

Digital Noise or Democratic Voice?

**“Assessing the Role of Social Media in Sustaining or Destabilizing
Public Communication in Nigeria”**

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Abstract:

This study interrogates the dual role of social media in Nigeria's public sphere, asking whether it functions as a "Democratic Voice" that sustains civic engagement or as "Digital Noise" that destabilizes communication. Using a descriptive survey design with 152 respondents, supported by reliability testing (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.70$), the research examined sustaining contributions, destabilizing effects, and public preferences for regulation. Findings reveal a paradox: while social media improves access to information (Mean = 4.13) and encourages citizen engagement (Mean = 4.01), its destabilizing impact is statistically stronger ($p = .009$). The most critical threat identified is the spread of unverified information causing public panic (Mean = 4.17), surpassing concerns about hate speech or propaganda. Regression analysis further shows that exposure to fake news does not significantly predict demand for regulation ($p = .087$). Instead, belief in digital literacy emerges as the strongest predictor ($p = .006$), indicating that Nigerians favor empowerment and education over censorship. Qualitative insights reinforce this preference, with respondents overwhelmingly endorsing individual verification and digital literacy as solutions. The study concludes that while social media remains indispensable for democratic participation, its current ecosystem is weighted toward disruption. Sustainable resolution lies in institutionalized digital literacy, individual responsibility, and verification protocols, rather than coercive state control. These findings carry critical implications for policymakers, civil society, and communication scholars seeking to balance the risks and benefits of digital platforms in Nigeria's evolving public sphere.

Keywords: Social media; Public communication; Democratic voice; Digital noise; Nigeria; Misinformation; Digital literacy

1.0 Introduction:

Social media has transformed public communication in Nigeria, evolving from platforms for social interaction into primary channels for news, civic engagement, political mobilization, and cultural expression. With over 33 million active users, platforms such as Facebook, X (Twitter), WhatsApp, TikTok, and Instagram now rival traditional media in influence and agenda-setting power. This dual evolution presents both merits and demerits. On one hand, social media has opened democratic spaces, enabling citizens—especially youths—to participate in debates, challenge authorities, and amplify movements such as #EndSARS. On the other hand, it has facilitated misinformation, disinformation, tribal hostility, election propaganda, and panic-inducing rumors, as seen during COVID-19 vaccine messaging. This paradox raises a central question: does social media strengthen or weaken public communication in Nigeria? Addressing this requires systematic study of how Nigerians experience and interpret digital discourse. The purpose of this research is to critically assess whether social media sustains democratic engagement or destabilizes public discourse, examining both its constructive and destructive impacts. By focusing on user perceptions, civic engagement, misinformation, and regulatory preferences, the study contributes empirical evidence to ongoing debates in communication and media studies. Its significance extends to scholars, policymakers, civil society, and digital rights advocates, offering insights into how Nigeria can harness social media's democratic potential while mitigating its destabilizing risks.

1.1 Literature Review

Social Media as a Democratic Voice

Globally, scholars argue that social media has transformed public communication from one-way dissemination into participatory dialogue. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter/X, and WhatsApp dismantle traditional information barriers, enabling citizens to engage directly in civic debates and hold institutions accountable (Coombs & Holladay,

2019). In Nigeria, this democratizing potential is evident in movements like #EndSARS, where digital platforms amplified youth voices, mobilized protests, and attracted international solidarity (Nwosu & Okoro, 2021). Research confirms that social media fosters **citizen engagement**, enhances access to information, and sustains democratic dialogue by creating spaces for marginalized groups to participate in national discourse (Yildirim, 2020).

Social Media as Digital Noise

Conversely, literature highlights the destabilizing effects of social media. Nigerian scholars argue that platforms often serve as conduits for misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda, which can trigger public panic and erode trust in institutions (Alabi, 2020). Hate speech, cyberbullying, and ethnic or religious hostility are recurrent themes, with evidence showing that political actors exploit digital platforms to manipulate opinion and polarize communities (Omojola, 2021). Empirical studies confirm that **unverified information spreads faster than corrective communication**, making social media a volatile environment where disruption outweighs constructive dialogue (Westerman, Spence & Van Der Heide, 2014).

The Voice vs. Noise Paradox

The paradox of social media lies in its dual role: while it democratizes access to information, it simultaneously destabilizes public communication. Nigerian research underscores this tension, noting that citizens value the openness of digital spaces but remain wary of their susceptibility to manipulation and panic (Alabi, 2020; Omojola, 2021). This aligns with global scholarship that frames social media as both an opportunity for engagement and a risk to public order (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2014). The literature suggests that the balance between voice and noise depends on institutional capacity, user responsibility, and the presence of regulatory or educational frameworks.

