

Misinformation and Disinformation in Political Discourse: A Pragmatic Analysis of the Political Discourse of 2023 General Elections in Nigeria

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Abstract

Misinformation and Disinformation imply the spread of false information. More specifically, misinformation encompasses the spread of false information without any intention to mislead people, while disinformation involves an intentional distortion of information with the aim of misleading people. In the Nigerian context, the spread of the duo has become deeply rooted in the history and development of the nation. The country's 2023 general election witnessed a series of misinformation and disinformation with various intentions. Scholarly attention is minimal in this area, and for this reason, this research investigated the various forms of false information and the intentions of the peddlers, along with the effects of such information on the masses during the pre- and post-2023 election political discourse in the country. Hinging on Relevance Theory and Gricean Maxims principles, the research explored instances of misinformation and disinformation in the data gathered from online media sources (newspapers and social media – Facebook and Twitter – X). The data were discourses and statements of politicians and other political

stakeholders. The findings revealed that peddlers of misinformation were ordinary social media users whose senses of appeal aligned with a particular news story (false information), and they spread them while the peddlers of disinformation made and/or spread the discourse for their mischievous or personal gains and to discredit some individuals. The research recommended that the government and communication agencies should create more awareness about the evils of fake information and be very strict in combating the menace.

Keywords: Misinformation, Disinformation, Political Discourse and Nigerian Politics, 2023 General Election, Relevance Theory, Gricean Maxims

Introduction

Misinformation, defined as inaccurate or misleading information disseminated unintentionally, and disinformation, the deliberate spread of falsehoods for strategic manipulation (Wardle, 2017), permeated the digital and offline spaces. According to Apuke and Omar (2020), political actors and their online armies frequently used fabricated news pieces, altered photographs and videos, and provocative social media postings as their go-to tactics. In the end, this “information warfare” (Ufem, 2023:89) endangered the integrity of the electoral process by focusing on opponents and influencing public opinion. Misinformation is defined as spreading false or incorrect information in an unintentional way, while disinformation refers to the purposeful spread of misleading information by individuals with a clear intention to deceive or mislead (Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook, 2017). The two phenomena are inseparable to the extent that they touch on the voter decision-making processes, the apparent credibility of the political actors, and the legitimacy of the democratic process itself.

The spread of false information and disinformation has affected democratic processes and public debate greatly in recent years, raising serious concerns in international political arenas (Giglietto, Lee, & Righetti, 2019). Nigeria has not been exempted from the impact of misleading information at crucial election times. There was a lively, if frequently turbulent, political debate during the general election in Nigeria in 2023. Amidst fervent

discussions of personalities, policies, and the country's future, a dangerous component was widely disseminating false information.

Therefore, the consolidation of fake news and disinformation in the 2023 general elections could be attributed to a confluence of factors. This, alongside poor digital literacy and media scepticism, aggravated the vulnerability of news consumers to wild and unchecked distortion (Nnabuife, 2022). Further, on online platforms, anonymity and echo chambers made information pollution worse as disinformation campaigns could be tailored for specific audiences.

The aftermath of this flurry of information-pollution is catastrophic. Misinformation and disinformation may erode democratic pluralism, widening social and political cleavages and eventually infusing voter choices, contravening the integrity and credibility of an election process (Pate & Ibrahim, 2019). In a Nigerian context, where ethnic and religious tensions do simmer beneath the surface, the weaponising of disinformation can have peculiarly destabilising effects (Onuoha, 2023).

The spread of false information during the 2023 Nigerian general elections shaped the political discourse of the country. The atmosphere was tensed along ethnic and religious divides, which led to chaotic situations in some cases. Many electorates were also influenced by the spread of false information. It is against this background that this research investigates the forms and nature of misinformation and disinformation during the electoral process. It examines the truthfulness and relevance of such information and the intentions of the peddlers, as well as the effects of such information on the masses during the pre- and post-2023 election political discourse in the country, using an integrative approach.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Misinformation and Disinformation

The concepts of misinformation and disinformation connote the spread of false information, though each has a range and an intent. Misinformation and disinformation are complex terms that are widely discussed in contemporary discussions, especially those involving politics and the media.

Misinformation

Misinformation is defined as false or deceptive information disseminated inadvertently. It could be the consequence of honest errors, subpar study, or just a lack of comprehension. For instance, a person may spread a news story that they think is accurate, even if it is based on inaccurate information or biased sources. Misinformation is usually transmitted without the intention of being misleading; it is commonly viewed as erroneous or faulty information (Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook, 2017). It may be unintentional, resulting from misreporting, misunderstandings, or inadequate comprehension. Therefore, misinformation is a reflection of an incorrect assessment of events or facts, which distorts public views.

