



**EXAMINING THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE SPREAD OF
ELECTION-RELATED MISINFORMATION: A CASE OF GHANA'S 2020
GENERAL ELECTION**

BY

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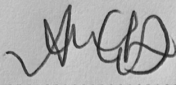
**A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF MEDIA,
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DECLARATION

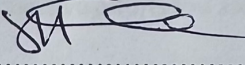
DECLARATION BY STUDENT

I hereby declare that this research is a result of my own original research and that, no part of it has been presented for another degree in this university or any other higher education institute. I further declare that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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CERTIFICATION BY SUPERVISOR

This Dissertation has been prepared and presented under my supervision according to the guidelines for supervision and formatting of Project Work laid down by the University of Media, Arts and Communication UniMAC-IJ.

DR JAMES ASANTE		19/02/2024
Supervisor	Signature	Date

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, especially my wife, whose unwavering love, support, encouragement and constant motivation has been my foundation throughout this academic journey. To all those working to foster meaningful development through communication, this work may serve as a small contribution to our collective efforts toward social change.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of social media in the spread of election-related misinformation during Ghana's 2020 General Election, focusing on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram. The study revealed that misinformation had a significant impact on voter perceptions and behaviours, often influencing voting decisions and eroding trust in the electoral process. Misinformation was found to spread rapidly through social media, amplified by engagement-driven algorithms, which favoured sensational content over accuracy. The findings also highlighted the ripple effect of misinformation, affecting not only individual voters but also their wider social circles, contributing to broader societal distrust. Despite efforts by social media platforms and fact-checking organizations to counter misinformation, participants perceived these initiatives as largely ineffective, emphasizing the need for more proactive strategies. The study recommends Recommendations from the study include strengthening collaboration between social media platforms and authorities, enhancing media literacy among the public, and improving real-time responses to false information. The study underscores the importance of developing comprehensive strategies to mitigate the effects of misinformation and safeguard the integrity of future elections. By providing insights into how misinformation spreads and influences electoral outcomes, this research contributes to the broader discourse on the role of social media in democratic processes.

Keywords: social media, misinformation, Ghana, election, voter behaviour, algorithms, fact-checking, electoral integrity

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

This chapter introduces the study on the role of social media in spreading election-related misinformation during Ghana's 2020 General Election. It outlines the study's background, problem statement, objectives, research questions, scope, significance, and organization of the study.

1.1 Background of the Study

In the digital era, social media platforms have emerged as pivotal instruments for the dissemination and consumption of information, fundamentally transforming how individuals access news and interact with one another (Woolley & Howard, 2018; Kreiss, 2016; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp have become ubiquitous, integrating into the daily routines of billions around the globe (Kietzmann et al., 2011; Boyd & Ellison, 2007). The 2020 Presidential and Parliamentary Elections in Ghana served as a critical case study, underscoring the pervasive influence of social media on public opinion and electoral processes (Sikanku, 2021; Abubakar & Ango, 2020). During this election cycle, social media became a primary battleground for political messaging, campaign strategies, and voter engagement, highlighting its essential role in shaping political landscapes in contemporary democracies (Chakrabarti, 2018; Hermida, 2020).

While social media significantly enhances connectivity and facilitates the rapid exchange of information, it also poses substantial risks, particularly the proliferation of misinformation during election cycles (Vosoughi et al., 2018; Tandoc et al., 2018). Research by Sikanku (2021) highlights this duality, emphasizing that the very characteristics that make social media effective—its speed, accessibility, and reach—also render it a breeding ground for falsehoods and misleading narratives. Amid elections, where information can alter public perceptions and influence voting behavior, the stakes are notably high (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Ferrara et al., 2020).

According to Chakrabarti (2018), social media amplifies the effects of information disorder, leveraging its extensive reach and immediacy to shape public discourse. This amplification can be particularly alarming in politically charged environments where misinformation can spread like wildfire (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019; Pennycook & Rand, 2019). The platform dynamics allow users to create and share content rapidly, often without the filters or checks traditionally associated with journalistic standards (Bakir & McStay, 2018). Hermida (2020) notes that this transformation has democratized news dissemination, enabling ordinary citizens to share news in real-time and participate actively in the information landscape.

The ability of individuals to contribute to public discourse through social media has empowered a more diverse range of voices, challenging the historical dominance of traditional media outlets (Kreiss et al., 2018; Freelon & Wells, 2020). However, this newfound power brings with it significant challenges, particularly in terms of verifying the accuracy of the information being shared (Tandoc et al., 2018; Lazer et al., 2018). The rapid spread of unverified or misleading news can easily lead to widespread misinformation, which distorts public understanding and misleads the electorate (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Vosoughi et al., 2018).

The consequences of this misinformation can be dire, influencing voter perceptions of candidates and parties, shaping policy discussions, and ultimately affecting the outcomes of elections (Pennycook & Rand, 2019; Tandoc et al., 2018). Scholars Vosoughi et al. (2018) and Thorne & Vlachos (2018) emphasize a critical point: access to information online does not inherently guarantee its authenticity. This creates a paradox where, despite the proliferation of information, the quality and reliability of that information are often in question (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Ferrara et al., 2020).

As of April 2024, over 5.07 billion social media users are reported worldwide, illustrating the integral role social media plays in daily life and the profound implications this has for information dissemination (Meltwater, 2024; Statista, 2024). The sheer volume of content generated by this vast user base complicates the task of discerning truth from falsehood, particularly during pivotal moments such as elections (Sikanku, 2021; Freelon & Wells, 2020). The algorithms driving social media platforms often prioritize engagement over accuracy, allowing sensationalist and misleading content to gain traction (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019; Tandoc et al., 2018).

The 2020 elections in Ghana witnessed heightened social media activity, characterized by an unprecedented volume of posts, shares, and interactions that significantly shaped the political landscape (Abubakar & Ango, 2020; Sikanku, 2021). The spread of misleading information during this period had tangible effects on public perception, voter behavior, and overall electoral integrity (Chakrabarti, 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018). For instance, false narratives about candidates, party affiliations, and policy positions circulated widely, often leading to confusion among voters regarding their choices (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Bakir & McStay, 2018).

In the aftermath of the elections, the ramifications of misinformation became evident, raising urgent questions about the integrity of democratic processes and the role of social media in facilitating informed citizenship (Freelon & Wells, 2020; Lazer et al., 2018). As social media continues to evolve, it becomes increasingly vital to develop strategies for combating misinformation and ensuring that accurate information prevails in the public sphere, particularly in the context of future elections (Tandoc et al., 2018; Bradshaw & Howard, 2019).

Moreover, policymakers and stakeholders must recognize the need for comprehensive regulations addressing the unique challenges digital communication poses in elections (Pennycook & Rand, 2019; Bakir & McStay, 2018). By doing so, it is possible to harness the positive aspects of social media—such as enhanced connectivity and engagement—while mitigating the risks associated with misinformation. Ultimately, as societies grapple with the complexities of digital communication, fostering an informed citizenry will be paramount in safeguarding the integrity of democratic processes and ensuring that the power of social media is used for the public good rather than as a tool for deception and division (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Ferrara et al., 2020).

1.2 Problem Statement

Social media's role in information dissemination has fundamentally transformed democratic processes, particularly during elections (Woolley & Howard, 2018; Kreiss, 2016; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and WhatsApp have become indispensable tools for political communication, enabling candidates, parties, and activists to engage directly with the electorate (Woolley & Howard, 2018; Kreiss, 2016). The immediacy

and accessibility of these platforms allow for the rapid sharing of messages, campaign updates, and calls to action, reaching vast audiences almost instantaneously (Larsson, 2018). This shift has democratized political discourse, empowering ordinary citizens to voice their opinions and participate in discussions that were previously dominated by traditional media outlets (Hermida, 2020).

However, this transformation has introduced new challenges, particularly concerning the spread of misinformation, which poses significant risks to the integrity of electoral processes (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The 2020 General Election in Ghana vividly illustrated the problematic nature of misinformation in the digital age. During this election cycle, social media became a double-edged sword: while it provided a platform for political engagement and information sharing, it also facilitated the rapid dissemination of false information (Chakrabarti, 2018). This phenomenon raised significant concerns about the impact of social media on the electoral process, as unverified claims and misleading narratives circulated widely, potentially influencing public perception and voter behavior (Benkler et al., 2018).

One of the most pressing issues is the inherent susceptibility of social media to propagate misinformation and disinformation, which can severely undermine the credibility of elections (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). Unlike traditional media, which typically operates under stringent editorial guidelines and fact-checking processes, social media platforms often lack rigorous oversight (Vosoughi et al., 2018). This absence of editorial control allows unverified and misleading content to spread unchecked, reaching large audiences in a matter of seconds. The ease with which anyone can publish content means that falsehoods can masquerade as legitimate news, distorting public discourse and complicating the verification process (Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

The proliferation of false narratives, rumors, and conspiracy theories creates fertile ground for misinformation, particularly during critical moments like elections. The algorithms employed by social media platforms often prioritize sensational content that generates engagement, further exacerbating the spread of misinformation (Guess et al., 2018). For instance, during the 2020 General Election in Ghana, social media was rife with misleading posts, doctored images, and false claims aimed at manipulating voter opinions and sowing distrust in the electoral process (BBC Monitoring, 2020). These falsehoods not only misinform the electorate but also create an environment of confusion and skepticism, making it challenging for voters to discern the truth (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

The prevalence of misinformation complicates the ability to verify information and maintain accurate public discourse. In a landscape where sensational and misleading content can overshadow factual reporting, the challenge for electoral authorities and the public alike lies in distinguishing between accurate information and misinformation (Karpf, 2018). This is particularly concerning when misinformation can lead to voter suppression, erode trust in electoral institutions, and ultimately undermine the legitimacy of election results (Freelon & Wells, 2020).

Unlike traditional media, which operates under a system of checks and balances, social media platforms allow anyone to publish content, regardless of its veracity. This democratization of information has positive aspects, such as giving voice to marginalized communities and allowing for a broader spectrum of opinions to be heard (Tufekci, 2017). However, it also carries significant risks, as the lack of necessary editorial oversight means that false information can easily masquerade as truth, leading to widespread confusion and potentially influencing electoral outcomes (Hermida, 2020).

Moreover, the challenge lies in balancing the platform's extensive reach with the need for accurate information. This dilemma poses critical questions about how to safeguard democratic processes in a digital age plagued by misinformation (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). While social media has the potential to enhance democratic participation by providing a platform for diverse voices, it also has the potential to disrupt democratic processes by spreading falsehoods. The consequences of misinformation can be severe, as it can lead to a breakdown of trust in electoral institutions and the democratic process itself (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019).

Addressing this challenge requires a multi-faceted approach that includes improving mechanisms for detecting and countering misinformation on social media platforms. This could involve the development of sophisticated algorithms to flag false information, increased transparency regarding the sources of information, and partnerships between social media companies and fact-checking organizations (Lazer et al., 2018). Furthermore, enhancing public awareness and media literacy is essential to better equip individuals to navigate the complex information landscape. Educating the public on how to critically assess information sources and recognize potential misinformation can foster a more informed electorate capable of making sound decisions based on accurate data (Guess et al., 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

While social media has revolutionized political communication and engagement, it has also introduced significant challenges that threaten the integrity of democratic processes. As the influence of social media continues to grow, it is imperative for stakeholders—including policymakers, electoral authorities, and civil society—to work collaboratively to mitigate the risks associated with misinformation. By fostering an informed citizenry and promoting responsible information sharing, it is possible to harness the positive aspects of social media while safeguarding the principles of democracy (Benkler et al., 2018).

1.3 General Objective

The main objective of this study is to examine the role of social media in spreading election-related misinformation ((such as false claims about voter fraud, incorrect election results, or misleading information about candidates or voting procedures) during Ghana's 2020 General Election.

1.4 Specific Objectives

- To identify key mechanisms through which election-related misinformation spreads on social media.
- To analyze the effects of election-related misinformation on voter behavior and electoral outcomes.
- To propose strategies for mitigating the spread and impact of misinformation on social media.

1.5 Research Questions

- What are the primary mechanisms through which election-related misinformation spreads on social media platforms?
- How does election-related misinformation on social media influence voter behavior and electoral outcomes?
- What strategies can effectively mitigate the spread and impact of election-related misinformation on social media?

1.6 Scope of the Study

This research focuses on the impact of social media on the dissemination of election-related misinformation during Ghana's 2020 General Election. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter have become critical channels for political communication, but they also serve as conduits for the rapid spread of misinformation. During the 2020 election, these platforms were inundated with false claims, manipulated images, and misleading information that had the potential to distort public perception and influence voter behavior. By analyzing how misinformation spread on these platforms, this study aims to uncover the mechanisms that facilitated the viral spread of false information, and the strategies used by malicious actors to exploit social media for electoral manipulation.

Moreover, the study delves into the broader implications of this misinformation for democratic processes in Ghana. It examines the extent to which misinformation influenced voter decisions and potentially affected the overall electoral outcomes. The research also explores the challenges posed by misinformation in a real-world electoral context, highlighting the difficulties faced by electoral authorities, media organizations, and the public in countering the spread of false information. By providing insights into these challenges, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of social media in modern elections and to offer recommendations for mitigating the negative effects of misinformation on democratic integrity.

1.7 Significance of the Study

Understanding the role of social media in spreading election-related misinformation is increasingly crucial in the digital age, where online platforms have a profound influence on public opinion. This research illuminates the ways in which false narratives and misinformation can sway voter behavior and ultimately shape electoral outcomes. By focusing on the Ghanaian context, the study provides a specific lens through which to examine these dynamics, offering valuable insights into the complex interplay between digital communication and democratic processes. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of how social media's pervasive reach can be both a tool for engagement and a vehicle for misleading information, thereby impacting the very foundations of democracy. The insights garnered from this research have practical implications for a range of stakeholders. Policymakers can use this knowledge to craft more effective regulations that address the unique challenges posed by misinformation in the digital era. Election officials can apply these findings to enhance transparency and ensure that electoral processes remain fair and credible, even in the face of widespread misinformation. Social media platforms, too, can benefit from these insights by developing more robust strategies to detect and counter false information, thereby improving public trust in their role as facilitators of democratic discourse. Collectively, these efforts can help to preserve the integrity of electoral systems and strengthen the overall health of democratic institutions.

1.8 Organization of the Study

The structure of this study is organized into five comprehensive chapters. Chapter 1: Introduction sets the stage by providing essential background information on the research topic. It outlines the

problem statement, research objectives, and guiding questions, while defining the scope and significance of the study. This chapter also presents the overall organization of the research, allowing readers to understand the context and purpose of the investigation.

In Chapter 2: Literature Review, a thorough examination of relevant literature is conducted, anchored in a robust theoretical framework. This chapter critically explores the role of social media in the dissemination of election-related misinformation, drawing on existing studies and theoretical perspectives to contextualize the research. The insights gathered from the literature will provide a solid foundation for understanding the complexities of misinformation in electoral contexts.

Chapter 3: Methodology elaborates on the research design, detailing the data collection methods and analytical techniques employed in the study. This chapter clarifies how the research was conducted, ensuring transparency and replicability.

Following this, Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion presents and discusses the results of the data collected, applying relevant theories to analyze the findings and their implications.

Finally, Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations summarizes the key findings, draws conclusions based on the analysis, and offers practical recommendations for stakeholders, highlighting the significance of the research outcomes and suggesting directions for future study.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

This chapter comprehensively present the theoretical frameworks employed in the study of misinformation, offering a thorough review of relevant literature that illuminates the complexities of this issue. It outlines the conceptual framework that guides the analysis and operationalize key terms essential for understanding the nuances of the topic. By doing so, the chapter aims to provide a clear and detailed understanding of how social media influences election-related misinformation, particularly in the context of Ghana's 2020 general election. This exploration will not only highlight the mechanisms through which misinformation spreads but also assess its impact on voter perceptions and electoral integrity, thereby underscoring the significance of addressing misinformation in contemporary democratic processes. Through this multifaceted approach, the chapter seeks to establish a solid foundation for the ensuing discussions and analyses presented in the study.

2.1 Conceptual Framework

2.1.1 Misinformation Dynamics:

Misinformation Dynamics refers to the processes through which false or misleading information is created, distributed, and amplified, particularly in the context of social media and digital communication. (Boateng, 2021) These dynamics include the stages of misinformation dissemination, beginning with the creation of false content, followed by its spread across various platforms, and finally, its amplification through user engagement (McCornack, 1992; Boateng,

2021). The content often originates from different sources, including political actors, media organizations, or even individual users, and spreads rapidly due to the networked nature of social media. Social media algorithms, designed to prioritize highly engaging content, inadvertently enhance the visibility of such misinformation, allowing it to gain traction even faster than accurate information (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Mensah & Obeng, 2024).

