

RELIGION, MISINFORMATION, AND SOCIAL MEDIA: SECURITY IMPLICATIONS FOR NIGERIA

Emmanuel Onah Oko, PhD

Department of Religions, Federal University, Benin City, Edo State

Emmanuel.oko@uniben.edu/07061114705

&

James Igbabee Jonathan Ukpe PhD

Department of Religion and Cultural Studies, Benue State University, Makurdi

chigabee@gmail.com/08066021097

Abstract

Religion plays a central role in Nigerian public life, while social media has transformed the production, circulation, and reception of religious information. This study examines how religious misinformation disseminated through digital platforms creates security implications in Nigeria. It aims to analyse the relationship between religion, misinformation, and social media; identify pathways through which religious misinformation contributes to insecurity; and assess practical strategies for mitigating its effects. The study adopts a qualitative research design based on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports, policy documents, and reputable news reports. Data were collected through documentary research and analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke's approach. Findings indicate that religious misinformation can intensify interreligious conflict, facilitate radicalisation and extremist mobilisation, erode public trust, generate panic and social disorder, and weaken national unity and social cohesion. The study is significant because it demonstrates that misinformation becomes a security concern when it interacts with religious identity, existing grievances, institutional distrust, and rapid digital communication. It recommends stronger digital literacy, responsible religious communication, coordinated fact-checking and rapid-response mechanisms, and integration of misinformation monitoring into security and peacebuilding frameworks. The study concludes that religious misinformation should be treated as a significant component of Nigeria's contemporary security environment.

Keywords: Religion, Misinformation, Social Media, Security, Nigeria

Introduction

A single forwarded voice note on WhatsApp can travel across several states, dozens of church and mosque groups, and thousands of phone screens before a fact-checker becomes aware of it. This reflects the speed at which religious information now circulates in Nigeria, where social media has transformed how sermons are delivered, prayers are requested, and doctrinal disagreements are debated in public. Platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube have become important instruments of communication, political mobilisation, and religious engagement, enabling churches, mosques, and individual religious leaders to circulate sermons, coordinate congregations, and participate in wider public debates beyond the physical boundaries of places of worship. Yet the same openness that enables a preacher in Enugu to address an audience in Kano within seconds also allows misleading or fabricated religious content to circulate with similar speed. Social media is structured around rapid dissemination and engagement, often allowing information to reach audiences before it can be adequately verified, while religious

claims carrying emotional weight or moral urgency may spread particularly widely because users tend to share content that evokes strong reactions. Akinola, Adewumi, and Ijaiya observe that the unregulated character of Nigeria's new media environment allows fake news to shape public trust and weaken social cohesion, with consequences that extend into the country's wider democratic life (177). Within religious communities, this dynamic means that a manipulated sermon clip, fabricated statement, or invented prophecy can influence perceptions of another religious group or intensify existing tensions before its authenticity is established.

The stakes are particularly significant in a country as religiously and ethnically diverse as Nigeria, where communal violence and attacks on rural populations have produced serious security and livelihood concerns in parts of Benue State (Gbinde and Ukpe 39–50). False claims, conspiracy narratives, and inflammatory religious messages do not necessarily remain confined to digital spaces; they can deepen suspicion between communities, undermine interreligious trust, and contribute to the escalation of local disputes. Aruku et al. argue that fake news and hate speech constitute significant security concerns in Nigeria because they can deepen existing political, religious, and ethnic divisions (773–74). Nigeria's experience of communal conflict demonstrates why the circulation of unverified and inflammatory claims deserves serious attention, particularly where religious institutions are themselves involved in efforts to respond to insecurity (Amase and Ukpe 84–95). When information is interpreted through existing religious and communal identities, a false report can acquire significance beyond its factual content, shaping perceptions of threat and influencing how individuals and communities respond to unfolding events. Misinformation, therefore, should not be understood solely as a communication problem; under particular social and political conditions, it can become a factor in the production and escalation of insecurity.

Despite these concerns, scholarship on misinformation in Nigeria has focused substantially on political communication, electoral misinformation, fake news, and hate speech, while the specifically religious dimension of the problem remains comparatively underexamined. Less attention has been devoted to how religious misinformation moves through digital networks, how religious identity and authority influence its reception, and how such narratives may generate security risks associated with faith, identity, belonging, and intergroup relations. This gap is significant because religious communication differs from many other forms of online communication in the degree of trust, moral authority, and emotional commitment that may accompany its messages.

