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DISINFORMATION BY DESIGN: A TYPOLOGY-SENSITIVE ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT AND VULNERABILITY IN NIGERIA

Abstract. This conceptual study explores how distinct types of social media content contribute to the spread of disinformation in Nigeria. It focuses on thematic categories such as personal, political, health-related, marketing, sensational, and event-specific content. The study examines how each type interacts with user interpretation and platform dynamics. Drawing on communication theory, cultural reception studies, and platform analysis, the paper proposes a typology-sensitive framework that explains disinformation as the result of overlapping factors including content form, emotional salience, cultural familiarity, and algorithmic amplification. Rather than attributing disinformation solely to false content or user illiteracy, the analysis highlights how trust, relevance, and interpretive norms frame what social media users believe and share. Through contextual illustrations such as recent protest movements, the paper underscores the need for culturally grounded media literacy that is responsive to content type, audience context, and digital infrastructure. The framework offers a locally informed foundation for future research and educational interventions aimed at addressing disinformation in high-choice, low-literacy environments.

Keywords: disinformation; social media platform; content typology; cultural interpretation; Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Social media have transformed communication by enabling rapid content sharing and blurring the lines between formal journalism and user-generated content (Verbitskaya and Lesnikovskaya, 2022). These platforms have disrupted traditional models of information literacy and trust, complicating how users interpret meaning and assess credibility (Boichak et al., 2019). In today's media environment, individuals are immersed in a continuous flow of content,

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which Volk et al. (2024) describe as “enveloping everyday life.” This abundance has altered how people access and process information, often encouraging reliance on simplified, emotionally resonant, and algorithmically tailored content (Verbitskaya and Lesnikovskaya, 2022; Boichak et al., 2019).

Although access to information has expanded, engagement remains uneven. Mobile-first and social media-based consumption tends to support more superficial interactions compared to traditional media sources (Makhortykh et al., 2020; Collier et al., 2021). Cultural background and trust networks also influence how users interpret content. In contexts with low institutional trust, like Nigeria, people often rely on informal sources for information, and user-generated content can gain traction, influencing public narratives during volatile political or social moments (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2021; Omotayo and Folunso, 2020; Ajaegbu et al., 2022).

Platform design contributes to this, as algorithmic curation favors high-engagement, emotional content over accuracy (Siles, 2023; Ruiz, 2020). Falsehood thrives where digital literacy is low and relevance overrides credibility (Boichak et al., 2019; Surjatmodjo et al., 2024). In Nigeria, these dynamics intersect with local conditions, reinforcing falsehood risks (Abimbade et al., 2022). Hence, this paper develops a typology-sensitive framework to understand vulnerability to false information in Nigeria. It examines how content type, cultural interpretation, and platform design shape public belief, offering insights for context-aware media literacy interventions.

The study employs a conceptual and analytical approach, synthesizing scholarship from media studies, communication theory, cultural analysis, and platform studies. Rather than empirical fieldwork, it analyzes existing literature, thematic models, and illustrative cases to explore how content types interact with user behavior, sociocultural filters, and algorithms, highlighting the factors that shape trust, interpretation, and susceptibility to false information.

1. CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION OF THE STUDY

Social and structural inequalities shape Nigeria’s information access. While social media are central to public opinion, participation remains uneven due to disparities in wealth, geography, and education. Low literacy and a fragmented media market limit informed engagement, making online communication simultaneously empowering and fragile (Francis, 2024).

Vulnerability to false information depends on how people evaluate content. Modern information literacy requires navigating emotionally charged, socially shared content that triggers biases (Boichak et al., 2019). People interpret messages through emotion, culture, and trust networks, not just logic, making their judgments highly context-dependent.

Platform features like algorithmic feeds often prioritize virality over accuracy (Siles, 2023). Where digital literacy or institutional trust is low, these cues can substitute for traditional gatekeeping, increasing exposure to false or misleading content (Ruiz, 2020). Cultural context also influences perceived credibility and relevance. In Nigeria, political, religious, and social affiliations frequently shape content evaluation. Khosrowjerdi et al. (2020) identify culture as a key antecedent to information behavior, from seeking to sharing. These sociocultural filters often outweigh factual accuracy, especially in high-choice, low-trust environments.

Content's thematic and emotional structure is also crucial. Sensational or emotionally charged narratives often gain more acceptance than neutral reports. This content aligns with pre-existing beliefs and elicits strong emotional responses, making it more sharable (Boichak et al., 2019). Inconsistent platform policies further enable the circulation of false or misleading content.