Disinformation

Disinformation refers to the purposeful dissemination of inaccurate or misleading data with the aim of deceiving or controlling others. It may have detrimental effects on both people and society at large and is frequently used for partisan or personal advantage. It is the intentional dissemination of inaccurate or misleading data with the goal of tricking, controlling, or swaying the audience's opinions (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). It is distinguished from misinformation by its intentional component, which entails a deliberate attempt to manufacture or distort reality, frequently for propagandistic, political, or ideological reasons. For instance, in an effort to harm their opponent's reputation and

influence voters, a political party may disseminate untrue stories about them during an election campaign.

Area of Divergence

Misinformation and disinformation are so commonplace that they have a significant impact on political processes and public debates. These occurrences have the power to drastically affect decision-making, public opinion, and institutional confidence (Lewandowsky, Ecker, & Cook, 2017). Furthermore, the introduction of digital media platforms has made it easier for misinformation and disinformation to spread quickly, which increases their potential effect.

While misinformation and disinformation may seem like two sides of the same coin, there are some key distinctions between them:

Intent: Misinformation is often unintentional, while disinformation is always deliberate.

Knowledge: People who share misinformation may not be aware that it is false, while those who spread disinformation know they are lying.

Impact: Misinformation can still be harmful, but it is generally less damaging than disinformation. Disinformation can be used to sow discord, undermine trust in institutions, and even incite violence (Wardle, 2017).

Political Discourse and Nigerian Politics

With over 250 ethnic groups, the largest of which are the Hausa/Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo, and 36 states (provinces), Nigeria is home to an estimated 227 million people (United Nations, 2024) of over 500 hundred languages and varieties of languages. One is compelled to assume that individuals with eloquence must practice politics in Nigeria due to the vast number of electorates in the nation. To put it another way, politicians must use a variety of persuasive language techniques to win over voters, particularly in English, which is the universal language. This means that those with stronger discursive strategies may have an

advantage in the political arena. Because of these various linguistic techniques, politicians may, more often than not, use language to manipulate the audience by appealingly portraying their identities.

Nigerian politicians use language mainly on printed and social media forms, such as posters, pamphlets, speeches, billboards, and internet sources, purposely selected across Nigeria. Oparinde (2018) submits that Nigerian politicians employ language to self-represent, in order to sway people's opinions and earn their votes. The Nigerian political discourse is embedded with connotative expressions, topicalisation, passivation, persuasion, and promises, euphemism and repetition (Abdullahi-Idiagbon, 2010), propaganda (Sharndama, 2016), metaphors, hyperboles, idiomatic expressions, parallelisms, and songs, positive self-representation; and negative other representation as ideological instruments of persuasion (Abdullahi-Idiagbon, 2010). The linguistic arena is also featured with pictures, images, and symbols as visual tools for political campaigns, and this includes customised vests, caps, Ankara fabric (Ademilokun & Olateju, 2015).

Mis/disinformation and Nigerian Political Discourse

Nigeria is a country in tension characterised by security threats in different parts of the country. These threats are manifested in forms of multiple conflicts, systemic and widespread corruption, debilitating poverty, weak institutions, threats of secession as well as perceived marginalisation, anger, hatred and economic challenges in a time when preference for untrue information is rising – i.e., post-truth era (Pate, Gambo & Ibrahim, 2019).

Nigeria is battling with the rise in populism politics, youth radicalisation, extremism, terrorism, drug and human trafficking, ethnic nationalism, hate and dangerous speech, fake news and the rewriting of the country's history, among others. Indeed, these are critical times for the media and the country. The political climate in the country has changed rapidly in recent years, signalling innovative developments and strange challenges in the country's democratic system. Largely, the current political culture in the country is inextricably

linked to the growing development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) (Audu, 2018; Pate, 2018).

This has severally affected the delivery and form of political communication and the communication of political ideas in our democratic system, as well as shifted and undermined the accountability for those messages. For instance, what was labelled “yellow journalism” and “character assassination/slander” have metamorphosed into what is today known as “fake news” and “fraudulent news”; these are terms that sound “big” and portend devastating effects in the society. These terms are fuelled and spread by the power of modern technology (Pate, 2019:22). There is no clear disparity between online lies and truths. This has been a boom for professional liars, (who) use these platforms to market falsehood; as vehicles for personal fame, or, as a way to spread propaganda. These have raised concerns that Nigerians are constantly and increasingly accessing inaccurate and/or misleading content without verification (gatekeeping) or verifiable attribution (Pate, 2019).

