwabuzor, M.N. (2021). Social Media and Youths Engagements and Mobilisation for the 2020 #EndSARS Protests in Nigeria. *EBSU Journal of Mass Communication*, 8(1), 13-24. Available online at: http://www.ebsujmc.com/uploads/233480_1628616029.pdf

Nwafor, K. A., Odoemelam, C.C. & Chibuwe, A. (2014). Social Media, Electioneering and Sustenance of Democracy in Africa: A “SWOT” Analysis. *Africa Media & Democracy Journal* 2(1), 297-316.

Nwafor, K. A., Odoemelam, C.C. & Chibuwe, A. (2012). Social Media, Electioneering and Sustenance of Democracy in Africa: A “SWOT” Analysis. *Africa Media & Democracy Journal* 2(1), 297-316

Ojebuyi, B. R., & Salawu, A. (2020). Digital journalism in Nigeria: Trends, challenges and prospects. *Journal of African Media Studies*, 12(2), 197–214. https://doi.org/10.1386/jams_00020_1

Ojebuyi, B. R., & Salawu, A. (2020). Social media and political mobilisation in Nigeria. *Journal of Communication and Media Research*, 12(1), 1–15.



- Okoro, N. M. & Nwafor, K. A. (2013). Social Media and Political Participation in Nigeria during the 2011 General Elections: The Lapses and the Lessons, *Global Journal of Arts Humanities and Social Sciences*, 1(3), 29-46. Available online at: <http://www.eajournals.org/wp-content/uploads/social-media-and-political-participation-in-Nigeria-during-the-2011-general-elections-the-lapses-and-the-lessons.pdf>
- Oso, L., & Pate, U. (2017). *Media and democracy in Nigeria*. Malthouse Press.
- Osimen, G. U., & Adeyefa, A. (2024). Social media propaganda and voter manipulation in Nigerian elections. *African Journal of Political Communication*, 5(2), 88–104.
- Osimen, G. U., & Adeyefa, C. R. (2024). Social media and political propaganda: A double-edged sword for democratic consolidation in Nigeria. *British Journal of Multidisciplinary and Advanced Studies*, 5(4), 21–38.
- Pariser, E. (2011). *The filter bubble: What the Internet is hiding from you*. Penguin Press.
- Quan-Haase, A., & Young, A. L. (2010). Uses and gratifications of social media: A comparison of Facebook and instant messaging. *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, 30(5), 350–361. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0270467610380009>
- Sundar, S. S., & Limperos, A. M. (2013). Uses and gratifications of social media: A review of theory and research. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 18(4), 504–525. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcc4.12017>
- Ufuophu-Biri, M. E., & Duru, C. W. (2021). Social media and political communication in Nigeria. *Journal of African Media Studies*, 13(3), 345–361.
- Ufuophu-Biri, M. E. (2020). The use of social media and participation in political communication in the 2019 general election in Nigeria. *Information and Knowledge Management*.
- Uwa, O. G., & Adeyefa, C. R. (2023). Social media, political propaganda and elections in Nigeria. *British Journal of Multidisciplinary and Advanced Studies*, 4(3), 45–62.
- Uwa, S. C., & Adeyefa, A. (2023). Political communication and misinformation in Nigeria's digital space. *Journal of Media Ethics in Africa*, 3(1), 41–58.
- Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science*, 359(6380), 1146–1151. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aap9559>
- Whiting, A., & Williams, D. (2013). Why people use social media: A uses and gratifications approach. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 16(4), 362–369. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QMR-06-2013-0041>