SEEING IS DECEIVING: THE ROLE OF VISUAL IMAGES IN THE SPREAD OF MISINFORMATION ON SECURITY ISSUES

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Misinformation, Visual Images, Security Issues, social media, Public Perception

Abstract

Research Problem: *This study addresses the lack of empirical research on how security-related visual misinformation influences public perception in the specific socio-political context of Nigeria.*
Methods/Theory: *Anchored on Social Cognitive Theory, this quantitative study surveyed 312 Nigerian social media users to analyse how the theory's core tenets are amplified by visual media.*
Results: *Findings indicate high public concern over visual misinformation, with news websites and user-generated content as primary sources. Exposure significantly increased fear, anxiety, and distrust in official communications.*
Conclusion: *The proliferation of false visual images profoundly impacts how Nigerians perceive security. The phenomenon is a cognitive and behavioural challenge, not merely an informational one.*
Key Contribution to Knowledge: *This paper provides the first empirical analysis of visual misinformation's impact on security perceptions in Nigeria, offering crucial local insights into vulnerabilities and mitigation.*
Recommendation: *The study advocates for a multi-stakeholder approach, including enhanced national media literacy, improved fact-checking infrastructure, and adaptive regulation to defend public safety.*

Introduction

The digital age has fundamentally altered the global information ecosystem, offering unprecedented connectivity but also a parallel challenge: the widespread dissemination of misinformation. This phenomenon, defined as false or inaccurate information, is particularly potent in its visual form, where images and videos can rapidly convey emotionally charged narratives without the context or verification of text (Verdoliva, 2020; Smith, 2022). This study focuses on a specific and critical dimension of this issue: the impact of security-related visual misinformation on public perceptions in Nigeria.

Existing scholarship has extensively documented the persuasive power of visual content and the psychological mechanisms through which it is processed. Studies on Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) have shown how individuals learn by observing the behaviour of others, a process that is amplified in digital environments (Bandura, 1986). Likewise, researchers have identified key sources of misinformation globally, from news websites to user-generated content (Altay et al., 2023). However, a critical examination of this literature reveals a conceptual and empirical gap. While we understand the general mechanics of misinformation, there is a lack of targeted, empirical research that connects the spread of security-related visual misinformation to its direct effects on public anxiety, trust, and behaviour within a context as complex and susceptible as Nigeria. This study is premised on the understanding that images related to security threats, such as fabricated visuals of conflict, violence, or unrest, have a uniquely disruptive power to create panic and erode trust in both media and official institutions (Wolfers, 1952).

This research, therefore, interrogates the specific dynamics of this issue within the Nigerian context. It seeks to move beyond a general acknowledgement of the problem to provide a targeted analysis of the phenomenon. In doing so, it provides a crucial, localised empirical contribution to the broader scholarly conversation on misinformation. The statement of the problem that follows provides a detailed articulation of the specific issue this study seeks to address.

Statement of Problem

The rapid proliferation of digital technologies has transformed social media into a primary source of information for many Nigerians. However, this shift has created a fertile ground for the spread of misinformation, particularly through the use of powerful and emotionally resonant visual content. While a growing body of global research acknowledges the threat of misinformation, there remains a critical contextual gap in the scholarly literature.

Previous studies, such as those cited by Altay et al. (2023) and the American Psychological Association (2024), have focused on the general psychological and societal impacts of misinformation, often in health or political contexts. Similarly, existing work on visual misinformation (e.g., Davis et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2023) primarily discusses its general mechanics. What is conspicuously under-explored is the specific and acute impact of security-related visual misinformation on public perception within the unique socio-political landscape of Nigeria. This is a significant omission, as Nigeria's history of complex security challenges makes its population particularly vulnerable to narratives that exploit fear and sow distrust. The current state of research has not adequately addressed how the "seeing is deceiving" phenomenon, when applied to visual security threats, modifies public behaviour and belief in this specific environment. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by providing empirical evidence on how security-themed visual

misinformation influences security perceptions among social media users in Nigeria.

