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Endangered democracies: A comparative study of the 2023 Nigerian presidential election and the rise of Nazism in 1930s Germany

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Abstract

Social media has transformed political communication, but its role in facilitating harmful discourse during elections remains underexplored. This study examines how X (formerly Twitter) contributed to the spread of misinformation, hate speech, and political propaganda during Nigeria's 2023 presidential election. It investigates how election-related hashtags were strategically used to shape public opinion, reinforce political identities, and intensify social and political divisions. A qualitative research design was adopted. Publicly available posts associated with major election hashtags were collected through web scraping using the Selenium package in Python. The data were then analyzed using qualitative textual analysis to identify patterns of misinformation, hate speech, and manipulative political narratives. The findings show that hashtags served as powerful communication tools for amplifying false information, promoting inflammatory rhetoric, and legitimizing exclusionary political discourse. These communicative practices increased political polarization and created conditions that heightened the risk of electoral violence. The analysis also identifies similarities between contemporary digital propaganda and historical patterns of mass persuasion that have contributed to social conflict. This study advances communication scholarship by demonstrating how qualitative textual analysis can reveal early warning indicators of violence in online political discourse. The findings have practical implications for policymakers, electoral management bodies, communication professionals, social media platforms, and peacebuilding practitioners. They support the development of evidence-based strategies to counter misinformation, reduce hate speech, strengthen electoral integrity, and promote peaceful democratic participation in digitally connected societies.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, social media has become one of the most powerful mediums of communication worldwide. Its influence goes beyond the reach of conventional modes of communication. It plays a significant role in public opinion, political thinking, perception, and participation (Akinyetun, Odeyemi, & Alausa, 2021). Because of its extensive reach and perceived benefits for communication and civic engagement, (Dunu & Uzochukwu, 2015) its negative consequences are often overlooked. Communication scholarship has initiated an exploration into the evolution and impact of social media in Nigeria, yet it has not fully addressed the perilous role social media played in the 2023 nationwide elections. Previous studies focused on broader influences, with Udanor, Aneke, and Ogbuokiri (2016) examining its political power without specific attention to the heightened tension in the 2023 election. Based on firsthand experience during the election, the online landscape emerged as a battleground for major political camps, each exploiting specific hashtags. The dissemination of online rumors led to the breakdown of trust in government institutions, mirroring patterns outlined by Paasch-

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Colberg, Strippel, Trebbe, and Emmer (2021). Nigeria, a country with a thriving democracy and a growing internet population, is an interesting case study for analyzing the complex effects of social media on politics, particularly in the context of its presidential elections.

Drawing from the social media dialogue, the project aims to contribute valuable insights into the manipulation of social media for political purposes and its consequences for violence prevention. The paper acknowledges the need for a more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics that transpired during the 2023 election by exploring the evolution of social media in Nigeria. The purpose of this study is to highlight the potential gravity of manipulative tactics in influencing public opinion and intensifying societal conflicts by drawing comparisons with historical events, such as the Holocaust. The focus on Twitter hashtags as a strategic tool for political actors in spreading inflammatory content adds a specific dimension. It sheds light on the mechanisms through which tensions were escalated, echoing historical patterns of dangerous speech and propaganda. This comprehensive approach, bridging scholarly analysis and historical context, offers a unique perspective on the complex role of social media in the Nigerian political landscape. It emphasizes the enduring impact of such tactics on societal trust and political stability. The recognition of how social media is changing in Nigeria highlights the need for continued research to inform policies and strategies that mitigate the negative consequences of digital communication in the political sphere. The study draws critical lessons from historical contexts like the Holocaust to prevent the recurrence of manipulative practices with severe societal repercussions.

1.1. Research Questions

This research raises important questions, such as:

a) How did the strategic use of Twitter hashtags contribute to the amplification and dissemination of fake news, misinformation, and hate speech during the 2023 Nigerian elections, and what role did these manipulative tactics play in escalating tensions and inciting violence among different political camps?

b) In what ways can practical measures, informed by communication scholarship and the specific socio-political context of Nigeria, be implemented to mitigate the dangers posed by the manipulative tendencies of social media in the realm of political communication?

