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# Digital Misinformation in Local Government Elections in Nigeria's Fourth Republic: An Emerging Electoral Challenge

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## Abstract

This study examined the growing influence of digital misinformation on local government elections in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, highlighting its implications for electoral integrity, democratic participation, and public trust. The widespread adoption of social media and digital communication platforms has transformed political engagement while simultaneously creating opportunities for the rapid dissemination of false and misleading information. The study addressed the problem of increasing digital misinformation, which undermines informed voting, incites political tensions, manipulates public opinion, and weakens confidence in electoral institutions during local government elections. The research is predicated on the following questions: How has digital misinformation affected local government elections in Nigeria's Fourth Republic? What factors facilitate its spread? What measures can effectively mitigate its impact? Accordingly, the objectives examined the nature and impact of digital misinformation, identified the drivers of its proliferation, and proposed strategies for addressing the challenge. The study adopted the Information Disorder Theory as its theoretical framework, explaining the dynamics of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation in electoral processes. Methodologically, the research employed a descriptive design using contextual and documentary analysis. Data were obtained from secondary sources, including scholarly journals, books, reports by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), policy documents, newspapers, and credible online publications. Findings revealed that digital misinformation significantly influences voter perception, fuels political polarisation, encourages electoral violence, and diminishes confidence in election outcomes, particularly at the grassroots level. The study recommended strengthening digital literacy, enhancing electoral regulations relating to online political communication, promoting fact-checking initiatives, fostering collaboration among INEC, civil society organisations, and technology companies, and enforcing legal sanctions against deliberate dissemination of electoral falsehoods. The study concluded that addressing digital misinformation is essential for safeguarding democratic governance, ensuring credible local government elections, and strengthening electoral accountability in Nigeria's Fourth Republic.

Keywords: Digital misinformation, Local government elections, Nigeria's Fourth Republic, Electoral integrity, social media.

# 1.0 Introduction

The Fourth Republic of Nigeria, which commenced in 1999, represents the longest period of uninterrupted democratic governance in the country's political history. Central to the consolidation of this democratic experience is the conduct of credible elections, including local government elections, which provide citizens with opportunities to participate directly in grassroots governance. Local governments served as the foundation of democratic representation by bringing governance closer to the people and facilitating community development. However, the integrity of these elections has increasingly been challenged by emerging technological and communication trends, particularly the proliferation of digital misinformation through social media platforms and online networks.

Digital misinformation refers to the creation and circulation of false, inaccurate, or misleading information through digital platforms, often without clear verification of facts. Unlike traditional forms of political propaganda, digital misinformation spreads rapidly across social media networks, reaching large audiences within a short period and influencing political attitudes and electoral behaviour. The rise of internet accessibility and smartphone usage in Nigeria has expanded political communication beyond conventional media outlets, enabling citizens to participate actively in political discussions while also creating opportunities for the manipulation of public opinion (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). In electoral contexts, misinformation can distort citizens' understanding of political candidates, electoral procedures, and election outcomes.

The Nigerian electoral environment has experienced increasing dependence on digital platforms for political mobilisation, campaign communication, and citizen engagement. While these platforms have strengthened democratic participation, they have also facilitated the spread of rumours, fabricated news stories, manipulated images, and misleading narratives capable of affecting electoral choices. Research on digital media and elections indicates that misinformation can undermine democratic processes by weakening trust in institutions, increasing political polarisation, and reducing citizens' ability to make informed decisions (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). These challenges are particularly significant at the local government level, where limited access to verified information and weaker institutional communication structures may increase citizens' vulnerability to misleading content.

In Nigeria, electoral misinformation has become a recurring challenge during election periods. False claims about candidates, electoral fraud, voter registration processes, and election administration frequently circulate through social media platforms. The spread of such information has the potential to influence voter perceptions and create doubts about electoral legitimacy. According to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), maintaining public confidence in electoral processes requires effective communication strategies and mechanisms for countering false information. The increasing sophistication of digital misinformation campaigns presents a challenge for electoral management institutions, particularly in ensuring that voters receive accurate and timely information.

