

The Role of AI-Generated Political Messaging in Shaping Public Opinion: Ethical and Democratic Implications

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Abstract

This study examined the role of social media in political communication, focusing on its influence on political engagement, the spread of misinformation, and public trust in online political discourse. With the increasing reliance on digital platforms for political information, concerns about the credibility of such content and its impact on democratic participation have grown. The study sought to understand how social media affected political engagement, assessed the influence of misinformation on trust in political communication, and explored policy measures to enhance the credibility of online political information. Guided by the agenda-setting theory as its primary theoretical framework developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), the theory posited that the media played a crucial role in shaping public opinion by influencing what issues people think about and how they perceived them, this study adopted a quantitative research methodology. A structured survey was administered to a sample of 300 respondents across various demographic categories, analysing their social media usage patterns, perceptions of misinformation, and trust levels in online political communication. Findings indicated that social media significantly influenced political engagement, with platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook being the most utilised. However, misinformation remained a critical challenge, as many respondents reported encountering misleading political content, leading to skepticism about the credibility of online information. The study recommended implementing digital literacy programmes to enhance media awareness, strengthening regulatory frameworks for platform accountability, and encouraging civic engagement through verified digital platforms. These measures aimed to mitigate misinformation and foster trust in political communication. Despite limitations such as self-reported data bias, the study underscored the need for continued research on artificial intelligence's role in shaping online political discourse. The findings contributed to ongoing

discussions on social media's impact on democracy and policy interventions for improving political communication in the digital age.

Keywords: *Political communication, Social media engagement, Misinformation, Public trust, Digital political participation*

Background of the Study

Political communication has undergone a significant transformation with the advent of digital technologies, particularly artificial intelligence (AI). Traditionally, political messaging was crafted by human strategists, speechwriters, and campaign managers. However, AI-powered tools now enable the generation of political content, including speeches, social media posts, and campaign advertisements, with minimal human intervention. This development raises critical questions about the influence of AI-generated political messaging on public opinion, voter behavior, and democratic processes. The increasing reliance on AI in political communication is largely driven by the need for efficiency, personalization, and data-driven strategies. AI algorithms can analyze vast amounts of voter data and generate tailored political messages aimed at specific demographics (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018). Social media platforms, which serve as key channels for political engagement, have already integrated AI-powered tools that automate content creation and dissemination, allowing political actors to reach wider audiences with minimal costs (Tufekci, 2020). However, while AI-generated content can enhance political engagement, it also raises concerns about authenticity, misinformation, and ethical responsibility.

One of the primary concerns with AI-generated political messaging is its potential to manipulate public opinion. AI systems can create highly persuasive content that mimics human communication, making it difficult for voters to distinguish between human-crafted and AI-generated messages (Napoli, 2019). Additionally, AI-driven misinformation campaigns have become a growing threat to electoral integrity, as seen in past elections where automated bots and deep fake technology were used to spread false information (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). This development poses significant challenges to democratic accountability, as voters may be influenced by AI-generated narratives that do not reflect reality. Moreover, AI-generated political messaging raises ethical and regulatory concerns. Issues such as transparency, bias, and accountability remain largely unresolved, as existing regulations on political advertising and communication do not fully address AI-driven content (Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016). There is also a growing debate on whether AI should be allowed to generate political content without human oversight, as this could undermine trust in political institutions and the democratic process (Ferrara, 2020).

Despite these concerns, research on AI-generated political communication remains relatively limited. While existing studies have examined the role of AI in digital campaigning and misinformation, there is a need for deeper investigation into how AI-generated political messages shape voter perceptions and democratic engagement (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021). This study aimed to bridge this gap by analysing the ethical, political, and regulatory implications of AI-driven political messaging. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing policies that balance technological innovation with democratic integrity.

The intersection of artificial intelligence (AI) and political communication is redefining how political actors engage with the electorate, raising new challenges for democratic governance. AI-driven political messaging, which leverages machine learning, natural language processing (NLP), and automated content creation, has become a powerful tool in shaping political discourse. Political campaigns, government agencies, and advocacy groups increasingly rely on AI to generate speeches, social media posts, and even debate responses, reducing human effort while maximising outreach (Howard, 2020). However, the implications of AI-generated

political content for public opinion formation, voter trust, and democratic accountability remain underexplored. One of the most critical concerns surrounding AI-generated political messaging is the potential for misinformation and manipulation.

AI-powered content creation tools can generate highly persuasive yet misleading political narratives, making it difficult for voters to differentiate between authentic and fabricated information (Hancock, Naaman, & Levy, 2021). The increasing use of deep fake technology, where AI synthesises realistic video and audio recordings, further complicates the information landscape. Studies have shown that exposure to AI-generated deep fakes can significantly alter political perceptions and undermine trust in political institutions (Chesney & Citron, 2019). This phenomenon raises ethical concerns regarding the accountability of AI-generated content and the potential for political deception. Moreover, AI-driven political communication has widened the gap between political elites and the general public. Automated chatbots and AI-generated responses are now commonly used to interact with citizens on social media platforms, creating an illusion of direct engagement while reducing actual human interaction (Borges & Gambarato, 2020). While these tools enable political figures to maintain an active online presence, they may also contribute to voter alienation, as automated political messaging lacks the emotional intelligence and authenticity of human communication. This shift raises important questions about the role of AI in fostering genuine political discourse and civic engagement.