Regulation, Literacy, and Empowerment

A growing body of work advocates for **digital literacy** as the most sustainable solution to mitigating digital noise. Rather than coercive state regulation, scholars recommend empowering users to verify information and practice responsible digital behavior (Nwosu & Okoro, 2021). Nigerian studies highlight that citizens themselves prefer education and

self-verification over censorship, reflecting a demand for policies that strengthen resilience without undermining free speech. This perspective situates digital literacy as both a civic skill and a democratic safeguard (Alabi, 2020).

2.0 Statement of the Problem

As social media expands its role in Nigeria's communication ecosystem, the balance between its constructive and destructive impacts remains unclear. While digital platforms provide unrestricted access to public dialogue, they also create a communication environment susceptible to manipulation, misinformation, emotional extremism, and polarization. Without systematically studying this tension, scholars and policymakers risk drawing conclusions based on isolated events instead of grounded evidence. The challenge is not merely the presence of misinformation or hostile exchanges but the scale and speed with which they spread, often influencing public perception before credible information can intervene. Furthermore, the absence of clear regulatory models that protect free speech without enabling digital harm leaves the public sphere vulnerable.

2.1 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to critically examine the influence of social media on public communication in Nigeria, specifically assessing whether its net effect strengthens democratic engagement or destabilizes public discourse.

2.2 Research Objectives

1. Assess how social media sustains public communication in Nigeria
2. Examine how social media destabilizes public communication
3. Evaluate public perception of balancing risks and benefits
4. Identify user-driven recommendations

2.3 Research Questions

- How do Nigerians engage with social media as a space for public

communication?

In what ways does social media support democratic participation and civic expression?

- What forms of misinformation, propaganda, and hostility do users encounter, and how do these shape public discourse?
- How does social media influence public opinion, trust, and collective understanding?

What communication patterns sustain or undermine healthy public communication in Nigeria?

2.4 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to ongoing debates in communication and media studies by providing empirical evidence on the contradictory effects of social media within Nigeria's public sphere. It offers insights valuable for scholars, media professionals, government and policy institutions, civil society groups, and general citizens.

2.5 Scope of the Study

The study focuses on Nigerian social media users across different age groups, regions, work status, and educational backgrounds. It examines major platforms, including Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. The analysis is limited to public communication phenomena, including civic engagement, misinformation, emotional discourse, propaganda, and digital behavior patterns.

2.6 Operational Definition of Terms

- **Public Communication:** Information exchange that shapes public understanding, opinion, or collective action.
- **Digital Noise:** Excessive or misleading communication that confuses, distracts, or destabilizes public discourse.
- **Democratic Voice:** Citizen participation in open dialogue, advocacy, and decision-making through digital platforms.
- **Misinformation:** False information shared without intent to harm.

- **Disinformation:** False information shared deliberately to manipulate.
- **Online Hostility:** Aggressive communication including insults, threats, cyberbullying, and harassment.
- **Civic Engagement:** Activities through which citizens participate in public or political life.

3.0 Methodology:

3.1 Research Design

The research employed a **descriptive survey design**, utilizing a structured quantitative instrument to aggregate data from a diverse sample of Nigerian social media users (N=152). The methodology was designed to capture both the *frequency* of specific phenomena (e.g., panic, fake news) and the *intensity* of user sentiment regarding these issues.

