

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Campaigns of Calumny: Social Media Hate Speech and Propaganda in the 2019 Nigerian Presidential Election

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Abstract

The study analysed social media hate speech and propaganda targeted at the two front runners in the 2019 Nigerian presidential election, Muhammadu Buhari of the APC and Atiku Abubakar of the PDP, and its influence on vote decision. Ten posts drawn from X, Facebook and YouTube were content analysed, while 200 voters were sampled in the week after the elections in Uyo, the Akwa Ibom State capital. It was found that hate speech and propaganda about the two front runner candidates went viral on the social media. The misleading information was spread on the select social media platforms using messaging techniques that combined text, video and pictures to make them look real. X was the most used platform in spreading political disinformation. The stories were deceptively attributed to respected society members apparently to manipulate the public to believe same as true. Yet, exposure to political disinformation had no significant impact on voters' perception of political candidates and voting decision. We advocate media literacy to equip the voting public with relevant skills to distinguish truth from falsehood on the social media to enable them to make informed decisions on the choice of political candidates. The use of social media for spread of political disinformation is discouraged

Keywords: Social Media, Political Disinformation, Hate Speech, Propaganda, 2019 Nigerian Presidential Election, Content Analysis.

1. Introduction

Modern election campaigns have migrated to the social media. Politicians are increasingly adopting these online sites to reach the electorate with their campaign messages. All this has been made possible by the Internet which has connected millions across the globe. The social media with their instant messaging advantage is today shaping modern political campaigns. Social media platform such as X, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc. are helping elective office seekers and their supporters reach millions of the electorate in real time and at reduced cost with their campaign promises. Sometimes,

political messages routed via these platforms could be deliberately manipulated to serve predetermined ends. They may contain hate speech and propaganda seeking to discredit political opponents and manipulate voters.

The UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech defines hate speech as... "**any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor**" (<https://www.un.org/en/hate-speech/>)

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understanding-hate-speech/what-is-hate-speech). In general, description of hate speech tends to be wide, sometimes even extending to embody words that are insulting of those in power or minority groups or demeaning of individuals who are particularly visible in society. Hate speech is a social problem that if not checked could lead to war, public disorder and disruption of the stability and peaceful co-existence of nations (Hare & Weinstein, 2011; Waldron, 2012; Alakali et al., 2017; Galeotti, 2020; Bradshaw & Howard 2021). Online hate speech is even more worrisome because of its anonymity and ease of circulation. Although several governments and social media sites are trying to curb hate speech, it is still plaguing society.

As used in the study, propaganda is false information created and spread via the social media with the aim of harming an entity. Specific to this discourse, propaganda refers to false information targeted at the two top contenders in the 2019 Nigerian presidential election – Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressives Congress (APC) and Atiku Abubakar of the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) spread through the social media. Apparently, such messages were smear campaigns targeted at these presidential candidates to poison the minds of the electorate against them. In this paper, hate speech and propaganda are used interchangeably with political disinformation. It is now common to use social media to spread political disinformation about political candidates.

Until recently, political office seekers campaigned through the mainstream media. They did this through party manifestoes and political messages to influence voter decision. Today, many presidential candidates exploit the social media with the aim of reaching the public as well as enhancing public engagement and political participation (Eze & Obono, 2018). Social media enable the spread of disinformation because of their support for online content creation, posting, access and replication. Even though political disinformation travels through other news sources, only social media make it viral, helping to amplify it in ways no other media can do. For instance, Facebook, X, YouTube and other online channels have been used to spread false information that impacts the way in which democracies work (Smith & Anderson, 2018; Mitchell et al., 2019; Galeotti, 2020). The inherent dangers in political disinformation are well-documented in the literature on media and politics (Morgan, 2018; Penny & Rand, 2019; Galeotti, 2020).

Nigeria has a fledgling democracy characterised by weak institutions, all-powerful personalities who

tower above the law, grassroots lobbying, mudslinging, campaigns that are not issue-based, but filled with funfairs. Recently, electoral campaigns in Nigeria have migrated to the social media. Facebook, X, Instagram, YouTube, WhatsApp, and blogs have become popular platforms for electioneering activities. The social media which have enhanced the dissemination of political information across the country have also facilitated the spread of hate speech and propaganda. This is particularly true during periods of election campaign. Politicians and their supporters manipulate information to tarnish the image of their opponents. What is not certain, however, is how disinformation informs and impacts voter behaviour. The study therefore examines the application of social media hate speech and propaganda in the 2019 Nigerian presidential election and what impact, if any, it had on voters’ choices, using Uyo-based voters in Akwa Ibom State, South-South Nigeria, as a case study.