1.2. Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

a) To investigate the impact of social media, particularly Twitter hashtags, on escalating tension during the 2023 Nigerian elections, with a focus on the role of fake news, misinformation, and hate speech in shaping public perception and inciting violence.

b) To develop a focused framework that addresses the impact of fake news, misinformation, and electoral violence in the Nigerian context, with a specific emphasis on the manipulative tactics observed on social media platforms, particularly Twitter.

2. Theoretical Framework

Dangerous Speech and the Conditions of Violence: The concept of dangerous speech provides a critical foundation for this study. Alshehri and Abdul-Mageed (2020) defined dangerous language as communication that expresses an intention to inflict physical harm, injury, or damage on someone as an act of retribution. This shows that dangerous speech increases the likelihood of violence by shaping audience perceptions and legitimizing harm. Through recurring patterns and messages, violence can appear acceptable, justified, or even necessary. This understanding is reinforced by Leader Maynard and Benesch (2016) who describe dangerous speech and dangerous ideology as communicative acts and systems of ideas that make genocide and other mass atrocities seem permissible. Their framework highlights how language does not merely reflect violence but can actively contribute to creating the conditions in which violence becomes possible. What is particularly important about this framework is that it shifts attention away from individual intent and toward contextual conditions. It emphasizes factors such as who is speaking, to whom, under what circumstances, and with what authority. These conditions are shaped by broader social, political, and technological environments, which in the digital age are increasingly structured by online platforms.

The Disinformation Order and Democratic Erosion: The rise of what Bennett and Livingston (2018) described as the "disinformation order" reflects a significant transformation in the nature of political communication. According to the authors, disinformation is often linked to efforts by radical right-wing movements and political parties to mobilize supporters against centrist parties and the mainstream media that communicate their messages. In this context, falsehood is not an accidental byproduct of communication, but a strategic tool. The goal is not simply to persuade, but to destabilize. By undermining trust in institutions and experts, disinformation weakens the possibility of a shared understanding of reality. As a result, citizens become increasingly divided in their interpretations of social and political issues. This phenomenon has significant implications for democratic societies. When citizens cannot agree on basic facts, deliberation

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becomes difficult, and polarization deepens. Consequently, the foundations of democratic participation, accountability, and informed decision-making are gradually eroded.

Hashtags as Infrastructures of Visibility and Power: Central to this study is the understanding of hashtags not as neutral markers, but as infrastructural tools that shape visibility and influence the flow of information. Hashtags organize discourse, connect users, and amplify messages. Bruns and Burgess (2015) argued that hashtags are central to Twitter's role in the formation and organization of publics. They explained that hashtags enable people to connect, coordinate, and engage around shared issues or events, creating dynamic networks based on common concerns rather than pre-existing social groups. The power of hashtags, however, extends beyond their ability to connect users. As mechanisms of visibility, they shape which narratives become prominent and which remain on the margins. By increasing the visibility of particular messages, hashtags can amplify certain voices, frame public conversations, and influence how social and political issues are understood. In political contexts, this makes them especially powerful tools for agenda-setting, mobilization, and the construction of public opinion. This study approaches hashtags as communicative infrastructures that both reflect and produce power. Rather than functioning as simple labels, they structure the circulation of information and shape patterns of engagement.

Historical Reflection on Communication and the Rise of Authoritarianism: The comparison to 1930s Germany is not intended to erase historical differences or suggest that the two contexts are identical. Rather, it is used to illuminate recurring patterns in how communication can be leveraged to shape public opinion, normalize exclusion, and consolidate power. Zhao (2023) observed that Nazi propaganda relied heavily on emotionally charged language and persuasive audiovisual content to enhance communication effectiveness and influence public opinion. The rise of Nazism was facilitated, in part, by the strategic use of communication to normalize exclusion, manufacture fear, and consolidate power. While the historical context is different, the communicative mechanisms used to shape perceptions and mobilize audiences remain relevant today. What distinguishes the contemporary environment is the speed, scale, and decentralized nature of communication. Social media platforms enable similar dynamics to unfold rapidly across vast networks, often without centralized control. Messages can be amplified within minutes, reaching millions of users and shaping public discourse in real time. This capacity of communication to create conditions in which exclusionary or harmful ideologies can gain broader acceptance makes it particularly powerful and potentially dangerous. As Popa-Wyatt (2023) argued, social media has contributed to the resurgence of hate by providing a medium through which hate speech can be produced, circulated, and amplified. The question, then, is not whether history repeats itself but whether its underlying logics persist in new forms.

