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AWARENESS AND PERCEPTION OF POLITICAL MISINFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA AMONG STUDENTS IN NUHU BAMALI POLYTECHNIC, ZARIA

***ISAH YAHAYA ALIYU; **ALIYU HUSSAINI; **HUSSAIN ALHASSAN; *ADAMU MUHAMMAD HAMID; ***SAHURA BALA TANKO**

*Department of Mass Communication, Nuhu Bamalli Polytechnic, Zaria, Nigeria **Department of Mass Communication, Federal Polytechnic, Bauchi, Nigeria ***Department of Development and Strategic Communication, University of Abuja, Nigeria,

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Abstract

The prevalence of social media platforms has profoundly transformed political communication, offering unprecedented opportunities for political actors to disseminate messages to a vast audience. Political messages have increasingly been disseminated via social media, raising the issue of political manipulation, particularly concerning the youth population. This research paper investigated the awareness and perception of political manipulation in social media political messaging among students of Nuhu Bamali Polytechnic, Zaria, Nigeria. Through a descriptive survey method, a semi-structured questionnaire was administered to 234 respondents, selected through a stratified random sampling technique. The findings reveal that the students have high exposure to social media political messages, and they agree to a high prevalence of political misinformation, blamed mostly on politicians. Further, some of the ways students identify misinformation include when information is posted by an anonymous source, spread by mischief makers, or spread by a fake website. Beyond the context of Nuhu Bamali Polytechnic, Zaria, findings from the study provide insights that can inform digital media literacy initiatives among students to foster critical thinking and empower them to discern political manipulation, thereby bolstering their ability to engage in informed and constructive political discourse in an increasingly digitized political landscape.

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Introduction

In the digital age, the transformative influence of social media on contemporary society cannot be overstated. The ubiquity and accessibility of platforms like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok have redefined the landscape of communication, facilitating the rapid dissemination of information and the fostering of virtual communities across the globe. Notably, this transformation has extended its reach to the realm of politics, making social media an indispensable conduit for political communication and engagement (Gibson & McAllister, 2015).

As political actors, parties, and interest groups increasingly recognize the potential of social media to reach, mobilize, and influence the public, political messaging on these platforms has surged (Bode & Dalrymple, 2016). In this context, users' access to, consumption of, and perceptions regarding political messages on social media have become subjects of immense interest and concern among scholars and policymakers (Vargo et al., 2018).

Political messages have increasingly been disseminated via social media, raising the issue of political manipulation, particularly concerning the youth population. This research paper investigated the awareness and perception of political manipulation in social media political messaging among students of Nuhu Bamali Polytechnic, Zaria, Nigeria. In an era where political communication is increasingly digitized, understanding how the younger generation, who are prolific users of social media (Duggan et al., 2015), interprets and interacts with political content is crucial. This study aims to contribute to this vital discourse by shedding light on the experiences of students who are navigating the digital information landscape amidst the complex interplay of political information and misinformation.

The ubiquity of social media platforms has reshaped political communication, allowing political actors to reach vast audiences. However, this transformation has raised concerns about political manipulation, particularly among the youth. This study investigates awareness and perception of political manipulation in social media political messaging among students at Nuhu Bamali Polytechnic, Zaria, Nigeria.

Specifically, however, the study attempts to address research gaps, including a limited understanding of how aware and perceptive students are regarding political manipulation on social media (Gibson & McAllister, 2015); susceptibility of the youth, including students, to political manipulation on social media is a critical concern, given their heavy social media use (Duggan et al., 2015); the evolving and sophisticated nature of political manipulation tactics on social media requires investigation, particularly among students (Vargo et al., 2018). Addressing these gaps is crucial for informing digital media literacy initiatives that empower students to navigate the complex landscape of political messaging on social media effectively.

Objectives of study

The study examines the awareness and perception of political manipulation among students in the context of social media political messaging, providing insights into their understanding, beliefs, and practical approaches to addressing this critical issue. The objectives are:

1. To assess mass communication students' level of use of social media and awareness of political manipulation;
2. To analyse students' perception of the influence of social media political manipulation on them;
3. To explore various ways students identify misinformation in political messaging on social media.