This paper addresses this gap by examining the relationship between religion, misinformation, and social media in Nigeria and analysing the security implications of their intersection. It focuses on the ways religious misinformation circulates through digital platforms, the social and technological conditions that facilitate its dissemination, and the pathways through which misleading religious narratives can contribute to conflict, radicalisation, panic, institutional distrust, and weakened social cohesion. Drawing on existing scholarship, the paper also considers strategies for mitigating these risks while preserving the legitimate role of social media in religious communication, freedom of expression, and public engagement.

Conceptual Clarifications

Religion and Digital Religion: Religion, in its broadest sense, refers to systems of belief, ritual, and communal practice through which people relate to the sacred and organise their moral and social lives. In Nigeria, religion extends beyond formal places of worship and influences areas such as marriage, community relations, dispute resolution, moral conduct, and political engagement. The migration of religious practices and communication onto digital platforms has given rise to what scholars describe as digital religion, a concept that captures the ways contemporary religious life is practised, communicated, and negotiated across both physical and digital spaces. These spaces do not necessarily function as separate domains; rather, they interact with and shape one another. Campbell, a leading scholar in the field, describes digital religion as an environment in which traditional religious practice and emerging digital culture intersect and reshape one another (1). A Sunday sermon streamed live, a WhatsApp prayer chain, or a Friday *khutbah* uploaded to YouTube is therefore more than a digital record of an offline religious activity. Such content becomes a new religious artefact that can be circulated, edited, commented upon, recontextualised, and reinterpreted beyond the control of its original producer.

Social Media: Social media refers to internet-based platforms that enable users to create, share, modify, and interact with content rather than merely consume information produced by established media organisations. Kaplan and Haenlein define social media as a group of internet-based applications built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 that facilitate the creation and exchange of user-generated content (61). This definition captures an important distinction between social media and traditional broadcast media: control over the production and circulation of information is no longer concentrated primarily in the hands of professional editors and institutional gatekeepers. Religious leaders, congregants, journalists, activists, political actors, and anonymous users can all participate in the production and dissemination of content. In Nigeria, this participatory structure has made platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, X, and YouTube important spaces for religious communication, public debate, mobilisation, and the negotiation of religious identities. At the same time, the reduced role of traditional gatekeeping creates conditions in which unverified and misleading religious claims can circulate rapidly.

Misinformation: Misinformation refers to false or inaccurate information that is shared without the deliberate intention to deceive or cause harm. Wardle and Derakhshan situate misinformation within a broader framework of information disorder and distinguish it from disinformation primarily based on intent (20). A person who forwards an inaccurate claim about a religious event because they believe the information to be true, for example, may be engaging in misinformation even though they have no intention of causing harm. This distinction is relevant to the present study because much of the misleading religious content circulated online may originate from individuals who do not recognise that the information is false. Such content may include fabricated quotations, inaccurate interpretations of religious teachings, misrepresented images, false reports of religious incidents, or claims attributed incorrectly to religious leaders. Although the original circulation may be unintentional, the resulting consequences can nevertheless be significant when such claims reach large and emotionally invested audiences.

Disinformation: Disinformation, in contrast, refers to false or misleading information that is deliberately created, manipulated, or disseminated with the intention of deceiving, influencing, or causing harm. Wardle and Derakhshan distinguish disinformation from misinformation on the

basis of intentionality, with the former involving a conscious effort to mislead or cause harm (20). In the religious context, this may include deliberately fabricated reports of attacks against a religious community, manipulated audiovisual material attributed to religious leaders, or false narratives designed to portray another religious group as an existential threat. Extremist actors may similarly employ deliberately manipulated religious narratives to legitimise violence, recruit supporters, or intensify perceptions of religious persecution. The distinction between misinformation and disinformation is therefore important because the two may require different forms of intervention. While misinformation may often be addressed through correction, verification, and public education, deliberate disinformation may also require stronger institutional, regulatory, or legal responses where it involves incitement, fraud, or other unlawful conduct.