In addition to concerns about misinformation and voter alienation, AI-generated political messaging has significant implications for electoral integrity. AI-powered micro-targeting, which analyzes voter preferences and personal data to deliver customised political advertisements, has raised concerns about privacy violations and the manipulation of voter behavior (Rubinstein, 2018). While micro-targeting allows campaigns to tailor messages to specific demographics, it also enables political actors to exploit psychological vulnerabilities and reinforce echo chambers, where voters are exposed only to information that aligns with their existing beliefs (Persily & Tucker, 2020). This has the potential to deepen political polarisation and erode democratic deliberation. Despite these challenges, AI-driven political communication also offers opportunities for improving political engagement and accessibility. AI tools can enhance political participation by simplifying complex policy discussions, providing real-time fact-checking, and translating political content into multiple languages (Bakir & McStay, 2018). AI-driven platforms have also been used to counter misinformation by detecting and flagging false political claims, thereby promoting information accuracy. However, the effectiveness of AI in combating misinformation depends on the ethical frameworks and regulatory measures governing its use. Given these developments, there is a pressing need for scholarly inquiry into the role of AI-generated political messaging in shaping democratic processes. While existing research has explored the impact of AI on digital campaigning, limited studies have examined how voters perceive and respond to AI-generated political content (Helberger, 2020). Furthermore, the regulatory landscape governing AI in political communication remains fragmented, with policymakers struggling to keep pace with rapid technological advancements. This study seeks to fill these gaps by analyzing the ethical, political, and regulatory dimensions of AI-driven political messaging. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for ensuring that AI enhances, rather than undermines, democratic engagement.

Statement of the Problem

The rise of AI-generated political messaging presents both opportunities and challenges for democratic engagement, electoral integrity, and political communication ethics. While AI-driven content creation enhances the efficiency of political campaigns and facilitates targeted voter outreach, it also raises critical concerns regarding misinformation, authenticity, and

the manipulation of public opinion. Despite the increasing use of AI in political communication, there remains a significant gap in understanding its impact on voters' perception, trust in political institutions, and overall democratic processes. One of the most pressing issues is the potential for AI-generated misinformation and deception. AI technologies, including deep fake videos, synthetic speech, and algorithmically generated political narratives, can create highly convincing yet misleading content. Studies have shown that AI-generated political messages can be difficult to distinguish from human-crafted ones, increasing the likelihood of misinformation influencing voter choices (Chesney & Citron, 2019). The proliferation of AI-powered disinformation campaigns on social media platforms further threatens electoral integrity and democratic stability (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). However, there is limited empirical research on how AI-generated content affects voter behaviour and the mechanisms through which it spreads across digital platforms.

Furthermore, AI-driven political communication blurs the line between human interaction and automated engagement, raising concerns about transparency and accountability. Many political actors deploy AI chatbots and automated responses to interact with voters, creating an illusion of direct communication while reducing meaningful political discourse (Borges & Gambarato, 2020). This automated interaction could potentially erode public trust in political leaders if citizens feel deceived by AI-generated messages that lack human authenticity. Despite these concerns, existing regulatory frameworks for political communication do not adequately address the ethical and legal implications of AI-generated content. The absence of clear guidelines on the responsible use of AI in political messaging creates a loophole for political actors to exploit AI technologies without oversight (Helberger, 2020). Moreover, the psychological effects of AI-generated political messaging remain underexplored. While research has examined micro-targeting and political persuasion, there is limited understanding of how different voter demographics perceive AI-generated content, whether they trust it as much as human-created messages, and how this trust (or lack thereof) influences political participation and decision-making (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021). Without comprehensive studies on these issues, policymakers and scholars lack the necessary insights to develop effective regulations that balance technological innovation with democratic integrity. Given these challenges, this study sought to analyse the influence of AI-generated political messaging on voter perception, trust in political communication, and democratic engagement. It also explored the ethical and regulatory frameworks necessary to ensure that AI-driven political communication promotes, rather than undermines, democratic values. Addressing these gaps is crucial for safeguarding electoral integrity, public trust, and the future of political communication in the digital age.

Research Objectives

The research objectives are stated below:

1. To examine the impact of AI-generated political messaging on voter perception and trust in political communication.
2. To analyse the ethical and regulatory challenges associated with the use of AI in political communication.
3. To assess the role of AI-generated political messaging in influencing democratic engagement and electoral decision-making.

Research Questions

The following are the research questions:

1. How does AI-generated political messaging influence voter perception and trust in political communication?

2. What are the key ethical and regulatory challenges associated with AI-driven political messaging?
3. To what extent does AI-generated political messaging shape democratic engagement and voter decision-making?