Literature Review

The Evolution of Political Communication:

Political communication has undergone a dramatic evolution with the advent of the digital age. In the past, political messaging was primarily mediated through traditional mass media channels such as television, radio, and newspapers. However, the digital era has democratized communication, enabling politicians, interest groups, and citizens alike to engage in real-time, direct communication on a global scale (Gibson & McAllister, 2015). This transition has dismantled traditional gatekeepers and expanded the reach of political messages.

The Role of Social Media in Contemporary Politics:

Social media platforms have emerged as powerful tools that facilitate political communication, participation, and mobilization. These platforms provide politicians and political entities with unprecedented opportunities to engage with the public, disseminate messages, fundraise, and mobilize supporters (Bode & Dalrymple, 2016). Furthermore, social media enables immediate feedback and interaction, fostering a sense of political interconnectedness and engagement among users.

The influence of social media on political communication is underscored by its capacity to amplify political messages, allowing them to "go viral" and reach millions of users in a matter of minutes. In this sense, social media platforms have become dynamic arenas where political narratives are crafted, contested, and disseminated (Gibson & McAllister, 2015).

Youth Vulnerability to Political Manipulation:

Young people, including students, are particularly vulnerable to political manipulation on social media due to their heavy use of these platforms and evolving political ideologies (Duggan et al., 2015). They often lack the experience and critical thinking skills necessary to discern the authenticity of information encountered online. Additionally, the desire to

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engage with peers and be part of digital communities can make them more susceptible to echo chambers and divisive content.

Political manipulation on social media is a multifaceted challenge that encompasses various types and tactics, all of which have the potential to influence political discourse and public opinion (Reisach, 2021). Understanding the strategies employed in political manipulation is crucial for mitigating its impact on society, particularly among the youth who are at the intersection of digital political communication and political vulnerability (Rogers & Niederer, 2020).

Forms of Political Manipulation:

1. **Misinformation:** One prominent form of political manipulation on social media is the deliberate spread of false or misleading information. This misinformation can take the form of fake news, doctored images, or fabricated statistics. The intention is to shape public opinion or influence political outcomes (Vargo et al., 2018). Misinformation preys on users' trust in the information they encounter on social media.
2. **Echo Chambers:** Social media algorithms often tailor users' newsfeeds to reinforce their existing beliefs and preferences. This can create echo chambers where users are exposed only to information that aligns with their existing views, limiting their exposure to diverse perspectives (Gibson & McAllister, 2015). Echo chambers can further entrench polarized political ideologies.
3. **Divisive Content:** Political manipulation may involve the strategic dissemination of divisive content designed to sow discord and create social or political tensions. This content can exploit societal fault lines, amplifying existing divisions within a society for political gain (Bode & Dalrymple, 2016).

Awareness and Perception of Political Manipulation

Understanding individuals' awareness and perception of political manipulation on social media is crucial for assessing their ability to navigate the complex digital political landscape. This section explores the existing research and insights regarding students' awareness and perception of political manipulation in the digital age.

Awareness of Political Manipulation:

Awareness of political manipulation refers to individuals' ability to recognize when they encounter manipulative tactics in political messaging on social media. Research indicates that students are becoming increasingly aware of the prevalence of political manipulation, including misinformation, echo chambers, and divisive content (Vargo et al., 2018). They often attribute the spread of such manipulation to political actors and their agendas. Often these actors use means that are subtle to trade their manipulative ideas

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and promote parochial, self-interested programmes and viewpoints (Rogers & Niederer, 2020).

Perception of Political Manipulation:

Perception of political manipulation pertains to how individuals interpret and respond to manipulative content on social media. Students' perceptions of political manipulation can vary widely. Some perceive such manipulation as a threat to democratic discourse, expressing concerns about the credibility of information (Gibson & McAllister, 2015). Others may view it as a common feature of online political interactions, potentially becoming desensitized to its effects (Vargo et al., 2018). However, whereas empirical about students' experience with political manipulation abound in published literature from various developed countries and contexts, such evidence appears to be sketchy in the context of the current study. Hence, a need to address the gap in literature.