3. Literature Review

The evolution of social media in Nigeria has attracted considerable scholarly attention, with researchers tracing its development alongside broader global transformations in digital communication. Mohammed (2021) explained the two phases of social media evolution: the early 1990s, which were characterized by the passive consumption of static information on websites with little user engagement, and the late 1990s and early 2000s, which saw the internet undergo a dynamic transformation into an interactive medium. With this change came the rise of social media sites like Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Telegram, and many more, all of which have interactive features and user-generated content. Chinedu-Okeke and Obi (2016) asserted that social media's introduction transformed human communication and that it continues to be a vital aspect of modern life. This suggests a deeper societal metamorphosis where communication, knowledge transmission, and community engagement experience a major shift, in addition to technological evolution. Social media's impact on Nigerian culture is becoming more and more pervasive, influencing political discourse, cultural standards, financial achievement, and the consumption and dissemination of information, in addition to individual relationships.

Within the Nigerian context, scholars have noted the rapid expansion of social media use in the early 2000s, with the youth viewing it as a means to express their aspirations for freedom and financial success. Serres (2023) described it as the internalization of visibility as a means of opportunity that creates a tangible, but unsustainable, mode of aspiration and wealth acquisition. This perception describes the mindset of an average Nigerian youth toward social media as a realm of opportunity. Therefore, it is rational to draw the conclusion that for Nigerian youths, social media is not just a means of interaction, expression, or information sharing, as purported by Akinyetun et al. (2021) but also a means for financial benefit, which makes them susceptible to manipulation. This insight succinctly captures the dynamics at play in the relationship between Nigerian youths and social media, highlighting its multifaceted role as both a source of empowerment and a potential avenue for exploitation. Thus, it is crucial to understand the broader societal changes brought about by the relentless progression of social media in Nigeria.

Studies examining social media and Nigerian elections has consistently highlighted both its democratic potential and its inherent risks. On one hand, social media has been understood as a powerful tool for connecting political leaders with the public. Akinyetun et al. (2021) aptly characterized it as the new mode of virtual political interaction. They viewed it as a means of connectivity between the government, political leaders, and the masses. Ekwueme and Folarin (2017) also noted that politicians have deliberately shifted their

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attention from using traditional and electronic media to using new media for electioneering. The switch is to explore the extensive benefits of social media in engaging with the masses for political discourse. This was evident in the 2015 general election, where the Twitter hashtag #NigeriaDecides played a significant role in dictating the political tempo (Udanor et al., 2016). Additionally, as Akinyetun et al. (2021) explained, candidates used social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter during the 2019 general election. The scholarship concluded that social media has benefited both political candidates and the masses by bridging communication gaps and being a powerful tool for decision-making. Although it played a significant role in the 2015 election by increasing participation, it also raised concerns regarding its influence, with some describing it as the big winner in the Nigerian 2015 election (Udanor et al., 2016).

However, this optimistic view is tempered by a growing body of literature that emphasizes the darker implications of social media in electoral contexts. Akinyetun et al. (2021) claimed it has proven to be a tool for spreading propaganda, hate speech, false information, and disinformation in order to incite election violence. This concern was echoed by Monaci, Morreale, and Persico (2023) who also referred to it as a breeding ground for conspiracy theories. Political actors and media strategists have identified and harnessed this potent tool to their advantage. Its power to be wielded for taunting and intimidation was evident in the Nigerian 2019 election, according to Akinyetun et al. (2021). This highlights the dual influence of social media on Nigerian elections, capturing both positive and negative aspects, all resulting from its manipulative tendencies. Given that Nigeria is considered one of the high-risk countries for mass violence and that it faces numerous security challenges compounded by humanitarian and political crises, as indicated by risk statistics from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, it cannot afford to tolerate propaganda, fake news, or hate speech. Therefore, it has become crucial to address and mitigate these issues as they once again reared their heads in the 2023 election.

