

Southwestern Mass Communication Journal

A journal of the Southwest Education Council for Journalism & Mass Communication
ISSN 0891-9186 (Print); ISSN 2641-6743 (Online) | Vol. 40, No. 1

Re-Examining the Impact of Social Media on Political Discourse: An Elaboration of Likelihood Model Analysis of Nigeria's 2019 Presidential Election

Alasana Camara
Texas Tech University

Social media has become an important component of political discourse. In Nigeria, social media has played a critical role in shaping political opinions and voting behaviors, especially during the 2019 presidential election. This research re-examines the influence of social media on political discourse using the Elaboration Likelihood Model as a theoretical framework to scrutinize the level of message elaboration among voters on social media platforms and the factors that impact the central and peripheral routes of persuasion. The study explored the influence of social media on voter's attitude, behavior and opinion during the election, with the ultimate aim of analyzing how different segments of society may react to persuasive messages. The findings of the study shed light on the level of social media usage during the election, the effect of voter's attitude and behavior, the role of political propaganda, and the factors influencing social media's effectiveness in shaping political discourse.

Keywords: social media, Elaboration Likelihood Model, propaganda, fake news

Social media has become an increasingly major component of modern political discourse, changing how political campaigns are run and how citizens interact and engage with politics. Social media speeds up the transmission of content and makes it accessible to large number of audiences. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook and MySpace, and among others, have grown to be an essential part of political campaigns. Especially after the successful use of social media in United States presidential campaign of Barack Obama (Wu et al., 2011).

This direct engagement with audience allows political candidate to address burning issues and raise concerns that are important to their electorates (Temitope & Ahmad, 2017). The rise of fake news is a critical challenge associated with the proliferation of social media in political discourse. Social media platforms have made it possible for ideas and information to flow quickly, but they have also facilitated the dissemination of fake and misleading information (Allcott, & Gentzkow, 2017). The spread of fake news is of particular concern during political campaign, where incorrect, misleading information may impact voter's opinion and behavior (Chen, Kearney & Chang, 2021). Fake news can have a massive impact on political campaigns, and it can create confusion, skepticism, and uncertainty among voters. It can also undermine the credibility and the integrity of political institutions and exacerbate political polarization (Safieddine, 2020). Fake news can also advance stereotypes, radical ideas and even instigate violence (Chen, Kearney & Chang, 2021). Nigeria's 2019 election was no exception, with social media playing a critical role in shaping voter's attitude, behavior, and determining the election's outcome. Use of media propaganda to impact the attitude, opinion and behavior of the Nigerian electorate has been observed throughout presidential elections since 1999, and numerous studies conducted by Nigerian researchers have attempted to support this fact. (Endong & Eumole, 2023). Victor Oyenuga, a prominent academician in Nigeria, has noted that social media-assisted propaganda has been a common element of political parties' electoral campaigns since 1990s (Endong & Eumole, 2023). Moreover, the main purpose of this research is to re-examine the influence of social media on political discourse during Nigeria's 2019 presidential election using the Elaboration Likelihood Model as a theoretical framework to scrutinize the level of message elaboration among voters on social media platforms and the factors that impact the central and peripheral routes of persuasions. The study explored the influence of social media on voter's attitude, behavior and opinion during the election, with the ultimate aim of analyzing how different segments of society may react to persuasive messages.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) is a popular communication model developed by Richard E. Petty and John T. Cacioppo in the 1980s. It explains the process by which individual process and react to persuasive messages (Petty, & Briñol, 2011). The model proposes that there are two main routes to persuasion: The central route and the peripheral route. The central route involves a rational, careful, attentive and a systematic analysis of message. While the peripheral route involves emotional and less critical analysis of the message (O'Keefe, 2012).

Central route concentration depends on the level of involvement, prior knowledge, motivation to get engaged with the message, ability, and it involves careful analysis of content, while peripheral route involves a superficial evolution, "mental shortcut." It focuses on emotional cues to evaluate content of

the message. A source's credibility, parasocial cues, attractiveness, and individuals who are less involved or less motivated – all predict an impetus toward the peripheral route (O'Keefe, 2012).

