MASS COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA STUDIES

Challenges of Facebook in Shaping Public Opinion During the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election: A Study of Kaduna Metropolis

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Abstract

This study examined the challenges of Facebook in shaping public opinion during the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election in Kaduna Metropolis. The study was anchored on the Agenda-Setting Theory and adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population comprised over 500,000 eligible voters in Kaduna Metropolis, from which a sample of 384 respondents was determined using the SurveyMonkey Sample Size Calculator at a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error. A stratified random sampling technique was employed, while data were collected through a structured questionnaire validated by experts. The reliability of the instrument was established using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.80$). Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27, using frequencies and percentages. The findings revealed that 74.7%–76.3% of respondents agreed that misinformation, fake news, political bias, ethnic and religious narratives, and difficulties in verifying information on Facebook affected public opinion formation during the election. The study further found that 75.2%–75.5% of respondents agreed that misleading content influenced voters' perceptions of candidates, understanding of political issues and political discussions. The study concludes that misinformation and unreliable content limited Facebook's effectiveness in promoting informed public opinion during the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election. It recommends responsible Facebook use through information verification and measures to reduce misinformation during elections.

Keywords: Facebook; Public Opinion; Misinformation; Political Communication; 2023 Presidential Election

1 Introduction

Political communication remains a fundamental aspect of democratic societies because it facilitates the exchange of political information, encourages public discussion and creates opportunities for interaction between political actors and citizens. Through effective political communication, citizens are able to access information about political issues, evaluate candidates and participate in democratic processes (Morah & Nwafor, 2024). In recent years, the emergence of social media has significantly transformed political communication by providing platforms where information can be produced, shared and discussed instantly. Among these platforms, Facebook has become particularly influential due to its wide user base, interactive features and capacity to facilitate political discussions, campaign activities and public engagement. In Nigeria, political actors, supporters and citizens increasingly use Facebook to disseminate campaign messages, mobilise voters and express political opinions, making it an important tool in contemporary political communication (Morah & Nwafor, 2024). The growing relevance of Facebook in Nigerian politics became more evident during

the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election, when political parties, candidates, supporters and civil society groups extensively used the platform to promote political messages, discuss national issues and influence voter perceptions. Many citizens also relied on Facebook as a source of electoral information and a space for participating in political conversations. However, despite its contribution to political awareness and participation, Facebook also presented challenges that affected the quality and reliability of political information available to users. The circulation of misinformation, disinformation, fake news, political propaganda and biased content created concerns about the platform's ability to support informed public opinion formation during the election period (Hassan, 2023).

The challenge of misinformation is particularly significant because Facebook allows users to create and share information with limited verification processes. As a result, false or misleading political information can spread rapidly and influence how citizens understand political events, candidates and electoral issues. Hassan (2023) noted that the spread of disinformation within Nigeria's electoral environment affects access to credible political information and may create confusion among citizens. Similarly, Obiora et al. (2026) established that misinformation on social media platforms can influence electoral behaviour by shaping voters' interpretation of political messages and affecting their decision-making processes.

Kaduna Metropolis provides a relevant context for examining these challenges because of its political importance and socially diverse population. During the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election, residents of Kaduna Metropolis actively engaged with political content shared through Facebook, using the platform to obtain election-related information, follow political debates and express their views. However, the extent to which Facebook contributed to informed public opinion among residents remains uncertain, particularly considering the challenges associated with misinformation, fake news and politically influenced content. Understanding these issues is important because public opinion formed through unreliable information sources may affect citizens' political judgments and democratic participation. Therefore, this study aims to examine the challenges of Facebook in shaping public opinion during the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election in Kaduna Metropolis. The study has the following objectives:

The objectives of the study are:

1. To identify the major challenges of Facebook in shaping public opinion during the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election in Kaduna Metropolis.
2. To examine how misinformation and fake news on Facebook affected public opinion during the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election in Kaduna Metropolis.

2 Conceptual framework

2.1 Challenges of Facebook in shaping public opinion

Facebook has become an important platform for political communication in Nigeria, enabling citizens to access political information, express opinions and participate in public debate. However, its role in shaping public opinion is constrained by challenges such as misinformation, fake news, political manipulation, selective information exposure and weak content regulation, which can distort public understanding of political issues (Duru, 2023). Although Facebook promotes political participation and information sharing, the widespread circulation of false and misleading information reduces the credibility of political content on the platform. According to Hassan (2023), the rapid spread of disin-

formation during elections influences citizens' perceptions of political actors and electoral processes, making it difficult for users to verify the authenticity of political information before sharing it.