Research Objectives

This study is guided by the following objectives:

i. To investigate the primary sources and common types of visual misinformation on security issues as perceived by Nigerian social media users.

ii. To empirically analyse the impact of exposure to security-related visual misinformation on public perception, trust in institutions, and levels of insecurity among the Nigerian population.

iii. To identify and evaluate the preferred countermeasures and mitigation strategies for combating the spread of visual misinformation on security issues, as suggested by social media users.

Literature Review

i. Seeing is Deceiving

The adage, "seeing is believing," has been fundamentally challenged by modern science and technology. Far from providing objective reality, visual perception is an active, constructive process shaped by the brain (Coren & Girgus, 1978). This inherent fallibility is not an aberration; rather, it highlights how our brains actively build perceptual realities. Ryan and Cummings (2014) expand on this by explaining that cognitive biases combine with sensory limitations, leading to frequent misinterpretations of visual information. While these perceptual inaccuracies may have once provided an evolutionary advantage by facilitating adaptive deception, they now render human perception highly susceptible to manipulation.

This vulnerability has been critically exploited by advanced digital technologies, particularly AI-produced deepfakes. Verdoliva (2020) demonstrated how these tools can generate deceptive, yet highly realistic, fake images and videos that exploit the very perceptual mechanisms detailed by Coren and Girgus (1978) and Ryan and Cummings (2014). This escalation represents a critical turning point in the "seeing is deceiving" phenomenon, creating unprecedented threats to digital authenticity and, by extension, public trust in visual evidence. By understanding these core concepts, this research can effectively analyse how these innate human vulnerabilities are weaponised in the digital age, particularly in high-stakes fields like security.

ii. Visual Images

Visual representations have become a powerful, primary mode of communication in the digital age. As Davis et al. (2023) and Khan et al. (2023) highlight, the efficacy of visual content lies in its ability to transmit complex information quickly, evoke profound emotional responses, and significantly enhance memory retention. Images simplify abstract data, making information more accessible and impactful than text alone. This is particularly relevant in the context of security, where images can bypass rational analysis and trigger immediate emotional reactions such as fear or anxiety. The profound emotional power and memorability of visuals necessitate a specialised form of visual literacy to counter their potential for misuse.

However, the very strengths that make visual images powerful communication tools also make them potent instruments of deception. Wu et al. (2023) provide a crucial dual perspective, recognising that visual images can both facilitate social connection and serve as a vehicle for persistent, credible-looking misinformation. This duality is central to understanding the proliferation and impact of

misinformation, especially as social media platforms leverage rapidly spreading images to shape public opinion on sensitive subjects. The immediate and emotional resonance of visual images can be strategically exploited to bypass critical thinking, making them a central component of any analysis of misinformation's influence on public perceptions of security.

iii. Misinformation

Misinformation, defined as false or misleading information, is distinct from disinformation due to the absence of deliberate malicious intent on the part of its creator (Altay et al., 2023). While this distinction is useful, it is often blurred in practice, as content can spread rapidly and innocently yet still cause significant harm. A key challenge, as Vraga and Bode (2019) note, is that the very definition of "accurate" information can shift over time, making definitive identification difficult for fact-checking mechanisms that must constantly adapt.

The widespread acceptance of misinformation is deeply rooted in psychological vulnerabilities. Ecker et al. (2022) demonstrates that belief in false content is not just a matter of factual inaccuracy; it is fostered by a complex interplay of cognitive biases, social dynamics, and emotional influences. This makes misinformation remarkably resistant to correction. When combined with the persuasive power and emotional resonance of visual images, these psychological traits create a fertile ground for the rapid and entrenched spread of false narratives. This study, therefore, positions misinformation not merely as a factual problem but as a cognitive and behavioural challenge amplified by visual media.

iv. Security Issues

Security is a multifaceted and diffuse concept that extends beyond singular military concerns to encompass political, economic, and social stability (Burgess & Owen, 2004). This inherent ambiguity is critical, as it allows for varied interpretations of threats and vulnerabilities (Wolfers, 1952). The lack of a universally understood definition can be exploited by visual misinformation, which can rapidly alter public perception of threats by capitalising on this definitional fluidity. For instance, a manipulated image of civil unrest can redefine what constitutes a "security threat" in the public imagination, even if the image is false.