Elaboration Likelihood Model on political discourse

ELM model has provided a framework for analyzing the influence of social media on voter's attitudes, behavior and opinions during political campaigns. The model has been applied in various fields, such as social psychology, political communications, advertisement and marketing. It is widely used to explain how individual process persuasive messages and make decisions (Wu et al., 2011) which include how they are affected by different factors such as message content, source of credibility, and people's motivation and their ability to process information (Rizal et al., 2022). ELM has been applied to political communication in order to understand how voters interpret political messages and how campaigns might successfully sway voter's opinions in favor of a certain candidate or cause (Çiftçi, 2018). In his study Çiftçi, (2018) primarily concentrated on the problematic applications of the persuasion process in political communication. With particular reference to individual judgments of candidates, shared values, and ideological connection, the ELM-Model was utilized for this process to explain the persuasiveness of the political communications. Wu et.al., (2011) explored the central route of persuasive messages by analyzing Twitter data of Singapore 2011 general election that provide detailed information and argument to convince voters and change their opinion. The study by Chen et al., (2008) investigates the impact of central and peripheral cues to identify the relative influence of each cue on users' belief or doubt in false news, as well as whether information literacy functions as a moderator to the cues. Chen & Chang (2008)'s research is an importance example of how the Elaboration Likelihood Model can be applied to comprehend the influence of central and peripheral cues on individuals' belief or disbelief in false news.

Level of education has shown conflicting results as to its influence in central versus peripheral processing. For example, a study of the role of electronic word of mouth information sharing (social media) found that level of education was predictive of critical thinking ability, social media literacy, and satisfaction with a decision made through online research, like a hotel booking (Leong, et al., 2019). But other studies of ELM found that level of education was not predictive (Lazard & Atkinson, 2015).

By examining how political polarization affects people's perceptions and behavior on social media, Kulkarni (2017) provides crucial insights into the impact of social media in aggravating political polarization and disinformation. His research has important implications for comprehending of the relationship between social media, political polarization and disinformation by pointing out factors that affect individuals' engagement with social media content such as disinformation. By factoring the ELM into the analysis, Kulkarni (2017) examines whether people are more likely to engage with disinformation via the central or peripheral route, and what factors influence this involvement.

Research Questions. Social media political propaganda can play a critical role in shaping voter's opinion and behavior towards political candidate and their parties, but different factors play a role in influencing level and type of persuasion. Social media platforms enable political actors a quick and effective tool to spread misinformation to a large audience, potentially affecting voters' choices and their decision-making process. Based on that research, the following questions are posed:

RQ1: How did social media political propaganda influence and shape the opinions, attitudes and behaviors of voters during Nigeria's 2019 presidential election?

RQ2: How did the educational backgrounds of individuals influence the level of their engagement with tweets shared on social media during Nigeria's 2019 presidential election?

Theory Application. Propaganda in the media proliferated throughout the 2019 Nigerian presidential election from a variety of perspectives. One of its most notorious aspects was the rise and transmission of fake news, which was mostly spread through social media with the intention of influencing the attitudes and actions of the Nigerian voters that may potentially translate into the polls. The following example demonstrates how the Elaboration Likelihood Model can be used in political discourse. To illustrate this, prior to Nigeria's 2019 presidential election, incumbent President Muhammadu Buhari had a health condition which was seen as deteriorating, due to his frequent medical trips to London. Rumors swirled that president Buhari had died and been cloned and replaced by a Sudanese man named Jubril (Okon & Ekpang, 2021). Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of separatist group Indigenous People of Biafra, or IPOB, was a prominent propagandist of this fake news. The rumor had significant effects on the Nigerian electorate and a large number of public electoral polls indicated the decline in support of Buhari, which prompted the All Progressive Congress, Buhari's party, to make attempts during the 2019 presidential campaign at debunking it (Okon & Ekpang, 2021). During the campaign in several rallies, President Buhari was compelled to reassure Nigerians that he was not cloned and dismissed the allegations that he had passed away (Okon & Ekpang, 2021).

