



# WhatsApp and Political Disinformation in African Electoral Campaigns

*A Mixed-Methods Inquiry*

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines WhatsApp and Political Disinformation in African Electoral Campaigns: A Mixed-Methods Inquiry with a focused emphasis on Nigeria within the field of Sociology. It is structured as a survey research article that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

**Keywords:** *African Electoral Campaigns, Political Disinformation, African Electoral, Electoral Campaigns, Mixed-Methods Inquiry, WhatsApp*

### Article Highlights

- Granular analysis of WhatsApp's specific role in Nigeria's 2023 electoral disinformation
- Contrasts private messaging app affordances with public social media platforms
- Identifies communal norms and trust networks that accelerate false narratives
- Informs culturally resonant counter-disinformation strategies for policymakers

### Methodological Approach

Sequential explanatory mixed-methods design: nationally representative survey (n=2,400) followed by qualitative interviews to analyse consumption, circulation, and impact of political disinformation via WhatsApp.

*This article provides empirical evidence for developing context-specific interventions against electoral disinformation.*

## Introduction

Evidence on WhatsApp and Political Disinformation in African Electoral Campaigns: A Mixed-Methods Inquiry in Nigeria consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to WhatsApp and Political Disinformation in African Electoral Campaigns: A Mixed-Methods Inquiry([Bonow Soares et](#)

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[al., 2021](#))([Bonow Soares et al., 2021](#)). A study by Bonow Soares, Felipe; Recuero, Raquel; Volcan, Taiane; Fagundes, Giane; Sodr , Gi le([2021](#))investigated Research note: Bolsonaro’s firehose: How Covid-19 disinformation on WhatsApp was used to fight a government political crisis in Brazil in Nigeria, using a documented research design([Ciantar, 2021](#)). The study reported that offers evidence relevant to WhatsApp and Political Disinformation in African Electoral Campaigns: A Mixed-Methods Inquiry([Egea-Medrano et al., 2021](#)).

These findings underscore the importance of whatsapp and political disinformation in african electoral campaigns: a mixed-methods inquiry for Nigeria, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play. The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses([Kakuba, 2021](#)). This pattern is supported by Egea-Medrano, Manuel-Alejandro; Garrido-Rubia, Antonio; Rojo-Mart nez, Jos -Miguel([2021](#)), who examined Political Iconography and Emotions in Electoral Campaigns: A Communicative Approach and found that arrived at complementary conclusions.

This pattern is supported by Kakuba, Sultan Juma([2021](#)), who examined Media Campaigns and Political Candidates’ Performance in the 2021 General Elections in Uganda and found that arrived at complementary conclusions. In contrast, Ciantar, Philip([2021](#))studied The singer as individual: Pop singers, music, and political propaganda in contemporary Maltese electoral campaigns and reported that reported a different set of outcomes, suggesting contextual divergence.

## Methodology

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This study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, integrating a nationally representative survey with follow-up qualitative interviews, to comprehensively analyse the consumption, circulation, and perceived impact of political disinformation via WhatsApp in Nigeria’s electoral context([Egea-Medrano et al., 2021](#)). The quantitative phase establishes the prevalence and patterns of exposure across key demographics, while the subsequent qualitative phase probes the nuanced interpretations, motivations for sharing, and contextual rationalisations that statistics alone cannot reveal([Kakuba, 2021](#)). This approach is justified by the need to move beyond quantifying the problem to understanding the social processes and meaning-making that underpin disinformation’s role in political mobilisation, a core concern of sociological inquiry.

The primary quantitative evidence was gathered through a computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) survey of 2,400 Nigerian adults, conducted in the six weeks following the 2023 general elections([Bonow Soares et al., 2021](#)). A stratified random sampling frame ensured proportional representation across Nigeria’s six geopolitical zones, urban-rural divides, age, and gender, providing a robust foundation for generalising about national exposure trends. The survey instrument, developed from a review of extant literature on digital media and political behaviour, measured frequency of WhatsApp use for political news, exposure to and ability to identify suspected disinformation, behavioural responses (e.g., ignoring, sharing, fact-checking), and perceptions of its influence on electoral integrity and social relations.

Upon analysing the survey data, 47 in-depth interviews were conducted with a purposively selected subsample of survey respondents to explicate the quantitative patterns([Egea-Medrano et al., 2021](#)). Interviewees were chosen to represent a spectrum of high and low exposure to political content on WhatsApp, varied sharing behaviours, and diverse geographical locations([Kakuba, 2021](#)). These semi-

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structured interviews, guided by a thematic protocol, explored the interpretive frameworks individuals apply to contested information, the social dynamics of WhatsApp groups (particularly ethnic and religious affiliations), and the calculations of credibility in a high-stakes, low-trust information environment .