Mitigating the impact of misinformation and disinformation in Nigerian political discourse requires a multifaceted approach. Media literacy programmes, fact-checking initiatives, and responsible reporting practices are crucial elements in enhancing public resilience against false information (Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2020). Strengthening regulatory frameworks for online content, fostering media professionalism, and promoting digital literacy can contribute to a healthier information ecosystem.

Nigerian 2023 General Elections

The general elections that took place in Nigeria in February and March of 2023 proved to be a momentous occasion, demonstrating both the tenacity of Nigerian democracy and the enduring barriers that impede its progress. These elections represented Nigeria's seventh straight democratic poll, making it the longest stretch of uninterrupted democracy in the country's history. This extended run of success confirms the maturity of Nigeria's democratic culture and highlights a growing commitment to democratic norms and the peaceful transition of power.

Three prominent candidates – Bola Ahmed Tinubu (APC), Atiku Abubakar (PDP), and Peter Obi (LP) – represented different philosophies and geographic bases in the fiercely contested presidential contest. This fierce rivalry was a reflection of a developing political environment. Notably, the number of young people registering to vote increased noticeably and engagement, signalling a noteworthy shift. Young Nigerians actively sought change after becoming disillusioned with previous administrations, bringing new energy to the political debate. A large number of these youthful, industrious persons sided with Peter of LP in an effort to elect a younger candidate and subvert the custom of electing older people to the presidency. The name “Obidient Movement” was given to this movement.

The Independent National election Commission (INEC) introduced the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) for voter verification in an attempt to increase transparency and decrease election malpractices. Notwithstanding the difficulties encountered, this endeavour was a stride towards integrating technological innovation into the political process. But ongoing allegations of electoral fraud, like as ballot snatching, vote-buying, and intimidation in some places, cast doubt on the elections' general validity.

A major obstacle was the pervasive insecurity, which was caused, especially in the unstable northern states, by violent attacks, kidnappings, and threats in different parts of the country undermining democratic processes and preventing free and fair participation. Existing societal divisions were widened by divisive campaign rhetoric and appeals to ethno-religious feelings, raising questions about national unity and intensifying identity politics.

The elections of 2023 have a mixed legacy. They exposed enduring risks even as they confirmed Nigeria's commitment to democracy. The elections present a complex picture that is both depressing and optimistic. They demonstrated Nigerians' unwavering yearning for democracy in spite of voting process flaws. Looking ahead, tackling the fundamental issues calls for alertness, proactive changes, and a shared dedication to bolstering the democratic project. Nigeria can only truly fulfil its potential to become a more powerful, inclusive, and democratic country by making such efforts.

Hate speech underwent a paradigm shift during the electioneering phase. Due to the increase in young involvement, hate speech has taken a new shape and is now pervasive across the nation thanks to social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter (X). A string of hateful statements and news phrases continued to shock the media, beginning with the campaign and ending with the election.

Theoretical framework

This research is hinged on mixed theoretical frameworks which include Relevance Theory and Grecian Maxims.

Relevance theory

Relevance theory is a cognitive pragmatics theory of human communication that was developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson in their book *Relevance: Communication and Cognition in the mid-1980s*. This theory was covered in their earlier publications as well, where they specifically compared it to Grice's cooperative principle. Since then, it has developed into one of the most significant theories in modern pragmatics, influencing a wide range of pragmatics research domains and discourse kinds. Cognition, communication, Grice and the role of intention, coding/infering, mutuality, the difference between semantics and pragmatics, relevance as a cost-benefit analysis, the explicit and implicit distinction in utterance interpretation, relevance and grammar, and social aspects of communication are all covered in this theory.

Relevance theory assumes that human communication is intentional and creates an expectation that helps an audience or an addressee decide what message the communicator wishes to put across. Two principles of relevance theory include a **cognitive principle**, which says that human cognition is geared to the maximisation of relevance through which inferential communication takes place (Sperber & Wilson, 1994), and a **communicative principle**, which asserts that utterances create expectations of optimal relevance. This principle may be merged to assert that each utterance relates to or communicates a

presumption of its optimal relevance. Relevance theory is built on the principle that the human communication process includes, among others, the encoding, transfer, and decoding of messages, as well as, more importantly, reference and context (Bagayang, 2002).

In Grice's approach to pragmatics, the role of context in communication and understanding was neglected. Relevance theory emphasises the role of context in communication and understanding by raising such questions as: How is the right context chosen? How is it that, from the several assumptions available at the time of utterance, an audience or addressees restrict themselves to the intended ones? (Sperber & Wilson 1994).