ELM is applicable in this scenario. For instance, false information about the president's death and cloning was spread on social media which acted as a source of information and many electorates bought into this propaganda which suggested that they processed the information through peripheral routes. Several factors may have influenced the voters to process information coming from media through peripheral routes regarding the false news about the president's death which include 1) Emotional appeal: Due to the president's prolong absence from the public scene that could instigate skepticism and fear about his death, the audience are more likely to evoke emotional cues in processing the message. 2) Superficial evolution: It may be that audience members lack motivation and the ability to deeply process the information, so they may rely on superficial cues such as the number of likes or shares the message received. Another possible factor could be 3) Mental shortcut: Maybe audience members used their mental shortcut or heuristics to make a quick judgment or decision based on the limited information at hand. Possibly they may rely on the first information they have come across or the opinion of a trusted authority figure. Perhaps, many of the audience regarded Nnamdi Kanu, the leader of IPOB, as an opinion leader or a trusted person to be relied on. Another possible explanation could be 4) Confirmation bias: Possibly some audience members sought to interpret and remember information that confirmed their existing beliefs or expectations regarding the president while ignoring information or dismissing information that contradicts them or does not reinforce their existing beliefs or expectations. Furthermore, the effort by The All Progressive Congress (APC) to debunk the false information by correcting it may be regarded as an attempt to shift voters from peripheral to central route of processing information. By examining the degree of message elaboration among voters on social media, the Elaboration Likelihood Model will help in assessing the influence of social media on political discourse during the election. The study identifies factors that affect the central and peripheral routes of persuasion and how they affect election-related attitudes, behaviors, and opinions.

Moreover, one of most striking debated topics during Nigeria's 2019 presidential was regarding the allegation of President Buhari's "Islamization" agenda. President Buhari faced allegations of

working toward the “Islamization” of Nigeria and this was propelled due to his past criticism of his predecessor's campaign and fighting against Boko Haram, and his nomination of key northerners and Muslims as security chiefs (Okon & Ekpang, 2021). He has been accused of attempting to Islamize Nigeria and his party members used most of their time to debunk this allegation during the political campaigns (Okon & Ekpang, 2021). In this case, ELM can be used to explain how individuals with different level of educational background and political knowledge may respond to these allegations of “Islamization.” In light with the assumption of ELM, those with higher level of educational background, highly involved and motivated, and have deep knowledge about politics and governance, are more likely to have a better understanding of the “Islamization” allegation and, as a result, are more likely to give the persuasive arguments coming from social media a careful and skeptical consideration. They are more likely to process information through a central route of persuasion, taking into account the evidence, rationalization, provided facts, logical argument, sound reasoning and forming more informed opinion and decision based on the issue at hand.

On the other hand, audience members with a lower level of educational background, less involved, unmotivated and not politically oriented, may be less likely to have a clear understanding of the issue or the ability to process persuasive messages through central routes. These individuals may be swayed by peripheral cues such as source of the message or emotional appeals. There are many factors that may influence audience to process the information through peripheral routes including 1) Emotional cues. For instance, Christians and other religious communities in Nigeria may denounce the alleged attempt by the president and evoke on religious sentiments that the president wants to emasculate other religious rights and Islamicize Nigeria. 2) It may also be that audience members lack the motivation and ability to deeply process the information, so they may rely on superficial cues, such as the number of likes or shares the message received. Or another possible explanation may be 3) The source’s credibility, since this information was announced by the former president of Nigeria Goodluck Jonathan, and he may be regarded as an opinion leader who can be trusted and can effect changes in the society. Furthermore, 4) Confirmation bias is another explanation that could be applied in this scenario. It's possible that some audience members tried to interpret and remember information about the president’s remarks and actions that supported their current beliefs that he might have some inclinations toward Sharia Law, as he and many of his supporters are Muslim, while disregarding and dismissing information that did not confirm or align with their beliefs.

Overall, the information presented in this study demonstrates how social media influences political discourse, attitudes, and behaviors during Nigeria’s 2019 presidential election campaign and how the Elaboration Likelihood Model might be applied to provide a framework for understanding how individuals process persuasive information through central or peripheral routes based on several factors that may influence their attitudes, opinions and behaviors.

METHODS

To answer the research questions, a qualitative textual analysis of 15 articles that surveyed the Nigeria’s 2019 presidential election from 2020-2023 were analyzed. Textual Analysis as a research method used to examine messages across different mediums. The data and information utilized for textual analysis can be sourced from various mediums such as documents, research articles, films, newspapers, printings, web pages, and other similar sources. These forms serve as the “text” under study