Understanding Misinformation Dynamics is essential for analyzing how false information affects public perception and electoral outcomes. In elections, misinformation can be used to manipulate voters' beliefs and behaviors, often leading to confusion and mistrust in the democratic process (Osei-Tutu, 2020; Agyapong & Tetteh, 2022). Political actors or parties may deliberately create misleading content to discredit opponents or sow doubt about the electoral process, while individual users can unintentionally contribute to the spread by sharing inaccurate information. Studies have shown that misinformation has a profound effect on voter behavior, particularly when voters lack access to reliable fact-checking resources or are exposed primarily to one-sided narratives (Pennycook et al., 2020; Hermida, 2020). The spread of misinformation thus plays a critical role in shaping political discourse, creating echo chambers where users are continually exposed to content that reinforces their biases.

The role of social media platforms in Misinformation Dynamics is pivotal, as algorithms often prioritize engagement over the accuracy of content (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Addo & Akosah, 2023). Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, through their design, encourage users to share highly engaging content, which unfortunately includes misinformation. When a piece of false information generates more reactions, shares, and comments, it is pushed to the forefront of users' feeds, thereby increasing its reach and impact (Duggan, 2015; Tucker et al., 2018). This amplification effect is particularly concerning during elections, where

misinformation can spread unchecked, leading to voter suppression, reduced trust in democratic institutions, and even post-election unrest. The dynamics of these platforms contribute to the rapid dissemination of false narratives, which may be difficult to correct after the fact (McCornack, 1992; Boateng, 2021).

In response to Misinformation Dynamics, various mechanisms have been developed to counter the spread of false information. Fact-checking organizations, public awareness campaigns, and educational programs focusing on media literacy have emerged as key tools in the fight against misinformation (Addo & Akosah, 2023; Pennycook et al., 2020). Fact-checking platforms such as Africa Check and similar initiatives work closely with social media platforms to flag and remove false content. These efforts are complemented by campaigns aimed at educating the public on how to critically evaluate the information they encounter online. Media literacy programmes, in particular, are designed to equip users with the skills needed to differentiate between credible and false information, thereby reducing the likelihood of sharing misleading content (Pennycook et al., 2020; Hermida, 2020).

By thoroughly analyzing the dynamics of misinformation, researchers can gain insights into the strategies employed by those who create and propagate false content. Studies have shown that misinformation campaigns are often highly coordinated, targeting specific demographics or exploiting existing societal divides to amplify their impact (Boateng, 2021; Agyapong & Tetteh, 2022). Understanding the pathways through which misinformation spreads allows for the development of more effective interventions, including improved algorithms that prioritize credible content and enhanced public education on the importance of media literacy (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Mensah & Obeng, 2024). As social media continues to evolve, so do the

strategies for combating misinformation, ensuring that the public remains informed with accurate, reliable information, particularly during critical periods like elections.

2.1.2 Social Media Algorithms:

Social Media Algorithms are computational systems designed by social media platforms to curate and present content to users based on a variety of factors (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). These algorithms operate by analyzing user data, including browsing habits, preferences, and interaction history, to generate personalized content feeds. The primary goal is to increase user engagement by displaying posts that align with individual preferences, thereby keeping users on the platform for longer periods (Addo & Akosah, 2023). Engagement metrics, such as likes, shares, and comments, play a critical role in this process, as posts that garner more interactions are often prioritized and given more visibility in users' feeds (Pennycook et al., 2020). However, this emphasis on engagement can create a feedback loop where sensational and controversial content is amplified, regardless of its accuracy.

The role of Social Media Algorithms in the spread of misinformation is significant, as these algorithms often favor content that evokes strong emotional responses, whether positive or negative (Agyapong & Tetteh, 2022). Content that stirs emotions—such as outrage, fear, or excitement—tends to receive more interactions, thus increasing its visibility. Unfortunately, misinformation often falls into this category, as false or misleading information is frequently crafted to exploit users' emotions (Boateng, 2021). Studies have shown that misinformation tends to spread more rapidly than accurate information on platforms like Facebook and Twitter, partly because the algorithms prioritize posts that trigger emotional responses (Tucker et al., 2018). By elevating highly engaging content without checking for its credibility, these algorithms

inadvertently contribute to the widespread dissemination of false narratives (Pennycook et al., 2020).

In addition to promoting engagement-driven content, Social Media Algorithms also interact with other variables, such as user behavior and platform-specific policies (Mensah & Obeng, 2024). Users often share and engage with content that reinforces their pre-existing beliefs, creating echo chambers where misinformation is continuously circulated among like-minded individuals (McCornack, 1992). This behavior can be further reinforced by algorithms, which present users with more of the content they engage with, regardless of its accuracy. Platform policies, or the lack thereof, also play a role. Some platforms have introduced measures to limit the spread of misinformation, such as flagging disputed content or down-ranking posts that have been fact-checked as false (Agyapong & Tetteh, 2022), but the effectiveness of these measures varies widely across different platforms (Addo & Akosah, 2023).

To mitigate the amplification of misinformation, several strategies have been proposed, including enhancing algorithmic transparency and adjusting prioritization criteria to reduce the prominence of misleading content (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Transparency refers to providing users with clearer insights into how their feeds are curated and how certain content is prioritized over others. By offering more control over content preferences and showing users why they are seeing certain posts, platforms can empower users to make more informed decisions about the information they consume (Tucker et al., 2018). Additionally, some researchers argue for altering the algorithms to prioritize credibility and trustworthiness over sheer engagement (Pennycook et al., 2020). This shift could involve integrating more rigorous fact-checking mechanisms directly into the content ranking process to prevent the spread of misinformation at its source.

Moreover, addressing the challenges posed by Social Media Algorithms requires a multi-faceted approach, involving collaboration between platforms, policymakers, and independent researchers (Boateng, 2021). Platforms can benefit from working with external experts to continuously refine their algorithms and policies, ensuring that they are responsive to emerging threats, such as election-related misinformation (Agyapong & Tetteh, 2022). Additionally, public awareness campaigns focusing on digital literacy can help users better understand how algorithms shape their online experiences, and the potential risks associated with engaging with unverified content (Addo & Akosah, 2023). In doing so, both users and platforms can contribute to a healthier information ecosystem that prioritizes factual content over misinformation, ultimately safeguarding public trust and democratic integrity (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

2.1.3 Electoral Integrity:

Electoral Integrity refers to the fairness, transparency, and legitimacy of the electoral process, encompassing the accuracy of vote counts, the accessibility of elections, and the public's trust in the system (Osei-Tutu, 2020). At the core of electoral integrity is the principle that elections should be conducted in a way that ensures they accurately reflect the will of the people, without any form of manipulation or interference. Any deviation from this, whether through voter fraud, disenfranchisement, or misinformation, can severely erode the legitimacy of an election (Boateng, 2021). Trust in the electoral process is critical; when voters believe in the fairness of the system, they are more likely to accept the results, even if their preferred candidate does not win (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Therefore, any factor that diminishes this trust, such as the spread of misinformation, can have dire consequences for democratic stability.

Misinformation is one of the greatest threats to Electoral Integrity, as it can create confusion and undermine public confidence in the accuracy and fairness of election results (Boateng, 2021; Addo & Akosah, 2023). False claims about voter fraud, rigged elections, or inaccurate reporting of results can lead to widespread distrust in the electoral process (Pennycook et al., 2020). For instance, during election periods, social media platforms often become hotbeds of misinformation, with misleading posts and unfounded accusations circulating rapidly (Agyapong & Tetteh, 2022). Such content can create a distorted perception of the election's legitimacy, causing some voters to question the validity of the results, regardless of the actual outcome (Mensah & Obeng, 2024). This eroded trust can lead to post-election disputes, legal challenges, and even violence, as seen in various elections worldwide (Tucker et al., 2018).

In assessing Electoral Integrity, it is crucial to evaluate indicators such as voter turnout, perceptions of fairness, and the extent to which misinformation disrupts the process (Agyapong & Tetteh, 2022). High voter turnout is often a positive indicator, suggesting that the public has confidence in the electoral system (Boateng, 2021). However, when misinformation campaigns are prevalent, they can discourage voter participation by sowing doubts about the effectiveness of voting or spreading confusion about voting procedures (McCornack, 1992). For example, misleading information about voting dates, locations, or eligibility can disenfranchise certain groups of voters, especially those who are already marginalized (Pennycook et al., 2020). Furthermore, false accusations of widespread voter fraud can result in unnecessary investigations and litigation, further destabilizing the electoral process (Osei-Tutu, 2020).

Maintaining Electoral Integrity is essential for preserving democratic principles, as it ensures that elections are a true reflection of the people's will (McCornack, 1992). To achieve this, electoral

stakeholders, such as election commissions, political parties, and the media, must work together to combat the spread of misinformation (Addo & Akosah, 2023). Fact-checking initiatives and real-time corrections are vital in countering false claims, particularly on social media platforms, where misinformation spreads quickly (Pennycook et al., 2020). Additionally, transparent communication between electoral bodies and the public can help dispel rumors and reassure voters of the process's fairness (Boateng, 2021). This transparency should include clear, timely updates on vote counts, the electoral process, and efforts to ensure the security of voting systems (Mensah & Obeng, 2024).

Finally, addressing the threat of misinformation to Electoral Integrity requires not only reactive measures but also proactive strategies to restore and maintain public trust (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Educational campaigns aimed at increasing media literacy among voters can help individuals better discern between credible news and misinformation (Pennycook et al., 2020). Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram can also play a role by enhancing their algorithms to prioritize factual content over sensationalized misinformation (Addo & Akosah, 2023). Moreover, electoral commissions should collaborate with social media platforms to swiftly remove or flag false information during critical periods of the election cycle (Agyapong & Tetteh, 2022). By adopting these strategies, countries can better safeguard the integrity of their elections and ensure that misinformation does not undermine the democratic process (Osei-Tutu, 2020).

2.1.4 Public Perception:

Public Perception refers to the collective opinions, attitudes, and beliefs held by the electorate concerning candidates, policies, and the overall electoral process (Addo & Akosah, 2023). These

views are shaped by a multitude of factors, including media reports, political campaigns, and interactions within the public sphere. However, misinformation can heavily distort public perception by introducing false narratives that skew voters' understanding of key issues, candidates' qualifications, or the fairness of the election process (Agyapong & Tetteh, 2022). The ability of misinformation to manipulate public perception makes it a critical area of study, especially in the context of elections, where it can undermine democratic decision-making (Boateng, 2021). For instance, false claims about a candidate's qualifications or a party's policies can shift voter support and potentially alter the election outcome.

The impact of misinformation on public perception is particularly concerning because it shapes how voters evaluate candidates and policies, often leading to distorted or incorrect beliefs (Mensah & Obeng, 2024). Voters who are exposed to false information may form negative views about candidates or parties that are based on inaccuracies rather than facts (Osei-Tutu, 2020). Misinformation also undermines trust in the electoral process itself, causing voters to question the legitimacy of the results and the integrity of election officials (Agyapong & Tetteh, 2022). This erosion of trust can be particularly damaging in closely contested elections, where even a small amount of misinformation can influence public confidence in the outcome. Thus, understanding how misinformation affects public perception is essential for addressing the broader issue of electoral integrity (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

To thoroughly understand public perception in the context of elections, it is necessary to assess how misinformation impacts voter trust, candidate evaluations, and beliefs about the fairness of the election process (Boateng, 2021). Surveys, interviews, and focus groups with voters can provide critical insights into how misinformation has shaped their opinions and decision-making processes (Addo & Akosah, 2023). For example, surveys might reveal that a significant

percentage of voters have been exposed to false claims about electoral fraud or candidate corruption, which could affect their voting behavior (Mensah & Obeng, 2024). Additionally, interviews with voters can explore how they process information from social media and other sources, offering valuable data on how misinformation spreads and influences public opinion (Agyapong & Tetteh, 2022).

Addressing the challenges of public perception requires proactive efforts to counter misinformation and promote accurate information. One key strategy is to engage in public education campaigns that help voters identify and critically evaluate the information they encounter (McCornack, 1992). These campaigns can teach voters how to recognize misleading content and encourage them to rely on trusted sources for their election-related information (Boateng, 2021). Additionally, enhancing media literacy is crucial for empowering voters to discern between credible and false information (Agyapong & Tetteh, 2022). Through these efforts, voters can become more resilient to misinformation, leading to a more informed electorate and a more trustworthy electoral process.

Finally, restoring public perception of electoral integrity requires a coordinated approach between government agencies, media outlets, and civil society organizations. Social media platforms, for instance, must work to detect and flag false information quickly to prevent it from spreading widely (Addo & Akosah, 2023). Media organizations should prioritize fact-checking and ensure that accurate information is prominently displayed, especially during election periods (Mensah & Obeng, 2024). Furthermore, electoral commissions can build trust by maintaining transparency throughout the election process, regularly updating the public on election procedures and outcomes (Osei-Tutu, 2020). By combining these efforts, it is possible to

mitigate the negative impact of misinformation on public perception and ensure that elections remain a reflection of the true will of the people.

2.1.5 Algorithmic Amplification

Algorithmic Amplification refers to the process by which social media algorithms selectively enhance the visibility and reach of specific content, often emphasizing sensational or controversial material (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This phenomenon is central to understanding how misinformation gains prominence on digital platforms, as algorithms prioritize content that generates high user engagement, regardless of its accuracy (Boateng, 2021). Sensational posts, particularly those that evoke strong emotional reactions, tend to garner more likes, shares, and comments, which in turn amplifies their visibility across the platform (Addo & Akosah, 2023). This amplification creates an environment where false or misleading information can spread more rapidly than factual content, posing significant challenges to the integrity of online discourse.

The process of analyzing Algorithmic Amplification involves investigating how engagement-based metrics such as comments, retweets, and likes to influence the content that users see (Agyapong & Tetteh, 2022). Algorithms, designed to keep users engaged by showing them content they are likely to interact with, often prioritize material that sparks debate or controversy. This can unintentionally promote the spread of misinformation, especially when false claims are more provocative than the truth (Mensah & Obeng, 2024). For example, a misleading post about an election might be shared widely because of its shocking or inflammatory nature, while

corrective information remains less visible. Understanding these mechanisms is critical for identifying how misinformation is promoted and developing strategies to counter its spread.

One of the key challenges in addressing Algorithmic Amplification lies in balancing the platforms' need for user engagement with the responsibility to prevent the dissemination of harmful content (McCornack, 1992). Currently, many social media platforms rely on algorithms that favor content based on user interaction rather than content accuracy, which inadvertently contributes to the spread of misinformation (Boateng, 2021). Adjusting these algorithms to prioritize factual and reliable information, rather than solely engagement, is an essential step in reducing the amplification of false content (Addo & Akosah, 2023). This adjustment could involve demoting content flagged as misleading or prioritizing posts from credible sources during critical events, such as elections.

A comprehensive approach to mitigating Algorithmic Amplification requires increased transparency regarding how these algorithms function and the criteria they use to prioritize content (Agyapong & Tetteh, 2022). Social media platforms must provide clearer information about how their algorithms rank posts and enable users to better understand why they are seeing certain types of content (Mensah & Obeng, 2024). Additionally, tools need to be developed that can automatically detect and reduce the spread of false information before it gains significant traction (McCornack, 1992). These tools could include real-time fact-checking integrations or warnings that alert users when content they are about to share has been identified as misleading (Boateng, 2021).

Ultimately, addressing the problem of Algorithmic Amplification is crucial for safeguarding the integrity of public discourse and protecting democratic processes from the disruptive effects of misinformation (Addo & Akosah, 2023). During elections, for instance, the amplification of false

claims about voting procedures or candidate misconduct can erode public trust and potentially influence the outcome of the election (Agyapong & Tetteh, 2022). By implementing algorithmic transparency, refining engagement metrics, and enhancing detection tools, social media platforms can mitigate the harmful effects of misinformation and contribute to a healthier and more informed online environment.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Information Manipulation Theory (IMT)

Information Manipulation Theory (IMT), first developed by McCornack in 1992, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how information can be deliberately manipulated to mislead or deceive an audience. The theory identifies three primary forms of manipulation: omission, distortion, and fabrication (McCornack, 1992; McCornack & Parks, 2007). Omission occurs when crucial information is deliberately withheld, leaving recipients with an incomplete understanding of the situation. Distortion, on the other hand, involves altering the context or meaning of the original information, creating a false or misleading interpretation. Fabrication represents the most extreme form of manipulation, where entirely false information is created and presented as factual (McCornack, 1992). These forms of manipulation are frequently used in misinformation campaigns, which are often aimed at shaping public perception for specific purposes.