Gricean Maxims

Gricean Maxims emanate from the work of Paul Grice's Cooperative Principles. The Grice Cooperative Principle is outlined in his essay "Logic and Conversation" (1975). In the paper, he opines that in order for a person to interpret what another says, there is a need for a kind of cooperative principle to be in operation. The principles presented by Grice enable observers to know when speakers are trying to assume something or evade the real topic of communication. Ogunsiji and Farinde, (2012) add that cooperation is indispensable in communication. Interlocutors engage in several strategies to accomplish this goal. Grice labels these strategies as **maxims of conversation**. Cooperation can be achieved through these principles, otherwise known as 'maxims'. There are four maxims that guide conversation, and these include: maxim of quantity, the maxim of quality, the maxim of relation, and the maxim of manner.

Maxim of quantity

This maxim states that the participants in a discourse should make their contribution as informative as is required by the discourse. Interlocutors are also cautioned that the information should not be more informative than is required. In short, the information

should neither be more nor less than what is required. The following can be summarised thusly:

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purpose of the exchange.
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required (Grice, 1975:45).

Maxim of Quality

Participants in any discourse should be truthful in their conversation and should not utter what they believe to be false during the discourse. Lies can be easily detected when a participant violates this maxim. This maxim can be summarised as follows:

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence (Grice, 1975).

Partridge (2006) adds that people should only say what they believe to be true and what they have evidence for.

Maxim of Relation

All information given by the participants in a discourse should be closely relevant to the topic under discussion. This means that what the speakers say should be in line with the present interaction and should not be things that are unrelated. Grice asserts that individual contributions should be relevant.

Maxim of Manner

This postulates that the participants of the discourse should be clear with the information that they give. Paltridge (2006) cautions the participants in the discourse against ambiguity and obscurity. They should be brief and orderly in their conversation. This can be summarised thusly:

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
4. Be orderly (Grice, 1975).

Methodology

This exploratory study was conducted during the electioneering period spanning between June 2022 and June 2023. Observation of false information on various media outlets was carried out during that period, and records were made. The media outlets explored included social media (Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter) and traditional online newspaper platforms. The purposeful sampling technique was adopted to gather false information, comprising aspects of misinformation and disinformation. Thereafter, the research adopted descriptive and qualitative methods to carry out the linguistic analysis of the data, focusing on the relevance, and intention of the peddlers of the fake information. The analysis relied on both primary and secondary data sources. The primary data included the false information itself, while the secondary data included the disclaimers to the false information published in news articles or social media posts.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the data in this section involves the investigation of the forms of the misinformation and disinformation (also known as false information or fake news) that eroded the media during the 2023 election period.

Misinformation and Disinformation during Nigerian 2023 General Elections

Below are some forms and instances of the false information that featured in the 2023 general elections:

False allegations against candidates

This involves the circulation of entirely fabricated or exaggerated allegations of corruption, criminal activities, or personal misconduct concerning particular candidates. False allegations against political candidates became the most widespread form of false information during the election. Some allegedly paid social media influencers went the extra mile to write untrue stories about some candidates, indicting them with some false allegations. Below are some of the instances:

Tinubu has a Guinean passport and should be disqualified. In April 2023, it was alleged that Tinubu held a Guinean passport, which made him a citizen of Guinea, and an individual with dual citizenship could not contest the Nigerian presidency. Tinubu's camp later clarified that it was a diplomatic passport that had expired.

Kwankwaso does not have an academic doctorate. In January 2023, Rabi'u Kwankwaso, a former Kano State Governor and presidential aspirant, was allegedly involved in a doctorate degree scandal. In reality, he did obtain a doctorate degree from Sharda University, India.

Atiku wants to sell our national assets to his cronies. In 2018, Abubakar Atiku, a former Vice President and presidential aspirant, promised to sell 90% of NNPC if elected. Since then, he has been accused of planning to sell all the Nigerian national assets. This came up in 2022, and he clarified his intention in June 2022.

Tinubu didn't attend Chicago State University; he forged his certificate. Tinubu was accused of certificate forgery because he did not attend CSU. Reno Omokri, a former minister of Nigeria and social media influencer, went to CSU in September 2022 to confirm if Tinubu did attend the university. Atiku also took the case to a US court, which validated Tinubu's attendance and graduation from CSU.

Tinubu owns Alpha Beta, which he uses to control Lagos taxes. Since 2020, Tinubu has been accused of owning Alpha Beta, which he used to take money from Lagos State. However, no official linkage justified this accusation.

Tinubu is a drug baron, which is why he forfeited \$460,000 to the US government. In April 2023, Tiubu's 1993 case of involvement in drug dealing resurfaced online, as he was accused of dealing in drugs. However, there was no evidence that Tinubu was convicted in the US for any drug-related case.

