

CITIZEN'S POLITICAL DISTRUST: THE ROLE OF GROWING MISINFORMATION

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Abstract

Political distrust is a global phenomenon that substantially burdens democratic governance, instigates political, ethnic, social, and personal division, and exposes a nation to underdevelopment. The trend is pervasive across the world. While researchers have identified multiple reasons for political distrust, the role of misinformation in political distrust has not received much literature attention. The present study examines citizens' political distrust based on the growing misinformation in contemporary society. Five hundred and twenty-eight youths (n=528) were conveniently selected from different locations in the Enugu States as the respondents. Data for the survey was collected using a self-report measure assessing political distrust and misinformation. Linear regression analysis was conducted on the data, and the result showed that misinformation statistically significantly predicted citizens' political distrust. The study concludes that misinformation is a significant contributory factor in political distrust among the citizens of Nigeria.

Keywords: *Misinformation, political distrust, citizens, democratic governance*

INTRODUCTION

The internet has changed the dynamics of information transmission and agenda-setting. The emergence of social media platforms has contributed significantly to humankind. These social media sites have become the information hub due to their inexpensive and easy accessibility (Collins et al., 2021). Regardless, social media platforms have been identified as an avenue for misinformation (Bahja & Safdar, 2020; Enders et al., 2021; Goreis & Kothgassner, 2020; Herrero-Diz et al., 2020; Khurana et al., 2019; Nnaemeka & Richard, 2020; Tambuscio et al., 2018; Valenzuela et al., 2019; Yustitia & Asharianto, 2020). Facts mingle with half-truths and untruths to create factitious informational blends that drive speculative politics. Indeed, correcting false information might be problematic to restore and may have long-term effects even after it is discredited (Nyhan & Reifler, 2015). One reason for this persistence is how people make causal inferences based on available information about a given event or outcome. As a result, false information may continue to influence opinions, memory, and attitudes even after being corrected (Bullock, 2006; Gordon et al., 2019; Thorson, 2016), especially when an alternate causal explanation does not replace it. Inaccurate information threatens democracy (Baptista & Gradim, 2021) and represents a pathway to an erroneous belief system.

There has been growing concern about the increasing infusion of misinformation, or "fake news," into public discourse and politics (Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021). Misinformation on political trust has significant implications for every democratic system. The spread of misinformation represents a severe threat to society, as it has the potential to alter beliefs and behavior (Van Bavel et al., 2021).

Public confidence in political establishments impacts civic and electoral behavior. However, distrustful citizens are less likely to participate in elections or vote for an aspiring candidate. In some instances, concerns about poor government performance may lead to citizen mobilization and high suspicion and distrust, making citizens withdraw from political participation. Nonetheless, research suggests that negative or biased reporting also reduces political trust and increases cynicism and apathy (Huang, 2017; Unger, 2021; Vincent & Gismo, 2021). Politically motivated frontier groups and external players have been implicated in the spread of misinformation, mimicking the political entity specifically to destabilize democratic institutions (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Incentive inspired misinformation channels usually generate sensational content, often eliciting more views by appealing to partisan bias, prompting negative emotions, and fueling political arguments.

Many observers expect that fake news is eroding political trust based on its characteristics. However, some misinformation sources can be portrayed more accurately as working to shift belief from mainstream institutions to fringe organizations or from one political entity to another. While citizens' decline in political trust can be harmful, an unwarranted increase in public confidence based on false stories would be similarly problematic. An unrealistically optimistic view of the government, for instance, can be dangerous if it convinces citizens that no further action or mobilization is needed.

A growing indication suggests that political distrust has assumed a commonplace in the political environment of many established democracies, and it is often used to explain current political phenomena (Bertsou, 2019). There has been a growing concern about the increasing political distrust in Nigeria recently. Although political distrust has been an age-long issue in the political arena of almost every country, the trend is currently having a devastating effect on Nigeria's democracy and integration. Across all states, cultures, religions, ages, and gender in Nigeria, political perception has been marred with distrust leading to disunity, hate, prejudice, ethnic violence, and political divisions. Institutional and political distrust is often associated with an individual's belief system commonly shaped by information. The rising political distrust in Nigeria and parts of Africa are currently attracting research attention in recent times. There is consensus on establishing possible consequences of this phenomenon for the functioning of democracies and social life. While deteriorating political trust has been increasingly observed in contemporary democracy, the behavioral implications of declining political trust have received extensive investigation. The literature indicates varying effects of political trust on the growth and development of society across contexts. In contrast, low levels of political trust are associated with a preference for protest parties (Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018).

The rise of fake news highlights the erosion of long-standing institutional bulwarks against misinformation in the internet age. Concern over the problem is global. However, much remains unknown regarding the vulnerabilities of the Nigerian citizens to manipulations from misinformation. Political distrust has been implicated in the nation's current state of insecurity, political crises, and interpersonal divisions (Samuel, 2021). Thus, this study is aimed to examine the impact of misinformation on political distrust.