In the context of Ghana's 2020 general election, IMT provides a useful lens through which to analyze the strategies employed in misinformation campaigns designed to influence voter behavior. For example, many of the false narratives spread during the election relied on fabricating stories about alleged election fraud or deliberately distorting candidates' policy

positions and past achievements (Osei-Tutu, 2020). By omitting critical details or presenting misleading information about political events, misinformation campaigns successfully shaped voter perceptions, often leading to confusion or skepticism about the legitimacy of the election process. The theory is especially helpful in explaining how these strategies, which distort or fabricate information, can erode public trust and disrupt the integrity of democratic processes (Osei-Tutu, 2020; Boateng, 2021).

Additionally, IMT is particularly relevant when examining how social media platforms amplified misinformation during Ghana's election. The nature of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, allows for the rapid and widespread dissemination of manipulated content. Misinformation that omits key details or distorts facts can quickly go viral, reaching vast audiences in a short period of time. This dissemination exemplifies IMT's principles in a digital environment, where fabricated content is not only created but shared and reshaped multiple times, making it difficult for voters to discern truth from falsehood (Agyapong & Tetteh, 2022). The combination of IMT's manipulation tactics and the algorithmic amplification of misinformation on social media creates a potent force that can significantly influence public opinion and voter behavior, as witnessed in the Ghanaian elections (Boateng, 2021).

The theory also sheds light on the psychological effects of manipulated information on voters. IMT posits that deception through manipulation impacts trust, which is essential in electoral processes. In Ghana's election, misinformation about voter fraud, doctored images, or fabricated endorsements created a climate of mistrust among voters. This mistrust, as IMT suggests, can lead voters to question the authenticity of the election process, ultimately affecting voter turnout, confidence in the democratic system, and the credibility of political institutions (McCornack, 1992). The strategic use of omission and fabrication by political actors and interest groups during

the election highlights how manipulation of information can distort electoral outcomes by changing the way voters perceive candidates and the overall process (Osei-Tutu, 2020).

IMT plays a vital role in understanding the impact of misinformation in Ghana's 2020 general election. The theory's categorization of manipulation techniques—omission, distortion, and fabrication—provides a clear framework for analyzing how misinformation was crafted and spread during the electoral process. Furthermore, the theory helps explain the role social media platforms played in amplifying these deceptive tactics, thereby influencing public opinion on a large scale. By applying IMT to the current study, the research can evaluate how misinformation campaigns successfully altered voter perceptions, undermined trust in the electoral process, and ultimately affected the election's outcome. This makes IMT an invaluable theoretical foundation for the study, providing both explanatory power and a framework for understanding the intricate relationship between misinformation and electoral integrity.

2.2.2 Agenda-Setting Theory

Agenda-Setting Theory, introduced by McCombs and Shaw in 1972, highlights the power of the media in shaping public discourse by determining which issues receive the most attention. According to the theory, while the media may not directly tell people what to think, it significantly influences what people think about by focusing on specific topics over others (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Media outlets act as gatekeepers, deciding which issues are prioritized, which ultimately shapes the public agenda by making certain topics more salient in the minds of the audience (Weaver, 1996). This influence is crucial in shaping public opinion, particularly during key moments like elections when media coverage can guide voter priorities.

In the context of Ghana's 2020 election, Agenda-Setting Theory provides an essential framework for understanding how misinformation became central to public discourse. Social media platforms, which now play a significant role in information dissemination, adopted a similar agenda-setting function through algorithms and content curation mechanisms. These platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, used their algorithms to amplify particular narratives, often prioritizing sensational or controversial content. False claims about election irregularities, voter fraud, and candidate misdeeds were frequently highlighted, drawing more attention from the public than accurate or verified information (Addo & Akosah, 2023). This emphasis on misinformation influenced the public agenda by directing voter attention to certain narratives, which in many cases overshadowed the real issues at stake in the election (Mensah & Obeng, 2024). Thus, the theory is particularly relevant in understanding how social media platforms shaped the electoral agenda and influenced public perceptions during the 2020 election.

Moreover, Agenda-Setting Theory sheds light on the broader interaction between misinformation and public perception. The theory suggests that the framing and presentation of issues by the media (or social media algorithms) shape not only what the public focuses on but also how they perceive the significance of those issues. In Ghana's 2020 election, the amplification of misinformation, such as fabricated news about vote tampering or political scandals, framed the electoral discourse in a way that heightened voter anxiety and mistrust. This distorted focus contributed to voter polarization and skepticism, creating a situation in which false narratives held more weight than factual ones (Weaver, 1996). The theory helps explain how social media, through agenda-setting mechanisms, can play a critical role in shaping electoral discourse and influencing voter attitudes and behaviors (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Agyapong & Tetteh, 2022).

The implications of Agenda-Setting Theory in the digital age are profound. As social media platforms increasingly dominate information flows, the traditional media's role in setting the agenda is supplemented and often overshadowed by these platforms' content recommendation algorithms. The prioritization of certain posts, often based on engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and comments, can distort public discourse by elevating misinformation. This distortion, as explained by Agenda-Setting Theory, affects not only voter priorities but also undermines the integrity of the democratic process by misinforming the electorate (Boateng, 2021). When social media platforms prioritize sensational or misleading content, they contribute to an electoral environment where misinformation shapes public debate, distorting the issues that voters perceive as most important.

2.2.3 Diffusion of Innovations Theory

Diffusion of Innovations Theory is a framework developed by Everett Rogers in 1962, which explains how new ideas, practices, or technologies spread within a society or from one society to another. This theory identifies several key components in the diffusion process, including the innovation itself, communication channels, social systems, and the adoption decision process (Rogers, 2003). The theory categorizes adopters into five groups: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards, based on their willingness to embrace new ideas. Understanding these dynamics is essential for analyzing the spread of misinformation during electoral processes, particularly in the context of social media.

In the context of Ghana's 2020 election, Diffusion of Innovations Theory is particularly relevant for understanding how misinformation was disseminated and adopted by various segments of the population. The theory highlights that misinformation often spreads like an innovation, with

certain individuals or groups acting as innovators and early adopters who first encounter and share misleading information (Osei-Tutu, 2020). These early adopters play a crucial role in amplifying false narratives through their social networks, which can lead to a rapid diffusion of misinformation across broader populations (Boateng, 2021). For example, fabricated stories regarding electoral fraud may have originated from a small group of individuals who shared them, leading to widespread belief in these false claims among the early majority and late majority as the misinformation gained traction.

Additionally, the communication channels used to spread misinformation are vital to understanding its diffusion. Social media platforms serve as powerful communication channels that facilitate the rapid dissemination of information. The theory posits that the effectiveness of these channels significantly influences how quickly and widely an innovation—or in this case, misinformation—spreads. In Ghana's 2020 election, platforms like Facebook and Twitter enabled the swift sharing of false information, allowing it to reach vast audiences in a short period (Agyapong & Tetteh, 2022). The role of social media in the diffusion process underscores the importance of recognizing the unique characteristics of each platform, as different channels can affect the speed and extent of misinformation dissemination (Addo & Akosah, 2023).

Moreover, Diffusion of Innovations Theory emphasizes the importance of social systems in the adoption process. In the context of the election, social norms, peer influence, and existing attitudes towards political candidates and the electoral process played significant roles in how misinformation was received and shared. Individuals are more likely to adopt and propagate information that aligns with their preexisting beliefs or that comes from trusted sources within their social circles (Mensah & Obeng, 2024). Understanding these dynamics helps to

contextualize the psychological effects of misinformation, as seen in studies by Addo and Akosah (2023), which demonstrated how exposure to misleading information influenced voter attitudes and behaviors, leading to increased skepticism and polarization.

Incorporating Diffusion of Innovations Theory into the study of misinformation during Ghana's 2020 election provides a comprehensive understanding of how false narratives spread and the factors influencing their adoption. By analyzing the stages of diffusion, researchers can better assess the effectiveness of misinformation campaigns and the specific strategies employed by those spreading false information. This theory not only enhances our understanding of the mechanisms behind misinformation dissemination but also highlights the importance of targeted interventions to mitigate its impact on public perception and electoral integrity.

Overall, the integration of Diffusion of Innovations Theory with Agenda-Setting Theory and Information Manipulation Theory enriches the study's framework by addressing the multifaceted nature of misinformation in electoral contexts. Together, these theories provide a robust foundation for analyzing how misinformation influences public trust, shapes electoral discourse, and ultimately affects democratic processes. Understanding the interplay between these theories allows for a deeper exploration of the implications of misinformation on electoral outcomes and highlights the need for comprehensive strategies to combat its spread in the digital age.

2.3 Review of Relevant Literature

In a study conducted by Osei-Tutu (2020), the role of social media in influencing voter behavior during Ghana's 2020 elections was meticulously examined. This research employed a mixed-method approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques to analyze the spread of misinformation across various social media platforms. Osei-Tutu (2020)

focused on the types of misinformation circulating during the election period, such as fabricated news articles, doctored images, and misleading political ads.

These forms of misinformation were used strategically to shape public opinion and disrupt the electoral process. The study's findings emphasized the damaging impact of misinformation on voter trust, calling attention to the urgent need for countermeasures to curb the dissemination of false information. The in-depth analysis provided in this research is critical for understanding the extent to which misinformation can compromise electoral integrity and public confidence in democratic systems (Osei-Tutu, 2020; McCornack, 1992).

Building on this, Boateng's (2021) research offers another valuable perspective by exploring how misinformation was spread through anonymous accounts and automated bots during the same election. Boateng utilized network analysis techniques to trace the sources and spread of misinformation, highlighting the role of social media algorithms in amplifying false content. The research revealed a web of interconnected sources that rapidly disseminated misinformation to large audiences. By prioritizing content based on user engagement metrics like likes and shares, social media platforms inadvertently facilitated the spread of sensationalized, inaccurate information. This study underscores the importance of understanding algorithmic amplification, showing how such mechanisms can have far-reaching consequences on voter perceptions and electoral outcomes (Boateng, 2021; McCornack, 1992; Agyapong & Tetteh, 2022).

A comparative study by Agyapong and Tetteh (2022) explored the differences in misinformation dissemination across various social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. Their research found that Facebook played a dominant role in spreading false information during the election due to its large user base and the ease with which content can be shared. However, platforms like WhatsApp and Twitter also contributed significantly to the spread of

misinformation, often through closed networks or echo chambers that reinforced false narratives. This platform-specific analysis underscores the need for tailored strategies to address misinformation on each social media platform. The study's findings are critical for formulating targeted interventions to prevent the spread of misinformation and protect the integrity of electoral processes (Agyapong & Tetteh, 2022; Addo & Akosah, 2023).

In a different but complementary focus, Addo and Akosah (2023) explored the psychological effects of misinformation on voters. Their research used surveys and focus groups to assess how exposure to false information influenced voter attitudes, behaviors, and trust in the electoral system. The study found that misinformation significantly contributed to voter skepticism, leading to polarization and a decrease in trust in both candidates and the electoral process. Voters exposed to high levels of misinformation were more likely to question the legitimacy of election results, highlighting the detrimental effect that false information can have on the democratic process. This research underscores the importance of addressing not just the spread of misinformation, but also its psychological impact on the electorate (Addo & Akosah, 2023; Mensah & Obeng, 2024).

Finally, Mensah and Obeng (2024) focused on the strategic use of misinformation campaigns by political entities. Their research employed case studies and interviews to examine how political groups deliberately used misinformation to manipulate voter behavior and gain an electoral advantage. The study revealed that many misinformation efforts were coordinated and politically motivated, making them an integral part of broader campaign strategies. This analysis highlights the deliberate nature of misinformation campaigns and their impact on the electoral process, providing valuable insights into the need for stricter regulations and interventions to mitigate politically motivated false information. Mensah and Obeng's (2024) study is essential for

understanding how political actors exploit social media to influence electoral outcomes, emphasizing the need for targeted measures to protect electoral integrity (Mensah & Obeng, 2024; Boateng, 2021).

Usefulness to the Study

These studies are crucial to the current research as they offer extensive insights into the multifaceted dynamics of misinformation within electoral contexts, particularly in Ghana. The research conducted by Osei-Tutu (2020) and Boateng (2021) plays a foundational role in understanding the specific mechanisms by which misinformation is disseminated across social media platforms. Osei-Tutu's (2020) identification of key misinformation types, such as fabricated stories and doctored images, provides valuable evidence on how false information can be used strategically to manipulate voter perceptions.

Additionally, Boateng's (2021) focus on algorithmic amplification uncovers the critical role social media algorithms play in prioritizing and spreading sensational or false content. Both studies contribute to the broader understanding of how misinformation can distort the electoral process by eroding voter trust, making them highly relevant to research aimed at safeguarding electoral integrity.

Furthermore, Agyapong and Tetteh's (2022) comparative analysis of social media platforms adds another dimension to the understanding of misinformation spread by examining the specific characteristics of platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. Their findings highlight the need for platform-specific interventions, as different platforms have unique algorithms and sharing mechanisms that facilitate the spread of false information in various ways. This comparative perspective is particularly useful for this study's examination of the role of social

media in elections, providing an in-depth understanding of how each platform contributes to the dissemination of misinformation. By identifying the distinct features of each platform, Agyapong and Tetteh (2022) offer critical insights into how misinformation travels through different online environments, which is essential for developing effective strategies to counteract it.

Moreover, Addo and Akosah's (2023) exploration of the psychological effects of misinformation is instrumental in understanding the broader implications of false information on voter behavior. Their research demonstrates how misinformation can lead to increased skepticism, polarization, and a loss of trust in electoral processes. This psychological impact is vital for the current study, as it delves into how misinformation not only distorts facts but also influences voters' emotional responses and decision-making processes. Addo and Akosah's (2023) work underscores the importance of addressing the cognitive and emotional aspects of voter behavior, thereby offering a deeper understanding of the long-term effects of misinformation on electoral participation and trust. Their findings will inform this study's exploration of the relationship between misinformation and voter attitudes, particularly in the context of Ghana's electoral system.

In addition, Mensah and Obeng's (2024) analysis of politically motivated misinformation campaigns offers critical insights into the strategic use of false information by political actors. Their research shows how misinformation is often employed as part of a broader political strategy aimed at manipulating voter behavior and gaining an electoral advantage. The study's focus on the intentional and coordinated nature of misinformation efforts provides an important lens through which to understand the political dimensions of misinformation in elections. Mensah and Obeng's (2024) findings emphasize the need for targeted interventions to address politically motivated misinformation, which is a key focus of the current research. By

understanding how misinformation campaigns are orchestrated, this study can better assess the impact of such campaigns on voter perceptions and electoral outcomes in Ghana.

Overall, these studies provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex relationship between misinformation, public trust, and electoral outcomes. They contribute valuable theoretical and empirical insights that are essential for this study's examination of the role of social media in shaping electoral perceptions and integrity. Osei-Tutu (2020), Boateng (2021), Agyapong and Tetteh (2022), Addo and Akosah (2023), and Mensah and Obeng (2024) collectively enhance the understanding of how misinformation spreads, its psychological impact, and its use as a political tool. These studies offer a robust foundation for the current research, allowing it to build on existing knowledge while addressing gaps in the literature related to Ghana's specific electoral context. Thus, their inclusion is integral to the development of effective strategies for mitigating misinformation and preserving the integrity of elections

2.4 Operationalization of Key Terms

Misinformation

This term refers to false or misleading information deliberately spread to influence voter behavior. It encompasses fabricated news stories, doctored images, and misleading claims. To operationalize misinformation, instances will be identified and categorized through content analysis of social media posts. This involves systematically examining posts for accuracy and intent and categorizing them based on their potential to mislead or deceive.

Social Media Platforms

The focus will be on major platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp during the election period. Operationalizing this term involves measuring platform usage by tracking the frequency of misinformation posts, analyzing user engagement levels (e.g., likes, shares, retweets), and evaluating the overall reach and visibility of misinformation content on these platforms. Metrics will include the number of posts, engagement statistics, and the spread of misinformation.

Electoral Integrity

This term will be assessed through indicators such as voter confidence, perceived fairness of the election process, and disruptions caused by misinformation. To operationalize electoral integrity, surveys will be conducted to gauge voter confidence and perceptions of fairness, and interviews will be carried out with electoral stakeholders. Additionally, analysis of election reports will be performed to identify and quantify instances of misinformation-related disruptions.

Public Perception

This refers to voters' views and attitudes towards the election process and candidates, influenced by misinformation. To operationalize public perception, surveys and interviews with voters will be used to assess changes in attitudes and beliefs related to candidates and the electoral process. Questions will focus on how misinformation has impacted their voting decisions and overall perceptions of the election.

Algorithmic Amplification

This term describes how social media algorithms enhance the visibility and reach of certain types of content, particularly misinformation. Operationalization involves analyzing how algorithms prioritize content based on engagement metrics (likes, shares, comments) and examining the visibility of misinformation. Strategies to mitigate its spread will also be explored, including adjustments to algorithmic prioritization and transparency measures.