Atiku embezzled \$145,000 during his tenure as Vice President. In 2022, an accusation was levelled against Atiku, purporting that Olusegun Obasanjo claimed that Atiku stole more than enough to feed 300 million people for 400 years. The accusation was baseless and unofficial.

Peter Obi embezzled funds from Anambra State, as indicted by the Pandora Papers. In 2021 and 2022, Peter Obi was accused of violating the Code of Conduct Bureau's mandate for failing to honestly declare his assets. EFCC invited him, and he was cleared. The accusation was baseless.

Peter Obi used Anambra's money to establish a brewery. Obi was accused of investing Anambra's money in Interfact Beverages Limited, a South African joint-owned brewery, for his personal profit. Peter Obi did invest in that company, but not for personal gain. The accusation was baseless.

Shettima harboured Boko Haram fighters. In 2022, an old picture of Kassim Shetima resurfaced online, where he was pictured eating bread and 'suya' with some people allegedly tagged 'Boko Haram' terrorists. However, the facts showed that they were relatives of some kidnapped people, and he celebrated their freedom with them.

The bearers of this false information were political supporters of individual politicians. In a bid to make their own candidates relevant to their supporters, they created false information and negative impressions of other candidates through their utterances and outputs. All the expressions above violated the Grecian maxim of quality, which states, "Do not say what you believe to be false" and "Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence" (Grice, 1975). All the pieces of information were false. They also violated the

maxim of relation, which posits that an individual's contribution should be related to the subject matter of the discourse (the victim of the false information). However, anyone who believed the false allegations against a candidate assumed the relevance of such discourse. Such an assumption was in line with the principles of cognition and communication as propounded by Sperber and Wilson (1994).

Malicious rumours

Spreading unfounded rumours about candidates, their personal lives, or their previous professional engagements to create a negative impression or sway voters' sentiments. During the election period, a series of malicious rumours were spread against individuals, political parties, and institutions. Below are some of the malicious rumours spread during the period:

Tinubu and the Chief Justice of the Federation met in France. After the 2023 presidential election, which was held on February 25, 2023, there was a widespread rumour that the Chief Justice of Nigeria and the President-elect, Bola Tinubu, were meeting in France. The CJN was said to have disguised himself as a sick and disabled man to meet Tinubu in a hotel. On March 24th, the presidency debunked the rumours.

Fashola wrote the supposed presidential election judgement for the Tribunal to favour his principal, Tinubu. After the election, it was rumoured that Fashola, the former Minister of Works and Housing, had purportedly written the judgement to be delivered by the Tribunal and handed it over to the Tribunal. On August 6, 2023, Fashola denied the allegations, and the Tribunal did the same.

BVAS failed to upload results because INEC wanted Tinubu and APC to win. The candidate of the Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP), Atiku Abubakar, accused INEC of using third-party devices to manipulate election results in favour of the APC and Tinubu. This was not a mere accusation; it later transcended into malicious rumours.

Tinubu urinated on his body during his visit to Awujale's Palace: Upon his visit to Awujale's palace in 2022, Tinubu was rumoured to have urinated on his body. In September of that year, Tinubu was said to be wearing a catheter bag to contain urine in London. All these were baseless rumours, as debunked by Tinubu's camp.

Nigerian military plans to overthrow the government: Some weeks before the presidential election on February 25, 2023, there were rumours that the military was making an unscrupulous move to take over the government and that Muhammadu Buhari had made an agreement to hand over the country to the military since his unknown preferred candidate did not emerge as the flag bearer of the party.

Some governors have stacks of old Naira cash for vote-buying. As the effect of the Naira redesign and cash constraints bit harder on Nigerians, there were malicious rumours that some state governors, especially in the North, had stacks of the old currency at home. These rumours went all over the media, and the governors were shaded for this unpatriotic behaviour. However, there was no substantial evidence to back up the rumours.

Atiku fell ill and jetted out of the country. About a month before the general elections, it was rumoured that the presidential candidate of the PDP fell ill and was flown out of the country. The rumours went viral, as carried by popular media houses such as *Sahara Reporters*, *The Punch*, and others. On January 9, 2023, the PDP dismissed it and added that he (Atiku) was invited to London by the British Government.

Peter Obi has paid churches and pastors to campaign for him. Some weeks into the general election, there were rumours that Peter Obi gave the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) a sum of two billion naira to support his presidential ambition. The rumour was spread by the *Nairaland Forum* and other media outlets. Peter Obi and the Labour Party dismissed the rumours on February 12, 2023.