2. Research Questions

The following research questions were raised to guide the study:

1. What were the hate speech and propaganda targeted at the two front runners in the 2019 Nigerian presidential election that went viral on the social media?
2. What level of influence (if any) did social media hate speech and propaganda have on voting decisions of the electorate in the 2019 Nigerian presidential election?

3. Literature Review

3.1 The 2019 Nigerian Presidential Election

The 2019 presidential election could arguably be described as one of Nigeria’s democratic elections to begin with a great upset since May 1999. The postponement of the presidential elections on the dawn of the Election Day, February 16, 2019 to February 23 sent a wave of confusion and disappointment across the nation that exposed the ineptitude and unpreparedness of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). The International Republican Institute (IRI) and National Democratic Institute (NDI) (2019) elections report reveals that the last-minute postponement of the elections undermined public confidence in INEC and created a lot of confusion.

The election was tagged a consolidation of democratic and electioneering processes in Nigeria after the feat achieved in the 2015 presidential election that was

deemed in some quarters as free, fair and credible. The general election, especially the presidential election, was expected to be an improvement on that of 2015, but as it turned out, it wasn't! The terrain and the political game-play in the build-up to the elections reflect and replicate past ugly occurrence of mudslinging, political intolerance and hostility, violence, campaigns that were not issue-based, but mere singing and dancing on campaign podiums.

The social media were deployed as channels of campaign in the build-up to the election and political candidates and their supporters took to various social media platforms to discredit their opponents in a bid to sway voters. The elections witnessed an increased number of political candidates jostling for the nation's top seat, but in the end it became a two-horse race between the ruling All Progressive Congress (APC) and the now main opposition People's Democratic Party (PDP), with the former presenting the incumbent president, Muhammadu Buhari, as its flagbearer for a second term in office and the PDP putting forward Wazari Atiku Abubakar and aiming to cause an upset as was seen in the 2015 presidential election.

The pronouncement and certification of the re-election of President Buhari of the All Progressive Congress (APC) with a total vote of 15,191,847 over his main rival, Atiku, of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) who polled 11,262,978 votes wasn't on the premise of free, fair credible and transparent polls. There was a litany of reports of violence, voter intimidation, etc. (Babayo et al., 2020).

3.2 Social Media Hate Speech and Propaganda

There is no commonly accepted definition of "hate speech," but rather several definitions exist in parallel. The widely used definition by the Council of Europe sees "hate speech" as "covering all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including: intolerance expressed by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and hostility against minorities, migrants and people of immigrant origin" (Council of Europe, 2017). On his part, Awan (2016) describes hate speech as any sort of rhetoric that is meant to dehumanise others, regardless of their colour, gender, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or any other characteristics, like disabilities, both physical and mental. Hate speech impacts negatively on the mental and emotional health of target individuals and groups, while also reinforcing prejudice and stereotypes in society (Citron & Norton, 2011; Festl & Quandt, 2013).

Online hate speech has frequently been adopted to encourage aggression against individuals and groups (Waltman & Haas, 2011). Many believe it has been enhanced by the ease and speed with which it spreads over the Internet. The social media have been indicted for abusive posting (Spiegel, 2019; Dahlberg, 2001) while a lack of tolerance, political clashes, discrimination, enmity and the openness of social media have been identified as some factors that promote hate speech.

Hate speech has continued to attract some research interest (see for example, Djuric et al., 2014; Burnap & Williams, 2014; Grimminger & Klinger, 2021; Nazmine et al., 2021). A common thread that runs through these studies is that online hate speech has been boosted because of anonymity and the absence of gate-keeping on social media. For instance, Nazmine et al., (2021) conducted a systematic review of 50 studies on social media and hate speech. Findings of the study revealed that because of anonymity the use of hate speech on social media is immensely increasing and continues to attract users. Absence of restriction, they argue, has expanded religious, gender and racists hate speech. Similarly, they reported an increasing spate of online harassment on the bases of gender and religion.

Also, Rao (2020) studied Facebook and Twitter use by political parties at the time of elections in Pakistan. Qualitative content analysis was applied in analysing the Facebook post and tweets of selected political party members to evaluate the level of media information literacy and hate speech in political campaigns. Findings suggest that political leaders from the different parties used social media platforms to promote hate speech in pursuit of their agenda and goals. The study recommended the formulation of code of ethics for political parties on social media for reducing hate speech. On his own, Awan (2016) examined Facebook in relation to promoting hate speech against Muslims. He reported that on the basis of religion, colour and faith, Muslims were targeted on some specific Facebook groups and pages, pointing out 494 incidents specifically related to hate speech against Muslims.