Ghaisani et al. (2017) identify four main types of online content: personal, sensational, political, and casual, each shaped by distinct motivations and social functions. Their model shows that emotional appeal, group belonging, and the search for validation often drive content sharing. A typology-sensitive approach that considers how different content forms interact with local interpretation and platform design offers a more practical way to study and address false or misleading information in Nigeria and similar settings.

Hence, the next section reviews existing studies on digital communication and falsehoods. Research shows that the affective, cultural, and algorithmic dynamics of social media both encourage civic participation and accelerate the circulation of false information. Social media enable civic exchange and real-time debate (Casero-Ripollés, 2018; Vlasiuk, 2023) but also amplify misleading content and intensify social division through algorithmic recommendation and rapid dissemination (Aïmeur et al., 2023; Cinelli et al., 2021).

Audiences engage with media messages through the lens of their prior experiences, cultural norms, and cognitive frameworks (Wilson, 2009; Rosemary et al., 2022). Research suggests that in societies where oral traditions and informal information networks remain central, trust often depends more on narrative familiarity than factual verification (Wilson, 2009; Rosemary et al., 2022;

Khosrowjerdi et al., 2020). This dynamic can also help explain why, in parts of Nigeria, messages resembling familiar storytelling forms may appear more credible in everyday exchanges. In such settings, emotional appeal can outweigh factual precision, especially where digital literacy is uneven and information circulates mainly through social relationships rather than formal media channels.

Social media platforms further influence these dynamics through their distinct affordances, algorithms, and interaction patterns (Latif et al., 2024). Twitter's short format amplifies concise and sensational messages, while Facebook's group-based design reinforces echo chambers among like-minded users. Instagram's visual orientation heightens the spread of misleading images and videos, emphasizing emotional engagement over accuracy (Cinelli et al., 2021).

Algorithmic amplification on platforms like Twitter often promotes low-credibility content, allowing misinformation to thrive during heated political periods (Corsi, 2023). This issue is exacerbated by populism, ethnic tensions, and unregulated social media engagement, as seen in misinformation surrounding herder-farmer clashes and COVID-19 in Nigeria (Hazzan, 2022; Hassan, 2023). Efforts to understand disinformation and other forms of false or misleading information must extend beyond individual literacy to include the influence of cultural norms, group identity, and local trust networks. These factors remain underexplored in many media environments (Blair et al., 2023).

2. FALSE INFORMATION VULNERABILITY IN NIGERIA

Social media exposes users to varied content types, each with distinct engagement patterns and susceptibility to false information. Core categories include personal, health, event-specific, marketing, and political or sensational content, all interacting with user behavior, platform design, and cultural factors (Ghaisani et al., 2017).

Personal and health-related messages are especially prone to manipulation, as emotional familiarity often overrides critical judgment. Users may disclose sensitive details without considering privacy or security risks (Tülek et al., 2020), while pseudonymity simultaneously enables protection and abuse, including anonymous disinformation and cyberbullying (Kotler et al., 2024).

Health communication during crises illustrates these risks. During the 5G and COVID-19 controversy, conspiracy narratives spread rapidly through religious and community networks, heightening fear and confusion (Ndinojuo, 2020). Large-scale analyses confirm that unreliable health information circulates widely,

often preceding official reports and undermining trust in institutions (Gallotti et al., 2020).

False content also spreads quickly during protests or disasters, when urgency and emotional intensity limit verification. Social media enhances coordination and awareness but simultaneously accelerates rumor circulation that exceeds verified communication (Ofli et al., 2020; Zahra et al., 2019; Palen and Hughes, 2018; Vongkusolkit and Huang, 2020).

Furthermore, health-related content on social media includes treatment advice, medical updates, and personal illness experiences, and it becomes especially prominent during public health crises. Misinformation about COVID-19 treatments, such as the off-label use of ivermectin, led to hospitalizations and veterinary drug shortages, demonstrating how false health claims can endanger public well-being and disrupt supply chains (Johnson, 2022).

Commercial content that merges advertising with user-generated posts presents additional risks. Emotionally charged and algorithmically targeted messages often conceal persuasive intent. Influencer promotions, branded posts, and online reviews combine emotional and informational appeals to shape consumer behavior (Lee et al., 2018). Algorithmic targeting blurs the boundary between advertising and information, exposing users to politicized or misleading advertorials that complicate credibility assessment (Zhou, 2023). Even user-generated reviews, valued for authenticity, can be manipulated to spread false information under the guise of peer influence (Kapoor et al., 2017).