Collectively, these varied interpretations underscore a crucial challenge: the absence of a shared understanding of security creates a susceptible environment for manipulation. Citizens find it difficult to discern genuine security concerns from fabricated narratives. Therefore, a primary goal of this research is to show how visual misinformation exploits this conceptual ambiguity to reshape public understanding and generate widespread fear, particularly in a context like Nigeria, where security issues are sensitive and multifaceted.

v. Empirical Review and Identified Gaps

An interrogation of the existing empirical literature reveals a substantial body of work on misinformation but also highlights critical knowledge gaps that our research is designed to fill.

First, studies on the general impact of visual misinformation, such as the mixed-methods research by Davis et al. (2023) and the systematic review by Wu et al. (2023), consistently demonstrate the powerful influence of images. These studies found that misleading visual content gains significantly more shares and user interactions than authentic content. While these findings confirm the global reach of the problem, they do not explore the specific psychological or social

consequences of this phenomenon within the unique socio-political context of Nigeria.

Second, a separate body of research focuses on the technological aspects of visual deception. Verdoliva's (2020) overview on deepfakes and media forensics, for instance, highlights the growing difficulty of detection, noting that deepfake distribution increased by approximately 35% in two years. Similarly, Lee (2022) and Smith (2022) demonstrated the impact of AI-generated content on public trust, with Smith's work showing a 55% loss of trust in official security alerts after exposure to deepfakes. These studies are critical for understanding the "seeing is deceiving" phenomenon, yet they too are limited in their scope, failing to connect these technological threats with their specific impacts on public perception and behaviour in a non-Western, security-sensitive environment.

Finally, while some research has explored mitigation strategies, the literature presents a disjointed approach. Studies by Brown (2023) and Lee (2022) highlight the potential of technological solutions and public education, respectively. However, a significant gap remains in understanding how to effectively unite these diverse approaches. Our research uniquely addresses this by analysing user preferences to identify the most effective, integrated, and context-specific mitigation strategies for Nigeria. The analysed research demonstrates a comprehensive divide because three fundamental approaches must unite for effective visual misinformation counteraction (Davis et al., 2023; Verdoliva, 2020; Brown, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

The Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), as developed by Albert Bandura (1986), serves as the theoretical foundation for this research. While SCT's core tenets, reciprocal determinism, observational learning, and self-efficacy, are well-established, this study moves beyond a mechanical application of the theory to demonstrate its unique relevance in a digital, visually-driven context. SCT explains how individuals acquire behaviours and beliefs through observation without direct personal experience. This is crucial for understanding how visually-driven false narratives about security, which are often observed from a distance, can be internalised and influence real-world fears and behaviours. By applying SCT to the Nigerian context, this study explores how the rapid spread amplifies the theory's principles, offering a new dimension to its explanatory power.

Strategies to Mitigate the Spread of Visual Misinformation on Security Issues

Mitigating the pervasive spread of visual misinformation concerning security issues requires a multi-faceted approach that integrates technological, regulatory, and educational interventions. A crucial component of this strategy involves the development and deployment of advanced algorithmic solutions capable of identifying synthetic images and videos. As Kauffman and Boruchovitch (2023) highlight, visual-based feature detection tools are essential for discerning artificially generated content, enabling the identification and removal of false information from social media platforms.

Complementing technological interventions, proactive public policies are crucial for tracking and identifying unlawful information activities. Such policies should empower authorities to disclose offenders, as the "name and shame" approach can significantly raise public awareness and foster collective resilience. Vraga and Bode (2019) underscore that effective policies against disinformation demand collaborative partnerships among governments, technology companies, and civil society organisations for

successful implementation. This regulatory pillar is vital for establishing accountability and creating a deterrent, directly addressing the systemic ease with which unverified visual content can proliferate.

Crucially, fostering media literacy among citizens is an indispensable strategy to diminish the impact of visual misinformation. As Burgess and Owen (2004) implicitly suggest with broader human security concepts, equipping the public with analytical competencies directly counters the cognitive vulnerabilities that make visually deceptive content so potent. Public empowerment through targeted educational initiatives provides individuals with the essential skills to critically analyse digital information and cultivate a healthy scepticism. This aligns with our study's findings, which show that the public's desire for fact-checking tools is a direct response to a perceived lack of individual "visual self-efficacy" in a complex digital environment.