Back home in Nigeria, Ezeibe (2015) analysed hate speech and electoral violence in Nigeria. The study focused on the effects of hate speech on pre, during and post-election violence in Nigeria. It pointed out that the political leaders in Nigeria neglect the provocative tendencies of hate speech so long as it enables them to capture and retain political power,

and contended that hate speech has been elevated to the status of a political campaign strategy in Nigeria. In another study, Fasakin et al., (2017) investigated the use of hate speech during the 2015 general elections in Nigeria. They reported that during the elections, the political environment was littered with different ads and propaganda messages and that media organisations in Nigeria were used as channels of spreading hate speech and propaganda targeted at political opponents and opposition parties. Among the hate speeches used in the election was that of the Kastina State Governor, Ibrahim Shema, where he instructed his supporters to reprise any provocation by the opposition and to kill them the way cockroaches are killed. The study recommended that political actors that used hate speech during electioneering should be punished according to Nigeria's electoral laws. With specific focus on the 2015 Nigerian presidential election, Sunday (2021) reported an unrestrained use of hate speech by politicians to attack one another. We add a layer to these studies by combining content analyses of social media hate speech and propaganda with a survey of likely impact such negative rhetoric could have on voting decision in the 2019 Nigerian presidential election.

3.3 Theoretical Framework

3.3.1 Agenda Setting Theory

The theory explains the relationship between the emphasis that media place on issues and the importance the audiences attach to those issues. It portrays the power of the media to determine the relevance of a topic in the public sphere through vivid presentation, positioning of the story and priming. McCombs and Shaw (1972) suggest that the media set public agenda by telling the public what to think about. In simple terms, agenda setting suggests the creation of public awareness based on the salient issues projected by the news media.

As has been repeatedly ascribed to Cohen (1963), the media may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think but successful in telling its readers what to think about. This is because, people look differently at issues depending on the map that is drawn for them by the newspaper they read (Cohen, cited in Baran & Davis, 2020). The basic assumptions of agenda setting are that: The media filter and shape reality, and their focus on a few issues lead to public perception that those issues are the most important.

Relative to news production and dissemination by traditional media, modern media is populated by

bloggers, citizen journalists, Facebook and X users, among other online media enthusiasts. The traditional mass media outlets no longer function as the primary sources of news. Based on this, anybody can create, produce and share uncensored information. While the mass media influence the public's priorities by focusing attention on their topics, social media also "set the agenda" for their publics. Social media such as Facebook and X now serve functions that were formally the preserve of the mass media. Their users are increasingly being exposed to news about social and political issues via status updates and shared online links, thereby conferring them (social media) with agenda-setting roles (Wohn & Bowe, 2014).

Social media have now assumed roles as media spaces to discuss news of the day as well as first-line reference for people, who increasingly turn to online networks as the initial source of information (Matsa & Mitchell, 2014). Despite these contemporary sources of news, people are still susceptible to their agenda being set (Feezell, 2017). In other words, while media platforms and sources of information have changed, the consequences of exposure to news have not changed. What has changed is who is setting the agenda. The "agenda setters" of today are mixed, including people who work on the newsfeed teams of social media corporations and write the algorithms. There are concerns over the kind of agenda the social media set in society when they promote political disinformation during periods of election.

4. Method

The study combined content analysis and survey, resulting in triangulation of methodologies. For content analysis, the population comprises all social media posts with hate speech and propaganda content on Facebook, X and YouTube between August 2018 and February 2019 targeted at the two front runners, Muhammadu Buhari of the All Progressive Party (APC) and Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), in the February 2019 Nigerian Presidential election. The survey population included all registered voters in Uyo, the Akwa Ibom State capital. Figures from Nigeria's electoral body, the INEC, indicate that in 2019 the total number of registered voters in Akwa Ibom State was 2.1 million. From this number, 200-Uyo based voters in the 2019 Nigerian presidential election who were also active on the three social media platforms used in the study were purposively selected.

Similarly, the purposive sampling technique was also used for the selection of ten social media posts analysed in the study. To be eligible for selection, the post has to be featured on the select social media platforms and must have at least 500 comments, likes, shares, views or retweets. The platforms were specifically studied because of the permanence of messages posted on them, accessibility and high level of use for election purposes in Nigeria. The time period of August 2018 to February 2019 was selected to accommodate hate speech and propaganda targeted at either Buhari or Atiku in the build-up to the presidential election. Uyo, the Akwa Ibom State capital, was purposively selected based on its metropolitan status in Akwa Ibom as it is home to people from diverse political orientations, ideologies, leanings, associations, inclinations, persuasions, ethnicities and cultural pluralities. Views expressed by voters from such a city are very likely to reflect these various hues.