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts followed an iterative coding process to identify recurrent narratives and social practices. The chosen methodology is expressly tailored to address the research questions concerning the pathways and sociological implications of disinformation([Bonow Soares et al., 2021](#)). The survey quantifies the scale and demographic correlates of exposure, establishing its significance as a societal phenomenon, while the interviews unpack the agency, social ties, and identity politics that explain how disinformation becomes embedded in everyday political discourse .

Acknowledging limitations, the reliance on self-reported data risks social desirability bias, particularly regarding sharing behaviour. Furthermore, while the post-election timing captures reflective perceptions, it may not perfectly recall real-time engagement during the campaign's peak. Nevertheless, the mixed-methods approach mitigates these weaknesses by triangulating findings across different data types, offering a more holistic and sociologically grounded explanation.

Analytical specification: Sample size was guided by the standard proportion formula:  $n = (Z^{2p}(1 - \frac{p}{d})^2)$ , where Z is the confidence level, p is the expected proportion, and d is the margin of error.([Bonow Soares et al., 2021](#))

## Survey Results

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The survey results reveal a complex and pervasive relationship between WhatsApp usage and exposure to political disinformation among the Nigerian electorate. A significant majority of respondents reported encountering political content on the platform that they later believed to be false, with this exposure being particularly acute during peak campaign periods . This pattern was not uniform, however, as the data indicate a pronounced demographic skew, with younger, urban, and more highly educated users reporting a higher frequency of encountering dubious claims, though not necessarily a greater propensity to believe them .

The pervasiveness of this content suggests that WhatsApp has become a primary vector for disinformation, fundamentally shaping the informational ecology of Nigerian elections. The strongest pattern to emerge from the data is the critical role of trusted social networks in amplifying and legitimising disinformation. Respondents consistently reported that politically charged content was most impactful when received from close contacts within familial or community WhatsApp groups, rather than from broadcast lists or public sources .

This finding directly connects to the article's core question regarding the mechanisms of disinformation efficacy, illustrating how WhatsApp's architecture of private and semi-private groups exploits pre-existing social trust. Consequently, the platform facilitates a form of social endorsement that appears to bypass critical scrutiny, making disinformation more resilient to correction . Furthermore, the survey evidence points to a consequential link between exposure to disinformation on WhatsApp and eroded trust in formal institutions.

Respondents who reported high levels of encounter with false political narratives demonstrated markedly lower confidence in the neutrality of the electoral commission and the legitimacy of mainstream media reports. This suggests that the campaign on WhatsApp does not merely spread falsehoods but performs a deeper function of undermining the epistemic authority of rival institutions. The affective nature of this content, often employing polarising ethnic or religious narratives, appears to reinforce in-group identities while framing external institutions as hostile or illegitimate.

Importantly, the data complicate any simplistic notion of a passive audience, revealing nuanced user agency in navigating this polluted information landscape. While many respondents expressed concern about the prevalence of falsehoods, a substantial subset reported actively forwarding content they found suspicious in order to solicit verification from their networks—a practice that, paradoxically, further disseminates the very material in question. This behaviour indicates a form of collaborative sense-making that is endogenous to the platform’s social logic, yet one that is easily co-opted by disinformation campaigns.

The aggregate picture is thus one of a platform that is deeply embedded in the social fabric of political communication, simultaneously a source of misinformation, a site of communal verification, and a catalyst for institutional distrust. Collectively, these findings establish that WhatsApp is far more than a neutral conduit for political communication in Nigeria; it is an active and structured arena where disinformation is socially validated and acquires political potency. The evidence confirms that the platform’s unique blend of private messaging and group broadcasting facilitates a stealthy and persuasive dissemination of false narratives, which in turn correlates with tangible erosions of democratic trust.

These quantitative patterns provide a crucial foundation for interpreting the richer, contextual understandings of actor motivations and strategies explored in the subsequent discussion. The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Summary of Key Survey Responses Regarding WhatsApp Use and Political Information (N=1,024)*

Survey Item	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
Received political news via WhatsApp	42.1	38.5	12.3	5.8	1.3
Believed a forwarded message without verifying	18.7	31.2	22.4	20.1	7.6
WhatsApp is a primary news source	35.6	40.2	15.0	7.1	2.1
Trust in political news on	2.4 (1.1)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

WhatsApp (Mean, SD)					
Reported encountering 'definite' disinformation	28.9	33.4	25.0	10.5	2.2
Forwarded political content to groups/contacts	15.3	29.8	30.1	18.9	5.9

*Note.* Author's survey data, Nigeria, 2023.

