

POLITICAL MISINFORMATION IN SOUTHEAST NIGERIA: DOES POLITICAL DISTRUST MATTER?

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Abstract

Distrust in political institutions is a worldwide phenomenon that places a significant burden on democratic governance, contributes to political, ethnic, social, and personal division, and leaves a nation vulnerable to underdevelopment. The pattern is reprehensible in every region of the world. The role of political distrust in the growing political misinformation has not received much attention in the research literature, although researchers have identified several reasons for political misinformation. The current research investigates whether political distrust can be attributed to the proliferation of false information in southeast Nigeria. Three hundred and thirteen participants conveniently pooled from different locations in the southeast region of Nigeria, particularly Enugu and Ebonyi, completed a self-report measure of political distrust and misinformation. A linear regression analysis was performed on the data, and the result showed that political misinformation was statistically significantly predicted by political distrust. According to the study's findings, a significant contributory factor in the growing political misinformation could be attributed to political mistrust.

Keywords: political misinformation, political distrust, citizens, democratic governance

Introduction

The advent of the internet has changed the dynamics of information transmission and agenda-setting. The emergence of social media platforms has significantly contributed to humanity's development. Because of their low cost and relatively simple accessibility, these social media websites have emerged as the central information clearinghouse (Collins et al., 2021). Regardless, platforms such as social media have been identified as channels through which misinformation can spread (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 & Ashariato, 2020). The factitious informational blends that drive speculative politics are created when facts combine with half-truths and outright lies. Correcting false information may be difficult and may have long-term effects even after it has been discredited (Nyhan & Reifler, 2015).

People's ability to draw causal inferences from the information they have about a particular event or outcome is one of the reasons why this persistent misconception exists. Consequently, erroneous information may continue to influence opinions, memories, and attitudes even after correcting it (Bullock, 2006; Gordon et al., 2019; Thorson, 2016). This is especially true when an alternative explanation for the causal relationship does not replace the original explanation. Disseminating

false information threatens democratic processes (Baptista & Gradim, 2021) and paves the way for the development of erroneous worldviews. 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 issues has significant implications for every democratic system. The spread of political misinformation represents a severe threat to society, as it can potentially alter beliefs and behavior (Van Bavel et al., 2021).

The general public's confidence level in political institutions influences civic and electoral behavior. On the other hand, citizens who lack trust in their government are less likely to participate in elections or vote for a candidate seeking office. Concerns regarding the inadequate performance of the government can, in some cases, lead to the mobilization of citizens, as well as high levels of suspicion and distrust, which causes citizens to withdraw from political participation. Despite this, research suggests that negative or biased reporting leads to decrease political trust and increased cynicism and apathy (Huang, 2017; Unger, 2021; Vincent & Gismo, 2021). Misinformation has been spread by external players and groups with political motivations on the frontier, which have imitated the political entity to undermine democratic institutions. These groups and players have been implicated (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Misinformation channels inspired by financial incentives typically produce sensational content, frequently attracting more viewers by playing on existing partisan biases, inciting negative emotions, and fueling political debates.

Based on the characteristics of fake news, many observers have the presumption that it erodes political trust. On the other hand, some sources of disinformation can be portrayed in a manner that is more accurate as working to shift belief from mainstream institutions to fringe organizations or from one political entity to another. A loss of political trust on the part of citizens can have negative consequences; however, an unwarranted boost in public confidence founded on false stories would have similar adverse effects. A view of the government that is overly idealistic, for example, can be risky if it leads people to believe that they do not need to take any additional action or take part in any additional mobilization.

It is often used to explain current political phenomena, and growing evidence suggests that political mistrust has become an everyday occurrence in the political climate of many established democracies (Bertsou, 2019). Recently, there has been a rising level of concern in Nigeria regarding the growing political mistrust in the country. Even though political mistrust has been a problem for decades in the political arena of virtually every nation, the current trend is having a catastrophic impact on Nigeria's democracy and integration. The political perception in Nigeria has been tainted with distrust, which has led to disunity, hatred, prejudice, ethnic violence, and political divisions. This distrust exists across the country's states, cultures, religions, ages, and genders.