Survey data was extracted with the use of a questionnaire. The questionnaire was subjected to a test-retest method to establish its reliability. It was administered to 10 respondents who were not part of the respondents for the main study. Data obtained was used to compute the reliability coefficient using the Cronbach coefficient alpha method. Result showed a reliability coefficient of 0.89. This falls within the acceptable range (Babbie, 2005; Ary et al., 2014). After content analysing the posts, false information was identified by independent fact checkers and disclaimers from the alleged sources of information. The most used information checkers are CrossCheck Nigeria (a project where journalists from different Nigerian media organisations work together to determine the accuracy of online information), and Reality Check (the fact checking arm of the BBC). The ascertained political disinformation was presented to the sampled voters to ascertain, first, if they believed same to be true; second, whether such messages affected their perception of the candidate targeted by the post; and finally, if the post influenced their vote decision. Data collected from the questionnaire and code sheet became the basis for tackling our research problem, after subjecting same to descriptive statistics and textual analysis.

Table 1. Social media use by respondents

Social media	Use	Percent (%)
Facebook	131	48.6
X	74	27.5
YouTube	64	23.8
Total	269	100

5. Results

Social media disinformation about the two front runner candidates during the 2019 Nigerian presidential elections is presented focusing on Muhammadu Buhari of the APC and his opponent, Atiku Abubakar of the PDP. Findings show the different aspects of disinformation, news sources, messaging, formats of story presentation and influence of false information on voters. A majority of the respondents were young people aged between 18 and 34 (70%) who were social media savvy. Table 1 presents social media use of the respondents.

Three social media platforms were studied as instruments of political information acquisition. Results showed the use of multiple platforms, accounting for the difference between the total number of sampled respondents (200) and social media use (269) as reflected in Table 1. On the whole, Facebook emerged as the most used (48.6%) social media platform for information acquisition, an indication of its popularity among the sampled respondents.

RQ 1: What were the hate speech and propaganda targeted at the two front runners in the 2019 Nigerian presidential election that went viral on the social media?

Hate speech and propaganda about the major presidential candidates went viral on social media. Although some of the messages appeared authentic on the surface due to the nature of messaging and the attributed story sources, findings revealed elements of disinformation. The stories were presented in texts, pictures and video formats, and shared to a large number of social media users. Generally, the content of the messages looked real, authentic and factual but on a close scrutiny by independent fact checkers and disclaimers their falsity was established. The political messaging was intentional to manipulate voters' minds and opinions about the presidential candidates; it was a deliberate and tactical attempt to mislead voters using false information. The following are the misleading social media posts analysed in our study (Cases 1 to 10). Some messages were deceptively attributed to former political office holders, respected public figures, opinion leaders and significant others, whose political views are often respected based on their perceived integrity.

Case 1

Buhari has finished fighting corruption; he should step aside for Atiku to fight poverty and hunger – Professor Wole Soyinka

This statement was attributed to Nigeria’s Nobel laureate, Professor Wole Soyinka. His picture was added to authenticate the information as seen in Figure 1. The post was published on Facebook by “NAIJA

MUST WORK AGAIN,” a personal blog with 148,000 followers. It was liked by 500 users, shared 3087 times and commented on 1365 times. However, CrossCheck Nigeria has written that the information is false and wrongly attributed to Soyinka. The next statement in Case 2 was attributed to a one-time INEC chairman, Prof Attahiru Jega:



Figure 1. Buhari should vacate for Abubakar. Source: <https://m.facebook.com/naijamustworkagain/>

Case 2

If the current INEC chairman can emulate me and conduct free and fair elections, nothing will stop Atiku from winning 2019 election– Prof Attahiru Jega

The statement was attributed to a former Nigeria’s Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) chairman, Prof Attahiru Jega, who conducted Nigeria’s 2011 general elections that was were believed in some quarters to be free and fair. The post claims Prof Jega

said that if Prof Mahmood Yakubu, the then incumbent INEC chairman, conducts a free and fair elections in 2019, Atiku Abubakar would emerge victorious. The post was published on X by “Dadiyata” on January 1, 2019. The X account has 381,000 followers that viewed the post, which was retweeted (shared) by 710 X users and liked by 860 users. Reality Check team however published that the statement is false and that Prof Jega never said anything like that. Case 3 contains a purported breaking new from CNN.