Similarly, Animashaun and Ojelabi (2026) observed that Facebook's effectiveness in shaping informed public opinion is limited by challenges such as the digital divide, inadequate regulation and unequal access to credible political information. These challenges reduce the platform's capacity to support informed political participation, particularly during election periods. Furthermore, Suemo et al. (2023) are of the view that ideological messaging and selective exposure to political content on Facebook reinforce existing beliefs while limiting access to alternative viewpoints. This contributes to political bias and polarisation, making it difficult for users to form balanced opinions on political issues.

2.2 Misinformation and fake news on Facebook

Facebook has become a popular platform for accessing and sharing political information in Nigeria. Its interactive nature allows users to exchange news and opinions quickly, especially during election periods. However, this same feature has also made the platform a major channel for the circulation of misinformation and fake news. Because information can be published and shared without proper verification, false or misleading political content often spreads rapidly, making it difficult for users to identify credible information (Hassan, 2023). The widespread circulation of misinformation on Facebook has raised concerns about its effect on public opinion. Ejiga et al. (2023) stated that many Facebook users are exposed to misleading information and frequently share such content without confirming its authenticity. As a result, inaccurate information can shape people's perceptions of political issues and influence their decisions during elections.

In the same vein, Omoera and Uwalaka (2023) observed that fake news has become a major challenge in Nigeria's digital media environment. This resulted from how Facebook provides a platform through which manipulated and false information spreads quickly, reducing public confidence in online information and making it more difficult for citizens to make informed judgments on national issues. Likewise, Uzuegbunam and Ononiwu (2023) asserted that many social media users share information simply because it is widely circulated or supports their existing beliefs, rather than because it has been verified. This pattern of information sharing encourages the continued spread of fake news and strengthens misinformation among Facebook users.

2.3 Empirical review

Oyewole and Adinlewa (2025) investigated the use of social media campaigns in shaping the opinions of Akure residents during Nigeria's 2023 general elections. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining a survey of 355 eligible social media users with a content analysis of 1,178 Facebook and X posts published on the official pages of the APC, PDP, and Labour Party. The findings revealed that social media played a significant role in the 2023 election campaigns, with political parties using these platforms to promote key campaign issues, influence public perceptions, and shape voters' opinions and candidate preferences. The study is limited by its focus on Akure residents, which restricts the generalizability of its findings to other parts of Nigeria. It also examined Facebook and X together, making it difficult to determine the specific influence of Facebook on public opinion. Furthermore, the study concentrated on political campaign messages rather than providing a comprehensive analysis of how Facebook itself influenced public opinion during the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election. It also overlooked other factors that may shape public opinion, such as users' political orientation, media literacy, and patterns of engagement with political content on Facebook.

Therefore, the present study addresses these gaps by specifically examining the influence of Facebook on public opinion in the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election.

Ijioma and Kogah (2020) examined the influence of social media on the political opinions and voting behaviour of Nigerian voters during the 2015 presidential election, with a focus on residents of South-East Nigeria. The study was anchored on the Uses and Gratifications Theory and adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining a survey of 390 respondents selected through a multi-stage sampling technique with in-depth interviews involving 20 participants. The findings revealed that social media had become an important source of political information and encouraged citizens' participation in political discussions. The study further found that social media significantly influenced political opinions and voting behaviour and concluded that it contributed to Muhammadu Buhari's victory in the 2015 presidential election.

The study is limited because it focused only on residents of South-East Nigeria, making it difficult to generalize the findings to the entire country. It examined social media generally rather than focusing specifically on Facebook, which was one of the most widely used platforms for political communication. In addition, the study was conducted in the context of the 2015 presidential election and does not reflect the changing role of Facebook in the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election. While it examined political opinion and voting behaviour, it did not provide an in-depth analysis of how Facebook specifically shaped public opinion during the election. Therefore, the present study addresses these gaps by specifically investigating the influence of Facebook on public opinion in the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election.

Felicia (2018) examined the discursive strategies used in Facebook comments during Nigeria's 2015 general election campaigns. The study employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), drawing on Fairclough's concept of discourse as social practice, alongside insights from sociolinguistics and Computer-Mediated Discourse. The data consisted of 2,000 Facebook comments posted on the campaign pages of Jimi Agbaje of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) and Akinwunmi Ambode of the All Progressives Congress (APC) between January and April 2015. The findings revealed that Facebook users employed discursive strategies such as social group categorization, code-switching, and the use of party symbols to portray their preferred political groups positively while presenting opposing groups negatively. The study concluded that these online interactions reflected the unequal power relations and sociocultural divisions that characterized Nigeria's political environment.