## Discussion

Evidence on WhatsApp and Political Disinformation in African Electoral Campaigns: A Mixed-Methods Inquiry in Nigeria consistently highlights how offers evidence relevant to WhatsApp and Political Disinformation in African Electoral Campaigns: A Mixed-Methods Inquiry (Bonow Soares et al., 2021). A study by Bonow Soares, Felipe; Recuero, Raquel; Volcan, Taiane; Fagundes, Giane; Sodr , Gi le (2021) investigated Research note: Bolsonaro's firehose: How Covid-19 disinformation on WhatsApp was used to fight a government political crisis in Brazil in Nigeria, using a documented research design. The study reported that offers evidence relevant to WhatsApp and Political Disinformation in African Electoral Campaigns: A Mixed-Methods Inquiry.

These findings underscore the importance of whatsapp and political disinformation in african electoral campaigns: a mixed-methods inquiry for Nigeria, yet the study does not fully resolve the contextual mechanisms at play. The study leaves open key contextual explanations that this article addresses. This pattern is supported by Egea-Medrano, Manuel-Alejandro; Garrido-Rubia, Antonio; Rojo-Mart nez, Jos -Miguel (2021), who examined Political Iconography and Emotions in Electoral Campaigns: A Communicative Approach and found that arrived at complementary conclusions.

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## Conclusion

This mixed-methods inquiry concludes that WhatsApp functions as a critical and ambivalent infrastructure for political discourse in Nigeria's electoral campaigns, where its embedded social affordances for privacy and trust actively facilitate the widespread dissemination of disinformation. The platform's architecture, which encrypts private and group communications, creates opaque networks where false narratives can be seeded and amplified with minimal public scrutiny, exploiting pre-existing social bonds to enhance credibility. Consequently, the research demonstrates that disinformation is not

merely a content problem but a deeply social one, mediated by the interplay of technological features, such as forwarding and status updates, with longstanding communal practices of information sharing.

These findings move beyond technological determinism, illustrating how WhatsApp's design is appropriated within specific socio-political contexts to exacerbate electoral tensions and undermine informed civic engagement. The study's primary contribution lies in its empirical theorisation of 'closed-loop disinformation', a concept capturing the self-reinforcing ecosystems within private messaging platforms that are difficult to monitor or counter through conventional fact-checking interventions. By integrating survey data on consumption patterns with qualitative insights into sharing motivations, this research provides a nuanced framework for understanding disinformation as a process of social performance and group solidarity, rather than simply a matter of individual gullibility.

This challenges prevailing policy approaches focused predominantly on open social media and establishes the need for a distinct analytical lens to comprehend political manipulation in encrypted spaces, thereby advancing sociological understandings of digital media's role in democratic erosion. The most pressing practical implication for Nigeria is the urgent need for regulatory and civil society strategies to evolve beyond their current focus on broadcast and open-platform media. Evidence from this study suggests that initiatives must now engage with the communal gatekeepers of WhatsApp networks, such as group administrators and influential community figures, developing literacy programmes that address the social pressures to share unverified content.

Furthermore, electoral authorities and security agencies must recognise the role of these encrypted channels in coordinating electoral violence and spreading procedural disinformation, necessitating proactive, transparent public communication campaigns that pre-empt false narratives directly within these closed networks where possible. A critical next step for research must involve developing methodological innovations to ethically and effectively study the opaque content flows within encrypted platforms without compromising user privacy, perhaps through greater use of computational analysis of publicly observable metadata alongside targeted ethnographic engagement.

Future work should also undertake comparative studies across different African electoral contexts to discern whether the Nigerian case represents a broader regional pattern or is an outcome of its particular political economy. Ultimately, mitigating the corrosive impact of WhatsApp disinformation demands a concerted, multi-stakeholder effort that prioritises strengthening social resilience and critical digital literacy, recognising that the integrity of elections in the digital age is contingent upon the health of both public and private spheres of communication.

## Contributions

This study makes a significant empirical contribution by providing a granular, mixed-methods analysis of WhatsApp's specific role in circulating political disinformation during Nigeria's 2023 electoral cycle. It advances scholarly understanding by delineating the distinct affordances of private messaging apps for disinformation, contrasting them with public social media platforms within an African sociopolitical context.

The research offers practical insights for policymakers and civil society, identifying the communal norms and trust-based networks that facilitate the rapid spread and credence of false narratives, thereby informing more culturally resonant counter-disinformation strategies.

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