or primary subject of analysis and are used to evaluate, and assess the meaning, principles, values and messages being conveyed through them (Smith, 2017). Textual analysis is often used in the field of communication to examine the deeper meaning of messages and these messages can be in any form such as written, spoken words, visual, or even linguistic (Burrows, 2004). A secondary data result of Onyenwe et al. (2022) was also analyzed that presents a sentiment analysis of tweets related to the 2019 Nigeria presidential election using a voting ensemble approach. The sentiment analysis focused on location-based viewpoints, and the tweets dataset was segmented into Nigerian 36 states and 6 geopolitical zones to evaluate the similarity between the sentiment of location-based tweets and actual election results. Additionally, a secondary data list of Nigerian states by literacy rate surveyed by UNESCO was also analyzed to examine the literacy level of individuals by state and how voters' educational background can influence their level of digital engagement based on the results of tweet dataset conducted by (Onyenwe et al., 2022). To find relevant articles for this analysis, the study used a search engine approach of Google Scholar articles on the subject, using keywords like "Nigerian 2019 presidential election" This method yielded almost all relevant articles. The unit of analysis was articles that surveyed the voters' attitudes, behavior and their educational levels. To answer the research questions, results of these articles were textually analyzed to explain and interpret the attitude and behavior of voters.

Results

RQ1 sought to understand how social media political propaganda influence and shape the opinions, attitudes and behaviors of voters during Nigeria's 2019 presidential election. Among the 15 articles that were textually analyzed 14 of them concluded that social media played a significant role in shaping opinions, attitudes, and behaviors of voters during Nigeria's 2019 presidential election. Political propaganda and disinformation circulated widely on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, influencing public perceptions and potentially impacting electoral outcomes. However, Obono & Diyo (2021) study found that social media disinformation about the two front runner candidates in the 2019 Nigerian presidential elections went viral, but had a low influence on the voting decisions of electorates. The false information was spread on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube using political messaging techniques that combined text, video, and pictures to make them look real. While Twitter was the highest channel of disinformation, the stories were falsely attributed to respected society members to give credence to the information. Their study concluded that the disinformation had a low influence on the voting decisions of electorates in the Nigerian political field.

RQ2 sought to the explain how educational backgrounds of individuals influence the level of their engagement with tweets shared on social media during Nigeria's 2019 presidential election. Figure1, and table 1 give a brief analysis by seeking to provide answer to the RQ2.