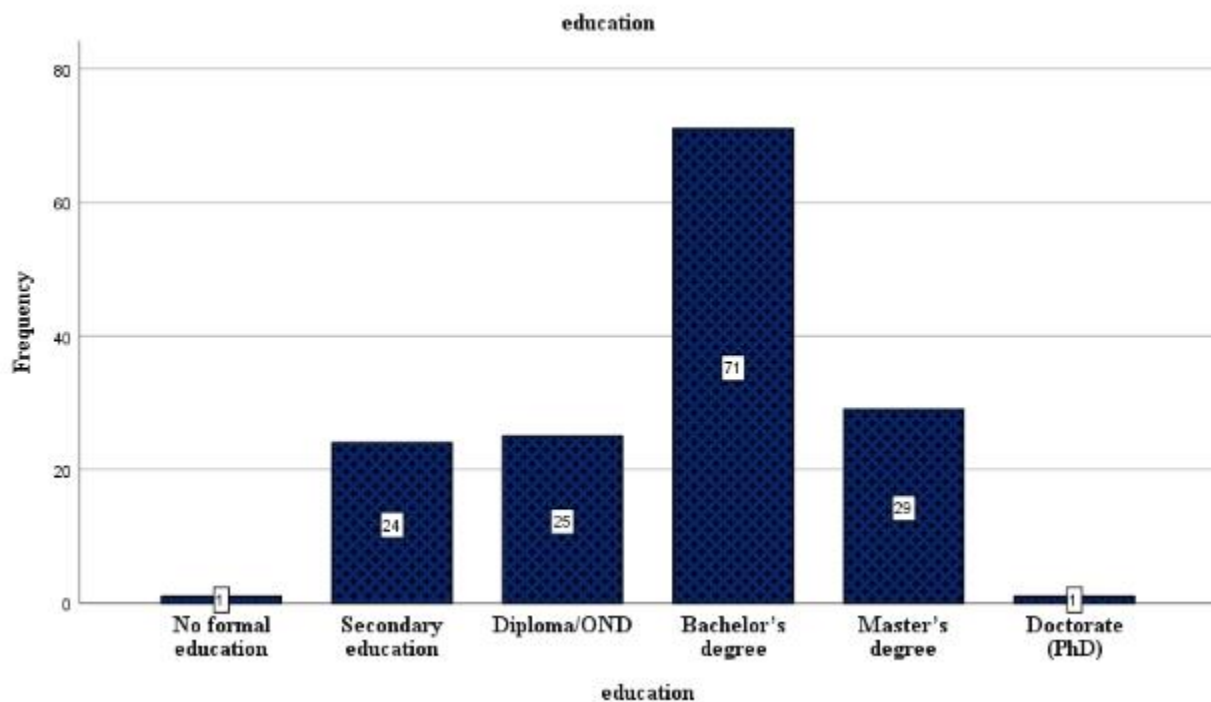


Figure 1: Distribution of Respondents by Education Level, indicating a highly literate sample (N=152).

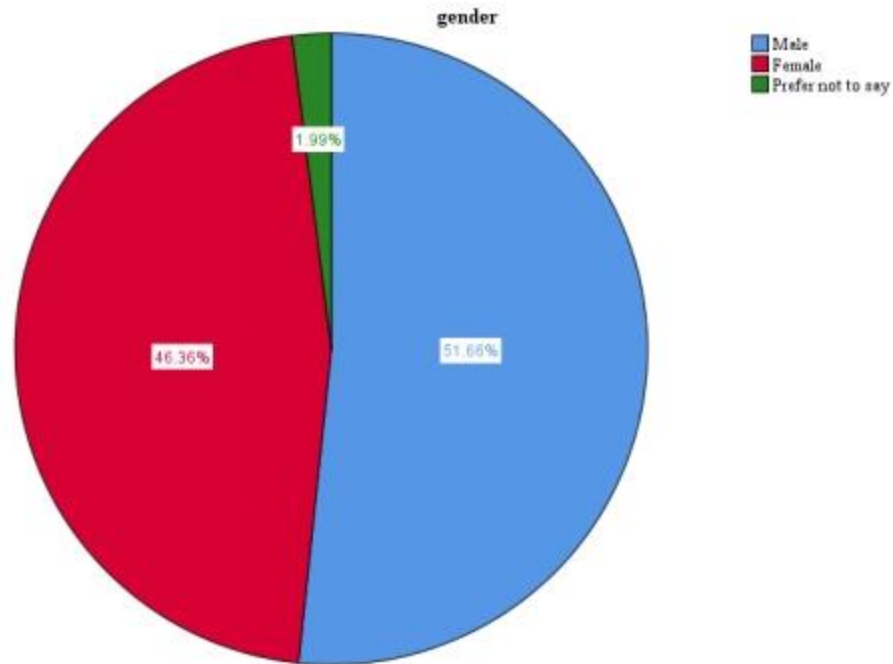


Figure 2: Distribution of Respondents by Gender

3.2 Instrument Reliability

To ensure data integrity and internal consistency, a **Cronbach's Alpha** reliability analysis was conducted. All constructs exceeded the acceptable threshold of 0.70, validating the instrument for rigorous statistical analysis.

Table 3.3: Reliability Statistics

Construct (Theme)	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Verdict
Sustaining Communication	5	0.736	Reliable
Destabilizing Effects	5	0.790	Reliable
Regulation/Bala	5	0.772	Reliable

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4.0 DATA PRESENTATION AND EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

4.1 Objective 1: Assessing the "Democratic Voice"

Goal: To assess the efficacy of social media in sustaining constructive public communication.

Respondents evaluated the positive contributions of social media using a 5-point Likert scale.

