



## Social Media Communication and Public Trust in Government: Evidence from Residents of Edo State's Selected Local Government Areas

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**Abstract.** As digital communication has grown, public trust in government institutions has decreased and it is unclear how the quality of social media communication affects citizens' trust at the subnational level. This paper therefore compared the effect of social media communication on the trust of government by the citizens of six Local Government Areas (LGA) of Edo State, Nigeria (Oredo, Ovia North-East, Egor, Ikpoba-Okha, Esan West, and Etsako West) in the period 2018 to 2026. Data collection was conducted using a quantitative cross sectional survey design with 406 respondents who were filled out on the Social Media Communication and Public Trust Questionnaire (SMCPTQ) and processed using descriptive statistics and multiple regression and Pearson correlation analysis. The results indicated that the credibility, transparency and timeliness of government communication had a significant influence on public trust, with credibility having the strongest impact, accounting for 54.9% of the variance. The effect of misinformation and political propaganda on trust was found to be negative and significant, and information verification behaviour was found to be positive and significant, with both accounting for 48.2% of the variance. The relationship between citizen's perception of government accountability and responsiveness was moderately and positively correlated with citizen engagement in government social media platforms. The results highlight the importance of trust in institutions, created through credible and transparent digital communication, which is reinforced by interactive dialogue, whereas misinformation erodes it. The study suggests that the government of Edo State focus on credible and timely communication, setting of digital fact-checking mechanisms, and sustaining citizens' engagement to bolster their trust.

**Keywords:** Social media communication, public trust, government accountability, misinformation, citizen engagement, Edo State

### 1. Introduction

There are very few resources of greater importance to a government than the trust of its citizens. Trust reduces the cost of governing, because trusted institutions are easier to collect taxes, can get people to obey without the threat of force and sustain crises without losing legitimacy (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Citizens seldom see governance; they experience it through what they receive, and therefore the communication of government is a part of trust not just its consequence. Made measurable, the OECD (2022) states that the key building blocks of institutional trust are responsiveness, reliability, integrity, openness and fairness – all of which are achieved at least in part through communication.

The rules of that communication have changed with the advent of digital platforms. Once the message went only one way through press statements, now it goes back and forth around Facebook, X, WhatsApp and Instagram, and citizens reply in real time (Mergel, 2013) and early supporters believed that this offered an inexpensive way to achieve transparency, and anti-corruption (Bertot, Jaeger & Grimes, 2010). The evidence has not been as neatly organised. However, in some contexts, citizens express greater trust in government-sponsored websites and social media accounts, as does transparency (Song & Lee, 2016), and as engagement via official platforms increases, so does institution-based trust, outside Western democracies as well (Warren, Sulaiman & Jaafar, 2014). Despite this, experimental research reveals that the trust dividend of transparency is small and culture-specific, and can even be negative (Grimmelikhuijsen,

Porumbescu, Hong & Im, 2013; Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2014). In short, context determines.

Nigeria provides a challenging environment. By the end of 2025, there were approximately 109 million internet users (45.5% of the population), 47.8 million active social media users (Kemp, 2026), and the National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy 2020–2030 (Federal Ministry of Communications and Digital Economy, 2019) officially commits the government to citizen engagement through the internet. The attitude to trust has gone in the opposite direction. Afrobarometer surveys reveal a ten-year decline in confidence in African public institutions (Adaba & Boio, 2024), and only a quarter of Nigerians had a favourable opinion of the electoral commission before the 2023 elections, which was down from 35 in 2017 (Afrobarometer, 2023). Some of the slide can be understood from the recent digital history. The blackouts of the #EndSARS protests by official accounts were found wanting by citizen and diaspora groups, who were more apt at credibly reporting of the Lekki shooting (Dambo, Ersoy, Auwal, Olorunsola & Saydam, 2022); WhatsApp was an industrial medium for electoral propaganda (Cheeseman, Fisher, Hassan & Hitchen, 2020); and a seven-month suspension of Twitter, read to many citizens as an act of censorship (Access Now, 2022).