Religious Misinformation: For this study, religious misinformation refers to false or misleading information concerning religious beliefs, practices, personalities, institutions, or events that circulates through digital and social media environments. The term is used here primarily to describe the religious dimension of information disorder, while recognising that such content may, in some circumstances, constitute religious disinformation when it is deliberately created or disseminated to deceive or cause harm. Religious misinformation may take the form of fabricated religious statements, distorted scriptural interpretations, false reports of attacks or religious persecution, invented prophecies, manipulated images or videos, and misleading claims attributed to religious leaders. Nigeria's experience during the COVID-19 pandemic provides an illustration of how religious authority can shape the circulation and reception of misleading information. Ndinojuo documents the dissemination of misconceptions linking 5G technology, COVID-19, and religious interpretations in Nigeria (103). Such claims demonstrate that the circulation of misleading information cannot always be understood solely in terms of the factual accuracy of a message. The identity and perceived authority of the person or institution associated with the message can influence whether audiences accept, question, or share it. Religious misinformation may therefore acquire additional persuasive force when it is communicated through trusted religious networks or attributed to recognised religious authorities.

National and Human Security: Security has traditionally been understood in state-centric terms, particularly in relation to the protection of territorial integrity, sovereignty, borders, and national institutions from external or internal threats. The concept of human security, however, broadens this understanding by placing the safety and wellbeing of individuals and communities at the centre of security analysis. The United Nations Development Programme's *Human Development Report 1994* advanced this broader conception, emphasising freedom from fear and freedom from want and identifying several dimensions of human security, including economic, food, health, environmental, personal, political, and community security (22).

This broader conception is particularly appropriate for analysing religious misinformation in Nigeria because its effects are not confined to the formal institutions of the state. Misleading and inflammatory religious narratives may undermine trust between communities, intensify perceptions of religious threat, encourage vigilantism, contribute to communal violence, and create fear and insecurity among individuals. The present study therefore approaches security as encompassing both national security and human security. National security concerns arise where religious misinformation threatens public order, institutional stability, and national cohesion, while

human security concerns arise where individuals and communities experience fear, violence, displacement, or loss of social trust. This combined perspective provides a more appropriate framework for examining the security consequences of religious misinformation in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on **Social Identity Theory**, developed by Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner to explain how group membership shapes individuals' perceptions, judgements, and behaviour towards others (33-47). The theory proposes that people derive part of their sense of self from the social groups to which they belong, including religious, ethnic, and national groups. They consequently tend to distinguish between an **in-group**, with which they identify, and an **out-group**, which they perceive as different. Such categorisation can encourage favouritism towards one's own group and a desire to maintain what Tajfel and Turner describe as positive distinctiveness. Intergroup bias does not necessarily depend on direct conflict; the simple distinction between “us” and “them” can influence how people interpret those who belong to other groups, particularly where identities are associated with competition, threat, victimisation, or historical grievances.

The theory is particularly useful for understanding the circulation of religious misinformation on social media in Nigeria. A Christian or Muslim user who encounters a fabricated story portraying another religious group as violent, dishonest, or hostile may interpret the claim through existing perceptions of religious identity rather than assess it solely on the strength of the available evidence. A message that confirms an established view of an out-group may therefore appear convincing and become more likely to be accepted or shared, while information that challenges such a view may be rejected even when credible. Fabricated sermons, manipulated images, false reports of religious attacks, and invented atrocity narratives can consequently gain influence because they reinforce existing ideas about who belongs to “us” and who constitutes “them”.

The relevance of the theory becomes even clearer where religious and ethnic identities overlap, as they often do within Nigeria's complex social and political environment (Ukpe and Tsendzuul 132–39). A misleading religious narrative may activate several dimensions of group identity at once, intensifying perceptions of collective threat and strengthening solidarity within the in-group. Once such perceptions become widespread, misinformation may contribute to suspicion, hostility, retaliatory attitudes, and mobilisation against perceived out-groups. Social media can intensify this process because users can reproduce and circulate identity-confirming narratives within networks of like-minded individuals, often before the claims have been verified. Social Identity Theory therefore provides a useful basis for tracing the movement from religious identity and group categorisation to the acceptance and circulation of misinformation, perceived intergroup threat, collective mobilisation, and potential security consequences.

Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative research design based on secondary sources** to examine the relationship between religion, misinformation, social media, and security in Nigeria. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study is concerned with meaning, interpretation, processes, and social phenomena rather than statistical measurement or generalisation. Creswell describes qualitative research as an inquiry process that seeks to understand social or human problems through detailed and holistic accounts derived primarily from words rather than numerical data

(15). The study therefore relies on documentary evidence rather than primary data generated through interviews or surveys. Following Bowen's conception of document analysis as a systematic procedure for reviewing and interpreting printed and electronic materials (27–28), the evidence base comprises peer-reviewed journal articles, institutional reports, policy documents, and reputable news reports relevant to the subject. Sources were selected according to their relevance to religion, misinformation, social media, and security in Nigeria, with preference given to recent publications and established academic or institutional outlets. Relevant literature was identified through searches combining terms such as “religion”, “misinformation”, “disinformation”, “social media”, and “Nigeria”, while documented cases, including the 5G conspiracy theory during the COVID-19 pandemic, were considered where they provided concrete illustrations of the issues under investigation. The selected materials were analysed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach, which involves familiarisation with the material, generation of initial codes, identification and review of themes, refinement and naming of themes, and development of the analytical account (87). The analysis examined recurring patterns in the circulation and reception of religious misinformation, the influence of religious identity and digital networks, and the security consequences associated with these processes. These patterns informed the principal themes of the study, including religious conflict and communal violence, radicalisation and extremist mobilisation, erosion of public trust, panic and social disorder, and threats to social cohesion and national security. The study nevertheless recognises the limitations of relying on secondary sources. Unreported incidents, locally circulated material, and the firsthand experiences of religious leaders, security officials, and social media users may not be adequately represented, while the analysis necessarily inherits the limitations and possible biases of the sources consulted. As Bowen observes, documents are generally produced for purposes other than the research for which they are subsequently used and may therefore contain gaps in the information available to the researcher (31). The qualitative and literature-based design also allows the study to identify patterns, relationships, and theoretically informed interpretations without establishing the precise prevalence or statistical magnitude of religious misinformation in Nigeria. The findings are therefore presented as analytically grounded insights into the mechanisms and security implications of religious misinformation rather than as statistically representative measurements of the Nigerian population.

Religion, Social Media, and the Circulation of Misinformation in Nigeria

Religion and Digital Communication: Religion continues to occupy a central place in Nigerian public life, shaping moral norms, communal identities, social relationships, and political behaviour. In recent years, this influence has extended increasingly into digital spaces as churches, mosques, and individual religious leaders build audiences on platforms once associated primarily with entertainment, commerce, and general social interaction. Nasidi and Ismail's study of Salafi, Sufi, and independent Islamic clerics in metropolitan Kano demonstrates how Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp have become important instruments of contemporary Islamic preaching and communication (web). Their study suggests that digital platforms have not simply displaced mosque-based religious authority but have transformed how that authority is exercised, combining established scriptural traditions with a technologically mediated environment characterised by visibility, interactivity, and competition among religious movements. A comparable development can be observed within Nigerian Christian communities, where livestreamed sermons, devotional messages, prayer groups, and online counselling have become increasingly integrated into congregational life.

The scale and accessibility of this transformation have significant implications for the production and circulation of religious knowledge. Facebook Live, YouTube, and WhatsApp groups can function as extensions of physical congregations, allowing religious leaders to reach audiences who may be geographically distant from their places of worship. At the same time, digital communication places competing religious movements within the same public arena. The situation identified by Nasidi and Ismail in metropolitan Kano illustrates how Salafi, Sufi, and independent clerics can compete for visibility, followers, and doctrinal influence within a shared digital environment (web). Such competition can broaden access to religious teaching and provide minority or reform-oriented voices with opportunities to reach audiences beyond conventional preaching spaces. It can also expose doctrinal disagreements to wider audiences, where complex theological questions may be reduced to short videos, quotations, memes, or emotionally charged exchanges that are difficult for ordinary users to contextualise or evaluate.

The openness of digital communication also creates vulnerabilities. Platforms such as WhatsApp allow religious messages to circulate through private groups and interpersonal networks, sometimes passing through several users before reaching a wider audience. In such circumstances, the source of a message may become difficult to establish, while its repeated circulation can create an impression of credibility. Aondover et al., in their study of social media news consumption and credibility in Lagos State, found evidence of widespread misinformation on social media and identified Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok among the platforms associated with its circulation (80–92). Their findings also indicate that social media users are encouraged to verify information before relying on or sharing it. The implications are particularly significant for religious communication because a message received through a trusted church, mosque, family, or congregational network may acquire credibility from the relationship between the sender and recipient rather than from the reliability of the information itself. Religious communication on social media therefore operates within a complex environment in which spiritual authority, interpersonal trust, technological affordances, and rapid information circulation intersect.