Table 4.1: Descriptive Statistics for Sustaining Factors

Indicator	Mean ($\bar{x}$)	Std. Dev.	Rank
Improved access to public information	4.13	1.139	1st
Encourages citizen engagement	4.01	1.036	2nd
Sustains democratic dialogue	3.54	1.038	3rd
Helps hold officials accountable	3.48	1.125	4th
Government agencies use it effectively	3.19	1.104	5th

Composite Sustaining Index	3.67	0.760	
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Simple Bar Mean of sm_improv, Mean of sm_encourage, Mean of sm_govt, Mean of sm_accountability, Mean of sm_dialogue by INDEX

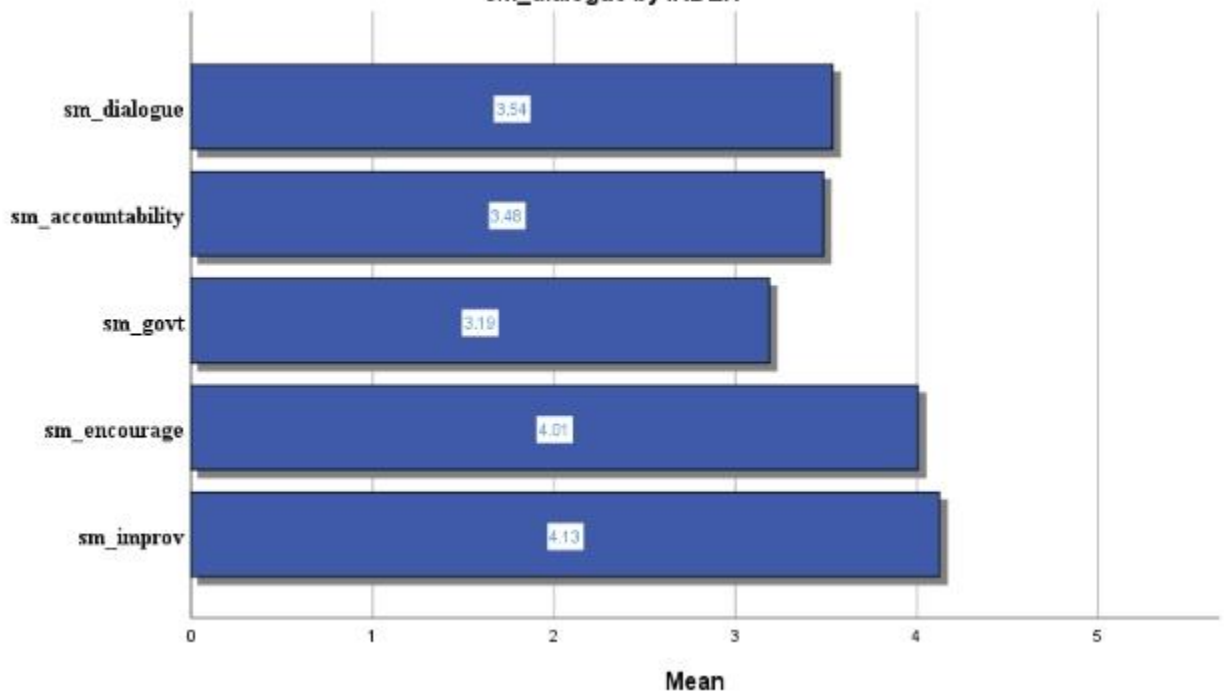


Figure 3: Mean Ratings of Sustaining Factors. Note the gap between "Citizen Access" and "Government Effectiveness."

Interpretation:

The empirical data corroborates the hypothesis that social media has successfully dismantled traditional information barriers $\bar{x}=4.13$. The strong endorsement of "Citizen Engagement" $\bar{x}=4.01$ suggests that the platform functions effectively as a mobilization tool. However, the notably lower score regarding "Government Effectiveness" $\bar{x}=3.19$ highlights a significant institutional lag; while the citizenry utilizes these platforms effectively for engagement, state institutions appear to lack the capacity for reciprocal communication.

4.2 Objective 2: Assessing the "Digital Noise"

Goal: To examine negative externalities and systemic risks.