Social Media

Social media refers to the online platforms and digital technologies that enable individuals and groups to create, share, and exchange information, ideas, and content in virtual communities and networks. In this study, social media specifically includes platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram, which were used by participants during Ghana's 2020 General Election to access information, engage in political discussions, and share content. These platforms serve as both sources of credible news and channels through which misinformation spreads, influencing users' perceptions and behaviors (Duggan, 2015; Tucker et al., 2018).

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This chapter details the research design, population, sample size and sampling technique, data collection procedures, sources of data, data analysis techniques, and ethical considerations to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the study was conducted and the rationale behind each methodological choice.

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative research design, which is particularly well-suited for exploring complex social phenomena and gaining in-depth insights into participants' perspectives and lived experiences (Creswell, 2014). This methodological approach was essential in this study because it provided a nuanced understanding of how social media influenced the spread of election-related misinformation during Ghana's 2020 general election. Qualitative research is characterized by its capacity to delve deeply into the subtleties of social interactions, human behavior, and the meanings individuals attach to their experiences, making it ideal for analyzing the complexities of misinformation and its impact on voter behavior (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). By employing a qualitative framework, the study was able to explore not only the direct effects of misinformation on individuals but also the broader social implications, such as changes in trust, voter turnout, and perceptions of electoral integrity.

In addition to being well-suited for exploring such social phenomena, qualitative research excels in capturing rich, descriptive data that reveals the subjective experiences of participants. This

depth of exploration is crucial when studying misinformation, as it allows for an understanding of not only what participants encountered but how they interpreted and responded to it (Maxwell, 2013). The use of semi-structured interviews enabled the study to capture personal, detailed accounts from individuals who were directly impacted by misinformation during the election, providing a clear view of how false information was encountered and internalized (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Each participant's narrative offered insight into the emotional, cognitive, and social consequences of misinformation, which quantitative approaches might have overlooked (Patton, 2015).

The integration of focus group discussions (FGDs) into the study added another layer of depth and breadth to the analysis. Focus groups, by nature, facilitate a group dynamic that encourages participants to build upon each other's ideas, providing a collective perspective that is often different from individual interviews (Morgan, 1997). FGDs allowed participants to discuss how misinformation was shared within their communities, workplaces, or social media networks, highlighting how misinformation flows and multiplies in social settings (Yin, 2018). Participants in the focus groups were able to compare their experiences, revealing patterns and commonalities in how misinformation was disseminated and received. This method also provided insight into the social dynamics of misinformation, such as peer influence and group polarization, which are critical for understanding the broader impact of false information in electoral contexts (Flick, 2014).

Furthermore, the qualitative research design's flexibility enabled the study to explore unexpected themes or issues that arose during data collection. For instance, in both interviews and FGDs, participants frequently discussed the role of social media algorithms in amplifying misinformation, a theme that had not been the primary focus of the study but emerged as a

significant factor in the dissemination of false information (Patton, 2015). This flexibility is one of the strengths of qualitative research, as it allows for the exploration of emerging topics that may not have been anticipated at the outset but are highly relevant to the research question (Silverman, 2016). The combination of interviews and FGDs ensured that the study captured a broad spectrum of experiences and insights related to the spread of misinformation, providing a comprehensive view of the issue.

Ultimately, the qualitative research design was instrumental in achieving the study's objectives. By facilitating rich, detailed data collection and analysis, the study was able to uncover the deep, multifaceted ways in which misinformation affected voter attitudes and decision-making during Ghana's 2020 general election. The integration of both individual and group perspectives through interviews and FGDs allowed for a holistic understanding of how misinformation operated at both the personal and social levels, thereby contributing valuable insights to the existing body of knowledge on misinformation in electoral processes (Creswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This comprehensive approach was crucial for understanding not only the direct impact of misinformation but also its broader implications for democracy and electoral integrity in Ghana (Maxwell, 2013).

3.2 Population

The population for this study included individuals who were directly involved in or affected by the spread of election-related misinformation during Ghana's 2020 general election. This group was diverse and encompassed a range of stakeholders, including voters, social media users, political analysts, and media personnel, all of whom had unique experiences with the dissemination and impact of misinformation. Voters and social media users were crucial to

understanding how misinformation reached and influenced the public, while political analysts and media personnel provided expert perspectives on how misinformation shaped electoral narratives and public opinion. The diverse nature of this population was essential for ensuring a comprehensive view of the phenomenon, capturing both the individual and systemic impacts of misinformation (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). By including voices from different sectors of society, the study aimed to reflect the varied experiences and insights surrounding the role of misinformation in the electoral process.

3.3 Sampling Technique and Sample Size

Given the qualitative nature of this study, purposive sampling was strategically employed to select participants who possessed relevant knowledge or firsthand experience with election-related misinformation. Purposive sampling, also referred to as judgmental or selective sampling, allows researchers to deliberately focus on individuals who are especially well-suited to provide insights into the specific research questions (Palinkas et al., 2015). This method is particularly appropriate for qualitative research as it emphasizes the selection of participants based on their capacity to contribute valuable and detailed information regarding the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2014). By choosing participants with direct exposure to or involvement in the spread and reception of misinformation, such as voters, social media users, political analysts, and media personnel, the study ensured that the data collected was both relevant and rich in context. This approach not only maximized the depth of the findings but also enhanced the study's capacity to address its core objectives by focusing on individuals who could offer nuanced perspectives drawn from their lived experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

3.3.1 Sample Size and Justification

A sample size of 10 participants was selected for in-depth interviews, complemented by two focus group discussions (FGDs) consisting of 5 participants each, bringing the total number of participants to 20. The inclusion of focus groups, alongside interviews, allowed the study to explore collective experiences and perceptions related to the spread of misinformation. Data saturation, a key principle in qualitative research, was achieved when no new themes or insights emerged from further data collection (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). The focus groups provided a dynamic setting where participants could engage with one another, reflecting on how misinformation spread within their social circles and communities. This combined approach ensured that the research captured both individual and group perspectives, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the role social media played in spreading misinformation during Ghana's 2020 elections.

The selected sample size allowed for a manageable yet in-depth exploration of the research topic, ensuring that data collected through both interviews and FGDs was rich and robust. Each participant, whether interviewed individually or part of a focus group, brought a unique perspective that contributed to a nuanced understanding of how misinformation influenced public opinion and voter behavior. The diversity of participants—including voters, social media users, political analysts, and media personnel—ensured that the study captured a broad spectrum of experiences, enriching the overall findings (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

3.3.2 Composition of the Sample

Voters Actively Engaged with Social Media: Two participants were chosen who had been actively involved with social media platforms during the election. These individuals provided

direct insights into how misinformation was encountered and perceived in the context of their voting behaviour. Their experiences highlighted how misinformation might have influenced their views and decision-making processes (Osei-Tutu, 2020). These perspectives were essential for understanding the personal impact of misinformation on electoral outcomes, particularly from the standpoint of ordinary voters navigating the barrage of information and disinformation on social media.

Social Media Users Witnessing Misinformation: Two participants who had witnessed or interacted with misinformation on social media were included in the study. These users offered valuable accounts of the nature and spread of false information, including its sources and the mechanisms through which it was disseminated (Boateng, 2021). Their experiences helped illustrate the practical aspects of spreading misinformation and its immediate effects on public discourse. By sharing how they identified or engaged with misinformation, these participants provided critical insights into the ease with which false information can circulate during high-stakes events such as elections.

Political Analysts: Two political analysts, well-versed in misinformation trends, were selected to provide a broader contextual understanding of how misinformation fits within larger political strategies. Their expertise allowed them to analyze the potential effects of misinformation on the electoral process, offering insights into its systemic implications for political stability and public trust (Agyapong & Tetteh, 2022). These analysts contributed expert perspectives on how misinformation could be leveraged to manipulate public opinion or disrupt electoral processes, which is crucial for understanding the strategic role misinformation plays in political contexts.

Media Personnel: Two media professionals who were actively involved in covering the election were included for their firsthand experience in reporting on and dealing with misinformation.

Their perspectives were invaluable in shedding light on the challenges of distinguishing fact from falsehood in a fast-paced media environment. Additionally, they discussed the role of traditional and digital media in either perpetuating or countering misinformation during the electoral period (Addo & Akosah, 2023). Understanding the media's role in shaping public perceptions was key to assessing the broader landscape in which misinformation operated during the election.

Experts in Social Media and Misinformation: Two experts in social media and misinformation were selected to provide both theoretical and practical insights into the ways misinformation spreads online. These experts focused particularly on the role of social media algorithms in amplifying false information and the broader impact of social media platforms on the dissemination of misinformation (Mensah & Obeng, 2024). Their contributions were crucial for contextualizing the findings within broader research on misinformation dynamics, offering a deep understanding of the intersection between technology, misinformation, and electoral integrity.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): In addition to these individual interviews, two focus group discussions were conducted, each consisting of 5 participants. These groups included a mix of voters, social media users, political analysts, and media personnel. The FGDs provided a platform for collective reflection and discussion, offering insights into how misinformation spread within social circles and communities. Participants were able to engage with each other's perspectives, revealing common experiences and social dynamics related to misinformation. The FGDs allowed for an exploration of how misinformation influenced group behavior and decision-making, adding depth to the individual interviews by showcasing the social dimensions of misinformation spread (Morgan, 1997).

This purposive sampling approach ensured that the study included a diverse yet relevant group of participants, each contributing unique but complementary perspectives. The combination of individual interviews and focus group discussions provided a holistic understanding of the role of social media in spreading misinformation during Ghana's 2020 elections. By including participants with different backgrounds and expertise, the study gathered comprehensive insights into the various facets of misinformation, including its personal, social, and systemic impacts on voters and the electoral process.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, providing flexibility in exploring participants' responses while ensuring that key topics related to misinformation were thoroughly addressed (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). This interview format was particularly suited for qualitative research as it allowed the interviewer to guide the conversation while giving participants the freedom to express their experiences in detail. The interviews aimed to elicit rich descriptions of participants' encounters with misinformation on social media, their perceptions of its impact on voter behavior and electoral outcomes, and their opinions on the effectiveness of existing strategies to counteract misinformation.

Each interview was conducted either face-to-face or via video conferencing, depending on participants' availability and preferences. This flexibility ensured that participants were comfortable, which contributed to the richness of the data collected. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent to ensure an accurate record of their responses. The recordings were then transcribed verbatim, capturing every detail of the conversation to maintain data integrity and enable thorough analysis (Britten et al., 1995).

The semi-structured format of the interviews included open-ended questions, which were designed to encourage in-depth responses. This approach allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences with misinformation and provide insights into how they interpreted its influence on the election. Follow-up questions were posed based on participants' initial answers, enabling the interviewer to probe further into relevant topics and uncover more nuanced perspectives. This flexibility and depth were crucial in gaining a comprehensive understanding of how misinformation operated in the 2020 Ghanaian election and its broader implications for electoral integrity (Patton, 2015).

In addition to the interviews, the focus group discussions (FGDs) were structured to complement the individual narratives by facilitating group dialogue. Participants in the FGDs were encouraged to share their collective experiences and discuss how misinformation influenced public discourse within their communities. Like the interviews, FGDs were recorded and transcribed to ensure that all interactions were accurately captured and included in the thematic analysis. This combination of data collection methods provided a well-rounded view of the social and personal dynamics related to the spread of misinformation during the election.

3.5 Sources of Data

The primary source of data for this study is the interviews conducted with the selected participants. Secondary data sources include relevant literature on misinformation, social media dynamics, and electoral processes to contextualize the findings from the interviews. The integration of primary and secondary data enriches the analysis and provides a robust basis for understanding the research problem (Flick, 2014).

3.6 Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach, a widely used and flexible method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method is especially effective for exploring complex social phenomena like misinformation, allowing researchers to understand the depth of participants' experiences and uncover the nuances in their responses. The thematic analysis process was designed to provide a comprehensive and nuanced interpretation of the data collected through both interviews and focus group discussions.

Transcription and Familiarization:

The first step in the analysis process involved transcribing the interview and focus group recordings verbatim to ensure an accurate representation of participants' responses. This transcription process required carefully listening to the audio recordings and converting them into written text. Familiarization with the data was crucial at this stage, as researchers immersed themselves in the content to gain an initial understanding of the key responses and issues raised by participants. This familiarization stage involved reviewing the transcripts repeatedly, allowing researchers to identify preliminary insights and contextual nuances within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Early patterns related to how participants encountered and processed misinformation were noted during this phase, laying the groundwork for more detailed analysis.

Coding:

After transcription, systematic coding of the data was performed, where researchers identified and labeled significant segments of text that corresponded to key concepts and ideas. This coding

process involved breaking down the data into smaller, manageable pieces and assigning codes based on the content of each segment. Coding helped to organize the vast amount of qualitative data and made it easier to identify patterns and recurring themes related to misinformation, voter behavior, and the influence of social media (Saldana, 2015). Codes were generated inductively, meaning they emerged organically from the data itself rather than being predetermined. This ensured that the analysis was grounded in the participants' own perspectives and experiences, making the findings more authentic and reflective of the actual responses.

Theme Development:

Once coding was completed, the next stage involved grouping related codes into broader themes. Themes are patterns that capture significant aspects of the data, representing the major ideas and insights derived from the interviews and focus group discussions. Researchers synthesized the codes into coherent themes that addressed the research questions and provided a deeper understanding of how misinformation spread during Ghana's 2020 election. For instance, themes such as "algorithmic amplification," "voter confusion," and "media credibility" were developed to encapsulate the various ways in which participants described the impact of social media on the election process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This thematic categorization allowed researchers to structure the findings in a way that aligned with the study's objectives.

Interpretation:

The final stage of thematic analysis involved interpreting the identified themes within the context of the research questions and theoretical framework. Researchers examined how each theme related to the study's goals, such as understanding the mechanisms through which

misinformation spreads and its effect on voter perceptions. This interpretation involved connecting the themes to the broader research context, offering a comprehensive explanation of how the data contributes to the understanding of social media's role in misinformation during elections (Saldana, 2015). For example, the theme "algorithmic amplification" was interpreted through the lens of Agenda-Setting Theory, revealing how social media platforms prioritize content that may include false or misleading information. Similarly, the theme "voter confusion" was analyzed in the context of Information Manipulation Theory, showing how distorted or fabricated information disrupted voter trust.

Thematic analysis provided a structured, rigorous approach to analyzing the qualitative data, ensuring that the findings were deeply rooted in participants' lived experiences while reflecting the complexity of the phenomena under study. By systematically identifying and interpreting these themes, the researchers were able to offer a detailed and contextualized understanding of the data. This method contributed essential perspectives to the field by providing insights into how misinformation shaped public discourse and voter behavior during Ghana's 2020 election (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldana, 2015). It also ensured that the study's conclusions were grounded in empirical evidence, adding both reliability and validity to the research findings.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are paramount in ensuring the integrity and credibility of research, particularly when dealing with sensitive topics such as misinformation and voter perceptions. Upholding ethical standards not only safeguards participants' rights but also enhances the reliability and validity of the study's findings. Key ethical practices include:

1. Informed Consent: Ensuring informed consent is a fundamental ethical requirement in research. Participants are provided with comprehensive information about the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. This information enables participants to make an informed decision about their involvement. They must give their written consent before participating in the study, confirming their understanding and agreement to take part voluntarily (Bryman, 2016). Informed consent is crucial for respecting participants' autonomy and ensuring they are aware of their rights throughout the research process.

2. Confidentiality: Protecting participants' confidentiality is critical to maintaining trust and ensuring the ethical conduct of the research. Participants' identities and responses are kept confidential, and personal data is stored securely to prevent unauthorized access. Data anonymization techniques are employed to ensure that individual responses cannot be traced back to specific participants, thereby safeguarding their privacy (Creswell, 2014). This practice helps in preventing potential harm or distress to participants and reinforces the ethical commitment to handling sensitive information responsibly.

3. Voluntary Participation: Participation in the study is strictly voluntary, meaning that individuals choose to partake in the research without any coercion or undue influence. Participants are informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point, without facing any negative consequences. This principle ensures that participants are not forced to remain in the study against their will and that they feel comfortable and secure throughout their involvement (Creswell, 2014). Voluntary participation is essential for respecting participants' autonomy and fostering a positive research environment.

4. Integrity: Conducting research with integrity involves ensuring that the study is carried out with honesty and transparency. Researchers must strive to report data accurately and objectively,

without fabricating, falsifying, or manipulating results. This commitment to ethical standards ensures that the findings are credible and reflective of participants' true experiences and perspectives (Bryman, 2016). Maintaining integrity in reporting and analysis upholds the scientific rigor of the research and reinforces its contribution to the field.