Scope of the Study

This study examined the impact, ethical considerations, and regulatory challenges associated with AI-generated political messaging, with a particular focus on its influence on voter perception, political trust, and democratic engagement. As artificial intelligence continues to reshape political communication, it is essential to understand how AI-driven content affects electoral processes, whether it enhances political discourse or undermines democratic values, and what regulatory measures are necessary to ensure its responsible use. The study specifically investigated the extent to which AI-generated political messaging influenced voters' perceptions of credibility and authenticity in political communication. It also explored whether citizens trust AI-driven content as much as human-generated messages, or if they perceived it as manipulative and deceptive. Furthermore, the study assessed the role of AI in either fostering greater political engagement or deepening political polarisation by reinforcing echo chambers and misinformation.

Ethical concerns surrounding AI-generated political communication form another key focus of this research. The study will analyze issues such as misinformation, deep fake content, and voter manipulation, which have raised alarms about the potential misuse of AI in shaping public opinion. It also examined the transparency of AI-driven political campaigns and the accountability of political actors using these technologies. Given that AI-generated messaging operated in a largely unregulated space, this study, however, explored existing legal frameworks governing political communication and assessed their adequacy in addressing the risks posed by AI. Geographically, the research focused on democratic nations where AI-driven political communication has been widely adopted. Case studies included the United States, where AI has played a significant role in digital political campaigns; the United Kingdom, where political parties have increasingly relied on automated messaging; and Nigeria, where AI-driven misinformation has posed challenges to electoral integrity. By comparing different political contexts, the study aimed to highlight both the benefits and risks of AI in political communication across diverse democratic systems.

The methodological approach of this study combined both qualitative and quantitative research techniques. A survey was conducted to understand voter perceptions of AI-generated political content, while in-depth interviews with political communication experts, policymakers, and electoral commission officials provided insight into the regulatory landscape. Additionally, the study incorporated case study analyses of AI-driven political campaigns to examine real-world applications and their consequences. More so, the study focused on developments in AI-generated political communication from 2016 to 2025, a period marked by rapid advancements in artificial intelligence and its growing influence on political campaigns and public discourse. By narrowing the scope to this timeframe, the research captured significant trends, case studies, and policy responses that illustrate the evolving role of AI in democratic processes. By addressing these key areas, the study sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of AI-generated political messaging, its implications for democracy, and the need for regulatory measures to ensure ethical and responsible use. The findings of this research will contribute to ongoing discussions about the intersection of technology and political communication, helping to inform policymakers, scholars, and electoral bodies on best practices for managing AI-driven political discourse.

Significance of the study

The increasing integration of artificial intelligence into political communication has raised important questions about its influence on democratic processes, voter behavior, and electoral integrity. This study is significant because it contributed to the growing discourse on AI-generated political messaging, providing valuable insights into its impact on voter perception, ethical implications, and regulatory challenges. By examining the intersection of AI and political communication, the research offered several contributions to different stakeholders, including policymakers, political actors, regulatory bodies, scholars, and the general public. One of the primary contributions of this study is its examination of how AI-generated political messaging affected voter perception and trust in political communication. As AI-driven content creation became more sophisticated, there is growing concern that voters may struggle to distinguish between authentic and artificially generated messages. Understanding how AI-generated content influenced voter trust is crucial in determining whether AI enhanced political discourse or contributed to misinformation and manipulation. The findings of this study intended to help political communication experts and campaign strategists design ethical AI-driven messaging that fostered informed political engagement rather than misleading the electorate.

Additionally, the study is significant in addressing the ethical and regulatory challenges associated with AI-generated political content. As AI becomes a key tool in electoral campaigns, the risks of deep fake technology, synthetic media, and algorithmically generated misinformation have increased. The study will highlight the ethical concerns surrounding AI use in political messaging, including issues of transparency, accountability, and public deception. By identifying these challenges, the research will contribute to policy discussions on regulating AI in political communication, ensuring that its application aligns with democratic principles and electoral integrity. The study's findings intended to be particularly useful to government agencies, electoral commissions, and legislators as they develop policies to mitigate the risks associated with AI-driven political communication. Furthermore, this research is important for understanding AI's role in democratic engagement and electoral decision-making. While AI has the potential to enhance political participation through personalised and data-driven outreach, it also raised concerns about voter manipulation, polarisation, and the reinforcement of echo chambers. By assessing how AI-generated messages influenced political engagement, this study sought to provide insights into whether AI fosters informed citizen participation or exacerbated mis-information and political divisions. The results will be beneficial to civil society organisations, media practitioners, and advocacy groups working to promote responsible AI use in political discourse.

From an academic perspective, this study contributed to the evolving field of political communication and technology studies. AI's role in shaping political narratives is a relatively new and underexplored area, and this research has filled existing gaps by providing empirical data and theoretical insights on the subject. Scholars and researchers will however, find this study valuable as it expanded discussions on AI's impact on political behavior, digital democracy, and electoral processes. The study also served as a foundation for future research on the ethical and practical implications of AI in political communication, particularly in different political contexts. Finally, the findings of this research held practical significance for the general public, as they intended to help raise awareness about the implications of AI-generated political messaging. Many voters may be unaware of how AI is used to shape political narratives, influence opinions, and spread campaign messages. By shedding light on these issues, the study aimed to empower citizens with the knowledge to critically evaluate political messages, thereby strengthening media literacy and democratic participation.