Sensational and political content frequently overlap in digital environments, using emotional triggers to attract engagement while evading scrutiny. Such material thrives on outrage, fear, and excitement, benefiting from algorithms that prioritize virality over accuracy (Swastiningsih et al., 2024; Ruiz et al., 2020; Latif et al., 2024). In Nigeria, sensational narratives often exploit ethnoreligious divisions and moral anxieties through rumor-based posts, memes, and edited videos (Hassan, 2023). Political elites and other influential actors also employ manipulative communication, invoking religion, ethnicity, or morality to polarize audiences and sustain misinformation for strategic advantage (Oparinde et al., 2021). False claims about candidates' health, religion, or electoral outcomes spread easily in low-accountability contexts with fragmented audiences (Eady et al., 2024; Pate and Ibrahim, 2020).

Users' political alignment strongly shapes how they engage with digital content. Kaiser et al. (2022) found that individuals with firm partisan identities often unfollow or block those who share opposing political information, reinforcing ideological divides and limiting exposure to alternative views. Bradshaw et al.

(2019) reveals that during the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the 2018 State of the Union address, Twitter was saturated with “junk news” designed to manipulate opinion, highlighting the need for greater critical engagement with online political content.

In Nigeria, false claims about candidates’ health, religion, or citizenship such as the “Buhari clone” narrative or recycled election reports presented as current persist amid public distrust and weak fact-checking mechanisms (Hassan, 2023; Pate and Ibrahim, 2020). Although reforms like the Cybercrimes (Amendment) Act of 2024 and the E-Government Bill of 2021 mark progress, the regulatory framework remains fragmented. The amended Act refines Section 24 but still employs ambiguous language such as “breakdown of law and order,” allowing broad interpretation (Ederagobor, 2025). While the E-Government Bill advances digital administration, it does not directly address false or misleading content (Sani, 2025). This gap weakens efforts to balance regulation with the protection of free expression. Scholars have therefore proposed stronger media literacy programs, algorithmic transparency, and a Converged Media Governance Framework to uphold journalistic and platform integrity (Bashir, 2020; Hazzan, 2022).

In online environments lacking traditional gatekeepers, authority increasingly derives from familiarity and emotional resonance rather than institutional credibility. Audiences align with communicators who reflect their values and identities, such as influencers or partisan figures (Wilson, 2009; Ghaisani et al., 2017; Rogers, 2021). Users may share misleading material not to deceive, but as expressions of identity, humor, or activism, complicating distinctions between misinformation and opinion (Perach et al., 2023; Tucker et al., 2018). Platform affordances further influence these dynamics: Instagram emphasizes curated imagery, TikTok blends entertainment with political messaging, and Twitter functions as both a site of activism and state control (Rogers, 2021; Akerele-Popoola et al., 2022; Mohammed and Adhlakun, 2023). Despite these challenges, social media continues to serve as a vital civic arena, as illustrated by the #EndSARS movement, which used digital platforms to organize protest and amplify dissent (Schäfer, 2015; Akerele-Popoola et al., 2022).

In Nigeria, demonstrations against police violence, poverty, and government neglect have drawn significant attention. The #EndSARS and #EndHunger movements reflect citizens’ growing demands for justice and reform (Omoyeni et al., 2024). The #EndSARS protest began in 2017 and gained momentum in October 2020 after a video shared by @AfricaOfficial showed police officers from the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) killing a young man in Ughelli, Delta State (Abimbade et al., 2022; Hatungimana, 2022). The Nigerian police,

a product of colonial legacy, have long been associated with repression and impunity (Abimbade et al., 2022).