The peddlers of this fake information were probably paid agents of individual politicians. In this context, they took over the media to spread malicious rumours to tarnish the image

of individuals, parties, or government policies. The utterance that made the political discourse above in the context of the last general election violated the Greek maxim of quality, which stated, “Do not say what you believe to be false” and “Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence” (Grice, 1975). All the pieces of information were false. They also violated the maxim of relation, which posits that an individual’s contribution should be relevant to the subject matter of the discourse (the victim of the false information). However, those who believed the rumours were peddled against candidates and political stakeholders showed the relevance of such discourse. Such an assumption was in line with the principles of cognition and communication as propounded by Sperber and Wilson (1994).

False electoral claims and dissemination of misleading polling data

This involves the deliberate propagation of false information regarding voter registration, the electoral process, electoral data, or results to potentially confuse electorates or supporters. The Nigerian 2023 general elections witnessed widespread false electoral claims and misleading polling data. Below are some instances of false electoral claims:

Peter Obi won the presidential election, while Tinubu came in third. After the presidential election in February 2022, among the people who said Peter Obi won the election was Babachir Lawal, the immediate ex-Secretary to the Government of the Federation, carried by *TheCable*, *Reuters*, and some other media houses. The rumours were debunked with the validation of Tinubu’s victory by the Presidential Election Tribunal and the Supreme Court of Nigeria.

Kwankwaso was used by Tinubu to divide Atiku’s votes in the North: During the campaign period, several rumours went around that Rabiu Kwankwaso was a pawn in Tinubu’s game of becoming president. According to the rumours, he (Kwankwaso) was ‘used’. The fact remained that the two belonged to different political parties, and there was no evidence that they worked for each other.

Tinubu manipulated people to convince Peter Obi to join the Labour Party and contest the presidency. During the election period, several netizens dished out fake information about Peter Obi's contest in the race as being influenced by Tinubu in order to divide and stall Atiku from winning the election.

The lack of a logo of the Labour Party on ballot papers in some places is an attempt to sideline the Labour Party. A lot of media houses, such as *Vanguard News*, *Daily Post*, *The Cable*, *Punch Newspapers*, and others, raised false alarms over the missing logo of the Labour Party on some ballot papers in some states like Ondo and Kogi on February 25, 2023. They called it an attempt to silence the Labour Party in those senatorial districts. However, the INEC gave a convincing explanation that the party did not submit the names of its candidates in those senatorial districts.

Peter Obi won Rivers State: After the announcement of the presidential election results held across the Nigerian states on February 25, 2023, the supporters of Peter Obi claimed that the election of Rivers State was won by Peter Obi, contrary to what the INEC declared (won by Tinubu). Several media houses, including *Premium Times Nigeria*, *Leadership News*, *Nairaland Forum*, and a host of others, stood by this false electoral claim.

These false claims were deliberate attempts to plant confusion in the minds of electorates and supporters of particular candidates. There were violations of the Grecian maxim of quality in the instances above. It stated, "Do not say what you believe to be false" and "Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence" (Grice, 1975). They were all false electoral claims capable of causing confusion for supporters. They also violate the maxim of relation, which posits that each individual's contributions should be relevant to the topic of the discourse (the victim of the false information). However, anyone who believed the false electoral claims against a candidate assumed the relevance of such a discourse. Such an assumption was in line with the principles of cognition and communication as propounded by Sperber and Wilson (1994).

Conspiracy theories

Propagation of unfounded conspiracy theories about rigged election, foreign interference, or fake election permutations including decamping. Series of conspiracy theories were purported during the 2023 General Elections. Below are some conspiracy theories that emerged during the election:

Buhari and Atiku colluded with the CBN to frustrate the presidential ambition of Tinubu: During the electioneering period, *Sahara Reporters* published an article in September 2022 that Buhari and Aso Rock Cabals were secretly working against APC and Tinubu's presidential ambition. It was said that the cabals wanted to install another president of Northern origin and a Fulani to be precise. Atiku was the purported candidate. That led to the conspiracy theory that the Naira redesign was targeted at stopping Tinubu from becoming the president.

These conspiracies were deliberate attempts to create contempt in the minds of supporters of some candidates. The conspiracy theories propagated during the election period also violated Grecian Maxim of quality in the examples above. The mantra of the maxim is: "Do not say what you believe to be false" and "Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence" (Grice, 1975). Above all mere conspiracies peddled against individual politicians. They also violated Maxim of relation which posits that each individual's contributions should be relevant to the topic of the discourse (the victim of the false information). However, people assumed that the conspiracies theories were true and relevant to the electoral discourse. Such assumption went in line with the principles of cognition and communication as propounded by Sperber and Wilson, (1994).