Theoretical Framework

To analyse the impact of AI-generated political messaging on voter perception, democratic engagement, and regulatory challenges, this study adopted the Agenda-Setting Theory as its primary theoretical framework. Developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), the theory posits that the media plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion by influencing what issues people think about and how they perceive them. Given that AI-driven political communication is increasingly shaping electoral discourse, the agenda-setting perspective provides a relevant lens to examine how artificial intelligence influences political narratives, voter behavior, and the broader democratic process. The Agenda-Setting Theory emerged in the field of mass communication and political science as a response to the increasing influence of media on public discourse. The foundational study by McCombs and Shaw (1972) analyzed the relationship between media coverage and public perception during the U.S. presidential election, concluding that the media does not tell people what to think, but rather what to think about. Over the years, the theory has evolved into different levels, including first-level agenda-setting, second-level agenda-setting, and agenda-building (McCombs, 2004).

First-level agenda-setting refers to the ability of media (or in this case, AI-driven content) to highlight certain political issues and prioritise them in public discourse. Second-level agenda-setting goes beyond issue salience to influence how people perceive political candidates, parties, or policies based on the framing of AI-generated content. Agenda-building explains how different actors - such as politicians, campaign strategists, and AI-powered algorithms - interact to shape the political narrative. With the rise of artificial intelligence in political communication, AI-generated messaging has the power to amplify specific issues, manipulate public perceptions, and influence voter decisions, making the agenda-setting approach highly applicable to this study.

AI-driven political communication is reshaping the way political messages are constructed, distributed, and consumed. Unlike traditional media, where human journalists and editors set the agenda, AI-powered tools such as chatbots, deep fake videos, algorithmically generated campaign ads, and automated news writing are now influencing political narratives (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). These technologies can prioritize certain political themes, alter voter perception through targeted messaging, and even create hyper-personalized political content based on user data. The agenda-setting theory helps in analyzing the mechanisms through which AI-driven messaging establishes political priorities and influences public discourse. AI algorithms used in political campaigns can determine which issues dominate public discourse by promoting certain narratives over others. Social media platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok use AI-driven recommendation systems to amplify political content based on engagement patterns, often leading to the prioritization of sensationalist or emotionally charged issues (Bakshy, Messing & Adamic, 2015). This can shape public perception by making specific political topics appear more urgent or significant than others, even if they lack factual credibility.

AI does not only dictate what political issues receive attention but also frames them in particular ways. Deep learning algorithms can tailor political messages to individual voters, reinforcing their existing beliefs and biases. AI-generated deep fake videos and synthetic political advertisements can present political figures in a positive or negative light, influencing voters' impressions without them realizing the content is AI-generated (Chesney & Citron, 2019). The agenda-setting theory's framing perspective is useful in analyzing how AI-driven content modifies public attitudes toward political candidates, policies, and governance. Beyond voter perception, political actors - including political parties, governments, and interest groups - use AI-driven messaging to strategically build their own agendas. AI-generated bots and automated campaign managers can mass-produce and distribute political narratives, creating an artificial sense of public consensus (Howard, Woolley & Calo, 2018). The agenda-

setting theory helps explain how these actors manipulate AI-driven content to manufacture political legitimacy, silence opposition, or enhance their electoral appeal.

While AI-generated political messaging presents opportunities for enhanced voter engagement and political outreach, it also poses significant ethical and regulatory challenges. The agenda-setting theory provides a lens to explore the imbalances in information dissemination, particularly how AI-driven political campaigns can distort democratic participation by reinforcing misinformation, suppressing dissenting voices, and promoting algorithmic bias. The study will analyze how unregulated AI-generated content may lead to an erosion of political trust, a decline in electoral transparency, and heightened concerns about political manipulation (Napoli, 2019). To mitigate these challenges, policymakers and regulatory bodies must develop frameworks that enhance transparency in AI-driven political messaging, such as disclosure policies that mandate labeling AI-generated content, algorithmic accountability measures, and ethical AI guidelines for political campaigns (Floridi, *et al.*, 2018). The agenda-setting theory thus serves as a critical foundation for proposing regulatory solutions to ensure that AI remains a tool for democratic enhancement rather than political deception.

The increasing integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into political communication has significantly reshaped electoral processes, public discourse, and democratic engagement. AI-driven tools, including chatbots, deep fake videos, algorithmic content creation, and targeted campaign messaging, have introduced both opportunities and challenges in the political landscape. While AI can enhance voter outreach, personalize political messaging, and improve campaign efficiency, it also raises concerns about misinformation, ethical accountability, and electoral manipulation. Despite the growing use of AI-generated political messaging, there remains a gap in scholarly research regarding its specific influence on voter perception and democratic governance. This study is justified on several grounds. Firstly, this research is essential for understanding how AI-generated content influences voter behavior and decision-making. Existing studies on political communication have primarily focused on traditional media (television, radio, and newspapers) and, more recently, social media as a platform for digital campaigning (McCombs, 2004; Howard, Woolley & Calo, 2018). However, fewer studies have critically examined how AI-generated political messages shape voters' cognitive and emotional responses. Given the ability of AI to tailor political content to individual preferences, there is an urgent need to analyze whether such personalization fosters informed electoral choices or reinforces ideological echo chambers that polarize public opinion.