Despite these insights, scholarship has often neglected critical elements contributing to the propagation of fake news, misinformation, and hate speech on social media, with Twitter hashtags emerging as a pivotal focus. Small (2011) defined hashtags as keywords associated with tweet content, facilitating searches, and denoted by "#" symbols. Their significance lies in their ability to make tweets go viral, simplifying effective engagement. Chang (2010) emphasized that popular hashtags become trending topics, enhancing the discovery of tweets related to specific subjects through searches. It affirms the easy accessibility of information on Twitter using trending topics. Acknowledging this trend, political actors strategically focus on employing hashtags on Twitter to disseminate information, utilizing Twitter influencers - popular figures with a high number of followers on Twitter - to propagate political agendas. This literature stresses the need for extensive research into the manipulative use of hashtags, particularly during electoral processes, highlighting their underexplored role in rapidly spreading fake news, hate speech, and misinformation on Twitter.

The broader literature on hate speech, propaganda, and misinformation provides important context for understanding these dynamics. Historically, scholars have consistently highlighted the dangers of propaganda and hate speech, from the era of the Holocaust to the Rwandan genocide. Benesch (2014) a strong advocate of genocide prevention, claims that dangerous speech often leads to widespread violence when specific rhetorical characteristics are demonstrated, even in different historical eras, languages, and cultural contexts. This emphasizes the presence of identifiable markers that transcend cultural and social backgrounds, aiding in recognizing dangerous speech. Bennett and Livingston (2018) also defined disinformation as the intentional spread of falsehoods and a deliberate disruption of the flow of reliable information. This deliberate manipulation of information serves as a strategic disruption of trust and perception in a broader context. While investigating the repercussions of disinformation, Paasch-Colberg et al. (2021) proclaimed that disinformation leads to widespread distrust. Building on previous scholarly literature and established methodology, this study hopes to identify the pattern of hate speech, fake news, and misinformation on display during the just-concluded election.

In contemporary political environments, political discussion has sometimes turned into noise where all those involved - rulers, politicians, media, and activists - use any tool to attack the opponent, including lies, half-truths, or facts taken out of context (Ribeiro, Calais, Almeida, & Meira Jr, 2017). This sheds light on the pervasive use of diverse strategies, such as disinformation and contextual manipulation, to discredit opponents. Bennett and Livingston (2018) claimed that circulating false information through social media is a way for parties to mobilize supporters. This trend was on display during the Nigerian 2023 election, with several propaganda pieces on electoral candidates. Weapons such as hate speech, misinformation, and fake news were used to influence public opinion and disrupt the democratic order. Monaci et al. (2023) alluded to the fact that social media sites like Facebook and Twitter have played a critical role in the dissemination of fake news as well as increasing its visibility. Udanor et al. (2016) also referred to Twitter as the most influential among the online media. Given the foundation laid by scholarship, this study analyzed communications posted on X during the 2023 election.

The role of political actors online discourse further emphasizes the significance of these dynamics. Benesch (2014) highlighted the deliberate use of hate speech as a tool wielded by leaders to incite conflict. She further explained that hate speech is often employed as a carefully calculated tactic within specific social and

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political contexts to mobilize hostility and violence against targeted groups. In alignment, Ekwueme and Folarin (2017) acknowledged the use of social media by political opponents to stir conflict. The Nigerian 2023 election serves as a prime example of this multifaceted approach, with political actors using specific hashtags to disseminate information, fueling tensions. This strategic use extends beyond misinformation, revealing a calculated effort to incite violence and intensify political rivalries. The deliberate use of inflammatory speech through social media platforms emphasizes the urgent need for vigilance.

In response to these challenges, researchers have proposed several strategies for mitigating the impact of hate speech, misinformation, and electoral violence. As Bennett and Livingston (2018) posited, it takes more than just fact-checking and rectification to solve these issues. Definite steps must be taken to curb this menace. They contend that understanding the different communication channels is a good place to begin. Paasch-Colberg et al. (2021) expanded by providing a framework for tracing and identifying hate speech. This framework facilitates the classification of various forms of speech by breaking down the defining features. She believes this speech analysis can inform policymakers of the necessary steps to address hate speech. Although this study has a good foundation, it did not provide insight into the necessary policies that will help mitigate hate speech. On the other hand, Benesch (2014) identified five contextual factors to estimate the capacity of speech to incite mass violence. The research, though comprehensive, lacks practicality. She recognized this difficulty and clamored for more research into preventing and reducing hate speech, an appeal that this study intends to address.