Figure 2. Proclamation about Atiku Winning. Source: <https://twitter.com/dadiyata/status/115705002226251936>

Case 3

BREAKING NEWS: Diezani -returns \$90 billion dollars to President Buhari - CNN

This disinformation was presented as CNN news, that a former Nigeria’s Minister of Petroleum Resources, Diezani Alison Madueke, has returned \$ 90 dollars of her alleged loot to President Buhari. In what looks like a teleprompter, the picture of Alison Madueke is projected, with a CNN newscaster holding papers and

a text scroll at the bottom of the screen read “CNN BREAKING NEWS: Diezani returns \$90 billion Dollars to President Buhari.” The image was posted on X by “Flexxyworld”, whose account has 32,775 followers. The post was shared by 875 users and liked by 1025 users. CrossCheck Nigeria reveals that the information is false as CNN never reported it. The post was to generate hate speech and misinform the general public. Case 4 is even more pernicious and damaging.



Figure 3. Diezani returned \$90 billion to President Buhari. **Source:**<https://twitter.com/flexxyworld/status/1025720419072643272>

Case 4

Buhari has been replaced by a Sudanese clone named Jubril – Nnamdi Kanu.

In a YouTube video viewed 370,000 times, leader of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Nnamdi Kanu, explained six “scientific” facts to back his claim that Jubril Aminu Al-Sudani is impersonating President Muhammadu Buhari. The video concludes that “Jubril from Sudan is not a biological clone of

Buhari but a completely different fellow impersonating the “late” Buhari.

The information was widely spread so much that the then Presidential spokesperson, Garba Shehu, posted on Facebook that a Nigerian at a meeting with President Buhari in Krakow, Poland, asked Buhari if he was the real Buhari or “the much talked about Jubril from Sudan.” Buhari affirmed his identity and also posted a video on X where he dismissed the information as rumors. Case 5 follows.



Figure 4. Buhari replaced with a Sudanese clone. **Source:**https://youtube.com/watch?v=rv_A4hnqDpo

Case 5

40 million Nigerians are mad and are suffering from mental illness – President Muhammadu Buhari

As shown in Figure 5 in an X post, Femi Fani-Kayode claims that President Buhari said 40 million Nigerians are suffering from mental illness. Fani-Kayode, a former spokesperson to former President Olusegun Obasanjo, former Minister of Culture and former Minister of Aviation, alleges that Buhari made the statement in Paris on November 11, 2018. He wrote on his X page: “Buhari went to France and told the world that one quarter of the Nigerian people are

mad? I am at a loss for words! May God deliver us from this man!”

Fani-Kayode’s X account at the time had 938, 500 followers that viewed the posts. It was liked by 2,715 users and retweeted 1,883 times. *Pulse News* (2018), however, reports that the statement falsely attributed to Buhari was made by Abdulaziz Abdullahi, the then Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Health, who said an estimated 20 – 30% of Nigeria’s population is believed to suffer from mental disorders. Abdullahi was lamenting the inadequacy of the attention that mental disorders received in the country and was advocating better awareness. Case 6 follows.



Figure 5. Buhari said Nigerians are mad. Source: <https://twitter.com/realFFK/status/1227234627091402752>

Case 6

Keep them in poverty, then give them handouts. Atiku in Sokoto yesterday – Lauretta Onochie

President Buhari’s social media aide, Lauretta Onochie, published a post on X, alleging that Atiku Abubakar shared food and a cash handout of N500 to Nigerians who attended his inaugural campaign rally in Sokoto. Onochie posted a picture showing N500 notes attached to several food packs with the caption “KEEP THEM IN POVERTY, THEN GIVE THEM HANDOUTS – ATIKU in Sokoto yesterday.” This is revealed in Figure 6, which also presents

derogatory information of Atiku looting billions of Naira, buying the PDP candidacy with billions, and spending millions of dollars to acquire forgiveness from America. Onochie also claimed that Atiku plans to scrap the poverty alleviation programmes of the Buhari administration. Her X account at the time had 105, 100 followers who viewed the posts, which was liked by 1520 users and retweeted by 1800 users. CrossCheck Nigeria found that the image Onochie used was recycled and miscontextualised. The image first appeared online in February 2017 when a Lagos-based charity foundation released pictures from an outreach. Subsequently, we examine Case 7.



Figure 6. Corruption allegations against Atiku Abubakar. Source: <https://twitter.com/Laurestar/status/12271727450542082>

Case 7

Atiku has made a ceasefire deal with Boko Haram in exchange for oil and land in Borno State.