By adhering to these ethical practices, researchers can uphold the principles of respect, confidentiality, and honesty, thereby enhancing the overall quality and credibility of the study. These considerations are essential for conducting ethical research and ensuring that participants are treated with dignity and respect throughout the research process.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA ANALYSIS, PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the analysis and findings from the interviews conducted to investigate the role of social media in the spread of election-related misinformation during Ghana's 2020 General Election. The chapter is organized according to the study's three primary objectives: exploring the channels through which misinformation was disseminated on social media, assessing its impact on voter behavior and electoral outcomes, and evaluating the effectiveness of measures to counter misinformation. Each section provides a detailed examination of participant responses, offering insights into how misinformation affected the election process and the efficacy of efforts to mitigate its spread.

4.1 Demographic Information

The demographic profile of participants is crucial for contextualizing their perspectives on the spread of election-related misinformation during Ghana's 2020 General Election. Understanding the diversity within the participant group helps analyze how various demographic factors—such as gender, age, and education level—affect perceptions and experiences with misinformation.

4.1.1 Sex

The participant pool comprised six males and four females, offering a balanced perspective on how misinformation might impact different genders. This gender distribution is significant because it allows for an examination of how misinformation affects individuals differently based

on gendered experiences and social roles. Studies have shown that men and women often engage with social media differently and may have varying susceptibilities to misinformation (O'Reilly, 2020). For instance, research suggests that women might be more likely to encounter and share misinformation related to health and social issues, while men might engage more with political misinformation (Wright et al., 2019). This gender balance ensures a comprehensive view of how misinformation impacts diverse demographic segments, reflecting varied experiences and coping strategies.

4.1.2 Age

Participants were categorized into three distinct age groups: 18-30 years, 31-40 years, and 41-50 years. Specifically, three participants were in the 18-30 age range, four in the 31-40 range, and three in the 41-50 range. This age distribution is critical for understanding how misinformation affects different stages of life and generational cohorts. Younger participants (18-30 years) are often more engaged with social media platforms and are therefore potentially more exposed to and influenced by misinformation (Smith, 2019). They may also exhibit different patterns of information sharing and verification compared to older age groups. Middle-aged participants (31-40 years) might have developed more sophisticated information-processing skills and could be more adept at distinguishing credible information from misinformation. Older participants (41-50 years), who may have varying levels of digital literacy, might experience misinformation differently, potentially affecting their engagement with online political content (Pew Research Center, 2020). This age diversity provides a rich perspective on how different age groups interact and are affected by misinformation.

4.1.3 Education Level

Regarding educational background, eight participants had tertiary-level education, while two had secondary education. The level of education is a significant factor in how individuals engage with and assess misinformation. Higher educational attainment is generally linked with improved critical thinking skills and a greater ability to discern credible information from false claims (Jones & Salter, 2021). Participants with tertiary education are likely to have more developed analytical skills and a higher level of skepticism towards unverified information, which can affect their susceptibility to misinformation. On the other hand, participants with only secondary education may have less experience and fewer resources for critically evaluating information, potentially making them more vulnerable to misinformation (Brunk et al., 2020). The educational diversity among participants highlights how varying levels of formal education can influence one's ability to engage with and respond to misinformation, providing valuable insights into how educational background impacts misinformation susceptibility and critical analysis.

4.1.4 Social Media Usage

Participants' social media usage patterns during the 2020 General Election reveal significant insights into how information, including misinformation, was disseminated and interacted with. The diversity of platforms used underscores the multifaceted nature of social media as a tool for both information dissemination and consumption.

Types of Social Media Platforms

The study participants reported using several key social media platforms, each serving distinct functions in their information-seeking and sharing behaviors. Facebook emerged as the most

widely used platform for news updates. P1 highlighted, “I primarily used Facebook for news updates, which helped me stay informed about the election.” Facebook's extensive reach and the ability to share articles, posts, and live updates made it a central hub for political information. The platform's news feed algorithm also plays a role in shaping what users see, which can amplify both credible news and misinformation (Edelson, 2019).

WhatsApp was noted as a primary channel for receiving and sharing misinformation. P1 further remarked, “WhatsApp was where most of the misleading information came through.” The platform's closed-group feature allowed for rapid and private dissemination of information among friends and family, which, while fostering close communication, also facilitated the spread of unverified and false content. The encrypted nature of WhatsApp conversations can make it challenging to monitor and control misinformation, allowing false narratives to proliferate more freely (Zuckerberg, 2020).

Twitter was described by P2 as a space for political discourse and debate. “Twitter was where I saw a lot of political discussions and debates,” P2 said. Twitter's real-time nature and public visibility of tweets make it a significant platform for political engagement and information sharing. However, its open structure also means that misinformation can spread quickly as users retweet and engage with controversial or sensational content. The rapid dissemination on Twitter underscores the platform's role in shaping public opinion and influencing political narratives (Pew Research Center, 2021).

Instagram, while not as prominently mentioned as the other platforms, was also utilized for sharing and receiving election-related content. Its visual-centric format means that information often comes in the form of images, memes, and videos. The impact of visual misinformation can be particularly potent, as users may be more likely to engage with and remember visual content

compared to text-based information (Tandoc, 2021). The use of hashtags and story features on Instagram also facilitates the spread of both news and misinformation, influencing how information is consumed and shared.

Impact on Perception and Behavior

Understanding which platforms were used and their roles in information dissemination provides critical insights into the dynamics of misinformation spread. Each platform's unique features contribute to how information is consumed, shared, and perceived. For instance, the ability of Facebook and WhatsApp to facilitate the widespread sharing of posts and messages highlights their roles in amplifying misinformation. In contrast, Twitter's role in real-time political discourse and Instagram's visual engagement demonstrates demonstrate how different platforms cater to various aspects of information processing and influence (Gordon, 2021).

4.2 OBJECTIVE 1: Explore the Channels Through Which Election-Related Misinformation Was Spread on Social Media

4.2.1 Encountering Election-Related Information on Social Media

Participants in this study frequently encountered election-related information across various social media platforms during Ghana's 2020 General Election. This prevalent presence of election content highlights the significant role social media plays in shaping political discourse and public perception. The ubiquity of such information underscores the centrality of platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp in disseminating and amplifying election-related narratives. As P2 observed, "Social media was flooded with election news, from Facebook to WhatsApp groups, everyone was sharing something about the election." This experience reflects

broader trends noted in the literature, where social media platforms are identified as pivotal arenas for political communication and information exchange (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

The pervasive nature of election-related content on social media platforms had a profound impact on how information was consumed and shared. Participants reported that their social media feeds were consistently filled with updates, opinions, and discussions about the election, reflecting the platforms' role in saturating users with political content. This phenomenon is consistent with research suggesting that social media's capacity to rapidly disseminate information can lead to information overload, making it challenging for users to filter and verify the accuracy of the content they encounter (Tufekci, 2018). The high volume of information during the election period meant that users were continuously exposed to political content, influencing their perceptions and interactions with election-related topics.

Furthermore, the diversity of platforms used for sharing election information, from mainstream sites like Facebook to more private channels such as WhatsApp groups, indicates the varied ways in which political content reaches users. This distribution across different types of platforms suggests that misinformation and election-related content can proliferate through both public and semi-private spaces, complicating efforts to track and manage the spread of false information. The observation of participants that information was not confined to any single platform but spread across multiple channels highlights the multifaceted nature of social media's influence on political communication (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017).

Participants also noted the interaction between election-related content and user engagement on social media. The constant stream of updates and discussions led to heightened user engagement, with many individuals actively participating in sharing and commenting on election-related posts. This increased engagement underscores the role of social media not only as a passive channel for

information dissemination but also as an active space for public debate and participation. The interactive nature of social media means that users are not just receivers of information but also contributors to the spread and shaping of election narratives (Boulianne, 2015).

Overall, the extensive exposure to election-related information on social media during the 2020 General Election highlights the platforms' significant role in the electoral process. The constant influx of political content across multiple channels illustrates the challenges faced by users in navigating and verifying the information they encounter. As social media continues to evolve as a primary source of political information, understanding its impact on election-related discourse remains crucial for addressing issues related to misinformation and ensuring informed public engagement (Pew Research Center, 2020).

4.2.2 Most Commonly Used Social Media Platforms

The study revealed that Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp were the most frequently used platforms for disseminating misinformation during Ghana's 2020 General Election. This finding highlights the significant role these social media channels play in shaping political discourse and the spread of misleading content. As P7 noted, "Facebook was the most active; people were sharing posts, articles, and even memes about the election." This observation underscores the platform's pivotal role in both amplifying and spreading election-related information, reflecting broader patterns observed in various studies that emphasize Facebook's dominance in online political communication (Hermida, 2020).

Facebook emerged as the most active platform for misinformation dissemination. Participants frequently cited Facebook as the primary source of election-related content, including both genuine updates and misleading information. The platform's extensive user base and its features,

such as sharing posts, articles, and memes, make it a powerful tool for spreading information quickly and widely. The viral nature of content on Facebook, combined with its algorithm-driven feed, often exacerbates the spread of misinformation by prioritizing engaging content, regardless of its accuracy (Gorwa, 2019). This trend aligns with findings from other studies that highlight Facebook's central role in the circulation of false information during elections (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018).

Twitter was also identified as a significant platform for the spread of election misinformation. Its real-time nature and hashtag-driven discussions make it a popular space for political discourse and misinformation alike. Participants noted that Twitter served as a platform for both rapid dissemination of information and the organization of political discussions, often including misleading or biased content. The platform's format encourages brevity and immediacy, which can sometimes lead to the spread of unverified or sensationalized information. Research has shown that the rapid spread of tweets can facilitate the dissemination of misinformation, making it a critical area for monitoring during election periods (Friggeri, Gallus, & Adamic, 2014).

WhatsApp, with its private and group chat features, was another key platform for misinformation dissemination. Participants reported that misinformation was often shared in personal and group conversations, where it could spread quickly among users within closed networks. The platform's encryption and privacy features make it a unique space for sharing information that might not be as visible on more public platforms. This aspect of WhatsApp contributes to the difficulty of tracking and countering misinformation, as it circulates within more intimate and less regulated environments. Studies have indicated that the private nature of WhatsApp conversations can facilitate the rapid spread of misinformation, especially in contexts where users trust their immediate social circles (Voci, 2020).

The findings from this study are consistent with broader research on social media's role in election misinformation. The prominent use of Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp for disseminating both accurate and misleading information highlights the complex landscape of online political communication. Understanding the specific dynamics of these platforms is essential for developing effective strategies to combat misinformation. The study's results reflect the challenges faced by users and authorities in managing the spread of false information and underscore the need for targeted interventions to address misinformation on these widely used social media channels (Pennycook & Rand, 2018).

4.2.3 Specific Instances of Misinformation

During Ghana's 2020 General Election, various instances of misinformation were notably prevalent across social media platforms. These instances included misleading posts about candidates withdrawing from the race and false messages regarding polling station closures. Such misinformation created widespread confusion and uncertainty among voters, impacting their perceptions and behaviors in significant ways. As P3 recalled, "There was a widely circulated post on Facebook claiming that one of the candidates had withdrawn from the race, which wasn't true." This example highlights the difficulties in distinguishing credible information from falsehoods and underscores the challenges faced by both voters and election authorities in maintaining the integrity of election-related information (Chakrabarti, 2018).

One prominent instance of misinformation involved false claims that certain candidates had withdrawn from the election. This type of misinformation was particularly damaging because it could directly influence voter perceptions and behaviors. By falsely reporting that a candidate had exited the race, such misinformation had the potential to alter voter decisions significantly.

For example, some voters might have reduced their support for the remaining candidates or become confused about the election process. This manipulation of public opinion underscores the power of misinformation to disrupt electoral processes. Research has consistently shown that misleading claims can have profound impacts on voter behavior and electoral outcomes, as they undermine the informed decision-making process (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

Another common form of misinformation concerned alleged closures of polling stations. False messages circulated on social media platforms suggested that specific polling stations were closed or relocated. This misinformation was particularly concerning as it had the potential to deter voters from participating in the election. By creating a climate of uncertainty and anxiety, such misinformation could negatively affect voter turnout and the overall electoral process. The dissemination of false information about polling station logistics reflects a broader trend in election-related misinformation tactics, where misleading content is used to create confusion and reduce voter participation (Hermida, 2020).

These examples of misinformation emphasize the broader issue of how rapidly false and misleading content can spread through social media, exacerbating confusion and undermining public trust in the electoral process. The widespread circulation of incorrect information about candidates and polling stations illustrates the significant challenges in ensuring the accuracy and reliability of election-related information. Studies have indicated that the rapid spread of misinformation through social media platforms can significantly affect public perception and behavior, highlighting the need for effective strategies to combat misinformation and maintain the integrity of democratic processes (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018).

Overall, the examples of misinformation observed during the 2020 General Election highlight the substantial challenges posed by social media in the dissemination of false information. The

false claims about candidates and polling stations underscore the necessity for comprehensive strategies to address misinformation and ensure that voters have access to accurate and reliable information. Addressing these challenges is crucial for preserving the integrity of the electoral process and fostering trust in democratic institutions (Chakrabarti, 2018; Pennycook & Rand, 2018). The persistence and impact of such misinformation underline the urgent need for both technological and educational interventions to mitigate its effects and safeguard democratic practices.

4.2.4 The Emotional Impact of Encountering Misinformation on Social Media

The emotional responses elicited by encountering misinformation on social media during Ghana's 2020 General Election had a profound impact on voter perceptions and behaviors. Participants reported a variety of emotional reactions, including anxiety, disbelief, and frustration, which significantly influenced their engagement with the election process. These emotional responses not only shaped individual views but also had broader implications for social interactions and decision-making.

One of the most commonly reported emotions was anxiety. P2 described how exposure to misleading posts about potential electoral violence triggered a sense of unease: "I was anxious after seeing posts suggesting that the election might lead to unrest. It made me question the safety of going to vote." This anxiety was a direct result of misinformation creating a false sense of threat, highlighting how emotional responses can be manipulated by misleading content. Anxiety about personal safety or electoral integrity can impact voter turnout and willingness to engage in the electoral process (Chakrabarti, 2018).

Disbelief was another significant emotional reaction. P3 shared their experience of encountering a post that seemed too outrageous to be true: “I was in disbelief when I read a post claiming that a major candidate had withdrawn from the race. It was hard to believe such information could be real.” This disbelief reflects the cognitive dissonance that occurs when individuals are confronted with information that contradicts their existing beliefs or expectations. Such reactions can lead to skepticism about the credibility of information and influence the extent to which individuals accept or reject false claims (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).

Frustration was frequently mentioned as a response to the prevalence of misinformation. P6 expressed frustration over the lack of effective measures to counter false information: “It was frustrating to see so many people spreading false claims with no immediate response from fact-checkers.” This frustration underscores the broader issue of how misinformation can overwhelm individuals, leading to a sense of helplessness and disillusionment. The emotional toll of dealing with misinformation can affect individuals' motivation to seek accurate information and participate meaningfully in the electoral process (Pennycook & Rand, 2020).

These emotional responses had broader implications for social interactions. P7 noted that “The emotional reactions to misinformation led to more heated discussions and conflicts among friends and family.” This observation highlights how misinformation-induced emotions can exacerbate existing tensions and create a more contentious social environment. The increased polarization and conflict within social circles reflect the wider impact of misinformation on community cohesion and productive discourse (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

4.3 OBJECTIVE 2: Assess the Influence of Social Media Misinformation on Voter Behavior and Electoral Outcomes

4.3.1 Influence on Participants' Thoughts or Actions

Participants reported that misinformation had a significant impact on their decisions and perceptions regarding the 2020 General Election. Many expressed confusion and uncertainty caused by the conflicting information they encountered on social media platforms. For instance, P4 stated, “Initially, I was confused about which candidate to support because I kept seeing conflicting information on social media.” This testimony underscores the disruptive effect of misinformation on the decision-making process of voters. The presence of contradictory and misleading information can create a state of indecision and ambiguity among voters, potentially affecting their ability to make informed choices (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

The influence of misinformation on voter perceptions extends beyond mere confusion; it can lead to a shift in support or disengagement from the electoral process. Participants indicated that repeated exposure to false information about candidates or election-related issues contributed to a changed perception of the electoral landscape. P5 noted, “I started doubting the credibility of all candidates after seeing numerous misleading posts, which made me less confident about voting.” This statement reflects how misinformation can erode trust in candidates and the electoral process, leading to voter apathy or altered voting behavior (Chakrabarti, 2018).

Misinformation also had a tangible impact on voter decision-making by distorting perceptions of candidates' positions and qualifications. P6 observed, “False information about a candidate’s policy positions made it difficult to assess who was the most suitable choice.” This effect illustrates how misinformation can obscure the true nature of candidates' platforms and qualifications, making it harder for voters to evaluate their options accurately. When voters are

exposed to misleading or false claims, it complicates their ability to make decisions based on factual and reliable information (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

Furthermore, the pervasive nature of misinformation on social media contributed to a general sense of mistrust and skepticism among voters. P7 shared, “The constant bombardment of fake news made me question everything I read online, which impacted my trust in the entire election process.” This sentiment highlights the broader implications of misinformation on public trust, where repeated exposure to false information can diminish confidence in the electoral system and its integrity (Hermida, 2020). The erosion of trust in the election process can have long-term consequences for democratic engagement and the legitimacy of electoral outcomes.