The Role of Media Literacy in Political Engagement:

Media literacy plays a pivotal role in shaping students' awareness and perception of political manipulation. It equips them with critical thinking skills to discern credible information from manipulative content. Media literacy programs are increasingly recognized as essential tools in helping students develop the ability to evaluate the veracity and intent behind political messaging on social media (Bode & Dalrymple, 2016).
Students' awareness and perception of political manipulation have tangible implications for their political engagement. Those who are more adept at recognizing manipulative tactics may engage in more critical and informed political discourse (Vargo et al., 2018). Conversely, those who are less aware or perceive manipulation as commonplace may disengage from political conversations or develop a sense of distrust in political information. The present study is thus premised on the need to appreciate the students' level of awareness and perception of political manipulations in social media political messaging within the target population of the study. This can have a huge implication on policy directions on youth political mobilization, engagement, and promotion of civilized democratic discourse (Reisach, 2021).

Overview of the Concept of Social Media:

Social media has transformed the way individuals, groups, and organizations communicate and interact in the digital age. This paper provides a comprehensive overview of the concept of social media, its key features and functions, and its profound impact on society. Drawing from a range of scholarly sources, we explore the definition of social media, its fundamental features, the dynamics of communication and networking it enables, content sharing, and the landscape of social media platforms.
Social media, a term that encompasses a diverse array of online platforms, has become an integral part of contemporary society. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media

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as digital environments that enable users to create profiles, connect with others, and share various forms of content. Social media has redefined communication patterns and introduced new avenues for personal and professional interaction.

Boyd and Ellison (2007) describe the fundamental features of social media, including user profiles, content sharing, and the ability to connect with others. Users engage in real-time or asynchronous conversations, fostering connections across geographical boundaries. Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) emphasize the role of social media in facilitating social connections and networking. Platforms offer both synchronous and asynchronous communication, allowing users to engage at their convenience.

Social media is known for its virality, as demonstrated by the rapid spread of content through likes, shares, and retweets. Berger and Milkman (2012) explore the factors that contribute to the virality of content on these platforms. Tufekci (2014) discusses the profound impact of social media on various facets of society. It has influenced communication, marketing, politics, and social activism, but has also raised concerns regarding privacy, cyberbullying, and the spread of misinformation. The social media landscape is dynamic, with platforms continually evolving. Duggan and Smith (2013) provide insights into the ever-changing nature of social media, including the emergence of new platforms and shifts in user preferences.

In summary, social media has reshaped the way people connect and communicate, playing a pivotal role in contemporary society. As researchers and practitioners, it is imperative to understand the dynamics of social media, its functions, and its societal implications. Staying current with the evolving landscape of social media platforms is crucial for harnessing the full potential of these digital environments.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the theoretical framework of Technological Determinism, a concept pioneered by Marshal McLuhan in the 1960s. McLuhan's theory asserts that changes in communication technology significantly impact culture and social order (McLuhan, 1964). A central tenet of this theory is that media functions as an extension of the human body, transforming environments and shaping the messages they convey. Essentially, technology, especially media, profoundly influences how individuals think, feel, act, and how societies function, manipulating our perceptions of the world (McLuhan, 1964).

In today's context, society is increasingly vulnerable to manipulation through digital misinformation due to various biases inherent in social media platforms (Menczer, 2016). Technological developments initially designed for legitimate purposes have led to unforeseen consequences. For instance, our natural tendency to trust information from our social circles and dismiss conflicting views is rooted in evolutionary survival instincts (Menczer, 2016).

This predisposition to form echo chambers, where individuals associate with like-minded peers and isolate from dissenting opinions, is widespread in the digitally connected world (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2017). Political manipulation narratives predominantly thrive within partisan echo chambers on platforms like Twitter and Facebook, leading to the acceptance of false information within these ideologically homogeneous groups (Guess et al., 2020a; Tufekci, 2017).

In this context, the Technological Determinism theory provides a valuable lens to analyze the transformative impact of digital media on political communication and individuals' susceptibility to manipulation within the evolving social media landscape. This study aims to explore these dynamics among students at Nuhu Bamali Polytechnic, Zaria, Nigeria, to understand how McLuhan's theory manifests in the realm of political messaging on social media and its implications for the youth population.