Disinformation

This is a deliberate distortion of information with the intention of some political manipulation. There were also cases of disinformation during the last general election in Nigeria. Below are some instances of disinformation recorded during the election period.

Peter Obi uses only one wristwatch and doesn't fly private jets. Peter made a claim to portray himself to his followers as a prudent spender, saying that he had been using a wristwatch for 17 years and that he had been flying public aircraft. These claims were debunked by media influencers such as Reno Omokri and Femi Fani Kayode, who posted Peter Obi's pictures using different wristwatches and in private jets.

Peter Obi's children stay in rented apartments and don't have their own cars. Peter Obi once made this claim, and in 2022, this false claim went viral on social media to justify Peter as a disciplined father. However, people counted it as disinformation because they had heard such stories from other politicians, which were always found to be false.

Peter Obi destroyed mosques in Anambra and made Northerners wear ID cards. When Peter Obi was the Governor of Anambra State, it was rumoured that he carried out anti-Muslim actions, including forcing Hausa Muslims in the state to wear ID cards after demolishing their mosques. These false claims came up again in August 2022 in an attempt to spread propaganda against him in the North. The *Daily Trust* fact-checked this claim and found that it was mere false information.

Tinubu will be arrested on the inauguration day. After his declaration as the winner of the presidential election by INEC, various false prophecies and predictions started flowing on the internet that Tinubu would not be inaugurated as the president of the country. However, on May 29, 2023, all the prophecies and predictions became obvious disinformation.

Osinbajo is revealing Tinubu's secrets to the opponents: During the electioneering period, there was various false information that the then sitting Vice President, Yemi Osinbajo, was involved in revealing his party's secrets to the opposition due to the fact he lost out in the primary election to Tinubu. These fake details painted and tagged the VP as 'a betrayer'. This information was not only false but also capable of damaging the image of the VP.

Peter Obi was endorsed by the IPOB/ESN: The Independent People of Biafra (POB) and Eastern Security Network (ESN) were proscribed as terrorist groups by the Nigerian

government in 2017. During the 2023 election period, Peter Obi's inability to openly condemn the two groups signalled to Nigerians that he had been endorsed for his presidential aspiration. In fact, the National Peace Movement (NPC) expressed their concerns over this, and they withdrew their support for him. *Premium Times Nigeria, Ya Shuaib, The Cable, Vanguard News, Nairaland Forum*, and a host of other media houses were involved in the spreading of the false information.

INEC delisted 1.1 million registered voters from southern Nigeria only in order to disfranchise them. There were various cries all over social media when the INEC delisted about 1.1 million new registrants over double registrations and incomplete registrations. It was said that the action was an attempt to shortchange the southern voters.

The Ghanaian president wrote a letter to Tinubu asking him to step down for Peter Obi: In August 2022, a lot of fake news went viral on the internet that the Ghanaian President, Nana Akufo-Addo, wrote a letter to Tinubu to forego his presidential ambition and give a young man like Peter Obi the chance to rule. On August 9, the Ghanaian President debunked the false information.

The instances of disinformation were deliberate attempts to feed Nigerians false information. They violated the Grecian maxim of quality, and they were intentional. The mantra of the maxim is "Do not say what you believe to be false" and "Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence" (Grice, 1975). They also violated the maxim of relation, which posits that each individual's contributions should be relevant to the topic of the discourse (the victim of the false information). However, people assumed that they were true and relevant to the electoral discourse. Such an assumption was in line with the principles of cognition and communication as propounded by Sperber and Wilson (1994).

Misinformation

Sambisa Forest is twice the size of Israel. Peter Obi: During the campaign period, Peter Obi, in a bid to impress his followers on August 11, 2022, tried to compare Sambisa Forest to Israel. But he gave the wrong information to that effect. Contrary to what he said, Sambisa is 518 km², while Israel is 22145 km².

Anambra's \$20 million investment in Intafact Beverages Limited is worth \$100 million today. Contrary to this false claim made by Peter Obi on May 3, 2022, Soludo, the current Governor of Anambra State, made a disclaimer on the claim.

Voters' cards have expiry dates. In 2022, Tinubu, in an attempt to encourage his supporters to go and register or renew their voters' cards because each voter's card had an expiry date, Even despite INEC's disclaimer that the cards had no expiry dates, Tinubu went ahead to reiterate his claims that they had expiry dates.