The Nigerian record is missing subnational evidence. There is a local level of trust, at the council office and the state ministry, but the vast majority of findings available are aggregated on the national level or on the level of Lagos and Abuja. Edo State provides instructive corrective. It held off-cycle governorship elections in 2020 and 2024 which were as competitive as at polling units (Independent National Electoral Commission, 2024), and its 18 local government areas range from the densely connected metropolis of Benin City to the rural areas where access is lacking (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). This study therefore looks at the relationship between social media communication and trust in government of residents (18 years and above) in the six selected local government areas in Edo State from 2018 to 2026.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problems

The Nigerian governments have never communicated so much, and been believed so little. At the same time, public institutions have seen a decline in their confidence over the same period, even though they have social media accounts that are active (Adaba & Boio, 2024; Afrobarometer, 2023). In the absence of official communication, building confidence was straightforward, and with the increasing visibility of

government in the digital sphere since 2018, there should be an increase in confidence, and there isn't. Existing work on Nigeria has focused on episodes of communication such as campaigns, protest, even platform bans, but not on the day-to-day relationship that citizens have with the government, to which they are bound by trust (Cheeseman et al., 2020; Dambo et al., 2022). The difference between 3 and 4 is the make or break. Often studies in Nigeria have failed to break down communication quality into the three facets of credibility, transparency and timeliness that have been found to have the trust effect in international studies (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2014; Porumbescu, 2016).

This means that the policymaker is unable to determine which of the three aspects of communication quality should be focused on to gain the benefits of the trust effect. Misinformation is documented to be high and detrimental to media trust in Nigeria (Apuke & Omar, 2021; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019), and it is yet to be documented how it affects trust in government at state and local level. Whether citizen participation on official platforms means that there is perceived accountability, the very mechanism on which the digital governance promise rests, has not yet been tested for any subnational Nigerian population. Ministries and Councils in Edo State then spend money on digital communication but without any evidence that they benefit from it, and at the same time the less connected members of the population face the risk of being cut out of the conversation between the state and the citizen. This study provides that evidence to six of the State's local government areas.

### 1.2 Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study is to investigate the impact of social media communication on public confidence in the government of Edo State, Nigeria. In particular the study aims to:

- Assess the impact of residents' trust in government institutions on the basis of the credibility, transparency and timely nature of government's communication via social media;
- Evaluate the impact of misinformation, fake news and political propaganda in residents' trust in government; and
- Investigate how the citizen's interaction with the government's social media platforms relates to their sense of citizen responsibility and responsiveness of government.

### 1.3 Research Questions

In this study, the following research questions are raised:

- How much do residents' trusts in government institutions depend on the credibility, transparency and timeliness of government communication using social media?
- How does the occurrence of misinformation, fake news and political propaganda affect the public trust in the government?
- What is the connection between citizens' engagement on government social media and residents' views on government accountability and responsiveness?

### 1.4 Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses will be tested at 5% level of significance:

Research hypothesis 1 (RH1): The credibility, transparency and timeliness of government social media communication do not significantly affect residents' trust in government institutions.

The hypothesis is that misinformation, fake news and political propaganda affect residents' trust in the government minimally.

Citizen engagement on government social media sites does not significantly relate to residents' perception of government accountability and responsiveness.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Government Social Media Communication: Conceptual Review

Government social media communication refers to the implementation of interactive digital communication tools by public institutions to disseminate information, solicit opinions and communicate with citizens. Mergel (2013) identifies two types of strategies: push – broadcasting and pull, by approaching citizens with an invitation to become part of official communications, and networking strategies – two-way exchange. Most agencies do not include anything beyond the first. The difference is critical as the characteristics of communication that are relevant to the trust are not in quantity but in quality. The first attribute is credibility, because if people don't believe what you're telling them, they won't accept it. Trustworthiness judgments are only enhanced by transparency up to a certain point, when it concerns decisions and performance of politicians and

transparency to citizens with little prior trust is more beneficial than transparency from those with strong prior distrust (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013; Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2014). In a “rumour before correction” media sphere, timeliness has stood on its own as a factor in social media's success over traditional websites (Porumbescu 2016).