Other scholars have proposed more policy-oriented solutions. Akinyetun et al. (2021) proposed using Sustainable Development Goals 16 as a potential remedy for cushioning the effects of disinformation, hate speech, propaganda, and electoral violence. He argued that Sustainable Development Goals 16, which call for justice, peace, and robust institutions, are crucial in curtailing this. While this recommendation lays strong groundwork, it has policy implications. Sádaba, Salaverría, and Bringué (2023) suggest that training in media literacy, not only among youths but also among senior citizens, can increase the capacity to spot fake news. If this recommendation is widely adopted and reproduced, it could provide a strong foundation for curbing disinformation and fake news. However, for a more comprehensive resolution, this research advocates a combination of the recommendations outlined in this review, as each complements the others, addressing their respective shortcomings.

4. Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative data collection and analysis technique to address the urgent need for understanding the risks associated with social media dynamics during electoral processes. Drawing inspiration from Jungherr (2016) the study focuses on the interplay between social media, politics, and public opinion, particularly on X. Therefore, the data collection phase was conducted through web scraping, specifically extracting publicly available content from X (formerly Twitter). The web-scraping process was implemented using the Selenium package in the Python programming language, which automated browser interactions to systematically retrieve election-related posts, hashtags, and associated content for analysis. As outlined by Zhao (2017) web scraping involves the systematic extraction of data from the World Wide Web (WWW) and its subsequent storage in a file system or database for subsequent retrieval and analysis. In this study, web scraping was performed using the Selenium package. Selenium automates browser interactions, enabling the systematic retrieval of publicly available content from dynamic web pages that cannot be easily accessed through conventional static web-scraping techniques. This approach facilitated the collection of election-related posts and hashtags from X for subsequent qualitative analysis. The data range for this study was from 2022 to 2023. Data collection focused on publicly available posts associated with major election-related hashtags, including #Obidient, #Batified, #Atikulated, #Emilokan, and #NigeriaDecides2023. These hashtags were selected because they represented the principal political narratives circulating on X (formerly Twitter) during the Nigerian 2023 election. The study focuses on content circulating on X because the platform provides a space where individuals can publicly express opinions, engage in political discussions, and respond to unfolding events with relatively few predefined constraints. Examining these interactions offers insight into how social media influences public opinion, shapes political dynamics, and affects democratic processes.

The data collection process relied on the Selenium package in the Python programming language to automate navigation of the X platform and retrieve publicly available election-related content. Selenium enabled automated browser actions such as loading pages, scrolling through timelines, and extracting textual data associated with selected hashtags. The retrieved content was compiled into a structured dataset that was subsequently reviewed and qualitatively analyzed to identify recurring themes related to misinformation, dangerous speech, emotional appeals, dehumanizing rhetoric, and distrust in democratic institutions. The methodology heavily used hashtags as a key analytical tool, aligning with Monaci et al. (2023) emphasis on their significance. Analytical techniques such as topic modeling, sentiment analysis, and critical metric assessments were deployed to discern users' stances on subjects and unveil underlying structures influencing online conversations. Brown (2017) acknowledges the complexity of hate speech, fake news, and

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misinformation, suggesting a careful analysis of their various forms. Sentiment analysis, following Medhat, Hassan, and Korashy (2014) model, emerges as a reliable framework for addressing the research question concerning the spread of false information on social media platforms during the election period. The study broadens its scope to include the influential role of political actors on Twitter, aiming to understand not only instances of hate speech and misinformation but also the involvement and impact of political actors in manipulating online discourse during election campaigns._Through this targeted yet focused approach, the study seeks to understand the influence of social media, particularly X, on public opinion and its potential role in contributing to tensions and violence during electoral processes. By employing qualitative data collection and analysis, the research reveals the complex relationship between social media communication and Nigerian electoral politics. The Selenium-based web-scraping procedure enhanced the consistency and transparency of the data collection process by enabling the systematic extraction of publicly available online content while reducing the potential for manual collection errors. The findings can contribute to the development of future strategies for more responsible digital communication.