Religious Misinformation in the Nigerian Context: Religious misinformation in Nigeria can take several forms, including fabricated religious statements, distorted interpretations of doctrine, invented prophecies, false reports concerning religious incidents, manipulated images or videos, and conspiracy narratives framed in religious language. The COVID-19 pandemic provides a useful illustration of the broader environment in which such misinformation circulates. Ahmed and Msughter's study of social media users in Kano State found that 65.6 per cent of respondents had encountered COVID-19-related fake news, while 74.2 per cent agreed that social media facilitated its spread; the study also found that 41.8 per cent associated exposure to such misinformation with non-adherence to safety measures (100189). Although the study was not specifically concerned with religious misinformation, its findings demonstrate the extent to which false information can circulate through Nigerian social media networks and influence behaviour. In a religiously mediated communication environment, similar dynamics can apply when false claims are attached to religious beliefs, personalities, institutions, or interpretations.

A more deliberate and consequential form of religious misinformation occurs when false or distorted religious narratives are intentionally employed to manipulate audiences or facilitate extremist mobilisation. Mohammed et al. identify disinformation as an important instrument used

by terrorist organisations in Nigeria, particularly Boko Haram and ISWAP, to manipulate perceptions, promote extremist narratives, and recruit members. Their analysis shows that extremist groups can frame their causes as religious or moral obligations, distort religious teachings, and present themselves as defenders of faith while portraying opposing institutions or communities as enemies (24–27). This pattern is significant because the persuasive force of such narratives derives not only from the information they contain but also from the religious authority they claim to represent. Falsehoods presented as unquestionable religious truths may therefore be more difficult to challenge than ordinary political claims, particularly among audiences already affected by social, political, or economic grievances.

Religious misinformation is also amplified by the wider technological conditions that facilitate the circulation of false information. Lawal's study of public awareness of AI and social media disinformation in Nigeria found that respondents recognised the relationship between disinformation, public panic, ethnic and religious bigotry, and threats to public safety and national security (785–803). The increasing availability of AI-assisted tools adds another dimension to this problem by making it easier to produce convincing synthetic text, images, audio, and video. Fabricated sermons, manipulated recordings, or digitally altered images attributed to religious leaders can therefore circulate as apparently authentic religious material. The combination of religious trust and increasingly sophisticated digital production creates conditions in which misinformation can acquire both speed and persuasive credibility.

Pathways from Religious Misinformation to Security Threats

The relationship between religious misinformation and insecurity is not automatic; false information becomes a security concern when it interacts with existing grievances, religious identities, perceptions of threat, social distrust, and mechanisms of collective mobilisation. Social media can intensify this process because misleading claims may travel rapidly through identity-based networks before they are verified or effectively challenged. One important pathway is the intensification of interreligious and communal tensions. Aruku et al. argue that fake news, hate speech, and stereotypical reporting constitute significant security concerns in Nigeria because they can deepen existing political, religious, and ethnic divisions (773–74). A fabricated report portraying one religious community as responsible for an attack, for instance, may be interpreted as confirmation of an existing threat rather than treated as an isolated falsehood. Once such a claim gains acceptance within a community, it can strengthen suspicion, encourage retaliatory attitudes, and turn a localised dispute into a wider confrontation. The security consequences therefore depend not only on the falsity of the information but also on the social conditions through which people interpret and respond to it.

A second pathway is **radicalisation and extremist mobilisation**, particularly where organised groups deliberately use religious narratives to advance political or violent objectives. Mohammed et al. demonstrate that terrorist organisations in Nigeria employ disinformation to manipulate perceptions, exploit grievances, disseminate extremist narratives, and recruit supporters (23–35). Religious language can give such messages additional force because political objectives may be presented as religious obligations, while participation in violence is framed as an expression of faith. Hassan similarly observes that armed non-state actors in northern Nigeria, including Boko Haram, ISWAP, and bandit groups, have increasingly used Telegram, WhatsApp, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, and X to disseminate disinformation, recruit members, coordinate activities,

and project power. Religious misinformation can also weaken public trust and generate uncertainty surrounding official accounts of attacks, security operations, and other crises. Hassan's study of disinformation surrounding political and electoral processes found that social media content can influence traditional media while exacerbating existing ethnic and religious tensions. Lawal likewise associates disinformation with public panic, ethnic and religious bigotry, and forms of vigilante or “jungle justice” behaviour (785–803). When citizens encounter competing accounts of a security incident, particularly during periods of heightened tension, uncertainty may encourage fear and make official corrections more difficult to accept. The security significance of misinformation therefore extends beyond whether a claim is true or false; a false threat can still alter behaviour when people believe it to be credible.