A 44-second long video posted on Facebook by “Make Nigeria Worse Again” claims that Atiku Abubakar made a ceasefire plan with Boko Haram insurgents. The video claims that the deal would give Boko Haram some land and autonomy in the North eastern state of Borno, and oil fields in exchange for a ceasefire. Captioned “We must stop Atiku’s hellish plan to GIVE AWAY parts of Borno State and oil to

Boko Haram in exchange for a cease-fire,” the video was posted on January 8, 2019. It shows Atiku and a Boko Haram member (Figure 7) with an inscription, “Atiku’s new worst idea.” The video was viewed more than 190, 000 times, liked by 1200 Facebook users, commented on by 1000 users and shared 994 times. The page that posted the video is liked by more than 9700 Facebook users and followed by more than 10,000 users. However, there was no evidence that Atiku’s campaign organisation announced such a plan. CrossCheck Nigeria writes that spokesperson to Atiku Abubakar, Segun Showunmi said the video is “high level criminal propaganda....” Case 8 is analysed.



Figure 7. Atiku made ceasefire deal with Boko Haram. Source: <https://m.facebook.com/makenigeriaworseagain/>

Case 8

Atiku avoided arrest in USA because he was booked as an office aide to Senate President Saraki –Lauretta Onochie

Lauretta Onochie, a social media aide to President Buhari, used her X account to make untrue allegations against Atiku Abubakar. In the post, she referred to Atiku and former Nigeria’s Senate President, Saraki, as “low lives.” She also claimed that the US Department of African Affairs said Atiku was not arrested on his US trip because of their diplomatic ties with Nigeria and the fact that Atiku was booked as an office aide to Saraki (Figure 8). Onochie added images alleging that Atiku refused to pay back a N150 million loan

obtained from Ecobank and took N300 million from Bank PHB in 1998 to fund his governorship election and as Vice President. She further claimed that Atiku used offshore companies to siphon millions of dollars to Jennifer Douglas, his fourth wife in the United States. She concluded the post by stating that “Atiku has let his followers down.” These allegations through a single post are many and weighty. CrossCheck Nigeria, however, writes that Onochie’s allegations against Atiku Abubakar are all claims that have not been substantiated with proof and no court has levelled charges against Atiku over these allegations. Onochie’s X account is followed by 106,500 people who view her posts that are liked 1,390 times and retweeted (shared) 978 times. Case 9 is presented



Figure 8. Allegations against Atiku. Source: <https://twitter.com/Laurestar/status/1189869220768686080>

Case 9

800 companies shut down in Nigeria during Buhari tenure - Monday Osunbor

An X user, “Monday Osunbor”, alleges that 800 companies were shut down in 3 years during Buhari’s tenure. He attributed the statement to the Nigerian Association of Chambers of Commerce, Industry, Mines and Agriculture (NACCIMA). The account has 18,010 followers that viewed its posts, liked 1900 times and shared 1090 times. *Premium Times* reports that the President of NACCIMA, Herbert Ajayi, said that at least 800 companies closed shops in Nigeria between 2009 and 2011 due to harsh operating business environment. This statement by Ajayi was made before Buhari’s tenure and the companies that shut down did so during the reign of President Goodluck Jonathan. Case 10 is analysed.

Case 10

A video posted on Facebook shows then United States President, Donald Trump, endorsing Atiku Abubakar. The video was posted by “Fabian Obum Uzochukwu” and was shared more than 3000 times. The video was posted with the caption: “Breaking News from Capitol Hill, Washington D.C. United State President Donald Trump has officially endorsed Alhaji Atiku Abubakar as the incoming president of Nigeria.” CrossCheck Nigeria denies such endorsement by Trump. The video is a doctored version of footage showing the American president signing an Executive Order weakening the health reforms known as Obamacare in October, 2017. Social media hate speech and propaganda during the election period is summarised in Table 2. A breakdown shows that six appeared on X, targeted both presidential candidates and mostly used multiple message formats. X (60%) is identified as a key source of false political information in the 2019 Nigerian presidential elections.

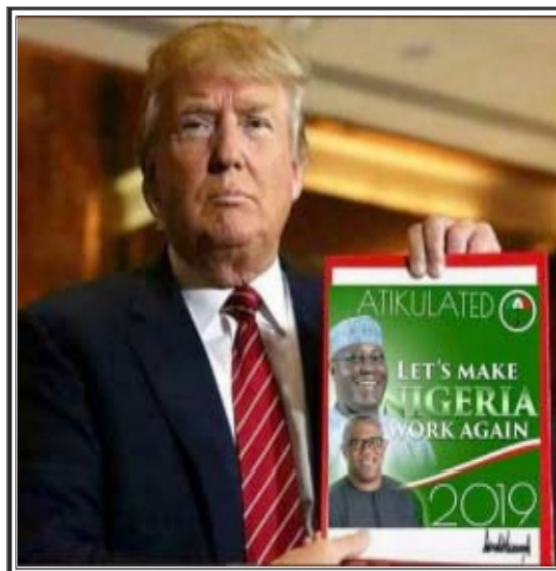


Figure 9. Trump endorses Atiku Abubakar. Source: <https://m.facebook.com/fabianobumuzochukwu/>