Table 4.2: Descriptive Statistics for Destabilizing Factors

Indicator	Mean ($\bar{x}$)	Rank	Severity Analysis
Unverified info causes public panic	4.17	1st	Critical Threat
Political actors manipulate opinions	3.94	2nd	High Severity
Increases hate speech/bullying	3.85	3rd	High Severity
Spreads misinformation (Fake News)	3.75	4th	High Severity
Worsens ethnic/religious tensions	3.56	5th	High Severity
Composite Destabilizing Index	3.85	0.751	

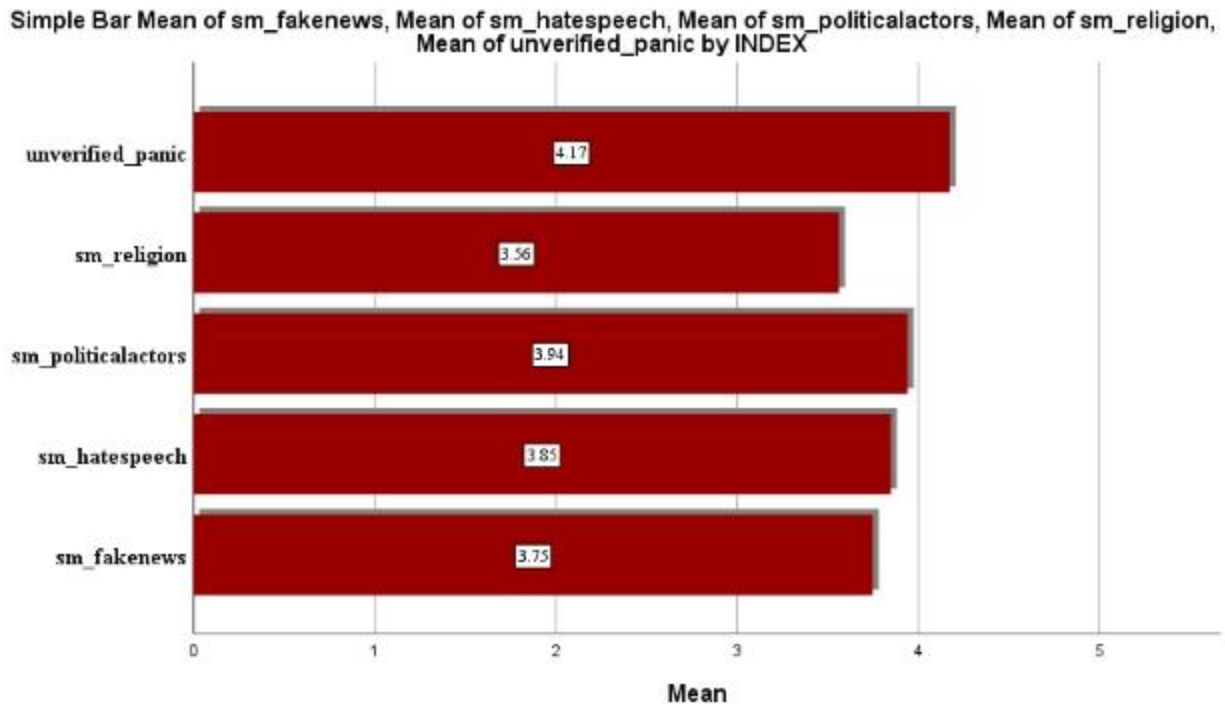


Figure 4: Mean Ratings of Destabilizing Factors. "Public Panic" represents the highest threat severity.

Interpretation:

The identification of "Public Panic" $\bar{x}=4.17$ as the primary threat is analytically significant. This suggests that the velocity of information dissemination poses a greater destabilizing threat than its veracity. Unverified rumors possess the capacity to precipitate immediate societal consequences before corrective information can be disseminated. Furthermore, the data indicts political actors $\bar{x}=3.94$ as primary agents of destabilization.

4.3 Objective 3: Public Perception of Balancing Risks & Benefits

Goal: To evaluate public preference regarding regulation, education, and self-censorship.

Table 4.3: Descriptive Statistics for Mitigation Mechanisms

Mitigation Strategy	Mean Ranking	Public Preference
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Users should verify info before sharing	1st	Very High
Literacy should be taught in schools	2nd	High
Civil society should promote responsible use	3rd	High
Stricter regulation is needed	4th	Moderate
Benefits of social media outweigh risks	5th	Moderate

Interpretation:

These findings carry profound policy implications. While there is moderate support for "Stricter Regulation," public preference is unequivocally stronger for Verification and Education. The populace does not advocate for the suppression of digital spaces, but rather for the acquisition of competencies necessary to navigate them safely.

4.4 Objective 4: User-Driven Recommendations

Goal: To identify user-driven solutions.

Open-ended responses were subjected to qualitative coding to identify recurrent themes.