These processes converge in a broader threat to **social cohesion and national security**. Persistent exposure to narratives portraying religious communities as dangerous, untrustworthy, or collectively responsible for violence can normalise suspicion and deepen divisions that already exist within Nigerian society. Aruku et al. associate the proliferation of fake news and hate speech with threats to societal trust, cohesion, and security in Nigeria (755–77). The problem becomes particularly serious when misinformation is embedded within religious identity, since such narratives can appeal to deeply held beliefs about morality, belonging, victimisation, and collective threat. A fabricated account of an attack may therefore do more than misrepresent an event; it can reinforce an existing sense of grievance, influence how a community interprets subsequent events, and prepare the ground for further hostility or mobilisation. Religious misinformation should consequently be understood as part of a wider information environment in which digital communication interacts with identity, grievance, distrust, and organised mobilisation. Its movement from an online claim to an offline security threat is neither inevitable nor uniform, but where these conditions converge, misinformation can contribute to conflict, radicalisation, panic, institutional distrust, and the gradual weakening of interreligious and social cohesion.

Security Implications of Religion, Misinformation, and Social Media

Religious misinformation poses a security concern in Nigeria partly because it can intensify tensions that already exist between communities. The experience of herdsmen attacks on farmers in Benue State demonstrates the serious consequences that communal insecurity can have for affected populations (Gbinde and Ukpe 39–50). Aruku et al. argue that fake news and hate speech can deepen the political, religious, and ethnic divisions within Nigerian society (773–74). A fabricated report, image, or audio recording attributed to a particular religious group may therefore have consequences beyond the falsehood itself, especially when it reaches audiences already sensitive to questions of religious identity and communal threat. The killing of Deborah Samuel Yakubu in Sokoto in May 2022 provides a stark example. Yakubu, a Christian student at Shehu Shagari College of Education, was accused of blasphemy after fellow students objected to a WhatsApp voice note in which she reportedly thanked Jesus for helping her pass an examination. Human Rights Watch reports that the accusation circulated among students before school authorities placed her in a security room for protection. A mob nevertheless removed her from the room, stoned her to death, and set her body on fire, while subsequent protests and attacks on Catholic church buildings extended the unrest beyond the original incident (Human Rights Watch). The episode illustrates how a religiously sensitive allegation can move rapidly through a closed digital network, acquire the force of a collective grievance, and contribute to physical violence.

Religious misinformation also creates conditions that extremist organisations can exploit for radicalisation and recruitment. Mohammed et al. show that terrorist organisations in Nigeria use distorted religious narratives to justify their ideological positions, manipulate perceptions, exploit grievances, and attract supporters (26–27). Boko Haram, for instance, has presented ideological and political claims as religious obligations, giving them an appearance of divine authority and making them more difficult to challenge through conventional security messaging. Hassan similarly reports that Boko Haram and ISWAP use digital platforms to circulate propaganda, promote recruitment narratives, project military strength, and communicate ideological and religious purpose ("Outlaws"). Social media expands the reach of such material beyond the areas where these groups maintain a physical presence, allowing extremist narratives to encounter audiences who may already be experiencing social, economic, political, or religious grievances. The security concern, therefore, extends beyond the circulation of false information itself: organised actors can incorporate misleading religious narratives into broader strategies of recruitment, ideological persuasion, and mobilisation. At the same time, such misinformation can weaken public confidence in security institutions. Mohammed et al. note that terrorist groups have circulated claims portraying Nigerian security forces as deliberately targeting Muslim communities under the guise of counterterrorism operations (27). Narratives of this kind can alienate communities from the state and undermine the cooperation required for intelligence gathering and community-based security interventions. The 2015 Baga killings further demonstrate the consequences of competing accounts during a security crisis, as early reports attributed the killings to Nigerian military forces before subsequent accounts identified Boko Haram as responsible (Mohammed et al. 28). Lawal likewise reports substantial public concern about the implications of AI and social media-driven disinformation for public safety and national security (785–803). Repeated exposure to contradictory or manipulated accounts can therefore make citizens less certain about which sources deserve trust, particularly during periods of crisis when accurate information is most urgently needed.