The problem is further complicated by the political characteristics of Nigeria's Fourth Republic, including intense competition for political power, ethnic and regional divisions, and declining public trust in governance institutions. Digital misinformation can exploit existing social and political tensions by promoting narratives that reinforce divisions among citizens. According to Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan (2017), misinformation operates within a broader information disorder ecosystem where false information may be unintentionally shared or deliberately produced to achieve political objectives. This distinction is important in understanding how digital misinformation affects electoral processes.

Academic studies have increasingly examined the relationship between social media, misinformation, and democratic politics. Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts (2018) argued that digital communication environments can contribute to the spread of politically motivated misinformation by enabling actors to bypass traditional media gatekeeping systems. Similarly, Andrew Chadwick (2017) contended that digital media has transformed political communication by creating new spaces where citizens, political actors, and non-state groups compete to shape public narratives.

Although existing studies have examined misinformation and elections at national and international levels, limited attention has been given to its implications for local government elections in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. Much of the scholarly focus has centred on presidential and legislative elections, while grassroots elections have received

comparatively less attention despite their importance to democratic consolidation. Local government elections often involve communities where interpersonal networks and digital communication channels interact closely, making them particularly susceptible to the influence of misinformation. This study therefore addresses this gap by examining digital misinformation as an emerging electoral challenge within Nigeria's local government elections.

The study is significant because understanding the impact of digital misinformation on grassroots elections is essential for improving electoral governance and democratic resilience. By analysing the nature, causes, and consequences of misinformation, the study contributes to broader debates on digital democracy, electoral integrity, and political communication in developing democracies. It also provides insights into strategies for strengthening digital literacy, improving institutional responses, and promoting responsible online political engagement.

This paper investigated digital misinformation in local government elections in Nigeria's Fourth Republic by examining its manifestations, implications, and possible solutions. Using descriptive contextual and documentary analysis, the study explores how misinformation influences electoral processes and identifies measures required to protect democratic participation and electoral credibility.

# 2.0 Literature Review

Digital misinformation has become a significant concern in contemporary democratic systems due to the increasing dependence on digital communication platforms for political engagement. The literature demonstrates that while social media has expanded opportunities for political participation, it has also created new avenues for the production and circulation of misleading electoral information. In Nigeria's Fourth Republic, this challenge has become increasingly visible as political actors, citizens, and interest groups use digital platforms to influence electoral narratives. Existing studies have mainly focused on national elections, leaving a gap regarding the implications of misinformation for local government elections.

The conceptual foundation of misinformation studies is largely associated with the distinction between misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) argued that information disorder occurs when false or misleading content is created, shared, or interpreted within social environments. Their framework explains that misinformation may be shared without harmful intent, while disinformation involves deliberate attempts to deceive audiences. This distinction is important in electoral studies because political misinformation is often strategically deployed to influence voter attitudes, damage opponents' reputations, and weaken confidence in electoral institutions.

Bennett and Livingston (2018) examined the relationship between misinformation and democratic decline, arguing that digital communication environments have facilitated the emergence of a "disinformation order" in which false narratives challenge established sources of political authority. Their study, published in the European Journal of Communication, 33(2), 122–139, shows that misinformation can contribute to political polarisation and institutional distrust. The argument is relevant to Nigeria, where electoral processes have historically faced challenges related to credibility, transparency, and public confidence.

Research on digital misinformation in Nigeria has increasingly examined the role of social media during election periods. Hassan (2023), in a study published in Cogent Social Sciences, explored the dissemination of disinformation in Nigeria's political and electoral processes. The study found that social media platforms have become important channels for spreading misleading political narratives capable of shaping public opinion and influencing perceptions of electoral legitimacy. The study further emphasised that misinformation is not only produced by political actors but also amplified by ordinary users who share unverified information.