Table 4.4: Distribution of User Recommendations

Recommendation Category	Percentage(%)	Share

Verification / Fact-Checking	<i>44.83</i>	Dominant Theme
User Responsibility / Ethics	<i>24.14</i>	Secondary Theme
Regulation / Monitoring	<i>20.69</i>	Minority Theme
Education / Digital Literacy	<i>10.34</i>	Minority Theme

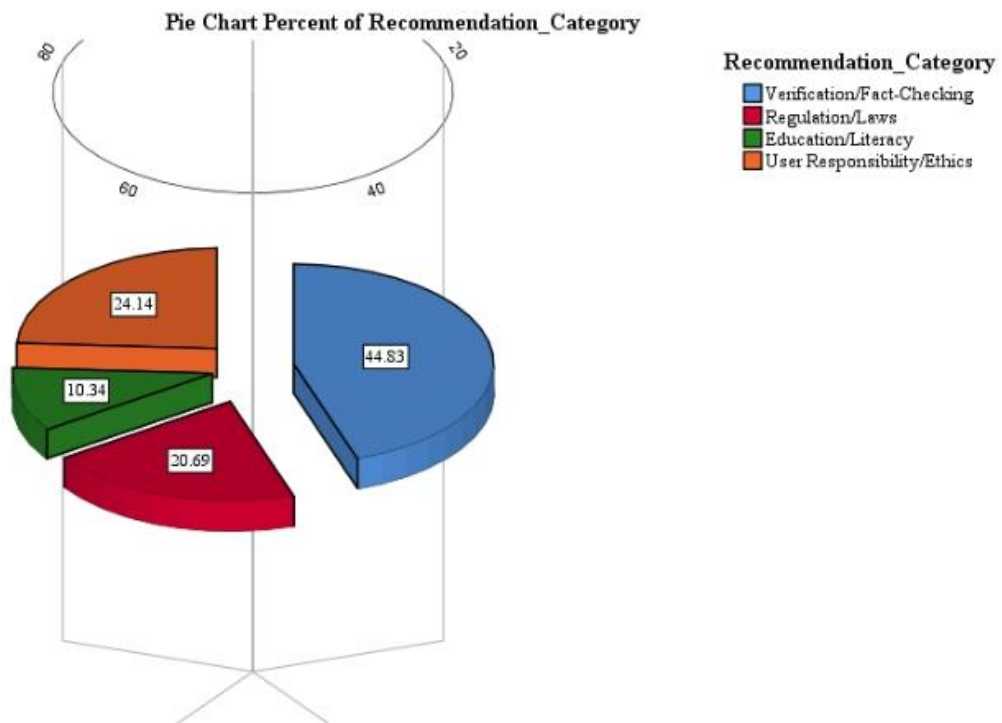


Figure 5: Distribution of User Recommendations. The dominant preference is for individual verification and education over state regulation.

Insight:

The qualitative data reinforces the findings of Objective 3. The dominant narrative is one of Individual Responsibility. Respondents overwhelmingly prescribed "Self-Verification" (confirming veracity prior to dissemination) as the primary antidote to digital noise.

5.0 Advanced Inferential Analysis

5.1 Hypothesis Testing (The Paradox)

Is the destabilizing effect statistically more significant than the sustaining effect?

A **Paired Samples T-Test** was conducted to compare the Sustaining Index (Voice) against the Destabilizing Index (Noise).

Table 5.1: Paired Samples T-Test Results

Variable Pair	Mean Difference	t-statistic	Sig. (p)
Sustaining vs. Destabilizing	-0.187	-2.640	.009