Methodology

i. Research Design

This research adopts a quantitative methodology to collect and analyse numerical data systematically for analysing patterns and relationships that exist within a population. This method follows a defined scientific method through statistics to evaluate research hypotheses while generating predictions. The research design provides optimal conditions for studies intended to establish universal patterns because it enables objective neural analysis of experimental variables.

ii. Population of the Study

Individuals aged 18 and above who are active social media users in Nigeria constitute the population subset of this investigation. The demographic of active social media user identities throughout Nigeria reached 38.7 million people in January 2025, while they accounted for 31.3 percent of the adult population. Social media users from Facebook to Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn make up this representative group, which displays total engagement levels of Nigerian adults.

iii. Sampling Technique

The research utilises simple random sampling, which offers equal selection opportunities to all members from the specified population. The method enhances both the representative nature of the sample and the decrease of selection biases, which transforms the research validity along with its reliability.

iv. Sample Size

To determine the appropriate sample size, the Taro Yamane formula is utilised:

$n = N / [1 + N(e)^2$

Where:

- n = sample size
- N = population size
- e = margin of error (typically 0.05 for 95% confidence level)

Applying the formula:

$n = 38,700,000 / [1 + 38,700,000(0.05)^2]$

$n = 38,700,000 / [1 + 38,700,000(0.0025)]$

$n = 38,700,000 / [1 + 96,750]$

$n = 38,700,000 / 96,751$

$n \approx 400$

The computed sample number amounts to approximately 400 people. The chosen sample represents an adequate number that delivers trustworthy results regarding visual images and

security-related misinformation spread among Nigerian social media users.

v. Description of the Research Instrument

The research instrument of this project is an online questionnaire. The questionnaire divides content across several segments that collect data on participant demographics while also assessing visuals specific to security issues and perceptions of incorrect information and its effect on security-related worries. The questionnaire contains three types of questions: Likert scale responses, multiple-choice options, and ranking questions that combine to promote data analysis simplicity and prevent mistaken responses. Through the online format, the survey can collect responses from different sets of social media users spanning across all regions of Nigeria.

vi. Validity and Reliability of the Research Instrument

The researcher uses expert examinations and pilot testing of the questionnaire to guarantee both its validity and reliability before deploying it to the target audience. The intended variables receive evaluation from media studies and security experts who confirm that the questions effectively assess these variables. The examination of reliability depends on Cronbach's alpha coefficient to assess internal consistency values. An acceptable Cronbach's alpha value should exceed 0.7 since this standard confirms that assessment instruments yield repeatable and stable measurements.

vii. Method of Data Collection

The online survey platform allows the questionnaire distribution by using email and social media, and messaging apps to obtain survey responses. The research asks respondents to join voluntarily, following their acknowledgement of study requirements, before starting the assessment. The survey application maintains an open duration spanning from two weeks to four weeks to obtain satisfactory participant responses. Repeat alerts help respondents participate better, while an anonymous setup ensures genuine and unbiased answers from participants.

viii. Method of Data Analysis

Researchers analysed the data collection by applying basic descriptive methods, which included frequency distributions together with percentages and mean scores. The study presents visual data through charts, including bar graphs, alongside pie charts and histograms, which show patterns of response data clearly and easily. The summary of fundamental results, along with the detection of security-themed social media user behaviour patterns, comes from descriptive statistics.