Similarly, Igwebuike and Chimuanya (2021) analysed political fake news in Nigeria through discourse analysis of social media content during the 2019 general elections. Published in Discourse & Communication, 15(1), the study revealed that platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter were used to circulate fabricated political messages. The authors demonstrated that digital misinformation often relies on emotional appeals, identity politics, and persuasive communication strategies to gain public acceptance. This finding has implications for local government elections,

where community networks and interpersonal relationships may increase the effectiveness of misleading political messages.

Akinsulire, Ayorinde, Yekinni, and Ilesanmi (2024) specifically examined political misinformation and disinformation during the 2023 gubernatorial election in Lagos State. Published in the International Journal of International Relations, Media and Mass Communication Studies, 10(3), 53–72, the study identified social media as a major environment for the circulation of false electoral claims. The authors noted that misinformation affected political communication by creating confusion among voters and influencing interpretations of electoral events. Although the study focused on a state-level election, its findings provide useful insights into how similar processes may affect grassroots elections.

The literature on social media and political communication further explains why digital misinformation has become influential in electoral contexts. Chadwick (2017), through the concept of the hybrid media system, argued that contemporary political communication involves interactions between traditional media institutions and emerging digital platforms. This interaction allows misinformation originating from online spaces to enter mainstream political discussions. In Nigeria, political messages circulated through social media platforms may move quickly into offline communities, influencing conversations among voters at the grassroots level.

Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018) also emphasised that networked communication systems can support the rapid spread of politically motivated misinformation. Their work demonstrates that digital networks may create information environments where partisan communities reinforce existing beliefs while rejecting contradictory information. This situation is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where political competition is often influenced by ethnic, regional, and ideological identities.

Despite the growing body of literature on digital misinformation and elections, limited scholarly attention has been given to local government elections in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. Existing research has concentrated largely on presidential and gubernatorial elections, despite the importance of local government institutions in democratic participation and grassroots development. Local government elections present unique conditions because they involve smaller communities where misinformation can spread rapidly through social networks, religious groups, community associations, and digital messaging platforms.

The literature therefore revealed three major research gaps. First, there is insufficient empirical attention to digital misinformation within Nigerian local government elections. Second, many existing studies examine misinformation generally without sufficiently exploring its effects on grassroots voter behaviour and electoral legitimacy. Third, there is limited integration of theoretical perspectives explaining how digital misinformation interacts with political participation, trust, and electoral accountability in developing democracies.

This study addressed these gaps by examining digital misinformation as an emerging electoral challenge in Nigeria's local government elections during the Fourth Republic. It contributed to the broader scholarship on digital politics by connecting misinformation studies with grassroots democratic processes and highlighting the need for stronger digital literacy, institutional communication strategies, and electoral information management systems.

# 3.0 Theoretical Framework

This study adopted Information Disorder Theory as its central theoretical framework to explain how digital misinformation has become an emerging challenge to local government elections in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. The theory provided a useful analytical lens for understanding not only the existence of false electoral information but also the processes through which such information is created, circulated, amplified, and interpreted by citizens within digital environments. The framework is particularly relevant to Nigeria's contemporary electoral landscape, where the rapid expansion of social media platforms has transformed political communication, voter engagement, and the struggle over electoral narratives.

Information Disorder Theory was developed by Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan in their influential report Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making published by the Council of Europe in 2017. The theory emerged from concerns that the digital age had created a complex information

environment where inaccurate, manipulated, and harmful content could spread rapidly through networked communication systems. Wardle and Derakhshan argued that information disorder extends beyond the simplistic idea of "fake news" by identifying three interconnected forms: misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation.

Misinformation refers to false or inaccurate information shared without the intention to cause harm; disinformation involves deliberately fabricated or manipulated information created and distributed to deceive audiences; while malinformation refers to genuine information that is deliberately used in harmful ways, such as releasing private information to damage political opponents. This classification is significant for analysing Nigerian local government elections because electoral misinformation may emerge from different actors with different motivations, including political parties, candidates, supporters, online influencers, and ordinary citizens.