Trust in government is defined as citizens' confidence that public institutions are capable of functioning effectively, equitably and in the public interest, without close supervision (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Easton (1965) makes a distinction between specific support of incumbent authorities and diffuse support of the regime. Institutional accounts of origins see trust as an ongoing assessment of performance, not as a cultural inheritance; thus, the information environment in which performance comes into view is causally significant (Mishler & Rose, 2001). The OECD (2022) defines this as being measured by five drivers of institutional trust: responsiveness, reliability, integrity, openness and fairness, some of which can only be evaluated by citizens based on government's claims.

Citizen engagement transforms communication into accountability. Where they are allowed to ask questions of officials in public, responsiveness can be observed, and silence from officials is corrosive, leading to civic participation and institution-based trust (Warren et al., 2014) as a result of that interaction (Song & Lee, 2016). But the same structure, when it comes to falsehood, carries falsehood further than correction. False content spreads further and faster than true content (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018), and is found across a continuum of fake news ranging from fabrication, manipulation and propaganda (Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2018). In Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa, trust in the news media has eroded, leaving African audiences exposed to heavy doses of misinformation (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019). In Nigeria, sharing of fake news is related to altruistic motivations, and verification is difficult to achieve (Apuke & Omar, 2021); and fake news is found on encrypted WhatsApp networks, beyond the reach of public rebuttal (Cheeseman et al., 2020). The rest of the story is the unequal access. When Nigeria is compared to other African countries, it is evident that social media and online communication has overcome the older and rural, the less educated and poorer Nigerians whose trust in the government is often the lowest, which is why they are treated as moderators here.

## 2.2 Empirical Review

The first systematically evidence was the e-government websites. Welch, Hinnant and Moon (2005), found that the use of websites is correlated with “satisfaction,” and that satisfaction is correlated with “trust”. Tolbert and Mossberger (2006) determined that the use of e-government is most strongly associated with satisfaction and, in turn, with responsiveness and trust, at the local level. The mechanism was refined in social media studies: Song and Lee (2016) showed that perceived transparency was the mediator between citizens' use of government social media and trust in the United States, while Porumbescu (2016) found that social media was associated with more favourable perceptions of government among Seoul citizens than were denser official websites, and Warren et al. (2014) extended the pattern to Malaysia. Modesty, conditionality, and even absence of the effects of transparency on trust are suggested by experimental work (Grimmelikhuijsen et al., 2013; Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2014).

Disruption has been documented in Nigeria, however, by Nigerian scholarship. Foreign media and diaspora networks were trusted during the Lekki shooting; social media provided the organising infrastructure for #EndSARS; WhatsApp facilitated grassroots mobilisation and industrial-scale disinformation during the 2019 elections; and Apuke and Omar (2021) developed a model for individual predictors of fake news sharing. No measure of the perceived quality of routine government communication and trust in government at subnational level are accounted for in this work.

## 2.3 Gap in the Literature

Combined, the literatures reveal the gap that this study addresses. International research provides us with attribute-level models of the communication–trust relationship, however, these studies are mostly conducted in the North American and European/East Asian contexts, while Nigerian research provides rich accounts of digital contention, but little measurement of trust as a product of the communication that takes place every day in the Nigerian context, most directly with local government. Those established questions of the quality of communication, influence of misinformation, and citizen engagement are taken into that untested setting in this study using a probability-based survey of six local government areas in Edo State.

## 2.4 Theoretical Framework

The study is supported by three theories, each of which weighs a certain amount. Uses and gratifications theory of Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1973) views viewers as active and with an agenda, and choosing platforms to meet the goals of surveillance, connection and diversion. It establishes an audience-side base of the study: those who actively follow official accounts to keep track of government and those who come across government content only in forwarded WhatsApp broadcasts have different gratification structures, and it assumes that they process the official messages accordingly. It leaves it deliberately ambiguous as to the effects of exposure on attitudes, which are answered by the two theories to follow.