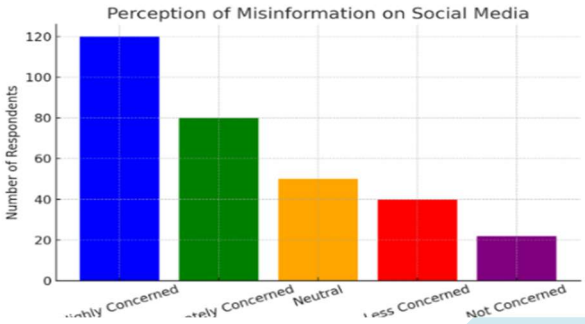
Results and Discussion

The results of this research derive from the 312 valid replies that the study received from its 400 distributed questionnaires. The research team analysed the results through graphical representations within each research goal after performing interpretations.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

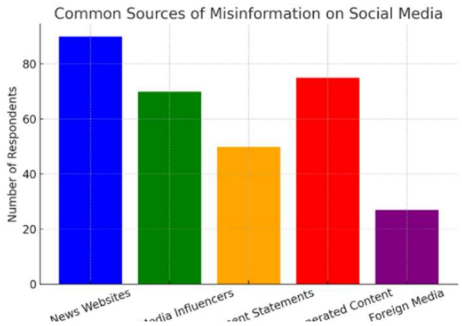
There are four detailed charts which fall under two different objectives, followed by their interpretations.

Chart 1: Perception of Misinformation on Social Media



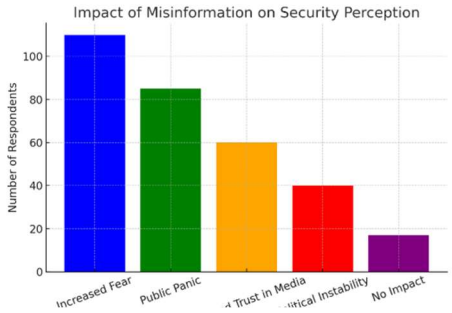
Social media misinformation concerns appear in various degrees among the survey participants, according to the presented graph. Seventy-nine percent (120) among the 312 participants identified themselves as highly concerned, while 60 percent (80) belonged to the moderate concern group. Problem pledges on social media misinformation are split between 50 neutral respondents and 40 and 22 people who show lower and no concern, respectively. Most respondents view misinformation as a significant issue on social media platforms because content regulation and verification systems require better enforcement.

Chart 2: Common Sources of Misinformation on Social Media



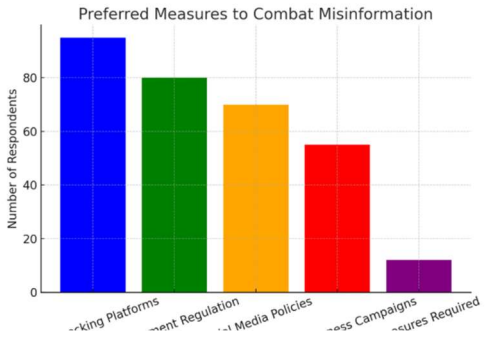
The chart displays what respondents think are the main distribution points of misinformation. News websites combined with user-generated content prove to be the major misinformation sources according to respondents, while social media influencers rank third in frequency (90, 75 and 70, respectively). Government public declarations, along with reports from international media, appear less often as information sources. User-produced content has a prominent role in distributing misinformation because official media and influencers both play their part, but user-generated content spreads information at a greater rate, according to the study. Therefore, fact-checking programmes and media literacy education must receive priority.

Chart 3: Impact of Misinformation on Security Perception



The graphical presentation shows how wrong information modifies public security beliefs. A majority of 110 participants reported feeling more fearful as a result of misinformation, with public panic (85) and reduced trust in media (60) following closely behind. Out of all possible causes, political instability ranks as the third most attributed factor toward misinformation spread (40 respondents), while 17 people believe misinformation has no impact. Security-related misinformation creates substantial public concerns about uncertainty because people need enhanced fact-checking abilities combined with media literacy education.

Chart 4: Preferred Measures to Combat Misinformation



The table displays the public evaluation of measures which could help combat misinformation. People strongly favour fact-checking platforms (95) more than government regulation (80) and stricter social media policies (70). The data shows public awareness campaigns (55) present an acceptable choice

despite a minority holding the view that no measures should be taken. The data demonstrates widespread support for active strategies to fight misinformation, which confirms the necessity of combined initiatives between states, technology corporations and non-profit organisations.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide empirical evidence for the profound and multifaceted impact of visual misinformation on security perceptions in Nigeria. The results not only confirm global trends but also offer crucial, localised insights that directly address the research objectives.