Methodology

Research Design: This study employs a descriptive survey method to investigate the awareness and perception of political manipulation in social media political messaging among students at the Department of Mass Communication, Nuhu Bamalli Polytechnic, Zaria. A survey approach allows for efficient data collection from a diverse student population.

Population and Sampling: The population of this study consists of 563 students enrolled in the Department of Mass Communication during the 2021/2022 academic session. To ensure representative results, a combination of simple random sampling and stratified sampling, both of which are types of probability sampling techniques, were utilized. The population was stratified into four distinct strata: ND I, ND II, HND I, and HND II students, ensuring that each academic level was proportionately represented in the sample. This stratification enhanced the accuracy and relevance of the findings to different stages of students' academic journeys. Within each stratum, simple random sampling was employed to draw a representative sample of respondents. This approach ensured that respondents were selected at regular intervals from the strata, promoting an equitable distribution of participants. Thus, to maintain gender balance and inclusivity, the researchers randomly selected respondents from both genders across the various academic levels.

Sample Size Determination: The researchers determined the sample size using the Krejcie and Morgan sample size determination formula. This calculation resulted in a total of two hundred and thirty-four (234) respondents selected across the department. This sample size was chosen to provide a robust and representative dataset, ensuring that the research findings accurately reflect the views and experiences of the target group.

Instrument/ Data Collection: In the context of this study, a semi-structured questionnaire was employed to collect data from the participants, who were students at Nuhu Bamali Polytechnic, Zaria, Nigeria. The research team designed a semi-structured questionnaire

tailored to the study's objectives. Questions were carefully crafted to explore various aspects of political manipulation awareness on social media. Respondents completed the questionnaires as self-administered paper-and-pencil survey format.

Data analysis: Simple descriptive statistics was used to analyze the quantitative data. The statistical method was used to present the key characteristics and patterns within the collected data. Specifically, frequency and percentage were the descriptive statistical tools used for data analysis. Quantitative responses related to students' exposure to social media political messages, their perceptions of political misinformation, and their identification strategies for misinformation were determined using this method of analysis. SPSS (version 23) was used for the analysis.

Findings and Discussion

Findings from this study are discussed in this section in line with the three research objectives (OBJs) set out in the introduction of the paper. The analysis of data collected via a self-developed semi-structured questionnaire is integrated into the discussion, while the data are presented in relevant statistical tables to provide a visual guide for readers.

OBJ 1: Mass communication students' level of use of social media and awareness of political manipulation.

Table 1: Respondents' level of knowledge and ability to identify political misinformation on social media.

Item	Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
I know and can identify political misinformation on social media.	Strongly Agree	56	23.90%
	Agree	146	62.40%
	Disagree	21	9.00%
	Strongly Disagree	2	0.90%
	Undecided	9	3.80%
	Total	234	100%

Source: field survey

The results indicate that Mass Communication students exhibit a high degree of engagement with social media platforms, with an overwhelming 84.2% reporting regular use (Table 1). This finding underscores the pervasive role of social media in their daily lives, consistent with global trends in increased social media activity (Vannucci, et al., 2020). However, a concerning aspect arises when considering the prevalence of political misinformation. An alarming 88.8% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that political misinformation is rampant on social media (Table 2). This highlights a significant issue, emphasizing the urgent need for digital media literacy among young social media users.

Table 2: Respondents' level of agreement with the prevalence of manipulation in social media political messaging.

Item	Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
There is a high prevalence of manipulation in political messages on social media.	Strongly Agree	86	36.70%
	Agree	122	52.10%
	Disagree	21	9.00%
	Strongly Disagree	3	1.30%
	Undecided	2	0.90%
	Total	234	100%

Source: field survey

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that 76.9% of respondents acknowledged that politicians are responsible for spreading political misinformation on social media (Table 3). This observation underscores the gravity of the problem, suggesting that political actors are actively utilizing social media platforms to disseminate biased or false information, possibly for political gain (Muhammed & Mathew, 2022). These findings are in line with the global concern surrounding the spread of misinformation and its repercussions for informed political discourse (Guess et al., 2020a).