Media system dependency theory of Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976), states that the more dependent audiences are on the media for information the more influence they will have and that dependence increases in times of conflict and uncertainty. The Nigerian information environment of 2018-2026, where the official channels of communication are barely accessible in the offline space and the traditional media or communication actors are all but trusted is a textbook example, and this is reflected in the 'alternative' space of platform networks where the #EndSARS protesters had to go to get their information (Dambo et al., 2022). The theory suggests testable hypotheses for the current study: communication quality and misinformation should both have an effect on trust judgements, and this effect should be greater for residents who are most reliant on social media to get government-information, suggesting systematic urban–rural and literacy-based implications.

The dependent variable is provided by institutional trust theory. Trust is a process that has been carried forward over the years from Easton (1965) to Mishler and Rose (2001) to the OECD (2022) framework of drivers, a process that takes place continuously, making the information input to that process causally central. From this perspective, communication in the public sphere by government is a performance signal in itself, and the degree of transparency as presented in the experimental literature on transparency are the limits of what can be achieved with communication (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2014). The frameworks that were considered and discarded were the adoption related frameworks like the technology acceptance model, as this study was not about the technology adoption but about the formation of attitude among the existing users.

### 3. Research Methodology

The study design employed was quantitative cross sectional descriptive survey which was appropriate for the study as it was used to measure the perceptions of the participants at the moment and to examine the relationship between the variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It was carried out in the six Local Government Areas (Oredo, Ovia North-East, Egor, Ikpoba-Okha, Esan West and Etsako West) which are located in the three senatorial districts, in addition to urban–rural diversity of Edo State. The study's target population included adults (18 years and older) that use or are exposed to social media. The sample size of 420 respondents was determined according to Yamane (1967) formula then was sampled by multistage sampling technique with stratification, purposive, random and systematic sampling.

The Social Media Communication and Public Trust Questionnaire (SMCPTQ) was used to gather data on demographic characteristics, social media use, perceived communication quality, misinformation

exposure, citizen engagement, accountability and public trust. The subjects were asked to respond on a four-point Likert Scale. Face and content validity were validated by three experts, and the Cronbach's alpha coefficients were obtained in a pilot study (with 40 residents of Uhumwonde LGA) was greater than the recommended 0.70 (Cronbach, 1951). In order to have good coverage of urban and rural communities' questionnaires were face-to-face administered for six weeks by trained research assistants. IBM SPSS Statistics Version 27 was used to analyse the data. Data were summarized using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations) and the hypotheses were tested using multiple regression and Pearson correlation at the 0.05 significance level. Ethical clearance was obtained prior to the collection of the data, consent was obtained from the participants and anonymity ensured, and handling of the data was in accordance with the Nigeria Data Protection Act (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2023).

### 4. Results

**Research Question One:** How much do residents' trusts in government institutions depend on the credibility, transparency and timeliness of government communication using social media?

**Table 4.3:** Perceived Influence of Government Social Media Communication on Public Trust (N = 406)

| Item                                                                           | Mean        | SD          | Decision        |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-----------------|
| Government information on official social media platforms is credible.         | 2.76        | 0.93        | Accepted        |
| Government communication is transparent.                                       | 2.71        | 0.92        | Accepted        |
| Government responds promptly to citizens on social media.                      | 2.53        | 0.98        | Accepted        |
| Timely communication increases my confidence in government.                    | 2.92        | 0.89        | Accepted        |
| Overall quality of government communication influences my trust in government. | 2.93        | 0.91        | Accepted        |
| <b>Grand Mean</b>                                                              | <b>2.77</b> | <b>0.93</b> | <b>Accepted</b> |

**Interpretation:** The results suggest that the overall government social media communication perceived by respondents was positive in improving public trust (Grand Mean = 2.77). The mean scores for Credibility, transparency and dissemination of information were all higher than the decision benchmark (2.50). The overall level of communication quality (M = 2.93), and timely communication (M = 2.92), were cited as the highest influence whereas the responsiveness of government to online enquiries was rated the lowest (M = 2.53), indicating that the interactive engagement is still not as strong as the information provision.