Table 2. Social media hate speech and propaganda

Variable	Social Media	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Platform	Facebook	3	30
	X	6	60
	YouTube	1	10
Target	Atiku	5	50
	Buhari	5	50
Format	Text	2	20
	Video	3	50
	Multiple	5	30
Likes	500 – 1000	2	20
	1001 – 2000	5	50
	Above 2000	3	30
	500 – 1000	5	50
Shares	1001 – 2000	3	30
	Above 2000	2	20

The results in Table 2 revealed that 80% and 50% of hate speech and propaganda was liked and shared respectively by more than 1000 social media users, implying the engagement of social media users in spreading hate speech and propaganda to online community of friends and followers. While Atiku Abubakar and Muhammadu Buhari were objects of political disinformation, their political fans contributed to the posting and spreading of false information.

RQ 2: What level of influence (if any) did social media hate speech and propaganda have on voting decisions of the electorate in the 2019 Nigerian presidential election?

To determine the influence of social media hate speech and propaganda on voting decisions, first, respondents were provided with 10 false information about the two front-runner candidates in the 2019 presidential election. They were to indicate which information they considered “True” or “False” as a

means of assessing voters’ knowledge of social media hate speech and propaganda. Table 3 reveals most voters identified false messages, especially those claiming that Buhari has been replaced by a Sudanese clone (71.5%) and that 40 million Nigerians are mad and suffering from mental illness (71.5%). The information mostly believed to be true is the one attributed to Prof. Soyinka, which claims that Buhari has finished fighting corruption and should step aside for Atiku to fight poverty and hunger (49%). Second, to assess the influence exposure to hate speech and propaganda had on voters’ perception of candidates and voting decision, we analyse the responses to two items that addressed the issue in our questionnaire: “Would you say that the hate speech and propaganda you were exposed to on the social media affected your perception of the two front runner candidates (President Buhari and Atiku)?” and “Do you think these negative rhetoric influenced your voting decision?” We present the results in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 3. Respondents’ recognition of social media hates speech and propaganda

S/N	Message	Target	True	%	False	%	Total
1.	“Buhari has finished fighting corruption, he should step aside for Atiku to fight poverty and Hunger” – Prof. Wole Soyinka	Buhari	98	49	102	51	200
2.	“If the current INEC chairman can emulate me and conduct free and fair elections, nothing will stop Atiku from winning 2019 elections” – Prof. Attahiru Jega	Buhari	89	44.5	111	55.5	200
3.	“Diezani returns \$90 billion to President Buhari” – CNN	Buhari	96	48	104	52	200
4.	“Buhari has been replaced with a Sudanese clone named Jubril” – Nnamdi Kanu	Buhari	57	28.5	143	71.5	200
5.	“40 million Nigerians are mad and are suffering from mental illness” - President Muhammadu Buhari	Atiku	57	28.5	143	71.5	200
6.	800 companies shut down in Nigeria during Buhari tenure	Buhari	93	46.5	107	53.5	200
7.	A photo of food packs with money attached. “Keep them in poverty, then give them handouts. Atiku in Sokoto yesterday” – Lauretta Onochie	Atiku	96	48	104	52	200
8.	Video that claims Atiku has made a ceasefire deal with Boko Haram in exchange for oil and land in Borno state	Atiku	71	35.5	29	64.5	200
9.	“Atiku avoided arrest in USA because he was booked as an office aide to Senate President Saraki” – Lauretta Onochie	Atiku	89	44.5	111	55.5	200
10.	An image of US president Donald Trump, endorsing Atiku Abubakar	Atiku	65	32.5	135	67.5	200

Table 4. Examination of whether exposure to political disinformation affected voters’ perception of candidates

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	8	4
No	182	91
Not sure	10	5
Total	200	100

Table 5. Examination of whether exposure to political disinformation influenced voting decision

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	---	---
No	192	96
Not sure	8	4
Total	200	100

Tables 4 and 5 portray that exposure to political disinformation had no significant impact on voters' perception of political candidates and voting decision respectively.

6. Discussion of Results and Implications

Analyses show how political disinformation spread through the social media in the build-up to the 2019 Nigerian presidential elections. Posts used powerful information sources, contents, formats, likes and shares to reach many voters on different social media platforms. In addition to the high level of sharing and liking of the false information by a large number of followers, a combination of visual, textual and audio media was exploited for emphasis. Most of the messages were backed up with pictures for authentication.