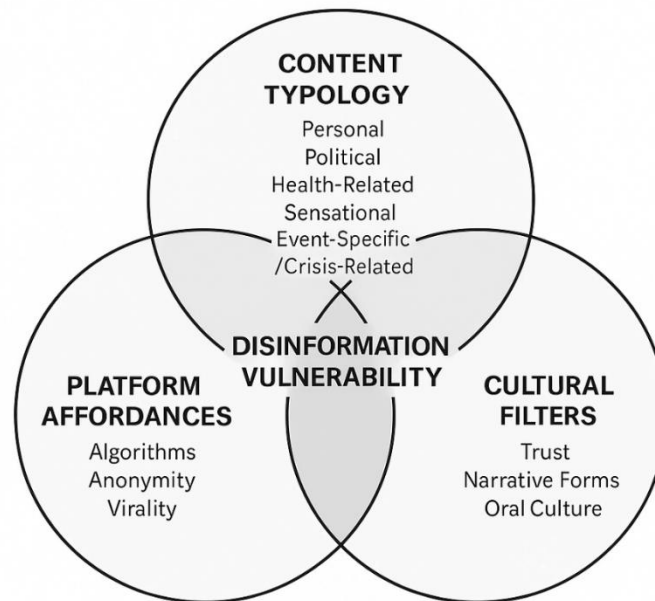
State responses to protests often raise concerns about balancing public order with rights to peaceful assembly and free expression (Omoyeni et al., 2024). Government censorship has occasionally resulted out of social media activism, as seen in the 2021 suspension of Twitter on national security grounds (Chiroma and Sule, 2022; Obiora et al., 2022). During #EndSARS, videos and images of victims circulated widely online, mobilizing support and global awareness but also risking re-traumatization and privacy violations (Francis, 2025). On October 11, 2020, the government dissolved SARS for the fourth time since 2017, yet protesters expanded their demands to include economic equality and rule of law (Omoyeni et al., 2024; Hatungimana, 2022). The movement demonstrated the power of user-generated content to amplify local struggles internationally (Akerere-Popoola et al., 2022), although unverified posts on Twitter also spread rumors and confusion that weakened its credibility (Ajaegbu et al., 2022; Oghogho and Osazuwa, 2024).

Promoting digital literacy and protecting digital rights can strengthen civic activism while reducing misinformation (Oghogho and Osazuwa, 2024). The circulation of false information in Nigeria reflects social and technological factors, with cultural norms influencing how trustworthiness is judged (Abimbade et al., 2022; see also Khosrowjerdi et al., 2019). During #EndSARS, social media amplified both legitimate resistance and misleading narratives (Ajaegbu et al., 2022; Omotayo and Folorunso, 2020). The evolving digital environment complicates political communication and media literacy, warranting continuous scholarly engagement (Casero-Ripollés, 2018; Tucker et al., 2018).

Users often prioritize familiar themes and trusted sources over factual accuracy, relying on alternative platforms when mainstream media seem biased or dismissive (Volk et al., 2024; Boichak et al., 2019; Kalogeropoulos et al., 2021). They also tend to remain within specific topics once engaged, particularly when guided by platform design (Makhortykh et al., 2020). Exposure to crime, terrorism, or polarizing issues through social media can increase fear and distort risk perception (Näsi et al., 2020), while avoiding mainstream sources on science-related topics can reduce factual accuracy (Damstra et al., 2021).

Algorithms further influence what users encounter by prioritizing popular or personalized themes, reinforcing existing beliefs or introducing related content. Whether this narrows or broadens perspectives remains debatable (Karlsen et al., 2020; Verbitskaya and Lesnikovskaya, 2022). Nevertheless, thematic framing shapes not only what audiences consume but also how they interpret and share information.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework illustrating how content typology, platform affordances, and cultural filters intersect to influence disinformation vulnerability in the Nigerian social media environment



Note. Own elaboration.

This framework integrates three interrelated dimensions: the type of content users encounter, the cultural lens shaping interpretation, and the influence of digital platforms on visibility and circulation. Research shows that sensitive topics such as politics, religion, and health evoke strong emotions that drive rapid sharing without verification, sustaining false narratives linked to identity, morality, and fear (Rosińska, 2021; Abdulazeez, 2024).

Interpretation of information is shaped by sociocultural norms and trust frameworks (Rosemary et al., 2022; Khosrowjerdi et al., 2020). In Nigeria, where oral traditions, religious authority, and communal ties remain strong, credibility often depends on alignment with shared values rather than institutional verification. This makes culturally embedded misinformation more persuasive and difficult to detect (Abdulazeez, 2024). Social media algorithms privilege emotionally charged content and anonymity weakens accountability (Siles, 2023; Latif et al., 2024).

These three factors clarify why false information spreads so easily. The issue lies not only in what people believe, but in how content appeals to their values, how platforms amplify certain messages, and how communities negotiate trust. Understanding these layers is essential for designing effective media literacy and communication policies that reflect real patterns of digital engagement.