The high level of concern expressed by 79% of participants (Chart 1) directly corresponds to the public's heightened sense of insecurity. This widespread anxiety, coupled with the reported increase in fear and panic (Chart 3), underscores the potent affective power of visual misinformation. From a Social Cognitive Theory perspective, this finding illustrates the principle of observational learning in action. Individuals are not just internalising the content of a false image; they are internalising the collective sense of alarm they observe in their social media feeds. This observation leads to the formation of a distorted, but deeply felt, perception of threat. Our results, therefore, extend the work of Ecker et al. (2022) by demonstrating how these psychological drivers of misinformation are uniquely amplified by the emotional resonance of visual content within a sensitive security context.

Furthermore, the data on the primary sources of misinformation, namely, news websites and user-generated content (Chart 2), highlights the intricate dynamics of reciprocal determinism. The prevalence of user-generated content confirms that social media platforms are not just neutral information conduits; they are interactive environments where users' behaviours directly shape the informational ecosystem. When an individual shares a deceptive image, they are actively participating in the creation of an environment that, in turn, influences the cognitive processes and behaviours of others. This finding is particularly significant for Nigeria, where decentralised, user-driven networks can bypass traditional media gatekeepers, making misinformation both pervasive and difficult to trace. This adds a critical contextual layer to the general findings of Wu et al. (2023) and Lee (2022), demonstrating how these dynamics manifest in a high-engagement, low-regulation environment.

Finally, the strong public preference for countermeasures, especially fact-checking platforms and government oversight (Chart 4), provides direct evidence for the public's desire to enhance its visual self-efficacy. As individuals feel their capacity to discern truth from falsehood is limited, they seek external mechanisms to restore a sense of control and reliability. This finding aligns with the comprehensive strategies advocated by Vraga and Bode (2019) and Kauffman & Boruchovitch (2023), confirming that combating visual misinformation requires a multi-stakeholder approach. Our results, however, provide a unique empirical validation of this need within a Nigerian context, showing that the public's search for structured defences against informational chaos is a direct response to a perceived erosion of trust in both institutions and their own critical evaluation skills.

Conclusion

The findings of this study conclusively demonstrate that the proliferation of social media-distributed false visual images exerts a substantial and multifaceted impact on how Nigerians perceive security matters. This impact is conceptually rooted in the "seeing is deceiving" phenomenon, wherein the inherent

human trust in visual evidence is exploited by sophisticated manipulations, leading to heightened susceptibility to misinformation. The empirical data on public concern and observed fear confirm this and provide a critical localised contribution to the broader scholarly conversation.

Theoretically, this research extends Social Cognitive Theory by illustrating how its core tenets, observational learning, reciprocal determinism, and self-efficacy, are uniquely amplified and challenged by the context of visual misinformation on security issues in Nigeria. The study's findings reveal that visual misinformation is not merely an informational problem but a cognitive and behavioural phenomenon that requires interventions tailored to its unique dynamics. By empirically validating the public's desire for tools that enhance "visual self-efficacy," this research provides a clear path for future action.

Ultimately, the research highlights the urgent necessity for extensive and integrated efforts to combat both the creation and reception of visual misinformation. An organised combination of robust fact-checking programs, comprehensive public education initiatives (especially visual literacy), and effective regulatory mechanisms is imperative to reduce the destabilising effects of visual misinformation on societal trust and stability, especially within critical security domains.

Recommendations

i. The Nigerian government and educational institutions should establish and fund media literacy programs across all regions to enhance users' ability to critically evaluate and separate authentic content from deceptive visual information on social media. This directly addresses the need for enhanced visual self-efficacy identified in the study.

ii. Public and private sectors should collaborate to enhance fact-checking infrastructure by funding initiatives that provide accessible and user-friendly tools for verifying visual information. This recommendation directly reflects the public's strong preference for fact-checking tools as a primary countermeasure.

iii. Relevant regulatory bodies should work with social media companies to create and enforce policies that hold platforms accountable for the unchecked proliferation of harmful, security-related visual misinformation. This measure is directly supported by the study's finding that a significant portion of the public favours stricter government and platform regulation.

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