Within Nigeria's Fourth Republic, local government elections occur within a highly competitive political environment where access to information influences voter behaviour, candidate perception, and electoral legitimacy. Unlike national elections, local government elections often receive limited media coverage, making citizens increasingly dependent on social media platforms, messaging applications, and informal digital networks for political information. In such an environment, false claims about candidates' qualifications, election dates, voting procedures, results, or alleged electoral malpractice can circulate widely before verification mechanisms respond. Information Disorder Theory helps explain this process by shifting attention from the false message alone to the broader ecosystem of actors, technologies, motivations, and audiences involved in its production and dissemination.

The theory is also valuable because it recognises that misinformation does not spread simply because people lack knowledge. Rather, it spreads through complex social and technological conditions. Digital platforms encourage rapid sharing, emotional reactions, and identity-based communication. Political messages that appeal to ethnic, religious, or partisan identities may gain greater visibility because they resonate with existing beliefs and social networks. Research on misinformation diffusion demonstrates that false information can spread effectively within online environments because users often share content based on emotional appeal, social trust, or political alignment rather than accuracy alone (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

Applying Information Disorder Theory to Nigerian local government elections therefore requires examining three major dimensions: the actors producing misinformation, the content and strategies used, and the consequences for democratic participation. First, political actors may intentionally create misleading narratives to weaken opponents or influence voter perceptions. During election periods, accusations of corruption, electoral fraud, incompetence, or anti-community behaviour can be digitally amplified to shape public opinion. Such practices represent disinformation because they involve strategic attempts to manipulate political attitudes.

Second, the theory draws attention to the nature of misleading electoral content. In Nigeria, misinformation may appear in the form of altered images, fabricated news reports, misleading videos, false opinion polls, and inaccurate claims about electoral procedures. The difficulty of distinguishing authentic information from manipulated content creates uncertainty among voters and may reduce confidence in democratic institutions. Wardle and Derakhshan's framework is useful here because it views information disorder as a communication process rather than an isolated act of falsehood.

Third, the theory allows analysis of the democratic consequences of digital misinformation. Local government elections represent an important foundation of democratic governance because they determine leadership at the grassroots level. When voters encounter persistent false information, they may become confused about candidates, lose trust in electoral institutions, or disengage from political participation. In extreme cases, misinformation can increase political tension and deepen social divisions among communities.

However, the application of Information Disorder Theory to Nigeria also considers the country's unique socio-political realities. Digital misinformation does not operate in isolation from existing challenges such as weak institutional trust, limited access to reliable political information, uneven digital literacy, and intense political competition. Therefore, misinformation should be understood as both a technological and social problem. The theory provides an analytical framework for examining how digital communication environments interact with Nigeria's political structures to produce new electoral challenges.

The framework further suggests that addressing misinformation requires more than deleting false content. Effective responses must involve media literacy education, stronger institutional communication, responsible political communication, fact-checking initiatives, and improved transparency by electoral bodies. In the Nigerian context, strengthening citizens' ability to critically evaluate digital information is essential for protecting the credibility of local government elections.

The Information Disorder Theory provides a comprehensive foundation for analysing digital misinformation as an emerging electoral challenge in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. By examining the relationship between false information, digital platforms, political actors, and citizen behaviour, the theory moves beyond viewing misinformation as merely inaccurate content and instead presents it as a wider disruption within the democratic information environment. This perspective is appropriate for understanding how digital misinformation influences local government elections and the broader process of democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

# 4.0 Research Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive, contextual, and documentary research methodology to examine digital misinformation as an emerging electoral challenge in local government elections in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. The choice of this methodology is informed by the complex nature of digital misinformation, which requires an approach capable of interpreting not only the existence and patterns of misleading online content but also the political, institutional, and social contexts within which such information is produced and consumed. Since the study focuses on understanding the dynamics, implications, and broader consequences of digital misinformation rather than measuring variables through statistical experimentation, a qualitative-oriented research design is considered appropriate.