OBJ 2: Perception of the influence of social media political manipulation on mass communication students in Nuhu Bamali Polytechnic.

Analysis of responses reveals that Mass Communication students are not unaware of the influence of political misinformation on their political perceptions. A significant proportion (86.3%) expressed confidence in their ability to identify political misinformation (Table 1). This heightened awareness can be attributed to their academic pursuit of Mass Communication, which equips them with critical media analysis skills.

Table 3: Respondents' level of agreement with politicians' responsibility in the spread of political misinformation on social media.

Item	Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Politicians are the major source of spreading political misinformation on social media.	Strongly Agree	120	51.30%
	Agree	60	25.60%
	Disagree	37	15.80%
	Strongly Disagree	10	4.30%
	Undecided	7	3.00%
	Total	234	100%

Source: field survey

Moreover, the majority (59.8%) acknowledged that people generally trust political information obtained from social media. This trust can be a double-edged sword, as it

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renders individuals more susceptible to accepting false information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs (Pennycook & Rand, 2018).

The most pivotal finding in this context is that 85.4% of respondents agreed that political misinformation negatively impacts them (Table 4). This indicates that despite their awareness and ability to identify misinformation, they remain susceptible to its influence. This is a significant concern, highlighting that misinformation can wield substantial influence over young social media users' political perceptions and decisions (Pennycook & Rand, 2019).

OBJ 3: Explore ways mass communication students in Nuhu Bamali Polytechnic identify misinformation in political messaging on social media.

Respondents identified several methods for detecting political misinformation on social media. Notably, they emphasized concerns related to anonymity and the credibility of sources. For instance, they are cautious when information is posted by anonymous sources, spread by malicious actors, or originates from unverified websites (Guess, et a., 2020b). These strategies reflect their vigilance in critically evaluating online information (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

Table 4: Respondents 'perception of the negative influence of political misinformation on students.

Item	Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
I believe political misinformation on social media has a negative effect on students.	Strongly Agree	63	26.90%
	Agree	137	58.50%
	Disagree	26	11.10%
	Strongly Disagree	5	2.10%
	Undecided	4	1.30%
	Total	234	100%

Source: field survey

These findings suggest that young individuals are proactive in scrutinizing political content on social media and have developed strategies to discern potentially unreliable sources of information. However, the necessity for such strategies underscores the challenges posed by the prevalence of political misinformation in digital spaces (Pennycook & Rand, 2019).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that Mass Communication students are not only avid users of social media but also highly aware of the issue of political misinformation on these platforms. This awareness is crucial, as it equips them with the ability to critically evaluate the information they encounter. However, it is concerning that despite their

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awareness and ability to identify misinformation, a significant number of students still feel negatively influenced by it. The findings underline the importance of promoting digital media literacy among young social media users to enhance their resilience to misinformation. It also highlights the need for ongoing efforts to combat the spread of political misinformation, particularly when it is propagated by politicians themselves.

In an age where social media plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion and political discourse, it is imperative that users, especially young individuals studying Mass Communication, are equipped with the skills to discern credible information from misinformation. This will empower them to engage in more informed and constructive political discussions and make well-informed decisions in an increasingly digitized information landscape.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, several recommendations can be made to address the issues and challenges identified:

1. Enhance Digital Media Literacy: Develop and implement digital media literacy programs, especially for Mass Communication students, to equip them with the skills needed to critically assess and discern political misinformation on social media.
2. Monitor Political Misinformation: Establish mechanisms for monitoring and addressing political misinformation on social media platforms, with a particular focus on the role of politicians in its dissemination, to safeguard the quality of political discourse.
3. Longitudinal Research: Conduct longitudinal research to track the evolution of Mass Communication students' political perceptions over time in response to their social media engagement, allowing for a deeper understanding of the long-term effects and trends.

Limitations

In conclusion, while the study has shed some light on important issues related to social media use, political perceptions, and awareness of political misinformation, it is crucial to acknowledge its limitations. These include small sample size, potential self-report bias, the cross-sectional design, and the focus on a specific group of students. These limitations should inform the interpretation of the findings and guide future research efforts, which can strive to address these constraints to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between social media and political perceptions.

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