Secondly, the study is justified by the potential ethical and regulatory implications of AI-generated political messaging. AI-driven political content can be manipulated to spread false narratives, distort facts, and create synthetic political personas that deceive voters (Chesney & Citron, 2019). The rise of deep fake technology has made it increasingly difficult to distinguish between authentic and fabricated political statements, raising questions about trust and credibility in democratic discourse. Despite these concerns, there is limited research on the governance frameworks needed to regulate AI in political campaigns, especially in emerging democracies where electoral institutions may lack the capacity to detect and mitigate AI-driven disinformation. This study will provide a critical examination of regulatory gaps and propose policy recommendations to ensure ethical AI use in political communication. Thirdly, this study contributes to the broader field of political communication by integrating AI as a key factor in shaping electoral outcomes. Traditionally, studies in this field have focused on media framing, agenda-setting, and political advertising (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Napoli, 2019). However, the advent of AI introduces a new dimension that requires scholarly attention. This research will expand the theoretical discourse on how AI-driven algorithms influence the political agenda, shape public narratives, and redefine the nature of political engagement in the digital age. By applying the Agenda-Setting Theory, the study will analyze how AI

technologies prioritise specific political issues and manipulate public perception through automated content dissemination.

Moreover, the study held practical significance for policymakers, electoral commissions, and political stakeholders. As governments and international organisations work toward establishing ethical guidelines for AI use in politics, empirical research is needed to provide evidence-based insights. This study will help inform policy decisions by identifying the risks and benefits associated with AI-driven political communication. Understanding these implications is particularly critical for electoral bodies tasked with ensuring free, fair, and transparent elections in the face of AI-generated misinformation and campaign automation.

The Agenda-Setting Theory provided a robust analytical framework for understanding the role of AI-generated political messaging in shaping voter perceptions and influencing democratic engagement. By applying this theory, the study explored how AI technologies prioritised political narratives, frame electoral discourse, and shaped the public agenda. Furthermore, the theory highlighted the potential risks and ethical dilemmas associated with AI-driven content, making it essential for both academic research and policy discussions on AI governance in political communication. This theoretical perspective has guided the study's analysis of AI-generated political messaging, helping to assess its impact on democracy, voter behavior, and regulatory practices. The justification for this study lied in its ability to bridge existing research gaps, provided theoretical and empirical contributions to political communication, inform ethical and regulatory policies, and offered practical insights for stakeholders navigating the evolving landscape of AI-generated political messaging. Given the profound implications of AI in shaping voter perception and democratic governance, this study is both necessary and urgent in ensuring a balanced and accountable use of AI in political processes.

Despite the growing body of research on political communication in the digital age, several critical gaps remain. While numerous studies have explored the role of social media in shaping public opinion and political behavior (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Lazer, *et al.*, 2018), there is still limited understanding of how emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence (AI) and deep fake videos, are influencing political discourse and voter perceptions. Existing literature has largely focused on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter (Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015; Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018), yet newer platforms such as TikTok and Telegram, which have increasingly been used for political mobilisation and propaganda, remain understudied. Additionally, while scholars have examined the spread of misinformation and computational propaganda (Ferrara *et al.*, 2016; Howard & Kollanyi, 2016), there is a lack of research on how different demographic groups engage with and respond to such information. Most studies have focused on Western democracies, particularly the United States and Europe (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018), leaving a significant gap in understanding how digital political communication operates in developing regions, such as Africa, Asia, and Latin America. These regions have unique political, social, and technological dynamics that may shape the effects of political communication in distinct ways.

Another notable gap in the literature is the insufficient examination of how emotional intelligence and psychological factors influenced political communication online. While some research has addressed the emotional appeal of political messaging (Tufekci, 2014; Bennett, 2012), there is a need for more empirical studies that explore the intersection of political communication, cognitive biases, and emotional reactions, particularly in highly polarised political environments. Furthermore, studies on political communication and social media have primarily employed quantitative methods, such as content analysis and social network analysis (Krippendorff, 2019; Shao *et al.*, 2018). However, qualitative approaches, such as ethnographic studies and in-depth interviews with political actors, campaign strategists, and voters, are underutilized. Such methods could provide deeper insights into the motivations and strategies behind digital political communication. Lastly, there is a limited understanding of the long-

term effects of social media-driven political communication on democratic governance and public trust in institutions. While research has documented short-term effects, such as misinformation influencing elections (Chesney & Citron, 2019; Howard, Woolley, & Calo, 2018), the broader implications for democratic resilience, political engagement, and institutional trust over time remain unclear. Future research should explore how digital political communication shapes political attitudes and behaviors in the long run, particularly in contexts where democratic norms are under threat. By addressing these gaps, future studies can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the evolving landscape of political communication in the digital era.

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-method approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative research methods to provide a comprehensive analysis of AI-generated political messaging and its implications for voter perception, democratic engagement, and regulatory frameworks. By integrating multiple research methods, the study ensured a holistic understanding of how artificial intelligence influenced political communication and electoral decision-making. The study employed a descriptive and exploratory research design, which was appropriate for analysing emerging trends and understudied phenomena. The descriptive aspect of the study sought to document and explain the extent to which AI-generated political messaging is shaping voter perceptions and democratic engagement. The exploratory aspect is focused on investigating ethical and regulatory challenges associated with AI-driven political communication, especially in the context of mis-information, transparency, and accountability. This research design enabled a structured yet flexible approach to examining the subject matter in depth.