Another significant consequence is the production of fear and social disorder. The aftermath of Deborah Samuel Yakubu's killing demonstrates that the effects of a religiously charged allegation can continue after the original incident, particularly when the claim remains embedded within networks already marked by religious tension. Human Rights Watch reports that the killing was followed by further unrest in Sokoto, including protests and attacks on Catholic church buildings (Human Rights Watch). Armed groups also exploit fear as a deliberate instrument of influence. Hassan documents the use of threatening material, including execution videos and other forms of propaganda, by Boko Haram, ISWAP, and other armed groups operating in northern Nigeria to create fear among civilians, vigilante groups, and government officials ("Outlaws"). Such content can affect behaviour even when audiences are not directly exposed to physical violence. People may avoid public places, restrict movement, leave communities, or respond defensively to perceived threats. The cumulative effect extends to national unity and social cohesion. Hassan's study of political and electoral disinformation finds that social media can aggravate existing ethnic and religious tensions, particularly where misleading narratives interact with established grievances and identities ("Dissemination"). Aruku et al. similarly associate fake news, hate speech, and stereotypical reporting with the deepening of Nigeria's political, religious, and ethnic divisions (773–74). In a society where religious identity often intersects with ethnic, regional, and political identities, repeated narratives portraying another community as violent, untrustworthy, or

inherently hostile can gradually normalise suspicion and weaken the trust required for peaceful coexistence (Ukpe and Tsendzuul 132–39).

Taken together, these consequences- religious conflict, radicalisation and extremism, institutional distrust, panic and social disorder, and weakened social cohesion- demonstrate that the security significance of religious misinformation lies not only in the falsity of individual claims but also in the reactions they can generate. A misleading religious message becomes particularly consequential when it encounters established grievances, strong group identities, distrust of institutions, and digital networks capable of spreading information within minutes. Social media can therefore serve as more than a channel through which misinformation passes; it can become part of the environment in which perceptions of threat are formed, grievances are reinforced, and collective responses are organised. In Nigeria's religiously plural society, an effective response requires attention not only to the correction of false claims but also to the social and digital conditions that enable them to gain credibility and produce wider consequences for public safety, interreligious relations, and national security.

Strategies for Addressing Religious Misinformation and Its Security Implications

Addressing religious misinformation in Nigeria requires stronger media literacy, responsible religious communication, and accessible fact-checking mechanisms. Citizens need practical skills for checking sources, authenticating images and videos, recognising manipulated content, and distinguishing verifiable claims from emotionally charged religious narratives. Such education should extend beyond schools and universities to churches, mosques, youth organisations, community associations, and rural communities, with particular attention to WhatsApp and other platforms where messages can circulate within closed networks. Religious leaders also have an important role in this process. Pastors, imams, Islamic scholars, and other religious communicators should verify information before sharing it, avoid unsubstantiated allegations and inflammatory claims, and correct inaccurate messages promptly when they become aware of them. Religious organisations could support this responsibility through clear guidelines for digital communication. Independent fact-checkers, journalists, academics, and religious institutions should likewise work together to verify viral religious claims, including fabricated statements attributed to religious leaders, alleged attacks on religious communities, manipulated videos, and inflammatory allegations. Corrections should appear in forms that audiences can easily access and share, such as radio broadcasts, short videos, graphics, and WhatsApp messages, allowing verified information to reach communities that may already have encountered the original falsehood.