#### Test of Research Hypothesis One

**RH<sub>1</sub>:** The credibility, transparency and timeliness of government social media communication do not significantly affect residents' trust in government institutions.

**Table 4.4:** Multiple Regression Analysis of Government Social Media Communication and Public Trust

| Variable                | $\beta$                      | T                 | p-value          |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| Credibility             | 0.406                        | 9.31              | <0.001           |
| Transparency            | 0.271                        | 6.26              | <0.001           |
| Timeliness              | 0.225                        | 5.32              | <0.001           |
| <b>Model Statistics</b> | <b>R<sup>2</sup> = 0.549</b> | <b>F = 163.57</b> | <b>&lt;0.001</b> |

**Decision:** The null hypothesis was rejected since the regression model was statistically significant (F = 163.57, p < 0.001). The three dimensions of communication accounted for 54.9% of the variance in public trust.

**Interpretation:** Credibility exerted the strongest positive influence on public trust, followed by transparency and timeliness. The findings suggest that residents are more likely to trust government institutions when official social media communication is perceived as credible, transparent and prompt.

**Research Question Two:** How does the occurrence of misinformation, fake news and political propaganda affect public trust in the government?

**Table 4.4:** Influence of Misinformation, Fake News and Political Propaganda on Public Trust (N = 406)

| Item                                                                                   | Mean | SD   | Decision |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|------|----------|
| Fake news on social media reduces my trust in government.                              | 3.14 | 0.84 | Accepted |
| Political propaganda makes it difficult to distinguish factual government information. | 3.07 | 0.83 | Accepted |
| Conflicting information creates uncertainty about government performance.              | 3.12 | 0.81 | Accepted |
| I verify government-related information before believing or sharing it.                | 2.94 | 0.84 | Accepted |
| Frequent misinformation weakens public confidence in government institutions.          | 3.18 | 0.79 | Accepted |
| Grand Mean                                                                             | 3.09 | 0.82 | Accepted |

**Interpretation:** The results indicate that respondents felt misinformation, fake news and political propaganda were important factors that impacted their trust in government (Grand Mean = 3.09). The highest agreement was for frequent misinformation weakens confidence in government (M = 3.18) closely followed by fake news reduces trust (M = 3.14). Overall, respondents agreed that misinformation on social media affects people's level of trust and confidence in public institutions.

### Test of Research Hypothesis Two

**RH<sub>2</sub>:** Misinformation, fake news and political propaganda affect residents' trust in government minimally.

**Table 4.5:** Regression Analysis of Misinformation and Public Trust

| Variable                 | $\beta$       | T            | p-value |
|--------------------------|---------------|--------------|---------|
| Misinformation/Fake News | -0.431        | -9.84        | <0.001  |
| Political Propaganda     | -0.287        | -6.71        | <0.001  |
| Information Verification | 0.169         | 3.98         | <0.001  |
| Model Statistics         | $R^2 = 0.482$ | $F = 124.83$ | <0.001  |

**Decision:** The hypothesis that misinformation, fake news and political propaganda has only a small impact on public trust is rejected. The regression model was highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ,  $F = 124.83$ ).

**Interpretation:** The results indicate that misinformation and political propaganda significantly reduce public trust in government. Misinformation exerted the strongest negative influence ( $\beta = -0.431$ ), while political propaganda also had a substantial adverse effect ( $\beta = -0.287$ ). Conversely, respondents who reported verifying information before accepting or sharing it exhibited relatively higher levels of trust in government ( $\beta = 0.169$ ). Collectively, the predictors explained 48.2% of the variation in public trust.

**Research Question Three:** What is the connection between citizens' engagement on government social media and residents' views on government accountability and responsiveness?