Descriptive research enables the study to systematically examine and present the nature, forms, and patterns of digital misinformation associated with local government elections in Nigeria. According to John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell (2018), qualitative research is particularly useful when researchers seek to explore social phenomena within their natural settings and interpret the meanings individuals and groups attach to those phenomena. In this regard, digital misinformation is treated as a social and political communication problem shaped by technological developments, political competition, and citizens' interactions within online spaces.

The descriptive approach allows the study to identify major forms of misinformation that influence electoral processes, including fabricated news stories, manipulated images and videos, misleading political claims, false election updates, and unverified allegations against candidates or electoral institutions. The approach is suitable because misinformation operates through changing narratives and communication practices that may not be adequately captured through numerical measurement alone. By describing these patterns, the study provides insight into how digital platforms have transformed political communication during local government elections.

Beyond description, the study employs contextual analysis to situate digital misinformation within Nigeria's political and electoral environment. Context is important because misinformation does not occur in isolation; it develops within specific social, institutional, and historical circumstances. Nigeria's Fourth Republic has experienced increasing political participation alongside challenges such as electoral distrust, intense competition among political actors, weak grassroots communication structures, and unequal access to credible information. These conditions influence how citizens receive, interpret, and respond to digital political messages.

Contextual analysis therefore enables the study to examine the relationship between digital misinformation and broader democratic concerns, including voter confidence, electoral legitimacy, and political participation. As argued by Manuel Castells (2015), contemporary politics is increasingly shaped by communication networks where power is exercised through the production and control of information. In Nigeria's electoral environment, social media platforms and digital communication networks have become important spaces where political narratives are constructed, contested, and amplified.

The documentary analysis component of the methodology involves the systematic examination of existing written and digital materials relevant to digital misinformation and elections. Documentary research is valuable because it allows

scholars to analyse social realities through already available sources, including academic publications, government reports, electoral documents, policy papers, newspaper reports, fact-checking reports, and credible online materials. According to Tim May (2011), documentary analysis provides researchers with opportunities to investigate social processes by interpreting documents as evidence of institutional practices, public debates, and historical developments.

For this study, documentary sources include publications from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), reports from civil society organisations monitoring elections, scholarly journal articles on misinformation and digital politics, and relevant media reports concerning local government elections in Nigeria. These documents are analysed to identify recurring themes relating to the creation, circulation, and consequences of misleading electoral information.

The documentary method is particularly relevant because digital misinformation leaves behind observable traces, including social media narratives, online discussions, public statements, and media responses. Although this study does not conduct direct content scraping of social media platforms, documentary evidence provides useful insight into how misinformation narratives emerge and influence public discourse. This approach is consistent with the argument of David Altheide and Christopher Schneider (2013), who emphasise that document analysis can reveal how social realities are constructed through communication processes.

The study adopts a purposive selection strategy in choosing documentary materials. Sources are selected based on their relevance, credibility, and connection to digital misinformation, electoral communication, and Nigeria's democratic development. Priority is given to peer-reviewed journal articles, official institutional publications, and recognised research reports. This ensures that the analysis is based on materials capable of providing reliable explanations of the relationship between misinformation and electoral challenges.

Data analysis is conducted through thematic analysis, which involves identifying, organising, and interpreting recurring themes within the collected documents. Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006) explain that thematic analysis is a flexible method for identifying patterns of meaning within qualitative data. In this study, themes such as misinformation production, political manipulation, voter perception, digital literacy, institutional responses, and electoral trust guide the interpretation of documentary evidence.

The methodology also recognises certain limitations. Because digital misinformation evolves rapidly, available documents may not capture every instance of misleading electoral content. Additionally, documentary analysis depends on the availability and quality of existing records. However, combining descriptive, contextual, and documentary approaches provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the phenomenon. Rather than treating misinformation as merely false information, the methodology examines it as a broader communication challenge influenced by political interests, technological changes, and social conditions.