Effective intervention also requires sustained cooperation among government institutions, security agencies, civil society organisations, universities, media organisations, and religious communities (Amase and Ukpe 84–95). Christian and Muslim organisations could also develop interfaith digital dialogue and early-warning mechanisms for responding to emerging rumours before they develop into wider communal tensions (Ukpe and Gbinde 182–93). No single institution possesses the authority, expertise, or community access required to manage religious misinformation and its security consequences on its own. Government and security agencies should maintain rapid channels for communicating verified information about attacks, communal disputes, security operations, and emergencies to religious and community leaders, who can then distribute such information through established congregational networks. Universities and civil society organisations can contribute research, monitoring, public education, and early-warning

information, while media organisations can provide independent verification and contextual reporting when rumours begin to circulate. Christian and Muslim organisations could also develop interfaith digital dialogue and early-warning mechanisms for responding to emerging rumours before they develop into wider communal tensions. Social media platforms have a complementary responsibility to strengthen procedures for identifying demonstrably false claims, incitement to violence, and direct threats against religious communities, while working with independent fact-checkers and credible Nigerian organisations familiar with local contexts. Such measures, however, should remain proportionate and transparent, with clear distinctions between accidental misinformation, legitimate religious disagreement, political criticism, and deliberately fabricated material intended to incite violence or facilitate extremist mobilisation. Clear reporting procedures, due process, and defined thresholds for intervention are particularly necessary as AI-assisted technologies make convincing synthetic and manipulated content easier to produce.

Religious misinformation should also form part of Nigeria's wider national security, conflict-prevention, and peacebuilding strategies. Security institutions need to recognise that misleading religious narratives can intensify grievances, facilitate extremist recruitment, undermine confidence in public institutions, generate fear, and deepen divisions between communities. Monitoring significant misinformation trends alongside conventional early-warning indicators could help identify narratives capable of escalating existing tensions, while universities and research institutions could provide systematic analysis of online religious discourse and emerging patterns of digital mobilisation. Community organisations and religious leaders are equally well placed to identify rumours and localised tensions at an early stage, particularly where such information may not yet have attracted national media attention. A preventive approach would therefore address the information environment in which insecurity develops rather than waiting until misinformation has contributed to physical violence, consistent with the broader emphasis on indigenous approaches to conflict management and national development (Ukpe and Gbinde 182–93). Integrating religious misinformation into existing security and peacebuilding frameworks would provide Nigeria with a more coordinated response to the changing relationship between religious communication, digital media, and insecurity.

Recommendations

1. Religious organisations should establish clear digital communication and verification protocols. Churches, mosques, and other religious organisations should require religious leaders and official media teams to verify information before sharing it through WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, X, or other platforms. They should also establish designated channels for correcting false religious claims, particularly those concerning alleged attacks, blasphemy, religious personalities, or interreligious disputes.
2. Government, security agencies, media organisations, and civil society groups should establish rapid-response mechanisms for religious misinformation. Such mechanisms should monitor emerging religious narratives with potential security implications and provide verified information to religious and community leaders as soon as credible rumours emerge. Regular collaboration between Christian and Muslim organisations should also be encouraged so that potentially inflammatory claims can be jointly investigated and publicly clarified before they escalate into communal tension or violence.

3. 3. Media-literacy and digital-awareness programmes should be integrated into religious and community-based engagement. Government agencies, universities, civil society organisations, and religious bodies should provide practical training that teaches citizens how to verify sources, identify manipulated images and videos, recognise fabricated religious claims, and report harmful content. Such programmes should prioritise young people and communities that rely heavily on WhatsApp and other social-media platforms, where misleading religious information can circulate rapidly through trusted personal networks.

Conclusion

This study has examined the relationship between religion, misinformation, social media, and security in Nigeria, demonstrating that the security significance of religious misinformation lies not simply in the circulation of false claims but in the social conditions through which such claims acquire meaning and influence. Social media has expanded the reach of religious communication, allowing sermons, teachings, claims, and narratives to circulate rapidly across communities, but the same networks can facilitate the spread of misleading or fabricated religious content before it can be verified. The study has shown that such misinformation can intensify existing religious and communal tensions, contribute to radicalisation and extremist mobilisation, erode public trust in security institutions, generate panic and social disorder, and weaken social cohesion. Social Identity Theory further explains how religious identities and perceptions of in-groups and out-groups can influence the acceptance and circulation of narratives that portray other communities as threatening or hostile. Although misinformation does not automatically produce violence, its interaction with existing grievances, distrust, identity divisions, and organised mobilisation can create conditions in which digital narratives contribute to wider insecurity. Addressing the problem therefore requires more than the correction of individual false claims after they have circulated; it calls for responsible digital communication among religious leaders, stronger media literacy, coordinated fact-checking, rapid information-sharing mechanisms, and the integration of misinformation monitoring into broader conflict-prevention and security strategies.

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