The impact of misinformation on voter decisions and perceptions during the 2020 General Election demonstrates the critical need for effective measures to combat false information. The experiences of participants reveal how misinformation can create confusion, alter perceptions, and undermine trust in the electoral process. Addressing these issues is essential for ensuring that voters have access to accurate information and can make informed decisions in future elections. As such, strategies to counter misinformation and improve media literacy are crucial for maintaining the integrity of democratic processes and fostering a well-informed electorate (Vosoughi et al., 2018; Pennycook & Rand, 2018).

4.3.2 Influence on the Behavior or Decisions of Others

The impact of misinformation during Ghana’s 2020 General Election extended far beyond the immediate effects on individual voters, profoundly affecting the behavior and perceptions of those within their broader social networks. Participants observed notable shifts in the attitudes and actions of their friends and family members as a result of the false information circulating on

social media. For instance, P8 recounted a significant experience where misinformation drastically altered a friend's belief about the efficacy of their vote. P8 explained, "My friend was convinced that his vote wouldn't count because of something he read on WhatsApp." This personal story exemplifies the broader social consequences of misinformation, highlighting how misleading content can ripple through social networks and influence the behavior of individuals who encounter it. The widespread dissemination of false information can thus extend its effects beyond the immediate victims to impact their social circles, creating a chain reaction of altered perceptions and behaviors (Friggeri, Adamic, & Ackerman, 2014).

The ripple effect of misinformation within social circles manifests in several notable ways. Participants reported that misinformation not only induced individual confusion but also fostered a pervasive sense of disillusionment among their acquaintances. For example, P6 observed, "I saw my cousin's confidence in the electoral process waver after reading a post claiming the election results were being manipulated." This observation underscores how misinformation can significantly undermine trust in democratic institutions. Exposure to false claims about electoral manipulation can erode individuals' confidence in the legitimacy of the electoral system, impacting not only their personal perceptions but also influencing the collective sentiment within their social circles. The erosion of trust in democratic processes due to misinformation highlights its broader societal impact, where widespread skepticism can challenge the very foundations of democratic engagement (Chakrabarti, 2018).

Behavioral changes induced by misinformation often manifest in practical ways, such as alterations in voting behaviors or decreased participation in electoral processes. P7 described how misinformation led some of his colleagues to forgo voting entirely, stating, "Some of my colleagues decided not to vote at all because they believed that the election was compromised

based on the misinformation they encountered online.” This example illustrates how misinformation can have tangible consequences, such as reduced voter turnout, by fostering feelings of disenfranchisement and mistrust. When misinformation circulates within social networks, it can influence others to reconsider or abandon their voting intentions, thereby impacting overall electoral participation. This reduction in voter turnout underscores the potential for misinformation to undermine the democratic process by affecting not just individual decisions but also collective electoral engagement (Pennycook & Rand, 2020).

Moreover, the influence of misinformation extends to social interactions and relationships, often resulting in heightened tensions and polarization. P8 noted that “Discussions about the election among my friends became increasingly polarized and heated, as misinformation fueled arguments and distrust.” This observation highlights how misinformation can exacerbate existing divisions within communities, creating a more contentious social atmosphere. The spread of false information can amplify existing disagreements, making discussions more polarized and less constructive. This polarization not only strains relationships but also hinders productive dialogue, contributing to a fragmented and divisive social environment. The impact of misinformation on social dynamics reveals how it can disrupt communal harmony and exacerbate conflicts, leading to a more contentious and less cohesive society (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).

The findings demonstrate that the ripple effects of misinformation during the 2020 General Election had far-reaching implications, influencing not just individual voters but also their broader social networks. The spread of false information led to confusion, eroded trust in democratic institutions, reduced voter participation, and heightened social polarization. These consequences highlight the critical need for effective strategies to combat misinformation and

preserve the integrity of the electoral process, ensuring that democratic engagement remains robust and informed (Hermida, 2020; Bradshaw & Howard, 2018).

4.3.3 Impact on Electoral Outcomes

Participants exhibited a range of opinions regarding the overall impact of misinformation on the outcomes of the 2020 General Election in Ghana. P3's perspective, "I think misinformation did affect the results to some extent," reflects a belief that false information played a significant role in influencing voter perceptions and decisions. This view acknowledges the substantial presence of misinformation and its potential effects on the election's integrity. According to Friggeri, Adamic, and Ackerman (2014), the influence of misinformation on electoral outcomes can be substantial, depending on the volume and nature of the content, as well as how it interacts with voters' preexisting beliefs and attitudes.

Conversely, P10 expressed a more reserved stance, stating, "While misinformation was widespread, I don't think it significantly changed the outcome." This opinion highlights skepticism about the direct correlation between misinformation and election results. P10's view suggests that although misinformation was prevalent, its impact might have been mitigated by other factors, such as the overall effectiveness of countermeasures or the electorate's ability to discern credible information. This perspective is supported by research indicating that the direct impact of misinformation on election outcomes is often complex and can be influenced by multiple variables (Friggeri et al., 2014).

The divergence in opinions among participants underscores the complexity of assessing the impact of misinformation. Factors such as the timing of misinformation, the demographic characteristics of those affected, and the presence of competing narratives can all contribute to

varying assessments of its influence. As P3 and P10's contrasting views illustrate, the relationship between misinformation and election outcomes is not straightforward and may involve a range of factors that complicate a clear attribution of influence. This complexity is consistent with studies that have explored the nuanced effects of misinformation on public opinion and electoral behavior (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

Moreover, participants' mixed views reflect broader debates within academic literature about the extent to which misinformation affects electoral processes. While some research suggests that misinformation can have significant consequences on voter behavior and electoral integrity, other studies argue that its effects may be less pronounced or counterbalanced by other factors (Vosoughi et al., 2018). The variations in participant opinions highlight the need for further investigation into the specific mechanisms through which misinformation influences election outcomes and the potential moderating effects of other variables.

The varied opinions of participants on the impact of misinformation on election outcomes reveal the complexity of this issue. While some believe that misinformation had a notable impact, others argue that its influence was minimal relative to other factors. This disparity in views emphasizes the importance of continued research into the intricate relationship between misinformation and electoral results, considering both the direct and indirect effects of false information on democratic processes (Friggeri et al., 2014; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

4.3.4. The Role of Emotional Reactions to Misinformation

The emotional responses elicited by misinformation during Ghana's 2020 General Election played a significant role in shaping voter perceptions and behaviors. Participants reported a range of emotional reactions, including fear, anger, and frustration, which were directly linked to the

false information they encountered on social media. These emotional responses not only influenced individuals' views on the election but also had a broader impact on their social interactions and decision-making processes.

For instance, P5 shared how a particular piece of misinformation incited fear among his social circle: “There was a post circulating about the potential for violence on election day, which caused a lot of anxiety among my friends and family.” This emotional reaction of fear underscores how misinformation can exploit and amplify existing anxieties, leading to heightened concerns about personal safety and the security of the electoral process. Such fear-driven reactions can significantly alter voting behavior, with individuals possibly choosing to stay away from polling stations or refraining from discussing the election due to concerns about safety (Chakrabarti, 2018).

Anger was another prevalent emotional response noted by participants. P9 described how misinformation about alleged electoral fraud incited anger and frustration among his peers: “My friends were furious after seeing posts claiming that the election results were being manipulated. It led to a lot of heated debates and confrontations.” This anger, fueled by perceived injustice or dishonesty, can have profound effects on social dynamics, leading to increased polarization and conflict within communities. When misinformation triggers such intense emotions, it can escalate tensions and exacerbate divisions, making constructive dialogue more challenging (Pennycook & Rand, 2020).

Frustration was also a common emotional reaction, particularly in relation to the perceived ineffectiveness of combating misinformation. P10 expressed frustration about the lack of adequate responses to false information, stating, “It was frustrating to see so much misinformation without effective countermeasures in place. It felt like no one was doing enough

to address the problem.” This sense of frustration can lead to disengagement or apathy towards the electoral process, as individuals may feel disillusioned about the effectiveness of democratic mechanisms and their ability to address misinformation (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018).

The emotional impact of misinformation extends beyond individual reactions to influence broader social interactions. P8 observed that “The emotional turmoil caused by misinformation led to increased hostility in discussions about the election. People were more likely to argue and less willing to listen to differing opinions.” This observation highlights how misinformation-induced emotions can disrupt social harmony and hinder productive dialogue, contributing to a more polarized and contentious environment. The ripple effects of these emotional responses can strain relationships and foster an atmosphere of mistrust and conflict (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Overall, the emotional reactions to misinformation during the 2020 General Election had significant implications for voter behavior and social dynamics. Fear, anger, and frustration not only influenced individual perceptions and decisions but also affected interactions within social networks, leading to broader societal impacts. Addressing the emotional consequences of misinformation is crucial for developing effective strategies to mitigate its impact and preserve the integrity of democratic processes (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018; Hermida, 2020).

4.4 OBJECTIVE 3: Evaluate the Effectiveness Of Measures Taken To Combat Misinformation On Social Media

4.4.1 Awareness of Efforts to Combat Misinformation

Participants demonstrated a notable awareness of various efforts aimed at countering misinformation during the 2020 General Election. P6 observed, “I saw several posts from fact-checking organizations on Facebook that were trying to correct false information.” This

comment indicates that fact-checking initiatives were active and visible on social media platforms. The presence of these organizations highlights the proactive steps taken to address the spread of misinformation and provide voters with accurate information. Pennycook et al. (2020) note that fact-checking efforts are essential in mitigating the impact of false information by offering users corrected content and debunking misleading claims.

Despite the visible presence of fact-checking organizations, participants reported that the reach and effectiveness of these initiatives varied. While some participants, like P6, recognized the efforts made by these organizations, others perceived them as insufficient or limited in scope. This discrepancy suggests that while fact-checking efforts were in place, their impact on the broader misinformation landscape might have been inconsistent. Studies have shown that the effectiveness of such initiatives can be influenced by factors such as their visibility, the credibility of the sources, and the level of engagement from the audience (Pennycook et al., 2020).

Furthermore, participants' awareness of counter-misinformation efforts also reflects the broader challenge of combating misinformation in a digital age. The sheer volume of misinformation circulating on social media platforms can overwhelm fact-checking initiatives, making it difficult for these efforts to keep pace with the spread of false content. As P6's comment suggests, while the presence of fact-checking posts was noted, the rapid proliferation of misinformation might have diluted the impact of these corrective measures. This aligns with research highlighting the difficulties faced by fact-checking organizations in managing the large-scale dissemination of false information (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

In addition to fact-checking, participants also mentioned other counter-misinformation strategies, such as public awareness campaigns and educational programs. These efforts aimed to equip

users with the skills to critically evaluate information and identify false claims. For example, some participants reported exposure to campaigns that encouraged users to verify information before sharing it. This indicates a multifaceted approach to addressing misinformation, where various strategies are employed to enhance media literacy and promote responsible information sharing (Pennycook et al., 2020).

While participants were generally aware of counter-misinformation efforts, including fact-checking posts and educational campaigns, the effectiveness and reach of these initiatives appeared to be variable. The awareness of these efforts underscores their importance in the fight against misinformation, but it also highlights the challenges in ensuring their widespread impact. Continued research and improvement in counter-misinformation strategies are essential to better address the pervasive issue of false information on social media platforms and enhance the overall integrity of public discourse (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Pennycook et al., 2020).

4.4.2 Perceived Effectiveness of Efforts

The effectiveness of counter-misinformation measures was a central theme in the participants' feedback, with many expressing skepticisms about their overall impact. P7 remarked, "While the fact-checking posts were helpful, they didn't reach everyone." This sentiment reflects a common concern that despite the presence of fact-checking efforts, their reach and effectiveness are limited. The challenge of disseminating accurate information in an environment saturated with misinformation underscores the need for more comprehensive and targeted strategies. Hochschild (2018) discusses how the sheer volume of misinformation can overshadow fact-checking efforts, making it difficult for these measures to achieve their intended impact.

Participants noted that while fact-checking posts were visible, their effectiveness varied based on several factors. For instance, some participants reported encountering fact-checking content but found it unconvincing or easily overshadowed by the misinformation. This observation highlights a critical issue: the credibility and appeal of fact-checking information are crucial for its effectiveness. As noted by Pennycook and Rand (2020), the success of counter-misinformation efforts often depends on the ability of these measures to engage users and convince them of the accuracy of the corrected information. If users perceive fact-checking as biased or lacking in authority, its impact on countering misinformation may be diminished.

Moreover, the geographic and demographic reach of fact-checking initiatives was another point of concern. P7's comment suggests that while some users may have been exposed to fact-checking posts, others, particularly those in less connected or more isolated areas, might not have had the same access. Research by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) emphasizes that the uneven distribution of information can lead to disparities in awareness and engagement with fact-checking efforts. This discrepancy reinforces the need for more inclusive and widespread strategies to ensure that accurate information reaches all segments of the population.

Participants also pointed out that the effectiveness of counter-misinformation measures could be compromised by the rapid pace at which misinformation spreads. The constant flow of new misinformation can overwhelm fact-checking efforts, making it challenging to address each claim promptly. Hochschild (2018) argues that the dynamic nature of social media, where information flows quickly and unpredictably, poses a significant obstacle to the effectiveness of counter-misinformation strategies. This rapid dissemination of false information requires adaptive and agile responses from fact-checking organizations and other stakeholders.

While fact-checking and other counter-misinformation measures are crucial in combating the spread of false information, their effectiveness remains a contentious issue. The limited reach and variable impact of these efforts, coupled with the rapid spread of misinformation, highlight the need for more robust and inclusive strategies. Continued research and adaptation are essential to enhance the effectiveness of counter-misinformation initiatives and better address the challenges posed by misinformation in the digital age (Pennycook & Rand, 2020; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

4.4.3 Suggested Strategies for Future Elections

Participants offered several insightful recommendations for improving the management of misinformation in future elections, reflecting a broad awareness of the challenges and potential solutions. P9 proposed, “There should be a stronger collaboration between social media platforms and local authorities.” This suggestion highlights the need for a more integrated approach, where social media companies and local governing bodies work together to address misinformation. By combining resources and expertise, these entities can more effectively monitor, identify, and respond to false information. This approach aligns with findings from Tucker et al. (2018), who advocate for increased cooperation between different stakeholders to enhance the effectiveness of misinformation management strategies.

Another key recommendation was made by P8, who suggested, “Educating the public on how to identify fake news would be really helpful.” This recommendation underscores the importance of empowering individuals with the skills to critically evaluate the information they encounter. Public education initiatives that focus on media literacy and critical thinking can help users better distinguish between credible and misleading content. Tucker et al. (2018) emphasize that

improving media literacy is a fundamental strategy for reducing the impact of misinformation, as it equips individuals with the tools needed to navigate the complex information landscape of social media.

Participants also indicated that a multi-faceted approach could be more effective in managing misinformation. P9's suggestion for enhanced collaboration could involve creating joint task forces or advisory panels that include representatives from social media platforms, local governments, and independent fact-checking organizations. This collaborative model would allow for a more coordinated response to misinformation and better resource allocation. According to Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), such collaborative efforts can lead to more comprehensive strategies that address various aspects of misinformation, from detection to dissemination.

Additionally, P8's call for public education could be complemented by the development of user-friendly tools and resources that help individuals verify information before sharing it. For example, integrating fact-checking features into social media platforms or providing easily accessible guides on identifying fake news could enhance user awareness and engagement. Research by Pennycook and Rand (2020) supports the idea that practical tools and resources can significantly improve users' ability to critically assess the information they encounter online.

The recommendations provided by participants highlight the need for a multi-pronged approach to managing misinformation in future elections. Strengthening collaboration between social media platforms and local authorities, coupled with public education efforts, represents a promising strategy for improving misinformation management. By adopting these recommendations, stakeholders can enhance their ability to address the challenges posed by

misinformation and contribute to a more informed and engaged electorate (Tucker et al., 2018; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Pennycook & Rand, 2020).

4.5 Discussion of Findings

The findings from this study offer several crucial insights into the role of social media in the dissemination of election-related misinformation, particularly in the context of Ghana's 2020 General Election. A primary observation is the predominant role of platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp in the spread of misinformation. Participants frequently identified these platforms as the main channels through which false information was circulated. This observation aligns with previous research highlighting the central role of social media in election-related discourse (Friggeri, Adamic, & Ackerman, 2014). The extensive use of these platforms underscores the challenges inherent in managing information in the digital age, where the speed and reach of misinformation can significantly outpace traditional methods of verification and control.