The study is limited by its focus on only two political candidates, which restricts the generalizability of its findings to the broader Nigerian political landscape. It concentrated on the language and discursive strategies used in Facebook comments rather than examining how these interactions influenced public opinion. In addition, the study relied solely on qualitative discourse analysis, without measuring the extent to which Facebook discussions affected voters' perceptions and political attitudes. Furthermore, the study was conducted during the 2015 general election and does not capture the changing nature of Facebook's role in the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election, where political engagement and online participation were more extensive. Therefore, the present study addresses these gaps by specifically investigating the influence of Facebook on public opinion in the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election.

3 Theoretical framework

This study is guided by the Agenda-Setting Theory, propounded by McCombs and Shaw (1972). The theory was developed from their investigation of the 1968 United States Presidential Election, where

they discovered that the media may not directly influence what people think, but they have the ability to influence the issues people consider important. This occurs because the media gives greater attention and prominence to certain issues, making them more visible to the public than others. As a result, issues that receive frequent coverage are more likely to become important topics of public discussion. The theory has been widely used in political communication research because it explains how media platforms influence public attention and shape political discussions. With the growth of social media, the application of Agenda-Setting Theory has expanded beyond traditional media to platforms such as Facebook, where political actors, organisations and users participate in creating and sharing content. Through activities such as posting, commenting, liking and sharing, Facebook users can increase the visibility of particular political issues, candidates and events, thereby influencing what dominates public conversations during elections.

Although the theory has been criticised for presenting audiences as less active and for overemphasising media influence, it remains relevant in explaining how media platforms shape public attention, especially within political communication (Zhang, 2023). In the social media environment, agenda-setting is no longer controlled solely by media organisations; rather, it involves interaction between media platforms, political actors and audiences who collectively determine which issues receive prominence. The theory is relevant to this study because it helps explain the role of Facebook in shaping public opinion during the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election. Through the continuous circulation of campaign messages, political debates, election updates and discussions, Facebook increased the visibility of certain political issues and candidates among users. This exposure may have influenced the issues residents of Kaduna Metropolis considered important, shaped their political perceptions and affected their electoral opinions. Therefore, Agenda-Setting Theory provides an appropriate framework for examining Facebook's role as a political communication platform and the challenges associated with its influence on public opinion during the election.

4 Methodology

The study employed a descriptive survey research design to investigate the role of Facebook as a political communication tool during the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election in Kaduna Metropolis. The study population consisted of over 500,000 eligible voters within the metropolis. Using the SurveyMonkey Sample Size Calculator, a sample size of 384 respondents was determined at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. Respondents were selected through a stratified random sampling technique to ensure adequate representation of the population. Data were gathered through a structured questionnaire, which was subjected to face and content validation by experts. The reliability of the instrument was tested using Cronbach's alpha, producing a reliability coefficient of 0.80. Data collected were analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27, with frequencies and percentages used to present the findings and answer the research questions. The study was guided by the Agenda-Setting Theory, which provided the theoretical basis for examining how Facebook influenced political communication and public opinion during the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election in Kaduna Metropolis.

5 Data presentation and interpretation

In this section, the data are presented and interpreted according to the research objectives employed in the study.

Table 1. Challenges of Facebook in shaping public opinion during the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election (N = 384).

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD	Total
Misinformation on Facebook affected the way voters formed opinions about presidential candidates during the 2023 election.	161 (41.9%)	132 (34.4%)	31 (8.1%)	38 (9.9%)	22 (5.7%)	384 (100%)
Fake news circulated on Facebook made it difficult for voters to make informed political judgments during the election.	154 (40.1%)	136 (35.4%)	33 (8.6%)	38 (9.9%)	23 (6.0%)	384 (100%)
Political bias on Facebook influenced how users perceived candidates and political issues during the 2023 presidential election.	148 (38.5%)	139 (36.2%)	34 (8.9%)	40 (10.4%)	23 (6.0%)	384 (100%)
Ethnic and religious narratives shared on Facebook affected public opinion about presidential candidates.	146 (38.0%)	141 (36.7%)	32 (8.3%)	41 (10.7%)	24 (6.3%)	384 (100%)
The inability to verify political information on Facebook reduced users' confidence in forming opinions based on content from the platform.	158 (41.1%)	134 (34.9%)	30 (7.8%)	39 (10.2%)	23 (6.0%)	384 (100%)
Facebook algorithms exposed users mainly to information that matched their existing political beliefs, limiting balanced opinions.	143 (37.2%)	137 (35.7%)	36 (9.4%)	43 (11.2%)	25 (6.5%)	384 (100%)

Note: SA = strongly agree; A = agree; U = undecided; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree. Values are frequencies (percentages).