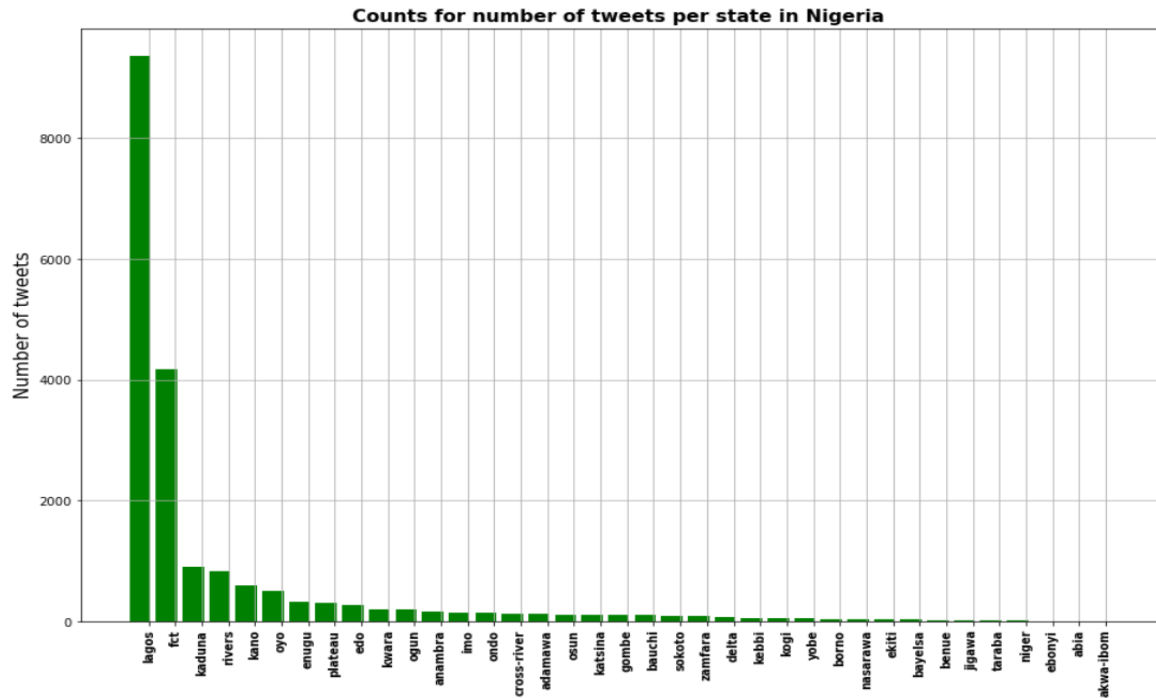


Figure 1. Count sizes of tweets per Nigeria state

Figure 1 depicts a comprehensive representation of all 36 Nigerian states along with the Federal Capital Territory in the dataset. It provides a summary view of the distribution of tweets across the states, showcasing the inclusion of geopolitical zone. From states with the highest tweet counts to those with the least, the figure encapsulates the diversity and participation of regions across Nigeria. Notably, Lagos emerges as a standout contributor, with nearly 90% of tweets originating from Lagos state. This observation underscores the significant role of Lagos in shaping digital conversations and reflects its prominence as a hub of social media activity within the country. Note, tweet frequency aligns with population distribution across Nigeria’s 36 states, with Lagos state being the smallest but most populous (World Atlas, n.d.).

Table 1

5 Nigeria states with highest educational level (UNESCO, 2012)

Rank	State	Literacy rate %
1	Lagos State	92.1
2	Ekiti State	80.0
3	Ondo state	75.1
4	Osun state	74.7
5	Anambra state	72.8
Overall	$M=78.94, SD=6.94$	5 states

Table 1 provides a straightforward breakdown of the top-performing Nigerian states in terms of literacy rates, drawing from UNESCO's 2012 data. The table presents a clear hierarchy, ranking each

state from 1 to 5 based on its literacy rate, alongside the corresponding percentages. Notably, Lagos State claims the top spot with literacy rate of 92.1%. Moreover, it's interesting to note that Lagos also emerged as a digital powerhouse during the 2019 presidential election, evidenced by the significant number of tweets originating from the state. Additionally, the results presented in Figure 1 and Table 1 can help us to find answers or understand the research question concerning the influence of individuals' educational backgrounds on their engagement with tweets shared on social media during Nigeria's 2019 presidential election. Table 1 provides data on the literacy rates of Nigerian states, with Lagos State standing out as having the highest literacy rate. This information suggests a potential correlation between educational attainment, as indicated by literacy rates, and digital engagement. Furthermore, the observation that Lagos, with its high literacy rate, also generated the highest number of tweets during the election underscores the significance of education in driving online participation. Therefore, the correlation between educational background and digital engagement suggests that individuals from states with higher literacy rates, such as Lagos, were more actively involved in social media discussions during the election.

DISCUSSION

The research findings from RQ1 and RQ2 highlighted the critical aspects of Nigeria's 2019 presidential election, especially with regard to the impact of social media propaganda and the role that educational backgrounds play in digital participation. RQ1 examined the impact of social media political propaganda on voters' opinions, attitudes, and behaviors during the election. The majority of analyzed articles concluded that social media played a significant role in shaping these factors, with political propaganda and disinformation circulating widely across platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. While such disinformation campaigns may have proliferated, Obono & Diyo (2021) study emphasized that despite the viral spread of false information, it had a low influence on voters' decisions. This suggests a nuanced understanding of the relationship between social media content and its effect on electoral outcomes. On the other hand, RQ2 aimed to explore how individuals' educational backgrounds influenced their engagement with tweets on social media during the same election. The combination of Figure 1 and Table 1 offers valuable insights into this question. Figure 1 visually depicts the distribution of tweets across Nigerian states, with Lagos emerging as a central hub of digital activity. Table 1 provides quantitative data on the literacy rates of Nigerian states, with Lagos boasting the highest literacy rate. This correlation between educational background and digital engagement suggests that individuals from states with higher literacy rates, such as Lagos, were more actively involved in social media discussions during the election. Hence, education seemingly played a crucial role in shaping the level of online participation among voters. These findings underscore the multifaceted nature of social media's impact on electoral processes and the significance of educational backgrounds in driving digital engagement. While social media platforms serve as arenas for political discourse and information dissemination, the level of influence they wield may vary depending on factors such as the credibility of information and the educational context of the audience. Thus, a nuanced understanding of these dynamics is essential for comprehending the evolving landscape of digital democracy in Nigeria and beyond.