3. STRENGTHENING INFORMATION RESILIENCE: IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY'S FINDINGS

Rather than viewing disinformation as a single phenomenon, the findings suggest that different content categories pose distinct risks within specific sociocultural contexts. Political falsehoods, for instance, often reinforce identity, grievance, and group loyalty in polarized or low-trust environments (Eady et al., 2024; Tucker et al., 2018).

A key insight is that people evaluate information based not only on factual accuracy but also on how it connects with familiar narratives and cultural meanings. Users interpret media through emotional cues, social values, and informal trust networks (Khosrowjerdi et al., 2020; Wilson, 2009; Rosemary et al., 2022), challenging universal models of media literacy based on rational evaluation.

Platform design reinforces these tendencies. Algorithms promote content that provokes strong emotions, favoring engagement over accuracy (Siles, 2023; Cinelli et al., 2021). As a result, users with limited media literacy may equate emotional tone or popularity with credibility, heightening their vulnerability to persuasive falsehoods (Blair et al., 2023).

Falsehoods also flourish in environments where institutional trust is weak and political divisions are deep. Although fact-checking and digital skills training remain important, they are not enough on their own. Emotional intelligence, cultural awareness, and trust dynamics must also be addressed (Surjatmodjo et al., 2024; Owiti, 2024).

This framework contributes to ongoing efforts to contextualize responses to misleading information in the Global South. It argues for locally grounded strategies that integrate message design, cultural interpretation, and platform influence. By highlighting the intersection of message design, cultural interpretation, and platform influence, this study supports more localized, inclusive approaches to strengthening information resilience in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined how the interplay of content typologies, cultural interpretation and platform dynamics influence false and misleading information in Nigeria. It argues that information disorder is not limited to false content or gaps in fact-checking, but is shaped by everyday meaning-making, trust relationships, emotional responses, and the ways digital platforms organize and circulate information.

The typology-sensitive framework presented here offers a foundation for more in-depth and context-aware responses. Rather than depending solely on fact-checking or regulatory measures, the findings highlight the importance of culturally rooted media literacy programs that reflect how individuals interpret, evaluate, and circulate content. Addressing content-driven and context-specific falsehoods requires coordinated efforts among educators, policymakers, and platform designers.

Future research should consider how this framework can be adapted to different settings and tested in practice. By doing so, scholars and practitioners can support more inclusive and effective strategies for strengthening information resilience in digitally mediated societies.

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DEZINFORMACJA JAKO STRATEGIA:
ANALIZA TYPOLOGICZNA TREŚCI W MEDIACH SPOŁECZNOŚCIOWYCH
I PODATNOŚCI ODBIORCÓW W NIGERII

Streszczenie

Niniejsze studium koncepcyjne analizuje, w jaki sposób różne typy treści w mediach społecznościowych przyczyniają się do rozpowszechniania dezinformacji w Nigerii. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono kategoriom tematycznym takim jak treści osobiste, polityczne, zdrowotne, marketingowe, sensacyjne oraz związane z wydarzeniami. Badanie ukazuje, jak poszczególne typy treści wpływają na interpretacje użytkowników oraz jak współdziałają z mechanizmami funkcjonowania platform cyfrowych. Opierając się na teoriach komunikacji, badaniach nad recepcją kulturową oraz analizie platform, autor proponuje typologiczne ramy teoretyczne, które ujmują dezinformację jako wynik współistnienia takich czynników jak forma treści, ładunek emocjonalny, kulturowa znajomość tematu oraz algorytmiczne wzmocnienie przekazu. Zamiast przypisywać dezinformację wyłącznie fałszywej treści lub niskiemu poziomowi kompetencji informacyjnych, analiza podkreśla znaczenie zaufania, poczucia relewancji oraz norm interpretacyjnych w kształtowaniu tego, co użytkownicy mediów społecznościowych uznają za wiarygodne i godne udostępnienia. Poprzez kontekstualne odniesienia, takie jak niedawne ruchy protestacyjne, tekst wskazuje na potrzebę kulturowo zakorzenionej edukacji medialnej, dostosowanej do rodzaju treści, uwarunkowań odbiorców oraz infrastruktury cyfrowej. Zaproponowane ramy analityczne stanowią lokalnie osadzoną podstawę do przyszłych badań oraz interwencji edukacyjnych mających na celu przeciwdziałanie dezinformacji w środowiskach, w których występuje duża różnorodność treści i niski poziom umiejętności krytycznego odbioru informacji.

Słowa kluczowe: dezinformacja; platforma mediów społecznościowych; typologia treści; interpretacja kulturowa; Nigeria