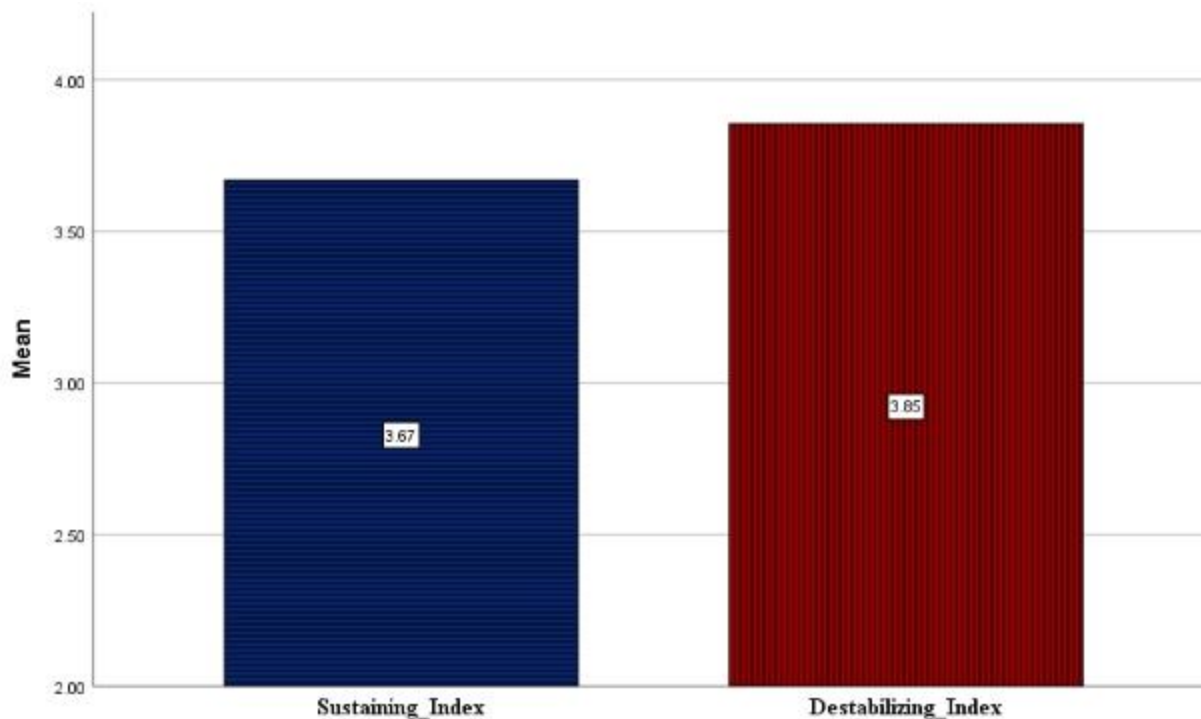


Figure 6: Comparative Analysis of Aggregate Indices. The Destabilizing Index (Noise) statistically exceeds the Sustaining Index (Voice).

Conclusion: The destabilizing effects are perceived as **significantly stronger** than the sustaining benefits $p=.009$. Consequently, the digital ecosystem is currently weighted heavily toward disruption.

5.2 Drivers of Regulation (Regression Analysis)

What factors predict the demand for regulation identified in Objective 3?

A **Multiple Linear Regression** was utilized to isolate the predictors of the desire for "Stricter Regulation."

Table 5.2: Regression Coefficients (Dependent Variable: Regulation)

Predictor Variable	Beta (β)	Sig. (p)	Analytical Verdict
(Constant)	-	.001	-

Belief in Digital Literacy	.228	.006	Significant Predictor
Exposure to Fake News	.168	.087	Not Significant
Exposure to Hate Speech	.052	.598	Not Significant
Age	-.075	.338	Not Significant

Insight:

Contrary to intuitive assumptions, exposure to "Fake News" does not statistically drive the demand for regulation $p > .05$. Instead, Belief in Digital Literacy $p = .006$ serves as the primary predictor. This indicates that the Nigerian public views regulation as a supportive framework for education, rather than as an instrument of censorship.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusion

This investigation concludes that while social media remains an indispensable instrument for democratic engagement (Objective 1), it currently operates as a **net-destabilizing force** (Objective 2) due to the prevalence of panic-inducing, unverified information. However, the public rejects draconian censorship (Objective 3), favoring a solution rooted in **verification protocols** and **universal digital literacy** (Objective 4).

6.2 Recommendations

Based on the empirical evidence, the following strategic actions are recommended:

1. **Policy Reorientation:** Government policy must pivot from punitive measures to **educational mandates**, specifically the integration of "Digital Civics" into the

national curriculum.

2. **Institutional Verification:** The establishment of **Rapid Response Verification Desks** is imperative to address information vacuums before unverified rumors precipitate public panic.
3. **Algorithmic Accountability:** Policy frameworks should prioritize the visibility of "Verified" sources during periods of national crisis to mitigate the velocity of misinformation.

Ethical Considerations:

Informed consent, confidentiality, right to withdraw, and data protection were observed to ensure compliance with research ethics.

Limitations of the Study:

Originally, a total of 400 samples were meant to be collected; however, 153 were obtained. The chief reasons were the very low response rate and access challenges, as the majority of the questions were administered online. However, the lot collected still provided meaningful insights with the scope of the sample achieved.

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Appendices

Appendix :

Survey Questionnaire/Consent form

Thank you for participating in this study. Your responses are anonymous and will be used solely for research.