REFERENCES

- Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. *Journal of economic perspectives*, 31(2), 211-236. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.31.2.211>
- Chen, C. Y., & Chang, S. L. (2008). Factors associated with belief or disbelief in false news: From the perspective of elaboration likelihood and moderating effect model. *Pervasive Artificial Intelligence research (PAIR)*. <https://cyber.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/2019-12/Factors%20associated%20with%20belief%20or%20disbelief%20in%20false%20news.pdf>
- Chen, C. Y., Kearney, M., & Chang, S. L. (2021). Belief in or identification of false news according to the elaboration likelihood model. *International Journal of Communication* 5(15). <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/14804>
- Çiftçi, D. (2018). Communication, persuasion and cognition: The review on application of the elm-model in political communication of North Cyprus. *Akdeniz Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi Dergisi*, (29), 133-142. <https://doi.org/10.31123/akil.454222>
- Endong, F. P. C., & Eumole, P. E. (2023). Online fake news and the resurgence of the magic bullet theory: A study of media propaganda during the 2019 Nigeria general elections. *North African Journal of Scientific Publishing (NAJSP)*, 1(2), 69-76. <https://najsp.com/index.php/home/index>
- Ibrahim, Y. & Safieddine, F. (2020). *Political and social impact of digital fake news in an era of social media. Fake News in an Era of Social Media: Tracking Viral Contagion*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Kulkarni, A. (2017). Internet meme and political discourse: A study on the impact of internet meme as a tool in communicating political satire. *Journal of Content, Community & Communication Amity School of Communication*, 6(3). <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3501366>.
- Lazard, A. & Atkinson, L. (2015). Putting Environmental Infographics Center Stage: The Role of Visuals at the Elaboration Likelihood Model's Critical Point of Persuasion. *Science Communication*, 3(1), 6-33. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1075547014555997>.
- Leong, L-Y., Hew, T-S., Ooi, K-B. & Lin, B. (2019). Do Electronic Word-of-Mouth and Elaboration Likelihood Model Influence Hotel Booking? *Journal of Computer Information Systems*, 59(3), 146-160. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08874417.2017.1320953>.
- O'Keefe, D. J. (2013). The elaboration likelihood model. In James Price Dillard and Lijang Shen (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of persuasion: Developments in theory and practice*, 137-149. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452218410>
- Obono, K., & Diyo, K. A. (2021). Social media disinformation and voting decisions during 2019 presidential elections in Nigeria. *EJOTMAS: Ekpoma Journal of Theatre and Media Arts*, 8(1-2), 129-151. <https://doi.org/10.4314/ejotmas.v8i1-2.8>
- Okon, P. E., & Ekpang II, J. E. (2021). The 2019 Nigerian presidential elections and the resurgence of the magic bullet theory of media effect. *International Journal of Communication and Society*, 3(2), 2684-9267. <https://doi.org/10.31763/ijcs.v3i2.199>
- Onyenwe, I. E., Nwagbo, S. N., Orji, R., Onyedinma, E., Ikechukwu-Onyenwe, O., Nwafor, C. A., & Agbata, O. (2022, Septemner 28). Location-based Sentiment Analysis of 2019 Nigeria Presidential Election Using A Voting Ensemble Approach. Research Square. <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-2104488/v1>
- Petty, R. E., & Briñol, P. (2011). The elaboration likelihood model. In Paul A M Van Lange, Arie W Kruglanski & E Tory Higgins (Eds.), *Handbook of theories of social psychology*, 224-245.
- Rizal, A. R., Nordin, S. M., Ahmad, W. F. W., Ahmad Khiri, M. J., & Hussin, S. H. (2022). How does social media influence people to get vaccinated? The elaboration likelihood model of a person's attitude and intention to get COVID-19 vaccines. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(4), 2378. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19042378>
- Temitope, O. A. S., & Ahmad, R. (2017). The role of social media during the 2015 voting process in the Nigeria election. *Research Journal of Applied Sciences, Engineering and Technology*, 12(2), 281-287.
- World Atlas (n.d.). The States of Nigeria by Population. <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/how-many-states-does-nigeria-have.html>
- Wu, Y., Wong, J., Deng, Y., & Chang, K. (2011, December). An exploration of social media in public opinion convergence: Elaboration likelihood and semantic networks on political events. In *2011 IEEE Ninth International Conference on Dependable, Autonomic and Secure Computing* (pp. 903-910). IEEE. <https://doi.org/10.1109/DASC.2011.151>

Funding and Acknowledgements

The author of this research paper hereby declares that there are no funding sources or conflicts of interest associated with the study or its publication. I affirm that this work is the result of independent research and that no external entities have influenced its content, analysis, or conclusions.

About the Author(s)

Alasana Camara is presently pursuing a Master of Arts degree in the Department of Mass Communication at Texas Tech University.

Online Connections

To follow these authors in social media:

LinkedIn: Alasana Camara

Instagram: camara.alasana

Facebook: Alasana Camara