The descriptive contextual and documentary research methodology provides an appropriate framework for investigating digital misinformation in local government elections in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. It enables the study to move beyond identifying false information to analysing the deeper political and social processes that allow misinformation to emerge, circulate, and influence electoral experiences. Through careful examination of existing evidence, the approach contributes to a clearer understanding of how digital misinformation threatens electoral credibility and democratic consolidation at the grassroots level.

# 5.0 Data Presentation and Analysis

This section presents and analyses the findings derived from the documentary and contextual analysis of digital misinformation within the framework of local government elections in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. The analysis focuses on the major patterns, channels, actors, and consequences associated with the spread of misleading digital information during electoral processes. Drawing from existing scholarly literature, institutional reports, and documented cases of online political communication, the study reveals that digital misinformation has become a significant challenge to electoral credibility, public trust, and democratic participation at the grassroots level.

The findings are organised around four major themes: the increasing use of digital platforms for electoral misinformation, the motivations and actors behind misinformation campaigns, the effects of misinformation on voters and electoral institutions, and the challenges associated with controlling digital falsehoods in Nigeria's democratic environment.

The analysis indicates that social media platforms and digital communication networks have fundamentally transformed political communication in Nigeria. Platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, YouTube, and online news forums have created opportunities for citizens to participate in political discussions and access electoral information. However, the same platforms have also provided channels through which misleading electoral information can spread rapidly.

The decentralised nature of digital communication allows information to circulate without traditional editorial controls. Unlike conventional media organisations that operate within professional and regulatory structures, digital platforms enable individuals and groups to create and distribute political content instantly. This environment increases the possibility of inaccurate information influencing public understanding of electoral events.

This finding supports the argument of Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan (2017), who explain that contemporary information environments have become vulnerable to different forms of information disorder, including misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. Their framework suggests that the problem is not only the existence of false information but also the technological and social conditions that enable its circulation.

In Nigeria's local government elections, where mainstream media coverage is often limited compared with national elections, many citizens increasingly depend on digital platforms for political updates. This dependence creates opportunities for false election dates, fake results, fabricated candidate profiles, and misleading claims about electoral procedures to influence voter perceptions.

The study further reveals that digital misinformation is not always accidental. Some misinformation narratives are deliberately produced and circulated by political actors seeking electoral advantage. In competitive political environments, misleading information can be used to damage opponents, create public distrust, or manipulate voter behaviour.

Political misinformation frequently takes the form of allegations about corruption, incompetence, ethnic bias, electoral malpractice, or personal misconduct. During election periods, emotionally charged messages often attract greater attention and engagement because they appeal to existing political identities and social divisions.

This observation corresponds with the findings of Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow (2017), who argue that fake news can influence political attitudes because individuals are more likely to accept and share information that aligns with their ideological preferences. Their study demonstrates that misinformation thrives within environments where political identity shapes how citizens evaluate information.

Similarly, Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral (2018) found that false information spreads faster and reaches wider audiences than truthful information on social media networks. This finding is particularly relevant to Nigeria, where political messages shared through informal networks such as WhatsApp groups can achieve significant influence before verification occurs.

The analysis demonstrates that digital misinformation affects elections by influencing voter knowledge, political judgement, and confidence in democratic institutions. When citizens encounter conflicting information about candidates, voting procedures, or election outcomes, uncertainty may increase. This confusion can discourage participation or create negative perceptions about the fairness of the electoral process.

At the grassroots level, misinformation may be particularly damaging because local government elections often operate within close social networks where personal relationships, community identities, and local grievances strongly influence political choices. False information about candidates can therefore have immediate consequences for reputation and electoral support.

The findings align with the argument of Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts (2018), who explain that digital media environments can contribute to the formation of fragmented information communities where individuals are exposed mainly to information that reinforces existing beliefs. Such environments can increase political polarisation and reduce opportunities for shared understanding.

The study also identifies institutional limitations as a major factor that allows misinformation to persist. Although organisations such as electoral management bodies, civil society groups, and fact-checking organisations have introduced initiatives to counter false information, their responses often struggle to match the speed and reach of digital misinformation.