The population of this study included voters, political communication experts, policymakers, and electoral commission officials across different democratic settings where AI-generated political content has been widely used. To obtain a representative sample, a multi-stage sampling technique was employed. In the first stage, purposive sampling was used to select countries with significant AI adoption in political communication, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Nigeria. These countries were chosen because of their diverse political landscapes and varying levels of AI regulation. In the second stage, stratified sampling was used to categorise participants into different groups, including voters, communication experts, policymakers, and electoral officers. Finally, simple random sampling was applied to select respondents within each category, ensuring that the sample was both representative and unbiased. The study aimed to survey at least 500 voters and conducted in-depth interviews with 20 experts and policymakers across the selected countries. This study utilised both primary and secondary data sources to ensure a well-rounded analysis. The primary method for gathering quantitative data was a structured survey, which was administered to voters across the selected case-study countries. The survey questionnaire was also designed to measure voters' perceptions of AI-generated political content, levels of trust in AI-driven messaging, and concerns about misinformation and manipulation. The survey included closed-ended questions with Likert-scale responses to quantify attitudes and trends. The questionnaire was distributed through online survey platforms to ensure a broad reach and diverse representation. To gain deeper insights into the ethical and regulatory challenges associated with AI-generated political messaging, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with political communication experts, policymakers, and electoral officials. These interviews explored topics such as the transparency of AI-driven campaigns, regulatory gaps, and potential policy interventions. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility, enabling respondents to provide detailed and nuanced perspectives.

A comparative case study approach was used to examine AI-driven political campaigns in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Nigeria. The case studies focused on notable instances where AI-generated political messaging was deployed, analysing its impact on electoral outcomes and voter engagement. The case study method was valuable for understanding real-world applications and contextual differences in AI-driven political communication. In addition to primary data collection, the study relied on secondary data sources, including academic literature, policy documents, electoral commission reports, and media analyses of AI-driven political campaigns. Content analysis was conducted on AI-generated political advertisements, deep fake videos, and synthetic news articles to assess the nature and framing of AI-driven messaging. The study employs both quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques to interpret findings effectively. Data collected from surveys was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics such as frequency distributions, percentages, and mean scores were used to summarise voter perceptions of AI-generated political messaging. Inferential statistics, including chi-square tests and regression analysis, were conducted to examine relationships between AI-driven content and voter trust. Data analysis was performed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) for accuracy and efficiency.

Data from interviews and case studies were analysed using thematic analysis, where responses were coded into recurring themes and patterns. This has helped identified key concerns, emerging trends, and expert opinions on AI's role in political communication. NVivo software was used to organise and analysed qualitative data, ensuring a systematic and rigorous approach. To ensure the reliability and validity of the study, triangulation was applied, combining multiple data sources (surveys, interviews, case studies, and content analysis) to verify findings and strengthen conclusions. A pilot study was conducted before the full-scale research to test the clarity and effectiveness of the survey and interview instruments. Additionally, expert reviewed was sought to enhance the credibility of the research tools. Given the sensitivity of AI in political communication, the study adhered to ethical research principles. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring that they understood the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity was maintained, especially for interviewees who might held regulatory or governmental positions. The research complied with international ethical guidelines, such as those outlined by the American Political Science Association (APSA) and institutional review boards (IRBs).

Tables of Data Presentation

Table 1: *Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N = 300)*

Research Question 1: *How does AI-generated political messaging influence voter perception and trust in political communication?*

Variable	Categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	160	53.3%
	Female	140	46.7%
Age Group	18-25 years	80	26.7%
	26-35 years	100	33.3%
	36-45 years	70	23.3%
	46 and above	50	16.7%
Education Level	Secondary education	50	16.7%
	Bachelor's	160	53.3%
	Postgraduate degree	90	30.0%

Table 2: Social Media Usage and Political Engagement (N = 300)

Research Question 1: How does AI-generated political messaging influence voter perception and trust in political communication?

Social Media Platform	Used for Political Information (%)	Used for Political Debate (%)	Used for Political Mobilisation (%)
Facebook	65% (195)	50% (150)	40% (120)
Twitter/X	55% (165)	48% (144)	38% (114)
WhatsApp	70% (210)	45% (135)	60% (180)
TikTok	50% (150)	42% (126)	35% (105)

Note: Values in parentheses represented the number of respondents using the platform for each category.

Table 3: Public Trust in Online Political Information (N = 300)

Research Question 1: How does AI-generated political messaging influence voter perception and trust in political communication?

Trust Level	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Highly Trust	40	13.3%
Moderately Trust	90	30.0%
Neutral	80	26.7%
Slightly Distrust	50	16.7%
Completely Distrust	40	13.3%

Table 4: Perceived Influence of Fake News on Political Opinion (N = 300)

Research Question 2: What are the key ethical and regulatory challenges associated with AI-driven political messaging?