Impersonation and fake endorsements

During the electioneering period, there were a series of impersonations and fake endorsements of political office aspirants. Some of them are highlighted below:

Tinubu hired fake bishops to attend his running mate unveiling: On July 20, Tinubu unveiled his running mate, Senator Kashim Shettima, and in attendance were numerous political stakeholders and religious figureheads, including some 'bishops' for his endorsement. The Nigerian Christian religious body, CAN, denied the bishops and tagged them 'fake bishops' because they could not trace their parishes or the churches to which they belonged. It was alleged that those people impersonated religious leaders and robbed them in the attire of religious leaders.

Obasanjo endorsed Tinubu: During the campaign period, Tinubu made a visit to Chief Olusegun Obasanjo, a Nigerian former president, in his residence on August 17, 2022. The visit paved the way for a series of unfounded rumours that the former president had

endorsed Tinubu's electoral ambitions. Instantly, Obasanjo dunked the claims while he openly and physically declared his support for Peter Obi.

Doctored videos/images

The electioneering period witnessed a series of doctored videos and images that shaped the discourse of the election, creating numerous false information and negative impressions. Such depictions were not relevant to the discourse, except for mischievous purposes. Some of these include:

I got the advice from a madman – Peter Obi: During the campaign period, a video of Peter Obi surfaced online in July 2022, in which he mentioned that he got advice from a madman to carry out a particular project. The video was then doctored and edited with an interview with a reporter. The reporter asked, "Why are you running for the presidency?" and Obi replied, "I got the advice from a madman." A previewed image of the clip of the video is shown below.



Shettima harboured Boko Haram terrorists: During the electioneering period, an old picture of Kashim Shetima surfaced online. In the picture, he was eating Bread and 'Suya' (grilled meat) with some unidentified people. The posters asserted that he was dining with members of Boko Haram..



Shettima harboured Boko Haram terrorists: During the electioneering period, an old picture of Kashim Shettima surfaced online. In the picture, he was eating bread and ‘Suya’ (grilled meat) with some unidentified people. The posters asserted that he was dining with members of Boko Haram. However, a disclaimer came from Shettima’s camp that it was an old picture where he was eating with some Fulani family members who had just gained their freedom from their Boko Haram abductors.

Tinubu is a drug baron: Through out the period of the election, Tinubu was tagged a druh baron and some edited images of him emanated online to that effect.



The instances of false information in the form of misinformation, impersonation, fake endorsements, and doctored videos and images were deliberate attempts to feed Nigerians with false information. They violated the Grecian maxim of quality, though they were

sometimes intentional and unintentional. The maxim states, “Do not say what you believe to be false” and “Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence” (Grice, 1975). They also violated the maxim of relation, which posits that each individual’s contributions should be relevant to the topic of the discourse (the victim of the false information). However, people assumed that they were true and relevant to the electoral discourse. Such an assumption was in line with the principles of cognition and communication as propounded by Sperber and Wilson (1994).

Conclusion

The degree of misinformation and disinformation is, to some extent, similar but differs to a large extent. While *duo* means false information, misinformation means inaccurate or misleading information disseminated unintentionally, and disinformation is a deliberate spread of falsehoods for strategic manipulation. It often takes place in both digital and offline spaces. Irrespective of the context, false information is capable of polluting a principality. In the Nigerian socio-political context, hate speech spreads frequently during the election period, and the 2023 general elections witnessed a widespread wave of hate speech. This research investigated the various forms and natures of false information that appeared during the election period, paying attention to the periods between 2022 and 2023. Focusing on the relevance and truthfulness of the pieces of information, the research found that the electioneering period witnessed false information such as false allegations against candidates, malicious rumours, false electoral claims and dissemination of misleading polling data, conspiracy theories, disinformation, misinformation, impersonation, fake endorsements, and doctored videos and images. The false pieces of information were untruthful, whereby almost all of them were intentionally spread to create confusion in the minds of the voters, tarnish the image of an individual candidate, create a good impression about a candidate, create tension in the political discourse, and undermine the power of the electoral body and the judicial system, among others. False information is spread through the traditional media or social media, and its evil persists until Nigerian citizens become more aware of it. These untoward actions have continued simply because the perpetrators

are not being brought to book. The research recommends that the government, communication agencies, and other regulatory bodies should create more awareness about the evils of fake information and be strict in combating the menace. This research has contributed to the existing body of knowledge on misinformation and disinformation while focusing on their forms during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, leaving research on the measures that should be taken to curb the spread of false information, especially during such critical periods as election periods.

Author Contributions

Introduction, Analysis and Discussion, Methodology, Ajayi, O.B (50%)

Literature Review and, Data Gathering Analysis and Discussion, Kilani S.O. (50%)

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