Hypothesis: *misinformation predicts citizen's political distrust*

Method

Participants

The target population for the present study was young people between the ages of 18 and 45 years residing in Enugu State. The rationale for targeting this cohort is that they are more likely to be exposed to media messages. The participants were approached in different locations in the Enugu State, Nigeria, between February and April 2022. In particular, they were briefed on the study's purpose and were equally informed that the survey was voluntary and they could withdraw anytime they wanted. Five hundred and forty-six individuals consented to participate in the study. Thus, those who completed the consent form were given the study's instrument to fill on the spot. They were urged to seek clarification on any perceived ambiguity. In all, five hundred and twenty-eight (528) copies of the questionnaire were appropriately filled and utilized for statistical analysis, while the remaining eighteen (18) copies were discarded for improper filling.

Measures

The instrument used for data collection was a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire items were developed from relevant literature and designed to assess political distrust, the overall perception of government behavior, and intention to migrate based on media contents on a five-point Linkert-type scale. The questionnaire was divided into two sections: A and B. Part A measures cognitive, affective, and behavioral assessment of the political system. and Part B includes questions about media messages. Thus, the measure was subjective, and respondents must self-report their conception of the variables. However, a Cronbach Alpha 0.79 coefficient was recorded for the scale following a pilot study using participants outside the study population.

Result

A cross-sectional survey design was adopted for the study. Data from the respondents were analyzed using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS, version 23). A simple linear regression was performed on the data. The result indicated that misinformation statistically significantly predicted political distrust at $\beta = .912$, $p < .05$, with R^2 of .314. Thus, the adjusted square showed that misinformation explained about 31.4% of the variation in political distrust.

Table 1:

Table showing the simple linear regression analysis for the effect of misinformation on citizens' political distrust.

	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	-1.77	.076		-23.31	.000
Political distrust	.912	.032	.912	26.05	.000
R^2	.314				

Discussion

The primary purpose of the present study was to determine the variation in citizens' political distrust based on misinformation. From the simple linear regression result, it was found that misinformation statistically significantly predicted political distrust at $\beta = .912$, $p < .05$. Misinformation accounted for 31.4% of the variance in citizens' political distrust in Nigeria. Accordingly, the result supported the study's expectation that misinformation would predict political distrust among the citizens of Nigeria. This means that sensational information that is most likely false can potentially trigger an emotional response of distrust among the citizens. Similarly, Rahbarqazi and Mahmoudoghli (2021) noted that social media has a positive effect on citizens' political distrust and causes an increase in their level of distrust in political institutions. In other words, people who cannot distinguish between accurate information and misinformation are more likely to perceive the political ecosystem as untrustworthy.

Over the years, research has tried to identify the causes of political trust and distrust and their implications for the democratic system (Fried, 2006; Zmerli & Hooghe, 2011). While most studies examined the aggregate trust levels from a comparative perspective and explored macro-level alternatives, generally categorized as institutional and economic performance or cultural-historical factors (Mishler & Rose, 2001). Others concentrating on micro-level determinants investigated more profound into the role of individual characteristics, perceptions of government performance in a series of policy areas, such as the economy, crime, and security, as well as individual appraisals of procedural fairness, impartiality, and democratic standards (Rothstein & Stolle, 2008). Nevertheless, the impact of individual levels of education and political interest has been emphasized as contributing to more positive orientations towards political institutions and general levels of approval. Equally, the failure of the government and the political system to adequately meet up with their responsibilities instigates disbelief and the motivation to seek a better future in another setting. The present study presupposes that misinformation reflects a significant determinant of distrustfulness. The trend has severe implications for democratic governance and the nation's unity.

Conclusion

The present study investigated misinformation as a scarcely explored correlate of political distrust among the citizens of Nigeria. The regression analysis performed on the data indicated that misinformation is a significant predictor of citizens' political distrust. The result entails that misinformation is a pathway to acquiring a mindset relative to untrustworthiness, distrust, disbelief, and dissatisfaction. The finding has implications for research and sustainable democratic dispensation. Although the study is challenged with some limitations, for example, self-report measures have been criticized for the issue of common variance. Further research should adopt multiple approaches for data collection to minimize biased reporting. Also, the sampling method poses a challenge for generalization. A more comprehensive sampling technique is required to build a generalizable outcome. Nonetheless, the study contributed to the literature by revealing misinformation as a factor contributing to the growing citizen's political distrust in Nigeria. Improving political performance is a straightforward and recognized approach to bettering political disbelief. Unfortunately, it is not feasible in present-day society. Doubt based on misinformation can be reversed if the political actors promote shared notions of equality and fairness, even reinforcing the monitoring mechanisms to limit morally reprehensible conduct relative to fake news in the system. Further research is needed to broaden our knowledge of other intervening variables in political distrust and misinformation relationships.

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