5. Findings

5.1. Strategic Construction of Hashtag Ecosystems

The analysis revealed that hashtags were not randomly generated but strategically constructed to promote specific political narratives. Each political camp developed its own ecosystem of hashtags, reinforcing particular identities and viewpoints. This correlates with Bruns and Burgess (2011) assertion that new hashtags can be created ad hoc by users themselves without any need to seek approval from Twitter administrators, allowing them to emerge organically around political events and discussion. These ecosystems functioned as echo chambers, where users were primarily exposed to content that aligned with their existing beliefs. Bruns and Burgess (2011) further explained that these users do not need to be connected through existing follower networks to engage in these conversations. Instead, hashtags serve as mechanisms for coordinating distributed discussions, enabling users from different locations and backgrounds to contribute to the same political discourse. The findings suggest that these hashtag networks played a significant role in shaping political communication during the election. Hashtags such as #Batified, #Atikulated, #Emilokan, #Obidient, and #NigeriaDecides2023 were used to signal political allegiance, mobilize supporters, and amplify campaign narratives. While some of these hashtags facilitated political engagement and participation, others became vehicles for spreading disinformation, hostility, and divisive rhetoric. As users repeatedly engaged with content circulating within these hashtag communities, they were often exposed to narratives that reinforced existing beliefs and deepened political polarization. Consequently, hashtags functioned as communicative infrastructures through which political identities were constructed, expressed, and reinforced. In some instances, these dynamics contributed to the circulation of hate speech, misinformation, and heightened tensions during the 2023 Nigerian election.

5.2. Amplification of Misinformation Through Emotional Appeal

Posts associated with highly visible hashtags often contained misleading or unverifiable claims. However, what distinguished these messages was not only their content but also their emotional intensity. Zhao (2023) argued that emotion, as an inherent element of news communication, plays a significant role in shaping both the production and circulation of information. In this sense, messages that evoke anger, fear, or outrage are more likely to be shared, creating cycles of amplification where emotional resonance is prioritized over factual accuracy. Similarly, Heath and Berger (2007) suggested that emotional appeals enhance message processing by increasing attention and engagement. This finding helps explain why political actors often rely on emotional framing when disseminating both accurate and misleading information. During the election period, this dynamic was clearly visible as political parties adopted increasingly aggressive and emotionally charged rhetoric in their communication strategies. As a result, public discourse became highly polarized and emotionally heightened, contributing to confusion among voters and, in some cases, triggering tensions and violent incidents at polling units and in public spaces. The situation escalated to the extent that authorities had to impose curfews in certain states in an attempt to reduce violent confrontations and restore order.

5.3. Normalization of Dehumanizing Language

The analysis revealed a recurring pattern of language that framed political opponents as threats or enemies. Although this language was not always explicitly violent, it contributed to an environment in which hostility toward others became normalized. Such discourse is significant because it shapes how individuals and groups are perceived, often creating divisions. This finding aligns with Cheng (2001) assertion that dehumanization has long served as a tool of discrimination. In this sense, dehumanization is a communicative process that influences how people think about and relate to others. The findings also support Landry, Orr, and Mere (2022) argument that dehumanization facilitates violence by disengaging moral concern. When targeted groups are perceived as less than fully human, it becomes easier to justify discrimination, aggression, and violence against them. Stollznow (2008) explained that dehumanization is a cognitive process with

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multifaceted social production. It is a way of thinking that manifests through language, symbols, and actions, including verbal abuse, discriminatory rhetoric, and physical violence. Repeated exposure to dehumanizing narratives can normalize hostility and influence behavior over time. The normalization of dehumanizing language is particularly concerning because of its ability to create conditions in which violence and unrest become more likely. As such rhetoric becomes embedded in public discourse, it gradually shifts the boundaries of what is considered acceptable communication and weakens the norms of mutual respect necessary for democratic engagement. The findings suggest that this dynamic was evident during the 2023 Nigerian election, where dehumanizing language contributed to heightened tensions and deepened political divisions. This created an environment conducive to violence.