The Independent National Electoral Commission has increasingly recognised the importance of public communication and voter education, yet misinformation continues to challenge electoral information management. The difficulty lies not only in correcting false information but also in ensuring that corrections reach the same audiences exposed to the original misleading claims.

Research by Samantha Bradshaw and Philip Howard (2019) highlights that organised manipulation of online spaces has become a global democratic challenge, requiring cooperation between governments, technology companies, civil society organisations, and citizens.

The findings confirm the relevance of Information Disorder Theory in explaining digital misinformation in Nigeria's local government elections. Misinformation functions as part of a wider communication ecosystem involving content creators, digital platforms, political interests, and audiences. The challenge is therefore not simply the presence of false information but the interaction between technology, politics, and social behaviour.

The analysis suggests that digital misinformation represents an emerging electoral challenge because it affects the foundations of democratic decision-making. Elections depend on citizens having access to reliable information, yet misinformation introduces uncertainty and manipulation into the electoral environment. Addressing this challenge requires strengthening digital literacy, improving institutional communication, encouraging responsible political behaviour, and developing effective mechanisms for verifying electoral information. The evidence demonstrates that digital misinformation has become an important factor shaping electoral experiences in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. While digital platforms have expanded political participation, they have also created new vulnerabilities that can undermine trust and democratic accountability, particularly at the local government level.

# 6.0 Recommendations

Digital misinformation has become a significant challenge to the credibility, transparency, and democratic value of local government elections in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. The increasing use of social media platforms and digital communication channels has created opportunities for political participation but has also provided avenues for the rapid spread of false information, manipulated content, and misleading electoral narratives. Addressing this emerging challenge requires coordinated efforts among government institutions, electoral bodies, technology companies, civil society organisations, political actors, and citizens. The following recommendations are proposed.

First, there is a need for stronger digital literacy and civic education programmes at the grassroots level. Many voters in local government elections are exposed to misinformation because they lack the skills required to identify false or misleading online content. Government agencies, educational institutions, civil society groups, and community organisations should develop awareness campaigns that teach citizens how to verify information, recognise manipulated media, and rely on credible sources of electoral information. Such programmes should target rural communities, young voters, and first-time internet users who may be more vulnerable to misinformation.

Second, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should strengthen its communication strategies through timely, accessible, and transparent dissemination of electoral information. Delayed responses to rumours and false claims often allow misinformation to spread widely before corrections are issued. INEC should establish dedicated digital communication units responsible for monitoring online discussions, responding quickly to false information, and

providing accurate updates on election procedures, candidate information, voter registration, and election results. Collaboration with local media organisations can further improve the reach of verified electoral information.

Third, social media platforms and technology companies should take greater responsibility in reducing the spread of harmful electoral misinformation. Platforms should improve mechanisms for detecting and limiting coordinated misinformation campaigns, particularly during election periods. They should also promote transparency in political advertising by clearly identifying sponsored political content and preventing the use of anonymous or misleading accounts for electoral manipulation. Partnerships between technology companies and fact-checking organisations can help identify and correct false claims before they influence voters' decisions.

Fourth, political parties and candidates should be encouraged to adopt ethical standards in their digital campaigns. Political actors often contribute to misinformation by spreading exaggerated claims, attacking opponents through false narratives, or sharing unverified information to gain electoral advantage. Electoral regulations should include stronger provisions against the deliberate creation and distribution of false information intended to mislead voters. Political parties should also train their campaign teams on responsible digital communication and encourage issue-based campaigns rather than misinformation-driven strategies.

Fifth, civil society organisations and independent media should expand their role in election monitoring and fact-checking. Local elections often receive less attention than national elections, creating information gaps that can be exploited by individuals spreading false claims. Civil society groups should establish community-based monitoring networks that track misinformation trends and provide voters with reliable explanations of electoral issues. Independent media outlets should also invest in investigative reporting, fact-checking initiatives, and public education programmes focused on electoral integrity.