**Table 4.6:** Citizen Engagement and Perception of Government Accountability (N = 406)

| Item                                                                                      | Mean | SD   | Decision |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|------|----------|
| I regularly engage with government information on social media.                           | 2.82 | 0.90 | Accepted |
| Government responds to citizens' enquiries through social media.                          | 2.58 | 0.96 | Accepted |
| My interaction with government social media has improved my perception of accountability. | 2.81 | 0.89 | Accepted |
| Active engagement by government increases my confidence in its responsiveness.            | 2.92 | 0.87 | Accepted |
| Citizen participation on social media promotes transparency and accountability.           | 2.99 | 0.84 | Accepted |
| Grand Mean                                                                                | 2.82 | 0.89 | Accepted |

**Interpretation:** The findings indicate that there is a positive relationship between the citizens' involvement in government social media and their perceptions of accountability and responsiveness (Grand Mean = 2.82). The respondents' mean ratings indicated that increased interactions between government and citizens increases confidence in government responsiveness (M = 2.92) and transparency (M = 2.99). However, there is room for improvement as government responses to citizens' enquiries are relatively low (M = 2.58).

### Test of Research Hypothesis Three

**RH<sub>3</sub>:** Citizen Engagement on government social media sites does not significantly relate to residents' perception of government accountability and responsiveness.

**Table 4.7:** Correlation Analysis of Citizen Engagement and Government Accountability

| Variables                                      | r     | p-value | Decision    |
|------------------------------------------------|-------|---------|-------------|
| Citizen Engagement × Government Accountability | 0.668 | <0.001  | Significant |
| Citizen Engagement × Government Responsiveness | 0.641 | <0.001  | Significant |

#### Decision:

The null hypothesis is **rejected** because there is a statistically significant positive relationship between citizen engagement on government social media platforms and residents' perceptions of government accountability and responsiveness ( $p < 0.001$ ).

#### Interpretation

The Pearson correlation analysis shows that there is a moderate positive correlation between citizen engagement and perceived government accountability ( $r = 0.668$ ) and government responsiveness ( $r = 0.641$ ). The findings indicate that the more active residents are with official government social media platforms, the more they see the government institutions as transparent, accountable and responsive to the concerns of the public. The results reflect the need for continuous two-way communication for the development of state–citizen relationship in the selected Local Government Areas of Edo State.

### 5. Discussion of Findings

The study revealed that the public trust in government institutions was significantly improved when government communicated through social media platforms in terms of credibility, transparency and timeliness. Credibility proved to be the most important factor in determining citizens' trust in government, with information that is accurate, consistent and timely being more likely to inspire trust. This discovery is consistent with the findings of Song and Lee (2016), Porumbescu (2016) and Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer (2014) that transparent and responsive digital communication helps build institutional trust. It also conforms to the framework of the OECD (2022), which recognizes openness and responsiveness as key factors of public trust.

The results also showed that misinformation, fake news and political propaganda have a strong detrimental impact on trust in government. This is in line with findings of Vosoughi et al. (2018), Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2019), and Apuke and Omar (2021) that misinformation travels quickly on digital platforms, and citizens' trust in the public institutions is undermined. Last, the positive association between perceptions of government accountability and responsiveness with citizen engagement corroborates Warrens et al. (2014) and Mergel (2013), who found interactive government communication fosters civic engagement and institutional legitimacy.

### 6. Conclusion

The study concludes that social media communication was found to have become an important factor in the public's trust of the Government in Edo State. When government information is credible, transparent, timely and interactive, trust is built, however misinformation and political propaganda will take trust away. Digital engagement is thus a key pillar of current public governance and democratic accountability.

### 7. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the study recommends that:

- Edo State government should disseminate official information on social media platforms using credible, transparent and timely information.
- Digital fact-checking units to be established by the Edo State Government to be able to immediately counter misinformation and fake news.
- Public institutions need to make prompt responses to citizens' enquiries and feedback on social media.
- Government to encourage digital and media literacy to assist citizens to recognize credible information.

- Government should improve citizen engagement by regular use of online means of engagement, consultation and feedback.

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