5.4. Breakdown of Trust in Democratic Institutions

One of the most significant themes that emerged from the analysis was the growing distrust in democratic institutions and electoral processes. Throughout the election period, X was saturated with allegations of election rigging, voter intimidation, and electoral malpractice. Whether verified or not, the constant circulation of these narratives contributed to a climate of uncertainty and heightened tension. The findings suggest that public conversations were not only centered on political candidates but also on the perceived legitimacy of the electoral process itself. Trust is a fundamental component of any democratic system. Warren (2018) argued that democratic institutions should promote and protect relationships of trust while minimizing conditions that generate distrust. Democratic governance depends on citizens believing that institutions are fair, transparent, and capable of representing their interests. However, the findings indicate that this trust was significantly weakened during the 2023 Nigerian election. Many X users expressed skepticism toward electoral institutions and questioned the credibility of election outcomes. This distrust became particularly visible through viral posts and hashtags documenting alleged voter suppression, polling unit irregularities, delayed voting processes, and claims of electoral manipulation. As these messages circulated widely, they amplified public frustration and fueled collective grievances. When people begin to doubt the effectiveness and fairness of democratic institutions, trust in the system erodes. This creates fertile ground for political polarization, social unrest, and the rejection of democratic outcomes.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal how social media, particularly X, functioned as a powerful arena through which political identities were constructed and narratives were amplified. Rather than serving solely as a platform for political participation and engagement, X became a site where misinformation, emotional manipulation, dehumanizing rhetoric, and distrust in democratic institutions circulated at unprecedented speed and scale. The strategic construction of hashtag ecosystems emerged as one of the most significant findings of this study. Hashtags such as #Obidient, #Batified, #Atikulated, and #Emilokan did more than categorize information; they created symbolic spaces that enabled users to affiliate with particular political communities. These hashtag ecosystems contributed to the development of polarized communicative environments in which competing perspectives were increasingly marginalized. In this sense, social media actively structured and intensified existing political divisions.

The findings further reveal the central role of emotional communication in the amplification of misinformation. This is particularly concerning because it demonstrates how political actors can exploit emotional communication to influence perceptions and mobilize supporters. Another important finding concerns the normalization of dehumanizing language within election-related discourse. The analysis identified recurring patterns of communication that portrayed political opponents as threats, enemies, or obstacles to national progress. The significance of this finding extends beyond the election itself. As dangerous speech scholars have argued, violence often begins not with physical action but with language that conditions audiences to view certain groups as undeserving of empathy or equal treatment. As noted in the analysis, this can lead to a significant breakdown of trust in democratic institutions. Allegations of election rigging, voter intimidation, and electoral malpractice dominated discussions throughout the election period. This suggests that distrust itself became a powerful political force during the election.

Collectively, false information, emotional appeals, and dehumanizing rhetoric interacted in ways that reinforced polarization and undermined trust in democratic institutions. This suggests that contemporary threats to democracy increasingly emerge through communication processes rather than through overt political coercion alone. The significance of dangerous speech lies in its capacity to create conditions under which violence becomes more likely. The 2023 Nigerian election demonstrates how social media can accelerate these processes by enabling the rapid dissemination of harmful narratives across vast networks of users. While the study does not suggest that online discourse directly caused electoral violence, it does indicate that communication patterns on X contributed to an environment in which tensions were heightened and divisions deepened. In addition, the historical reflections discussed in this study further illuminate the importance of these findings. The comparison with communication practices associated with the rise of Nazism is intended to highlight recurring communicative logics through which exclusion and hostility can be normalized. Although

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today's digital environment differs significantly, the findings suggest that similar communicative mechanisms continue to operate through social media platforms.

Ultimately, the findings reinforce the need to view social media not merely as a technological platform but as a communicative infrastructure with significant implications for democracy, violence prevention, and social cohesion. The study demonstrates that digital communication has become deeply intertwined with political processes and that understanding these dynamics is essential for safeguarding democratic institutions. Addressing the challenges identified in this study will require a multifaceted approach that combines hate speech monitoring, dangerous speech assessment, media literacy initiatives, institutional strengthening, and platform accountability. Each of these approaches addresses a different dimension of the problem and compensates for the limitations of the others. Together, they provide a more comprehensive response to the interconnected challenges of misinformation, fake news, propaganda, hate speech, and electoral violence.