Perceived Impact	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	100	33.3%
Agree	90	30.0%
Neutral	50	16.7%
Disagree	35	11.7%
Strongly Disagree	25	8.3%

Table 5: Regression Analysis – Impact of Social Media Exposure on Political Perception (N = 300)

Research Question 2: What are the key ethical and regulatory challenges associated with AI-driven political messaging?

Independent Variable	β Coefficient	Standard Error	p-value	Interpretation
Exposure to Political News	0.45	0.12	0.002**	Significant
Frequency of Social Media Use	0.38	0.10	0.005**	Significant
Trust in Online Information	0.20	0.08	0.07	Not Significant
Education Level	0.30	0.11	0.03*	Significant
Age	-0.15	0.09	0.09	Not Significant

Note: Significance levels: p < 0.01 () highly significant, p < 0.05 () significant.*

Table 6: *Chi-Square Test – Relationship between Social Media and Political Participation (N = 300)*

Research Question 3: *To what extent does AI-generated political messaging shape democratic engagement and voter decision-making?*

Variable	Chi-Square Value (χ^2)	p-value	Decision
Social Media Usage & Voting Behavior	15.32	0.003**	Significant
Exposure to Political Misinformation & Trust in News	10.45	0.07	Not Significant
Political Discussions Online & Offline Activism	17.21	0.001**	Significant

Key Insights from Data Analysis

Demographics: The sample population is evenly distributed across gender, age, and education levels.

Social Media Engagement: WhatsApp and Facebook are most commonly used for political information, while Twitter/X and TikTok have lower engagement in political debates.

Trust in Online Political Information: Only 43.3% of respondents trust political content online, while 30% remain neutral and 30% distrust it.

Misinformation Influence: About 63.3% of respondents believed that misinformation impacts their political opinion.

Regression Analysis: Exposure to political news and frequency of social media use significantly impact political perceptions ($p < 0.01$). However, age and trust in online information are not significant predictors.

Chi-Square Test: Social media usage significantly influences voting behavior ($p = 0.003$), while misinformation exposure does not significantly affect trust in news ($p = 0.07$).

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study provide critical insights into the intersection of social media usage, political engagement, misinformation, and public trust in political communication. This section discusses the key results in relation to existing literature, highlighting their implications for political communication discourse. The results reveal that WhatsApp (70%) and Facebook (65%) are the most widely used platforms for accessing political information, followed by Twitter/X (55%) and TikTok (50%). These findings align with studies such as that of Chadwick and Stromer-Galley (2023), which assert that private and semi-private messaging platforms like WhatsApp play a significant role in political mobilization, particularly in the Global South. The high usage of Facebook and WhatsApp for political debates and mobilization suggests that social media has become a critical space for political participation, providing alternative avenues for civic engagement beyond traditional mass media. However, the study also found that Twitter/X and TikTok have lower levels of political mobilization engagement (38% and 35%, respectively). This aligns with the findings of Enli (2022), who argues that while platforms like TikTok are increasingly used for political expression, their algorithmic structure prioritizes entertainment over structured political discourse. The implication is that different social media platforms serve distinct political communication functions, and campaign strategists must tailor their content to fit platform-specific audience behaviors.

The study shows that only 43.3% of respondents express trust in political information on social media, while 30% remain neutral, and 30% distrust online content. These findings corroborate the research by Guess et al. (2022), which suggests that public skepticism towards online political content is influenced by concerns over fake news, misinformation, and biased reporting. The relatively high neutrality (30%) observed in this study suggests that many individuals remain undecided about the credibility of online political information, which can lead to passive political engagement. This finding underscores the argument of Tandoc, *et al.* (2023), who emphasize that media literacy plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' ability to critically assess online political content. A striking finding is that 63.3% of respondents agree that misinformation influences their political opinions, confirming the growing concern over disinformation campaigns in digital political communication. This finding is consistent with Allcott and Gentzkow's (2023) study, which found that exposure to misinformation significantly alters political beliefs, particularly among low-information voters. The implication of this result is that misinformation remains a powerful tool in shaping public perception, making fact-checking initiatives and media literacy education essential to combat its effects.

Interestingly, only 8.3% of respondents strongly disagreed with the idea that misinformation affects political opinions, suggesting that only a small segment of the population perceives themselves as immune to false political narratives. This finding supports the third-person effect theory (Davison, 1983), which suggests that people tend to believe that misinformation affects others more than themselves. Regression analysis indicates that exposure to political news ($\beta = 0.45$, $p = 0.002$) and frequency of social media use ($\beta = 0.38$, $p = 0.005$) significantly influence political perception. This finding aligns with Bennett and Segerberg's (2023) connective action theory, which argues that individuals' exposure to digital political content personalizes and reinforces their political attitudes. Furthermore, the finding that education level ($\beta = 0.30$, $p = 0.03$) also significantly influences political perceptions supports the work of Prior (2022), who found that individuals with higher education levels are more likely to engage in critical thinking when evaluating political messages.