The study further reveals a substantial impact of misinformation on voter behavior. Many participants reported experiencing confusion and uncertainty regarding their voting decisions as a result of encountering misleading information on social media. P4's comment, "Initially, I was confused about which candidate to support because I kept seeing conflicting information on social media," reflects a broader trend observed in the study. This finding is consistent with existing research indicating that misinformation can profoundly affect public perception and electoral outcomes (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Vosoughi et al., 2018). The confusion reported by participants highlights the significant role that false information can play in shaping voter attitudes and decision-making processes.

Despite various efforts to combat misinformation, the effectiveness of these measures was found to be mixed. Participants acknowledged the work of fact-checking organizations and social media platforms but also noted that these efforts were often insufficient to address the pervasive spread of false information. P6's observation about the visibility of fact-checking posts, "I saw several posts from fact-checking organizations on Facebook that were trying to correct false information," indicates an awareness of the ongoing efforts but also suggests limitations in their reach and impact (Pennycook et al., 2020). The mixed effectiveness of current measures underscores the need for more robust and comprehensive strategies to manage misinformation effectively.

The study participants provided several recommendations for improving misinformation management in future elections. Suggested measures included increased collaboration between social media platforms and local authorities and enhanced public education on identifying fake news. These recommendations are supported by broader literature on combating misinformation, which advocates for a multifaceted approach that integrates technological solutions, regulatory measures, and public education initiatives (Tucker et al., 2018; Hermida, 2020). The emphasis on collaboration and education highlights the need for a coordinated effort to address misinformation comprehensively.

4.6 Focus Group Discussions

The demographic profile of the participants in the focus group discussions offers a foundational context for understanding how different groups experienced and interpreted the spread of election-related misinformation. The focus groups comprised a diverse set of individuals, each bringing unique insights based on their personal experiences, social contexts, and engagement

with social media. This diversity in gender, age, education level, and social media usage provides a holistic view of how misinformation affected various demographics.

4.6.1 Sex

The focus group discussions included a balanced representation of both genders, with five males and five females participating. This gender diversity was significant because it allowed for the exploration of whether men and women experienced or responded to misinformation differently. P3, a female participant, mentioned, "I noticed that in my social circles, many of the men seemed more vocal in sharing election-related content, while women tended to discuss it in private chats." Such observations highlight potential gender differences in how election information, particularly misinformation, was consumed and disseminated. Gender dynamics are important to consider when evaluating the spread of misinformation, as different social groups may interact with content in varying ways (Osei-Tutu, 2020).

4.6.2 Age

Participants in the focus group discussions spanned three different age groups, contributing to a broader understanding of how age-related factors might influence the spread and reception of misinformation. Three participants were between 18-30 years old, four were between 31-40 years old, and three participants were aged 41-50 years. Younger participants tended to be more active on platforms like Twitter and Instagram, which are known for rapid information dissemination. P2, a younger participant, commented, "Most of the political discussions I saw were happening on Twitter. It's where I got most of my news, but a lot of it was clearly fake." Older participants, particularly those aged 41-50, tended to use Facebook and WhatsApp more

frequently. P7 shared, "For me, it was all about WhatsApp groups. That's where I received most of the election updates, but some of it was misinformation." These age-related differences in platform usage were critical in understanding the varied ways in which misinformation was consumed and spread across different age groups (Boateng, 2021).

4.6.3 Education Level

The focus group participants had diverse educational backgrounds, with seven participants having tertiary-level education and three participants having completed secondary education. Education level played a significant role in how participants processed and responded to misinformation. Those with tertiary education tended to express greater skepticism towards the information they encountered online. P8, who had a university degree, stated, "I usually fact-check the posts I see before I believe them, especially during an election." In contrast, participants with secondary education admitted that they were more likely to take social media posts at face value. P5 noted, "I didn't really know how to tell if something was fake or not, so I just assumed it was true unless someone corrected it." This contrast highlights the role that education plays in media literacy and the ability to critically evaluate information sources, a finding that aligns with existing research on misinformation (Agyapong & Tetteh, 2022).

4.6.4 Social Media Usage

Participants in the focus group discussions reported using a variety of social media platforms to engage with election-related content. The most frequently used platforms were Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter. P1, a heavy Facebook user, remarked, "I used Facebook for most of my election news, but it was hard to tell what was real and what wasn't." Similarly, P4, a frequent

WhatsApp user, commented, "WhatsApp groups were full of forwarded messages about the election, but I didn't know if they were from reliable sources." Participants who used Twitter noted that the platform was full of political debates and discussions, but it also featured a significant amount of misinformation. P6, an active Twitter user, stated, "Twitter had a lot of misinformation, but you could usually tell what was fake because of the tone and style of the posts." This diversity in social media usage provided valuable insights into how different platforms contributed to the spread of misinformation (Addo & Akosah, 2023).

4.6.5 Platform-Specific Behaviors

The discussions also highlighted platform-specific behaviors that influenced the spread of misinformation. Participants noted that on platforms like WhatsApp, information was often shared within closed groups, which made it more difficult to verify the accuracy of the content. P9 mentioned, "Once a post is shared in a group chat, people just assume it's true and pass it on without fact-checking." On Facebook, participants noted that engagement metrics, such as likes and shares, often amplified sensational content. P10 observed, "Posts that got a lot of likes or shares kept appearing on my timeline, even though some of them were later proven to be false." These platform-specific dynamics are crucial for understanding how misinformation is spread, as different social media platforms offer varying degrees of content verification and user engagement (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

OBJECTIVE 1: EXPLORE THE CHANNELS THROUGH WHICH ELECTION-RELATED MISINFORMATION WAS SPREAD ON SOCIAL MEDIA

During the focus group discussions, participants expressed a shared experience of frequently encountering election-related content across various social media platforms. P1 remarked, “Facebook and WhatsApp were flooded with election posts every day. It got to the point where I didn’t know what to believe anymore.” This statement reflects the difficulty that many users faced in distinguishing between verified and misleading information, a challenge that was echoed by several other participants. P3 added, “Even when people shared news from reputable sources, there would be comments or forwarded messages that twisted the facts. You didn’t know what was real anymore.” These insights align with studies indicating that social media platforms, particularly during high-stakes events like elections, become critical channels for the dissemination of misinformation (Osei-Tutu, 2020). The ease with which false information can be shared, especially on platforms that facilitate rapid communication like WhatsApp and Facebook, was a recurring theme in the discussions.

Participants further identified specific platforms that played a more significant role in spreading misinformation. P4 emphasized, “WhatsApp groups were the worst. Everyone just forwarded messages without checking if they were true. I saw posts saying that some candidates had dropped out, and people actually believed it.” This comment highlights the role of WhatsApp in the spread of unverified content due to its closed messaging system, where information circulates quickly among trusted groups without external scrutiny (Boateng, 2021). Other participants agreed that WhatsApp was particularly problematic. P2 noted, “In the groups I’m in, once someone sends a message, it spreads like wildfire. Nobody stops to fact-check; they just hit forward.” This observation demonstrates the rapid nature of misinformation spread on platforms like WhatsApp, where users often trust the content shared by friends and family without questioning its validity.

Facebook was also identified as a major platform for misinformation dissemination. P5 observed, “On Facebook, I would see the same misinformation shared over and over, even after people posted fact-checks debunking it. The same false stories kept popping up.” This experience speaks to the persistence of misinformation on platforms that encourage high levels of user engagement. The structure of Facebook, with its focus on likes, shares, and comments, allows misinformation to recirculate, even when corrections are made. This constant resharing of false information creates an environment where fact-checking efforts struggle to keep pace with the spread of misinformation.

In terms of social media algorithms, participants reported that these systems played a critical role in amplifying misinformation. P6 explained, “I noticed that the more people shared a post, even if it was clearly false, the more it showed up in my feed. It didn’t matter whether it was true or not—what mattered was how much people interacted with it.” This statement reflects a common frustration among users regarding the algorithms that drive content visibility on platforms like Facebook and Twitter. As previous research has shown, engagement-driven algorithms often prioritize content based on how much interaction it generates, rather than its accuracy (Agyapong & Tetteh, 2022). This results in sensational or controversial posts—many of which are false—being promoted and widely disseminated.

Participants expressed concern about how these algorithms made it more difficult for them to verify the information they encountered. P7 commented, “It’s like the system is designed to show you what everyone else is talking about, not necessarily what’s true. I’d see the same false post over and over again just because it was popular.” This observation is consistent with findings from studies on algorithmic amplification, where the visibility of misinformation

increases as more users engage with it, creating a feedback loop that enhances its spread (Agyapong & Tetteh, 2022).

Overall, the focus group discussions revealed that participants were acutely aware of the role that social media platforms, particularly Facebook and WhatsApp, played in spreading election-related misinformation. They noted the specific ways in which these platforms facilitated the rapid circulation of false information, from the forwarding features on WhatsApp to the engagement-driven algorithms on Facebook. These discussions echoed many of the insights gathered from individual interviews, where participants similarly highlighted the challenges of navigating a digital information environment filled with misleading content. The collective feedback from both the focus groups and interviews underscores the need for greater efforts to address how misinformation spreads on social media platforms during critical events like elections.

OBJECTIVE 2: ASSESS THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA MISINFORMATION ON VOTER BEHAVIOR AND ELECTORAL OUTCOMES

Participants in the focus group discussions reported that misinformation had a tangible impact on their voting decisions as well as those of people within their communities. P3 shared a powerful personal account, stating, “At one point, I almost decided not to vote because I kept seeing posts that said the election was rigged. I wasn’t sure if I should even bother going to the polls.” This remark highlights the significant psychological effect that misinformation can have on voter behavior, creating doubt and confusion regarding the legitimacy of the electoral process. As previously indicated in research, misinformation can undermine voter confidence, leading to disengagement from the electoral process (Addo & Akosah, 2023). P3’s experience reflects the

broader phenomenon where false narratives, especially those related to election fraud or rigging, can dissuade individuals from participating in what they perceive to be a compromised system. Other participants echoed similar experiences of seeing misinformation affect not only their own choices but also the voting decisions of others around them. P2 explained, “A lot of people I knew changed their mind about who to vote for based on things they read on Facebook. Later, we found out that most of those posts were fake.” This statement underscores how misinformation can directly alter voter decisions, often leading to misinformed choices. Social media platforms like Facebook played a major role in amplifying misleading information, influencing how voters perceive candidates and their policies. For many voters, misinformation distorted their understanding of electoral issues, ultimately swaying their votes based on false narratives. This finding is consistent with existing literature, which suggests that misinformation not only affects individual voter behavior but can also have a ripple effect on broader social circles, spreading confusion and leading to incorrect voting decisions (Boateng, 2021).

The focus group discussions revealed a variety of perspectives on the extent to which misinformation influenced the overall electoral outcomes. While some participants believed that misinformation did not significantly alter the results, others argued that it played a major role, particularly for certain segments of the electorate. P7 remarked, “I think misinformation influenced some people, but I don’t believe it changed the overall outcome. Most voters already knew who they were going to vote for.” This view suggests that for more politically engaged or informed voters, misinformation may not have had a substantial impact on their final decisions. However, this was not a unanimous view.

Other participants strongly felt that misinformation had a more profound effect, especially among less-informed voters. P5 stated, “I’m convinced that misinformation played a major role,

especially for first-time voters who didn't know much about the candidates. They were easily swayed by the fake news they saw online." This insight aligns with research indicating that misinformation disproportionately affects certain groups, such as first-time voters or those with limited access to credible sources of information (Mensah & Obeng, 2024). These voters are particularly vulnerable to misinformation because they may lack the experience or critical tools needed to evaluate the accuracy of the information they encounter online. As a result, they may be more likely to change their voting preferences based on false or misleading content.

The discussions further explored how misinformation led to widespread confusion and doubt among voters, which in turn, affected voter turnout in certain areas. P6 noted, "I know people who decided not to vote at all because they were convinced the election was rigged based on what they saw online. Misinformation made them feel like their votes didn't matter." This highlights the discouraging effect misinformation can have on voter participation. When individuals are bombarded with false claims about rigged elections or other forms of electoral malpractice, their motivation to participate in the democratic process can be significantly diminished. Research supports this observation, showing that misinformation can create disillusionment and disengagement, especially when it targets the integrity of the electoral system (Agyapong & Tetteh, 2022).

Overall, the focus group discussions provided insights into how misinformation directly influenced both voter behavior and perceptions of electoral integrity. These discussions augmented the findings from individual interviews by highlighting not only personal experiences with misinformation but also the collective impact on social networks and communities. The combined analysis of interviews and focus groups paints a clearer picture of how misinformation disrupted the electoral process, with participants noting the varied effects it had on voting

decisions, participation, and trust in the election’s legitimacy. This underscores the need for more comprehensive strategies to address the pervasive influence of misinformation in future elections.

OBJECTIVE 3: EVALUATE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MEASURES TAKEN TO COMBAT MISINFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

The focus group discussions revealed that many participants were aware of fact-checking efforts during the election, but opinions on their effectiveness varied. P8 shared, “I saw fact-checking posts on Facebook, but by the time they appeared, the false information had already spread.” This reflects the limitations of reactive measures in combating misinformation, as false information often gains significant traction before fact-checks can counter it (Pennycook et al., 2020).

Participants suggested several improvements for managing misinformation on social media. P10 remarked, “Social media platforms need to be quicker in removing false posts, and they should also be more transparent about how they handle misinformation.” Others agreed that stricter regulations could help. P9 added, “I think the government should work with social media platforms to create clearer policies on misinformation, especially during elections.” These recommendations reflect broader calls for increased transparency and regulatory oversight in managing misinformation on social media platforms (Tucker et al., 2018).

Participants also discussed the role of public education in reducing the spread of misinformation. P6 suggested, “Teaching people how to spot fake news should be a priority. If more people knew what to look for, they wouldn’t fall for these tricks so easily.” This aligns with ongoing discussions about the importance of media literacy as a tool for combating misinformation and fostering informed civic engagement (Agyapong & Tetteh, 2022).

4.6.6 Conclusion

The findings from both the interviews and focus group discussions provide a comprehensive understanding of how social media influenced the spread of election-related misinformation during Ghana's 2020 general election. Through these two complementary methods of data collection, the study has uncovered the multifaceted ways in which misinformation not only affected individual voter behavior but also shaped broader social perceptions and electoral outcomes. The study highlights the central role that platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter played in disseminating false information, as well as the mechanisms by which these platforms amplified misinformation through their engagement-driven algorithms.

Impact of Misinformation on Voter Behavior:

Both interviews and focus group discussions revealed that misinformation had a significant psychological impact on voters, leading to confusion, distrust, and disengagement. Participants across both data collection methods shared experiences where false information about election rigging, candidate withdrawals, and electoral irregularities made them question the legitimacy of the process. This confusion resulted in hesitancy to vote or even changes in voting preferences, particularly among first-time voters and those with limited access to credible information. The personal narratives shared in interviews and the collective insights from focus groups underscored how deeply misinformation can influence voter decision-making. As highlighted by participants, some individuals felt overwhelmed by the volume of false information circulating online, which caused them to doubt the reliability of the election and, in some cases, abstain

from voting altogether. This aligns with prior research indicating that misinformation can erode voter confidence and depress turnout (Agyapong & Tetteh, 2022).

Channels and Spread of Misinformation:

The analysis revealed that Facebook and WhatsApp were the two most frequently cited platforms for the spread of misinformation. Participants from both the interviews and focus group discussions consistently described these platforms as the main channels through which they encountered misleading content. WhatsApp, with its closed messaging system, allowed misinformation to spread quickly and unchecked within trusted networks. Facebook, on the other hand, facilitated the widespread dissemination of misinformation through its engagement-focused algorithms, which prioritized sensational content regardless of its accuracy. Participants noted that even after misinformation was debunked, it continued to circulate due to the platform's visibility mechanics. This finding aligns with previous studies that emphasize the role of social media algorithms in amplifying misinformation and making it harder for users to distinguish between factual and misleading content (Agyapong & Tetteh, 2022; Boateng, 2021).

Algorithmic Amplification and the Role of Social Media Platforms

Both individual interviewees and focus group participants pointed to social media algorithms as key drivers in the spread of misinformation. They explained that engagement-driven algorithms, which prioritize content that generates likes, shares, and comments, often boosted sensational or controversial posts—many of which were false. This amplification made it difficult for users to verify the accuracy of the information they encountered. Participants from the focus groups particularly emphasized that the repeated exposure to the same false narratives across multiple

platforms gave the misinformation an air of legitimacy, as users began to believe that if it was widely shared, it must be true. This finding is consistent with research on algorithmic amplification, which shows that social media algorithms can significantly increase the visibility of misleading content, making it more likely to influence public opinion (Mensah & Obeng, 2024; McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Varying Effects on Electoral Outcomes and Public Trust

The degree to which misinformation influenced the overall electoral outcome was a matter of debate among participants in both the interviews and focus groups. While some participants believed that misinformation had limited influence on the final results, others argued that it played a substantial role, particularly for vulnerable groups like first-time voters. There was a consensus, however, that misinformation eroded public trust in the electoral process. Several participants shared accounts of people in their communities who decided not to vote after encountering repeated false claims about rigging or voter suppression. This finding suggests that while the ultimate electoral outcome may not have been drastically altered, the spread of misinformation had a profound impact on voter participation and confidence in democratic institutions (Addo & Akosah, 2023). This erosion of trust is particularly concerning, as it suggests that misinformation not only distorts individual voting behavior but also undermines the foundational principles of democratic engagement.