7. Limitations of the Study

While this study provides important insights into the relationship between social media and political communication, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study focuses exclusively on content collected from X. Although X played a significant role in shaping election-related discourse, it represents only one segment of Nigeria's broader digital communication ecosystem. Political discussions also occurred on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, and Telegram, each of which may exhibit different patterns of engagement, information dissemination, and political mobilization. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalized to all social media platforms.

Second, the study relied primarily on hashtag-driven data collection. While hashtags provided an effective means of tracing election-related conversations and identifying dominant narratives, not all political discussions were organized around hashtags. As a result, relevant conversations occurring outside hashtag networks may not have been captured in the analysis. Third, the study examined online discourse and communication patterns but did not directly measure the causal impact of social media content on individual behavior. Although the findings suggest that misinformation, dehumanizing rhetoric, and distrust contributed to an environment conducive to tension and conflict, the study does not establish a direct causal relationship between online discourse and acts of violence.

8. Future Research

Despite these limitations, the study contributes to growing scholarship on social media, dangerous speech, and democratic erosion in emerging democracies. Future research should adopt comparative approaches that examine multiple social media platforms to better understand how different digital environments shape political communication and public opinion. Such studies could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the online information ecosystem during elections. Future studies should also explore the effectiveness of intervention strategies designed to reduce misinformation, hate speech, and dangerous speech. Evaluating how these frameworks can be translated into practical policy interventions would significantly advance both scholarship and practice. Additionally, future research could investigate the role of media literacy initiatives, civic education programs, and platform moderation policies in reducing the spread of harmful content during elections. Given the findings of this study, examining how citizens develop resilience against misinformation and emotionally manipulative political communication remains an important area for further inquiry.

Finally, longitudinal studies are needed to examine whether the communicative patterns identified during the 2023 Nigerian election persist across future electoral cycles. Such research would provide valuable insight into the evolving relationship between social media, political polarization, and violence prevention in emerging democracies. By addressing these areas, future scholarship can build upon the findings of this study and contribute to the development of more effective strategies for promoting democratic resilience and responsible digital communication.

9. Conclusion

This study examined the strategic use of hashtags on X during the 2023 Nigerian election and explored how social media contributed to the circulation of misinformation, hate speech, and distrust in democratic institutions. Through qualitative analysis of election-related discourse, the study demonstrated that hashtags functioned as powerful communicative infrastructures that shaped political identities, amplified narratives, and influenced public perception. The findings reveal that social media played a far more complex role than simply facilitating political participation. While platforms such as X provided opportunities for democratic expression, they also created conditions in which conflict and violence became more likely. More broadly, this study argues that contemporary threats to democracy cannot be understood solely through political institutions or electoral outcomes. They must also be examined through the communication systems that shape public understanding of reality. The strategic use of hashtags demonstrates how visibility and information circulation have become central arenas of political struggle in the digital age. As social media continues to shape political discourse, the ability to influence narratives increasingly translates into the ability to influence democratic processes themselves.

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The study contributes to scholarship on political communication, dangerous speech, disinformation, and violence prevention by demonstrating how these phenomena intersect within digital environments. It extends existing research by highlighting the role of hashtags as mechanisms through which power, identity, and influence are exercised. The findings further reinforce the importance of examining communication as a factor that can either strengthen or weaken democratic institutions. The implications of this study extend beyond Nigeria. As democracies around the world become increasingly dependent on digital communication platforms, understanding how these technologies influence political discourse becomes increasingly important. Therefore, understanding the relationship between social media, public opinion, and political stability becomes increasingly urgent. Democracies are often weakened through gradual processes that undermine confidence in shared institutions. The findings of this study suggest that communication plays a central role in these processes. Ultimately, safeguarding democracy in the digital age requires building communication environments that promote truth, accountability, critical media engagement, and respect for human dignity. Only through a coordinated effort involving policymakers, educators, technology platforms, civil society organizations, and citizens can the risks posed by misinformation, hate speech, and electoral manipulation be effectively addressed.

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