While X, Facebook, and YouTube have been exploited for hate speech and propaganda in Nigeria politics, X was a major source of hate speech and false political information during the 2019 Nigerian presidential elections. Our study reveals that a majority of voters were able to recognise as false, hate speech and propaganda propagated through the social media in the build-up to the election. The dangers posed by political disinformation are well-known. Prior studies have reported a growing awareness among the public of the dangers and of the limits of social media (Graves-Cherubini, 2016; Mitchell, 2019). The awareness of the danger that political disinformation poses is the first step to exercising vigilance over the information transmitted through the social media and picked up by the mainstream media (Chamber, 2020).

Furthermore, we report that exposure to political disinformation on the social media had no significant impact on voters' perception of presidential candidates as well as voting decision. Studies on political disinformation and electoral outcomes have thrown up conflicting results. From a systematic review of studies in this domain, Galeotti (2020) concludes that the impact of disinformation on voting decision remains "ambiguous" (p. 65). Her review however admitted that even though political disinformation doesn't affect electoral outcome, "the dangers it presents for democracy are considerable" (p. 66). On the contrary, however, Cantarella et al., (2023) have established that "misinformation had a positive effect on electoral support for populist parties" (p. 11) in the 2013 and 2018 Italian elections, even though they warn that, "Fake news alone cannot explain most of the growth in populist preference" (p. 2).

As some studies reviewed in Galeotti (2020) reported with regard to political information, the influence of social media information seems to run along partisan identification, either reinforcing preexistent beliefs in the case of favorable content or being dismissed as fake in the case of adverse content. Therefore, belief in political disinformation is especially the effect of partisan affiliations. However, there's no contention that social media magnify the quantity of disinformation.

Hate speech thrives more in the context of weak democratic structures, structural inequalities, discrimination against groups and underlying conflicts among relevant groups (Benesch, 2012), which are all features of the Nigerian state. Yet, the spread of hate speech and propaganda at periods of presidential elections should be a major concern for Nigeria's political leaders at all levels because of its implications for her democracy and the country's unity. Today, the social media have become sites for the dissemination of political disinformation by political parties and their members as we have witnessed in Nigeria and in other democracies (Bradshaw & Howard, 2021). These online sites are increasingly being used for electioneering purposes across countries. And voters derive political information from these platforms. However, what should matter the most is voters' interrogation of news and what they eventually do with it.

Following the rapid spread of online messages, traditional mass media outlets such as the radio, television or newspaper no longer function as the primary sources of news. Social media currently share some of the functions of the mass media. They operate as sources of political information and voters can make political decisions based on the information conveyed by these channels. Millions of users are promptly exposed to political news through status updates and shared links (Castells, 2007). Therefore, messages sent through these channels should be truthful to favorably impact the democratic process. Factual political information is important because inaccurate information threatens the foundations of democracy, and by extension, economic and human development. Disinformation pollutes the public sphere, making it toxic and unsafe for public debates.

The Latin America Center of the Atlantic Council (2019) observes that citizens shape the social and political environments through engagement in politics and participation in elections. As several studies have shown, social media hate speech and

propaganda do not augur well for democracy (Hare & Weinstein, 2011; Waldron, 2012; Galeotti, 2020; Grimminger & Klinger, 2021). They can sometimes be used to harm targeted political candidates. If vote decisions are influenced by disinformation on social media platforms, it can result in enthroning the wrong candidate.

The US National Democratic Institute (n.d.) states that a pre-existing and globally recognised standard for democratic elections is the right to seek, receive and impart information for informed choice on Election Day. In other words, voters have the right to seek, receive and impart accurate information that allows for informed choices. This position is grounded on the provisions of freedom of expression as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (UNCAC) and the constitutions of several states. Electoral hate speech and propaganda subverts this right as it is designed to deceive and mislead voters, create confusion and undermine the electoral process.

7. Conclusion

Hate speech and propaganda about the two front runner candidates in the 2019 Nigerian presidential elections went viral on the social media. The misleading information was spread via Facebook, X and YouTube using political messaging techniques that combined texts, videos and pictures to make them look real. While X was the highest channel of hate speech and propaganda dissemination, the stories were attributed to respected society members to clothe them with false authenticity so as to mislead the electorate. As results suggest, the misleading information wielded no significant influence on voter preference for presidential candidates as well as voting decision of the sampled population.

Accordingly, it is canvassed that social media platforms be used for positive purposes and not for hate speech and propaganda dissemination. There is need for increased media literacy to mitigate the impact of hate speech and propaganda as well as to enable voters to make an informed choice of political candidates. Government and concerned bodies should also embark on increased voter education and public sensitisation campaigns to curtail hate speech and ensure the sustainability of Nigeria's democracy.

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