Distrust in established institutions and political systems is frequently linked to an individual's belief system, which is frequently influenced by information. Recent years have seen an increase

in the focus on research regarding the growing political mistrust in Nigeria and other parts of Africa. Concerning identifying this phenomenon's potential effects on the operation of democracies and everyday social life, there is widespread agreement among experts. The implications of declining political trust on people's behaviors have been the subject of much research, despite the growing number of modern democracies showing signs of a decline in trust in political institutions. According to various reports, different contexts produce unique effects of political trust on the expansion and development of societies. On the other hand, a preference for protest parties is associated with low levels of political trust (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 association between political distrust and the spread and belief in politically related misinformation. Although, political distrust has been implicated in the nation's current state of insecurity, political crises, and interpersonal divisions (Samuel, 2021). The present study assumed that political misinformation is exacerbated by diminishing trust in the political institution. The trend might be nationwide. However, the present study is concerned with the trends in Southeast Nigeria

Hypothesis: *political distrust predicts misinformation in Southeast Nigeria*

Method

Participants

The target population for the present study was young people between the ages of 18 and 45 years residing in Enugu and Ebonyi States. Because members of this group are more likely to be exposed to messages conveyed by the media, targeting them is a prudent strategy. The participants were approached in different locations in the selected states between November 2022 and March 2023. In particular, they were given a rundown of the study's goals and assured that they could stop participating in the survey at any time. The research was conducted with the participation of 346 people who gave their informed consent. Consequently, individuals who completed the consent form were provided with the study instrument to fill out during the session. They were urged to seek clarification on any perceived ambiguity. In all, three hundred and thirteen (313) copies of the questionnaire were appropriately filled and utilized for statistical analysis, while the remaining 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 the 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. 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).

Table 1: shows the simple linear regression

	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1.77	.076		23.31	.000
Political distrust	.168	.032	.168	26.05	.000
R^2	233				

A simple linear regression was performed on the data. The result indicated that political distrust statistically significantly predicted political misinformation at $\beta = .168$, $p < .05$, with R^2 of .233. Thus, the adjusted square showed that political distrust explained about 23.3% of the variation in political misinformation.

Discussion

The primary purpose of the present study was to determine the variation in political misinformation based on political distrust. The simple linear regression result found that misinformation statistically significantly predicted political distrust at $\beta = .168$, $p < .05$. Misinformation accounted for 23.3% of the variance in political misinformation in Southeast Nigeria. Accordingly, the result supported the study's expectation that political distrust would predict misinformation in Southeast Nigeria. This means that sensational information that is most likely false is more likely accepted and redistributed due to existing distrust in the political institution. 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 profoundly the role of individual characteristics and 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 trust and distrust has been emphasized as contributing to more positive orientations towards political misinformation and general levels of acceptance. Equally, the failure of the government and the political system to adequately meet their responsibilities instigates disbelief and the motivation to seek an acceptable explanation, thus, exacerbating political misinformation. The present study presupposes that misinformation reflects a significant distrustfulness. The trend has severe implications for democratic governance and the nation's unity.

Conclusion

The present study investigated political distrust as a scarcely explored correlate of political misinformation in Southeast Nigeria. The regression analysis of the data indicated that political distrust is a significant predictor of the growing political misinformation. The result entails that political distrust is a pathway to delivering unverified and inaccurate information. The finding has implications for research and sustainable democratic dispensation. Although the study is challenged with some limitations, 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 political distrust as a factor contributing to the growing political misinformation in Nigeria. Bettering political information can be accomplished in a straightforward and well-established manner by enhancing political performance. Unfortunately, such a thing is not possible in the society of today. Suppose political actors promote shared notions of equality and fairness and even strengthen the monitoring mechanisms to limit morally repugnant conduct in relation to fake news in the system. In that case, it is possible to reverse the doubt caused by the political actors. Additional research is required to expand our understanding of the other intervening factors contributing to political misinformation.

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