Section 1: Consent Form

Title of Survey: *Assessing the Role of Social Media in Sustaining or Destabilizing Public Communication in Nigeria*

Purpose of the Survey:

This survey aims to gather opinions and experiences on how social media influences public communication in Nigeria—whether it serves as a tool for informed engagement or contributes to misinformation and societal tension. The findings will be used strictly for academic purposes and to enrich research discussions in communication and media studies.

Voluntary Participation:

Your participation in this survey is entirely voluntary. You are free to skip any question or withdraw from the survey at any time without penalty.

Confidentiality:

All responses will remain confidential. No names, emails, or identifying information will be collected. Data will be analyzed collectively, ensuring your anonymity and privacy throughout the research process.

Estimated Duration:

The survey will take approximately **8–10 minutes** to complete.

Consent Statement:

By clicking "**I Agree**" below, you indicate that you:

- Have read and understood the purpose of this study;
- Are voluntarily participating in the survey; and
- Are at least 18 years old.

Question: Do you consent to participate in this survey?

- ☐ I Agree to Participate → Go to Section 2
- ☐ I Do Not Agree → End Form with message: *Thank you for your time. You may close this window now.*

Section 2: Demographics

Questions (all required unless specified):

1. **Age:**

- ☐ Under 18
- ☐ 18–24
- ☐ 25–34
- ☐ 35–44
- ☐ 45–54
- ☐ 55 and above

2. **Gender:**

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Prefer not to say

3. **Marital Status:**

- ☐ Single
- ☐ Married
- ☐ Divorced/Separated
- ☐ Widowed

4. **Highest Level of Education Completed:**

- ☐ No formal education
- ☐ Primary education
- ☐ Secondary education
- ☐ Diploma/OND
- ☐ Bachelor's degree
- ☐ Master's degree

- ☐ Doctorate (PhD)
- ☐ Other: _____

5. **Employment Status:**

- ☐ Employed (Public sector)
- ☐ Employed (Private sector)
- ☐ Self-employed
- ☐ Student
- ☐ Unemployed
- ☐ Retired

6. **Occupation/Field of Work:**

- ☐ Media/Communication
- ☐ Education
- ☐ Health
- ☐ Technology
- ☐ Business/Finance
- ☐ Civil Service
- ☐ Other: _____

7. **State of Residence:** _____

8. **Area of Residence:**

- ☐ Urban
- ☐ Semi-urban
- ☐ Rural

9. **Region of Residence:**

- ☐ North Central
- ☐ North East
- ☐ North West
- ☐ South East

☐ South South

☐ South West

10. Average Daily Time on Social Media:

☐ Less than 1 hour

☐ 1–3 hours

☐ 4–6 hours

☐ More than 6 hours

11. Most Frequently Used Social Media Platforms (tick all that apply):

☐ Facebook

☐ X (Twitter)

☐ Instagram

☐ WhatsApp

☐ TikTok

☐ YouTube

☐ Other: _____

Section 3: Core Survey Questions

Theme 1: General Use of Social Media

12. How long have you been using social media?

☐ Less than 1 year

☐ 1–3 years

☐ 4–6 years

☐ Over 6 years

13. Main reason for using social media:

☐ News and information

☐ Entertainment

☐ Social interaction

☐ Education/research

- ☐ Business/marketing
- ☐ Advocacy or activism
- ☐ Other: _____

14. How frequently do you post or share information?

- ☐ Several times a day
- ☐ Once a day
- ☐ A few times a week
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Never

Theme 2: Social Media and Public Communication

(Tick one per row: 1 = Strongly Disagree, ... 5 = Strongly Agree)

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
Social media has improved access to public information in Nigeria.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social media encourages citizens to engage in national issues.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Government agencies use social media effectively.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social media has helped hold public officials accountable.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social media helps sustain democratic dialogue and civic participation.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Theme 3: Social Media and Destabilizing Effects

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
Social media spreads misinformation/fake news.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social media has increased hate speech/online bullying.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Political actors misuse social media to manipulate opinions.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social media worsens ethnic/religious tensions.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Unverified info causes public panic.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Theme 4: Balancing the Impact

Statement	1	2	3	4	5
Benefits of social media outweigh the risks.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Stricter regulation is needed.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Users should verify information before sharing.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social media literacy should be taught in schools.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Civil society should promote responsible social media use.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Theme 5: Open-Ended Questions

30. How has social media changed communication about public issues?

☐ (Short answer)

31. Major challenges social media poses to public communication?

☐ (Short answer)

32. Steps to ensure social media contributes positively?

Section 4: Closing & Thank-You Page

Thank you for completing this survey. Your input is valuable. Responses are anonymous.

- Appendix B: Focus Group Discussion Guide
- Appendix C: Consent Form