Sixth, Nigeria should develop a balanced legal and policy framework for addressing digital misinformation. While combating false information is necessary, regulations must protect freedom of expression and avoid being used to suppress legitimate criticism or political debate. Laws and policies should focus specifically on intentional, harmful misinformation that threatens electoral processes, public safety, or democratic stability. Any regulatory approach should involve consultation with civil society, legal experts, media organisations, and technology stakeholders.

Finally, citizens must be encouraged to take personal responsibility for their online activities. The effectiveness of efforts against misinformation depends not only on institutional responses but also on individual behaviour. Voters should verify information before sharing it, question sensational claims, and rely on credible electoral sources. Building a culture of responsible digital citizenship is essential for strengthening democratic participation and ensuring that local government elections reflect the genuine choices of Nigerian citizens.

Digital misinformation represents a growing challenge to local government elections in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. A comprehensive approach involving education, institutional reform, technological solutions, ethical political practices, and responsible citizenship is necessary to protect electoral integrity. By implementing these recommendations, Nigeria can reduce the influence of misinformation and promote more credible, peaceful, and democratic local elections.

# 7.0 Conclusion

Digital misinformation has emerged as one of the most critical challenges affecting the credibility and effectiveness of local government elections in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. The rapid expansion of digital technologies, particularly social media platforms, has transformed the way citizens access, share, and discuss political information. While these platforms have created opportunities for greater political engagement, voter awareness, and democratic participation, they have also facilitated the spread of false, misleading, and deliberately manipulated information capable of influencing electoral behaviour and undermining democratic processes.

This study has demonstrated that digital misinformation poses serious threats to local government elections because of the unique characteristics of the local electoral environment. Local elections are often characterised by limited media coverage, weak information systems, intense competition among political actors, and strong community-based

political interests. These conditions create an environment where misinformation can spread quickly and have significant consequences. False claims about candidates, voting procedures, election results, security situations, or government policies can confuse voters, reduce public confidence, increase political tensions, and weaken trust in electoral institutions.

The emergence of digital misinformation in Nigeria's Fourth Republic also highlights the changing nature of electoral challenges in the digital age. Unlike traditional forms of electoral manipulation, misinformation spreads through decentralised networks where individuals, political groups, online influencers, and anonymous actors can produce and circulate content with minimal restrictions. The speed and reach of digital platforms make it difficult for electoral authorities and other stakeholders to respond effectively once false information begins to influence public opinion. This situation requires a shift from traditional approaches to election management toward more proactive digital monitoring, communication, and public education strategies.

Furthermore, the challenge of digital misinformation cannot be addressed through government regulation alone. Although legal and institutional measures are necessary, excessive restrictions may threaten freedom of expression and democratic participation. A sustainable response requires collaboration among electoral bodies, government institutions, technology companies, civil society organisations, media organisations, political parties, and citizens. Strengthening digital literacy, improving access to verified electoral information, promoting ethical political communication, and supporting independent fact-checking initiatives are essential steps toward reducing the impact of misinformation.

The role of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) remains particularly important in combating misinformation during local government elections. Effective communication strategies, rapid responses to false claims, and transparent dissemination of electoral information can help build public confidence and reduce the influence of misleading narratives. Similarly, political parties and candidates must recognise their responsibility in maintaining democratic standards by avoiding the use of false information as a campaign strategy.

Ultimately, digital misinformation represents not only a technological problem but also a broader democratic challenge. It reflects weaknesses in information systems, civic awareness, political accountability, and institutional preparedness. The future of credible local government elections in Nigeria depends on the ability of stakeholders to develop effective mechanisms for managing digital information while protecting democratic freedoms.

Addressing digital misinformation in Nigeria's local government elections requires a comprehensive and continuous effort that combines technological innovation, civic education, institutional strengthening, and responsible political behaviour. As digital communication continues to shape electoral processes in the Fourth Republic, tackling misinformation will be essential for promoting informed voter choices, protecting electoral integrity, and strengthening Nigeria's democratic development.

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