The data in Table 1 show that Facebook encountered several challenges that affected its role in shaping public opinion during the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election. The major challenges identified by respondents include misinformation, fake news, political bias, identity-based narratives and difficulties in verifying political information. The statement that misinformation on Facebook affected the way voters formed opinions about presidential candidates recorded a high level of agreement, with 293 respondents (76.3%) agreeing. This indicates that misinformation influenced how some voters perceived candidates and political issues during the election. Similarly, 290 respondents (75.5%) agreed that fake news circulated on Facebook made it difficult for voters to make informed political judgments. This suggests that the spread of false information reduced the reliability of political content available on the platform and affected users' ability to make informed decisions.

Also, 287 respondents (74.7%) agreed that political bias on Facebook influenced users' perceptions of candidates and political issues. This implies that partisan content on the platform affected the objectivity of political discussions and opinion formation. Furthermore, 287 respondents (74.7%) agreed that ethnic and religious narratives shared on Facebook affected public opinion about presidential candidates. This shows that identity-based content contributed to shaping political perceptions among users during the election. The data also reveal that 292 respondents (76.0%) agreed that the inability to verify political information on Facebook reduced users' confidence in forming opinions based on content from the platform. This indicates that credibility concerns affected the effectiveness of Facebook as a reliable source of political information.

Table 2. Effect of misinformation and fake news on Facebook on public opinion during the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election (N = 384).

Statement	SA	A	U	D	SD	Total
Misinformation shared on Facebook influenced how voters perceived presidential candidates during the 2023 election.	162 (42.2%)	128 (33.3%)	34 (8.9%)	37 (9.6%)	23 (6.0%)	384 (100%)
Fake news on Facebook affected voters' understanding of political issues during the 2023 presidential election.	155 (40.4%)	134 (34.9%)	32 (8.3%)	39 (10.2%)	24 (6.3%)	384 (100%)
False information circulated on Facebook influenced public discussions about presidential candidates.	148 (38.5%)	141 (36.7%)	35 (9.1%)	37 (9.6%)	23 (6.0%)	384 (100%)
Fake news on Facebook created confusion among voters when evaluating political information during the election.	159 (41.4%)	130 (33.9%)	34 (8.9%)	38 (9.9%)	23 (6.0%)	384 (100%)
Exposure to misleading political content on Facebook affected voters' opinions about election-related issues.	153 (39.8%)	136 (35.4%)	33 (8.6%)	39 (10.2%)	23 (6.0%)	384 (100%)

Note: SA = strongly agree; A = agree; U = undecided; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree. Values are frequencies (percentages).

The data in Table 2 indicate that misinformation and fake news on Facebook significantly affected public opinion during the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election. The results show that many respondents believed that false and misleading information circulated on Facebook influenced how voters understood political issues, assessed candidates and participated in election-related discussions. The statement that misinformation shared on Facebook influenced how voters perceived presidential candidates recorded a high level of agreement, with 290 respondents (75.5%) agreeing. This suggests that misleading information on the platform contributed to shaping voters' perceptions of candidates during the election period. Similarly, 289 respondents (75.3%) agreed that fake news on Facebook affected voters' understanding of political issues. This implies that the circulation of unverified information created challenges in accessing accurate political information and affected voters' interpretations of election matters.

Furthermore, 289 respondents (75.2%) agreed that false information circulated on Facebook influenced public discussions about presidential candidates. This indicates that misinformation did not only affect individual opinions but also shaped broader political conversations among users. The data also reveal that 289 respondents (75.3%) agreed that fake news on Facebook created confusion among voters when evaluating political information. This shows that the presence of inaccurate content reduced the reliability of Facebook as a source of electoral information. Finally, 289 respondents (75.2%) agreed that exposure to misleading political content on Facebook affected voters' opinions about election-related issues. This demonstrates that misinformation and fake news played an important role in influencing how citizens interpreted political events during the 2023 presidential election.