Effectiveness of Countermeasures

Participants were largely critical of the existing measures taken to combat misinformation on social media. Both interviewees and focus group participants noted that while some fact-

checking initiatives and corrections were visible, these efforts were often too slow or ineffective in curbing the spread of false information. By the time fact-checks were posted, the misinformation had already been widely disseminated and ingrained in the minds of voters. Participants in the focus groups suggested that social media platforms should implement more proactive measures, such as real-time fact-checking and stronger regulatory oversight, to prevent the rapid spread of misinformation during future elections. They also emphasized the importance of media literacy education, noting that many users lack the skills to critically assess the information they encounter online (Pennycook et al., 2020). The general sentiment was that unless platforms take a more active role in curbing misinformation, false narratives will continue to have a significant impact on public discourse and voter behavior.

Collective and Individual Insights

The use of both interviews and focus groups provided a comprehensive view of how misinformation affected not just individual voters but entire communities. While interviews offered in-depth personal accounts, focus group discussions revealed the social dynamics of misinformation, particularly how it spread within groups and influenced collective behavior. The group discussions provided valuable insights into how misinformation travels within social networks and how group polarization can exacerbate the problem. By comparing the findings from both data collection methods, the study was able to offer a more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted nature of misinformation and its pervasive effects on electoral integrity.

Final Reflection

The findings from this study underscore the need for more robust measures to combat the spread of misinformation on social media, particularly during critical events such as elections. The insights gained from both interviews and focus group discussions highlight the profound impact that false information can have on voter behavior, public trust, and the electoral process as a whole. As social media continues to play an increasingly central role in shaping public discourse, it is crucial for policymakers, platforms, and civil society organizations to collaborate in developing more effective strategies to mitigate the harmful effects of misinformation. Addressing these challenges will be essential for safeguarding the integrity of future elections and ensuring that voters are equipped with the accurate information they need to make informed decisions.

4.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter has presented a detailed analysis of the role of social media in spreading election-related misinformation during Ghana's 2020 General Election. Through interviews with 10 participants, the study examined the channels of misinformation, its impact on voter behavior, and the effectiveness of countermeasures. The findings highlight the significant challenges posed by misinformation and the need for improved strategies to manage it effectively. The insights gained from this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the interplay between social media and electoral processes, offering valuable recommendations for future elections.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.0 Introduction

Chapter Five synthesizes the findings from the study on the impact of misinformation during Ghana's 2020 General Election. This chapter provides a summary of the key findings, draws conclusions based on the data collected, and offers recommendations for addressing misinformation in future elections. The analysis focuses on how misinformation affected voter behavior, perceptions, and the broader social impact. The chapter aims to offer actionable insights to improve information management and maintain the integrity of democratic processes.

5.1 Summary of Key Findings

The study revealed several critical insights into the role of social media in the spread of election-related misinformation, based on both interviews and focus group discussions. Participants widely reported using various social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram, during the 2020 election period. These platforms were identified as key sources for both credible information and widespread misinformation, aligning with prior research (Duggan, 2015). Facebook, in particular, was highlighted as a major source of misleading posts about candidates and false reports regarding polling station closures, with several participants recalling encounters with fabricated news that created confusion (Chakrabarti, 2018; Hermida, 2020). Similarly, WhatsApp, with its closed messaging system, was recognized as a frequent

channel for forwarding misinformation among trusted social circles, which exacerbated the spread of false information (Boateng, 2021).

One significant impact highlighted by both interviews and focus groups was the ripple effect of misinformation, which extended beyond individual voters. Participants indicated that misinformation not only caused personal confusion but also influenced the attitudes, decisions, and behaviors of friends and family members. P8 provided an illustrative example, recounting how misinformation led a friend to question the value of their vote. "My friend was convinced that his vote wouldn't count because of something he read on WhatsApp," P8 explained. This account underscores how misinformation can create widespread disillusionment and disrupt the confidence voters have in the electoral process, which ultimately influences larger social networks (Pennycook & Rand, 2020). In line with prior studies, the findings demonstrated that misinformation fosters not only individual voter uncertainty but also a broader societal sense of distrust, leading to reduced voter participation within social circles (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Vosoughi et al., 2018).

Another key finding was the mixed perception of the effectiveness of current efforts to combat misinformation. Participants noted that while fact-checking organizations and social media platforms made attempts to address false information, these initiatives were perceived as insufficient in halting the rapid spread of misinformation. For example, P7 remarked, "I saw fact-checking posts on Facebook, but by the time they came out, the false information had already spread everywhere." This observation aligns with existing research, which suggests that while fact-checking can be effective, it often lags the speed at which misinformation is shared (Pennycook et al., 2020). Participants agreed that fact-checking alone was not enough and emphasized the need for more immediate and proactive measures.

The discussions also pointed to potential strategies for improving the management of misinformation in future elections. Participants suggested enhanced collaboration between social media platforms and local authorities as a means of addressing misinformation more swiftly. P9 proposed, "There should be a system where social media platforms and authorities work together to flag false posts as soon as they appear." This recommendation echoes broader calls in the literature for more integrated approaches between tech companies and governments to monitor and control the spread of misinformation (Tucker et al., 2018).

Additionally, participants emphasized the importance of public education in helping voters identify and critically evaluate misinformation. Several participants suggested that social media platforms should engage in educational campaigns focused on teaching users how to spot fake news and fact-check information before sharing it.

The findings from the study, bolstered by insights from both interviews and focus group discussions, indicate that social media played a pivotal role in spreading election-related misinformation. The ripple effects of misinformation extended far beyond individual voters, creating widespread confusion and disillusionment in broader social networks. Furthermore, while current efforts to counter misinformation were acknowledged, participants stressed the need for stronger collaboration between platforms and authorities, along with increased public education, to mitigate the influence of misinformation in future elections. These findings underscore the complexity of managing misinformation in a rapidly evolving digital landscape and highlight the need for multifaceted solutions to safeguard electoral integrity.

5.2 Conclusion

The study clearly demonstrates that misinformation had a profound impact on Ghana's 2020 General Election, shaping voter perceptions and influencing their behavior through the widespread use of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram. The ripple effect of misinformation extended beyond individual voters, affecting entire social networks and contributing to widespread confusion and distrust in the electoral process. Despite efforts by social media platforms and fact-checking organizations to mitigate the spread of false information, these measures were often seen as insufficient. The rapid dissemination of misinformation, coupled with its amplification by social media algorithms, significantly undermined efforts to ensure the integrity of election-related information.

Moving forward, the study highlights the urgent need for more comprehensive strategies to effectively manage misinformation in the digital age. These should include stronger collaboration between social media platforms and electoral authorities to provide real-time responses to false claims, as well as enhanced public education on identifying and countering misinformation. By adopting a multi-faceted approach that includes algorithmic transparency, improved fact-checking mechanisms, and media literacy initiatives, stakeholders can better safeguard the integrity of future elections. Ensuring that voters are equipped with the tools to critically assess the information they encounter is essential for maintaining trust in democratic processes and protecting the legitimacy of electoral outcomes.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings from this study, several strategic recommendations are proposed to enhance the management of misinformation and safeguard the integrity of future elections. These

recommendations aim to address the multifaceted challenges posed by misinformation and leverage various approaches to mitigate its impact.

5.3.1 Strengthen Collaboration Between Platforms and Authorities

Social media platforms should establish stronger and more coordinated partnerships with local authorities to address misinformation effectively. This collaboration could involve the development of real-time monitoring and response systems that quickly identify and correct false information.

Social media platforms often struggle to manage the rapid spread of misinformation due to the sheer volume of content and the speed at which it circulates (Tucker et al., 2018). By working closely with local election authorities and regulatory bodies, platforms can enhance their ability to detect false information and implement timely interventions. This collaboration could include joint task forces or specialized units dedicated to monitoring election-related content. Real-time monitoring systems, supported by advanced algorithms and human oversight, can help in swiftly identifying and mitigating the spread of misinformation before it reaches a wider audience.

Establishing protocols for regular communication and information sharing between social media companies and election authorities can facilitate quicker responses to emerging misinformation. Additionally, investing in technological tools for real-time content analysis and developing streamlined procedures for reporting and addressing false claims will enhance the overall effectiveness of misinformation management efforts.

5.3.2 Enhance Public Education

There should be a concerted effort to increase public education on media literacy and critical evaluation of information. Public awareness campaigns and educational programs should be designed to help individuals recognize and assess misinformation.

The effectiveness of misinformation is often linked to the public's ability to critically evaluate the information they encounter (Pennycook et al., 2020). Educating the public about identifying fake news, understanding bias, and verifying sources can empower individuals to make informed decisions and reduce the impact of false information. Media literacy programs can also foster a more informed electorate, capable of distinguishing between credible and misleading content.

Public education initiatives could include school-based programs, community workshops, and online resources dedicated to media literacy. Collaboration with educational institutions, media organizations, and civil society groups can enhance the reach and effectiveness of these programs. Additionally, integrating media literacy into school curriculums and creating interactive online tools for fact-checking can further support public understanding of misinformation.

5.3.3 Improve Fact-Checking Mechanisms

Support and integrate fact-checking organizations more effectively within social media platforms to ensure that accurate information is easily accessible and that false claims are promptly addressed.

Fact-checking organizations play a crucial role in verifying the accuracy of information and combating misinformation (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018). However, these organizations often face challenges in reaching a broad audience and competing with the rapid spread of false

information. Enhancing their integration with social media platforms can ensure that fact-checked content is prominently displayed and that users have access to reliable information.

Social media platforms should develop partnerships with reputable fact-checking organizations to incorporate their findings into content moderation processes. Features such as fact-checking labels, corrections, and context additions to misleading posts can help users identify accurate information. Providing fact-checkers with greater visibility and resources to address false claims in real-time can also enhance their impact.

5.3.4 Promote Transparency in Information Sources

Encourage transparency regarding the sources of information shared on social media to help users better assess the credibility of content. This includes clearer labeling of content and promoting verified accounts.

Transparency about information sources allows users to make more informed judgments about the credibility of content (Chakrabarti, 2018). Clear labeling of information sources, such as indicating whether content is from verified accounts or recognized news outlets, can help users distinguish between reliable and unreliable information. Promoting transparency also fosters accountability among content creators and platforms.

Social media platforms should implement policies that require clearer identification of content sources and enhance the visibility of verified accounts. Features such as source tags, origin labels, and transparency reports can provide users with context about the information they encounter. Additionally, encouraging content creators to disclose their affiliations and motivations can contribute to a more transparent information environment.

5.3.5 Support Research on Misinformation Dynamics

Invest in and support ongoing research into the dynamics of misinformation and its impact on various social groups. This research should focus on understanding the mechanisms through which misinformation spreads and its effects on different demographics.

Research into misinformation dynamics is essential for developing effective strategies to combat its spread (Hermida, 2020). Understanding how misinformation propagates, the factors that influence its dissemination, and its impact on different social groups can inform more targeted and effective interventions. Continued research can also identify emerging trends and challenges in the misinformation landscape.

Funding and supporting academic and industry research on misinformation can provide valuable insights for developing policies and interventions. Collaboration between researchers, social media platforms, and policymakers can ensure that research findings are translated into practical solutions. Additionally, sharing research results with the public and stakeholders can raise awareness and drive collective efforts to address misinformation.

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APPENDIX I

UNIVERSITY OF MEDIA, ARTS AND COMMUNICATION(UNIMAC-IJ)

SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

DEPARTMENT OF COMMUNICATION SCIENCE

SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Dear respondent, this interview guide is to aid in gathering data on “Examining the Role of Social Media in the Spread of Election-Related Misinformation: A Case of Ghana’s 2020 General Election”. Kindly respond appropriately to the questions given. You are assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of this exercise because it will solely be used for the intended academic purpose.

Section A: Demographic Information

1. Sex:

- Male []
- Female []

2. Age:

- 18-30 Years []
- 31-40 Years []
- 41-50 Years []
- Above 50 Years []

3. Highest Level of Education:

- Primary Education []

- Secondary Education []
- Tertiary Level []

4 . Which social media platforms do you use most frequently?

- Facebook []
- Twitter []
- WhatsApp []
- Instagram []
- LinkedIn []
- TikTok []
- Others (please specify)

2. For what purposes do you primarily use these platforms?

- News Updates []
- Social Interaction []
- Political Discussions []
- Entertainment []
- Professional Networking []
- Educational Content []
- Personal Interests/Hobbies []
- Others (please specify).....

3. Have you noticed any differences in the types of information you receive on these platforms?

- Misinformation []
- Credible News []
- Personal Opinions []
- Advertisements []
- Entertainment Content []
- Neutral Information (e.g., updates not related to politics or social issues) []
- Others (please specify)

OBJECTIVE 1: EXPLORE THE CHANNELS THROUGH WHICH ELECTION-RELATED MISINFORMATION WAS SPREAD ON SOCIAL MEDIA DURING GHANA’S 2020 GENERAL ELECTION.

1. How did you encounter election-related information on social media during the 2020 General Election?
2. Which social media platforms were most commonly used to share election-related information in your experience?
3. Can you recall any specific instances of misinformation you encountered on social media during the election period?

OBJECTIVE 2: ASSESS THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA MISINFORMATION ON VOTER BEHAVIOR AND ELECTORAL OUTCOMES.

1. In what ways did the election-related misinformation you encountered on social media influence your thoughts or actions regarding the election?

2. Did you notice any change in the behavior or decisions of others around you based on social media information during the election?
3. How do you think the spread of misinformation on social media affected the overall outcome of the 2020 General Election in Ghana?

OBJECTIVE 3: EVALUATE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MEASURES TAKEN TO COMBAT MISINFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA DURING THE ELECTION PERIOD.

1. Were you aware of any efforts or initiatives to combat misinformation on social media during the 2020 General Election? If so, what were they?
2. How effective do you think these efforts were in reducing the spread of misinformation?
3. What strategies do you believe would be more effective in combating misinformation on social media in future elections?

THANK YOU FOR PARTICIPATING

APPENDIX II

FOCUS GROUP GUIDE

Demographic Information

Sex:

Male []

Female []

Age:

18-30 Years []

31-40 Years []

41-50 Years []

Above 50 Years []

Level of Education:

Primary Education []

Secondary Education []

Tertiary Education []

Social Media Usage:

1. Which social media platforms do you use most frequently? (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram)
2. How frequently do you use these platforms during election periods? (e.g., once a day, several times a day)
3. For what purposes do you primarily use these platforms during elections? (e.g., news updates, political discussions, social interaction)

Objective 1: Explore the Channels Through Which Election-Related Misinformation Was Spread on Social Media

1. What types of election-related content did you frequently come across on social media during the 2020 election?
 - Probe: Were you able to distinguish between verified and unverified information?
2. Which social media platforms were most active in disseminating election-related misinformation?
 - Probe: Can you give examples of specific misinformation that spread on these platforms?
3. How did social media algorithms (e.g., suggested posts, trending topics) contribute to the spread of misinformation?

- Probe: Did you notice any posts that were widely shared but later proven false?

Objective 2: Assess the Influence of Social Media Misinformation on Voter Behavior and Electoral Outcomes

1. How did misinformation on social media affect your voting decisions or the decisions of others you know?
 - Probe: Did misinformation make you change your mind about any candidates or electoral issues?
2. Can you describe any situations where misinformation caused confusion or doubt about the integrity of the election?
 - Probe: How did this affect voter turnout or participation in the election?
3. How do you think misinformation influenced the overall electoral outcomes?
 - Probe: Do you believe that misinformation swayed votes in any particular direction?

Objective 3: Evaluate the Effectiveness of Measures Taken to Combat Misinformation on Social Media

1. Were you aware of any fact-checking efforts or other measures to combat misinformation on social media during the election?
 - Probe: How effective do you think these measures were in curbing misinformation?

2. In your opinion, how can social media platforms improve in handling misinformation during elections?
 - Probe: Do you think stricter regulations or more transparency would help reduce misinformation?
3. What role do you believe the government or other organizations should play in controlling misinformation on social media?
 - Probe: Should social media platforms or external agencies have more responsibility for managing misinformation?