However, age ($\beta = -0.15$, $p = 0.09$) and trust in online information ($\beta = 0.20$, $p = 0.07$) were not significant predictors of political perception. These results challenge the conventional wisdom that older individuals are less influenced by digital political communication (Stroud, 2023). Instead, they suggest that age may not be as strong a determinant of political perception in the social media era, as younger and older individuals alike are exposed to similar content streams. The chi-square test results indicate a statistically significant relationship between social media usage and voting behavior ($\chi^2 = 15.32$, $p = 0.003$), confirming the hypothesis that active engagement with political content on social media increases the likelihood of offline political participation. This is in line with the findings of Boulianne (2023), who demonstrated that social media fosters participatory democracy by enhancing political mobilization and voter turnout. On the other hand, exposure to political misinformation was not significantly related to trust in news sources ($\chi^2 = 10.45$, $p = 0.07$). This contradicts some earlier studies, such as Bakir and McStay (2022), which suggest that misinformation exposure reduces trust in media institutions. One possible explanation for this discrepancy is that individuals may develop selective exposure habits, wherein they consume misinformation that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, thus maintaining their trust in certain news sources.

The findings of this study underscore the increasing role of social media as both an enabler and disruptor of political communication. On one hand, platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook enhance political participation and discourse, while on the other hand, misinformation remains a significant challenge to democratic engagement. The moderate level of trust in online political content suggests that citizens are becoming more critical of digital political messages, which is both an opportunity and a challenge for political communicators. Furthermore,

the lack of a significant correlation between misinformation exposure and trust in news sources suggests that media trust is shaped by deeper ideological and psychological factors rather than just exposure to false information. This aligned with the concept of motivated reasoning (Taber & Lodge, 2022), which posits that individuals interpret information in ways that reinforce their pre-existing political beliefs. In conclusion, this study contributed to the growing body of knowledge on digital political communication by highlighting the complex interplay between social media, political engagement, trust, and misinformation. The findings emphasize the need for fact-checking mechanisms, media literacy programs, and platform regulations to ensure that social media remains a productive space for democratic discourse.

Conclusion of the Study

This study has provided a comprehensive analysis of the role of social media in political communication, focusing on political engagement, misinformation, and trust in online political information. The findings highlighted the dual nature of social media as both a facilitator of political participation and a platform for misinformation that can shape public perception. It was observed that platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook play a dominant role in digital political discourse, while newer platforms like TikTok and Twitter/X serve more specialized functions in political mobilisation and issue-based activism. One of the key insights from this study is that social media exposure significantly influences political perception and participation, reinforcing previous research that links digital political communication to civic engagement. However, the study also confirmed that misinformation remained a serious challenge, as a significant proportion of respondents acknowledged its impact on their political beliefs. Additionally, the study found that while many people engage with political content online, there is still a considerable level of skepticism regarding the credibility of online political information, a finding consistent with recent literature on media trust.

Despite these contributions, the study also acknowledged several limitations. One of the primary constraints was the geographical focus, as the study was conducted within a specific demographic and regional context, which may limit its generalisability to other populations. Additionally, while the study relied on survey responses, self-reported data can sometimes be affected by social desirability bias, where participants might not always accurately report their political behaviors or beliefs. Another limitation was that the study did not deeply explore the role of artificial intelligence (AI) and algorithms in shaping political communication, which is an emerging and highly relevant issue in digital politics. Given the evolving nature of political communication in the digital age, future research should explore the role of AI and algorithmic bias in influencing political perceptions and behaviors. Additionally, longitudinal studies could be conducted to examine how sustained exposure to political misinformation over time impacts voter behavior and democratic participation. Another promising area for further research is how socio-economic status, ethnicity, and religion interact with social media usage to shape political attitudes, particularly in diverse and multi-ethnic societies. Overall, this study contributed to the ongoing discourse on digital democracy and the challenges posed by misinformation, providing valuable insights for policymakers, media practitioners, and scholars of political communication. While social media has transformed the political landscape, ensuring its positive impact on democracy requires continued efforts in digital literacy, fact-checking, and regulatory frameworks to counteract misinformation and enhance public trust in political communication.

Policy Recommendations for implementation

Based on the findings of this study, the following three policy recommendations were proposed to enhance the positive role of social media in political communication while addressing the challenges of misinformation and trust deficits:

1. Governments, civil society organisations, and educational institutions should implement comprehensive digital literacy programmes aimed at equipping citizens with the skills needed to critically evaluate political information online. In achieving this, Fact-checking initiatives should be integrated into school curricula, media training programmes, and public awareness campaigns to help individuals distinguish between credible news sources and misinformation. Additionally, partnerships with social media platforms can facilitate the promotion of verified political content and counter false narratives through automated fact-checking alerts.
2. Policymakers should establish and enforce regulations that require social media platforms to disclose the sources of political advertisements, combat algorithmic bias, and enhance content moderation. This includes mandating transparency in political campaign financing on social media, enforcing labeling of AI-generated content, and holding platforms accountable for the spread of disinformation. Governments should collaborate with technology companies to develop ethical guidelines that balance freedom of expression with the need to curb political manipulation and fake news dissemination.
3. To maximise the democratic potential of social media, governments and electoral bodies should develop official digital engagement platforms that provide accurate and real-time political information to citizens. These platforms can serve as trusted sources for election updates, policy discussions, and civic participation opportunities, thereby reducing reliance on potentially misleading information circulating on social media. Political institutions should also leverage interactive digital tools, such as virtual town halls and policy discussion forums, to foster inclusive and informed public discourse on governance issues.

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