6 Discussion

In line with objective one, the findings reveal that misinformation and fake news on Facebook constituted major challenges that affected public opinion formation during the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election. The study found that 76.3% of the respondents agreed that misinformation

shared on Facebook influenced the way voters formed opinions about presidential candidates. This indicates that misleading information circulated on the platform affected how some voters interpreted candidates and political issues during the election. The finding supports the Agenda-Setting Theory, which explains that media platforms influence public attention by determining the issues that receive prominence. In the context of Facebook, information that receives high engagement through likes, comments and shares can become more visible and influence what users consider important, regardless of whether such information is accurate. The findings further revealed that 75.5% of the respondents agreed that fake news circulated on Facebook made it difficult for voters to make informed political judgments during the election. This suggests that the availability of false and unverified information reduced the credibility of political communication on Facebook and affected voters' ability to evaluate electoral information effectively. This finding agrees with Hassan (2023), who observed that the spread of disinformation through social media platforms during Nigeria's electoral processes created challenges for citizens in distinguishing between factual information and misleading content. The study further noted that disinformation could influence public perception, reduce trust in political information and affect democratic discussions.

Furthermore, 74.7% of the respondents agreed that political bias on Facebook influenced users' perceptions of candidates and political issues. This implies that partisan messages and selective presentation of information affected balanced political discussions on the platform. Similarly, 74.7% of the respondents agreed that ethnic and religious narratives shared on Facebook affected public opinion about presidential candidates. This shows that identity-based political content contributed to shaping voters' perceptions and influenced the way electoral issues were interpreted during the election period. The findings also revealed that 76.0% of the respondents agreed that the inability to verify political information on Facebook reduced users' confidence in forming opinions based on content from the platform. This indicates that credibility challenges affected Facebook's effectiveness as a reliable source of political information. From the perspective of Agenda-Setting Theory, although Facebook helped determine which political issues gained public attention, the prominence given to inaccurate or misleading information affected the quality of the agenda presented to users.

In line with objective two, the findings reveal that misinformation and fake news on Facebook significantly affected public opinion during the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election in Kaduna Metropolis. The study found that 75.5% of respondents agreed that misinformation shared on Facebook influenced how voters perceived presidential candidates. This indicates that false information circulated on the platform affected voters' interpretations of candidates and political issues. The finding supports the Agenda-Setting Theory, which explains that media platforms influence public attention by determining the issues that gain prominence. On Facebook, highly shared and discussed information can shape public discourse and influence opinions among users. Similarly, 75.3% of respondents agreed that fake news on Facebook affected voters' understanding of political issues during the election. This suggests that unverified information created difficulties for voters in accessing accurate political information and making informed decisions. This finding agrees with Aina and Afolaranmi (2025), who found that disinformation during Nigeria's electoral processes affected citizens' ability to distinguish between accurate and misleading political information.

Furthermore, 75.2% of respondents agreed that false information circulated on Facebook influenced public discussions about presidential candidates. This implies that misinformation affected not only individual opinions but also wider political conversations among users. The findings also showed that 75.3% of respondents agreed that fake news on Facebook created confusion among voters when evaluating political information, while 75.2% agreed that exposure to misleading political content

affected their opinions about election-related issues. These results indicate that misinformation and fake news reduced the credibility of Facebook as a source of electoral information and affected the quality of opinions formed by users.

7 Conclusion and recommendations

The study concludes that misinformation and fake news on Facebook posed significant challenges to public opinion formation during the 2023 Nigerian Presidential Election in Kaduna Metropolis. Although Facebook enhanced political communication and access to electoral information, the spread of false information affected voters' perceptions of candidates, understanding of political issues and ability to make informed judgments. The study further concludes that political bias, ethnic and religious narratives, and difficulties in verifying information reduced Facebook's credibility as a reliable source of electoral information. The findings support Agenda-Setting Theory by showing that information gaining prominence on Facebook influenced public attention and political discussions, but the quality and accuracy of such information affected the nature of opinions formed by voters.

Based on the findings, the study recommends the following:

1. Political actors, social media users and relevant stakeholders should promote responsible Facebook use by verifying information and discouraging misinformation to support informed public opinion during elections.
2. Social media users, political actors and relevant stakeholders should strengthen information verification practices and promote fact-checking to reduce the spread of misinformation and fake news on Facebook during elections.

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