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Testing the fault lines

A sample analysis of election-related fake content in South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria and Senegal and an account of the perceptions, behaviours, attitudes and beliefs of media studies students in the four countries

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Contents

Executive summary

This study reports on a sample content analysis of fake content circulated during recent elections in South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria and Senegal, as well as the results of focus group sessions held with media studies students in each country that sought to determine their perceptions, behaviours, attitudes and beliefs with respect to election-related disinformation.

It supports perspectives that disinformation in Africa needs to be understood within the specific cultural, socio-economic, political and other arrangements in countries, or what have been called their "contextual variations".[1] It suggests that media and information literacy increased the carefulness with which students shared information on social media and may have some impact on what we called 'credulity' or their vulnerability to believing disinformation. However, this vulnerability also acts independently of media and information literacy levels and may be more related to country dynamics and gender.

It found that the election-related fake content in the four countries drew on intersecting fault lines to build narratives that fueled an environment of uncertainty, suspicion, and public alarm during the election periods, while also skewing perceptions of support (or lack of support) for particular parties or candidates.

Fault lines which fake content 'tested' included a distrust in the election process, and religious and ethnic tensions, which were exploited more in both Kenya and Nigeria, as well as the periodic threat of election violence in some countries. Cross-cutting fault lines such as endemic corruption in all countries were also observed, as well as country-specific fault lines such as the economic instability in Nigeria. How and the extent to which fake content drew on the tensions in fault lines to catalyse its circulation was specific to each country.

Not all candidates or parties that participated in the elections were the subject of fake content attacks. Most notably in South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria, a contestation of fake claims was set up primarily amongst two candidates or parties with the exclusion of others, even if they were serious contenders for votes. The reason for this contestation appears to be driven by the country-specific fault lines, such as religious or ethnic tensions, or other factors such inter-party rivalries.

Fake content employed at least two content strategies to lend itself authenticity: the use of 'evidence' to support a claim, which may include misappropriated videos or photographs, and what we call forms of "identity theft", which included impersonation and appropriating the branding of media outlets, political parties, institutions or groups. Forms of impersonation included using fake social media accounts, 'shallow fake' videos and 'deep fake' voice recordings that were especially difficult to verify.

The use of these content strategies also appears influenced by country dynamics, such as the more frequent use of media branding in Kenya compared to other countries to provide authenticity to the claims, which corresponds with a higher trust in the media amongst students

[1] Timcke S. Orembo L. and Hlomani H. (2023) *Information Disorders in Africa: An Annotated Bibliography of Selected Countries.* Research ICT Africa. Information disorders in Africa: An annotated bibliography of selected countries – Research ICT Africa

in that country. The more frequent use of polls to lend fake claims authenticity was also suggested in Senegal.

Common to the election periods in South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria, and only marginally evident in Senegal, were claims that sought to undermine the integrity of the elections in different ways, with these claims driving the majority of election-related fake content in South Africa. They sought to cast doubt on the electoral processes and the reliability and veracity of the results, creating fertile ground for contesting the results and, potentially, public support for this contestation. At the same time, trust amongst students in key institutions and groups who make up the election information environment, such as politicians, their country's electoral body, and the media, can overall be said to be low. In the case of Kenya and Nigeria the electoral bodies were only marginally more trusted than politicians and even less trusted than influencers.

The students' perceptions of their political environments – again with the exception of students in Senegal who also trusted their electoral body more – were largely negative. The greater confidence in their electoral body amongst students in Senegal supports surveys that have found a higher satisfaction with democracy in that country compared to the others in this study.

There were marked differences in the students' political awareness and engagement when considering gender, with overall male students considering themselves more aware and engaged than female students. The fear of being cyberbullied, that women were "socialised" not to be interested in politics, and their marginalisation from the political sphere were given as reasons why female students would not post political information to their timelines. Female students also appeared to be noticeably more disillusioned, despondent and disempowered about their political future.

Female students tended to have more social media accounts compared to male students and spent more time each day using social media. However, this did not necessarily translate to a greater exposure to disinformation. Male students had more public accounts, were likely to be more confident online, but also more vulnerable to believing disinformation and conspiratorial thinking overall.

Year of study appeared to impact the carefulness of the online information sharing behaviour of students, including reading an article before sharing it, thinking carefully about their motivations for sharing content, and verifying whether information was true before sharing it. This correlates with reviews that suggest media and information literacy has a positive impact on mitigating the circulation of disinformation.

Despite this carefulness election-related disinformation was still likely to be forwarded if false claims concerned the safety of family or friends, or for entertainment – when students found a fake content item "silly", "funny" or "bizarre" and shared it to humour others – a tendency which year of study and a deeper awareness of the impact of disinformation only somewhat appears to mitigate. Moreover, the weaponisation of fake content to do political battles online was evident amongst first-year students in Kenya.

Year of study appeared to have only some impact on the vulnerability of students to believe disinformation or conspiratorial thinking, which also correlated with country dynamics and gender. While students strongly valued the need for evidence, many also trusted their intuitions when assessing if something was true or not, which may also involve preconceived ideas about

the extent to which politics and power dictates the 'truth of things'. This vulnerability to believe disinformation was highest amongst students in Nigeria. Male students were also likely to trust their intuitions more, or, in terms of a framework developed by Garrett and Weeks, have "faith in intuition as facts".[2]

Evidence of the students' vulnerability to disinformation and conspiratorial thinking included students doubting whether western medicines worked in Africa, whether Covid-19 vaccines worked, and whether the moon landing was real. Some 40% of male students believed the photographs of the moon landing were faked.

The greater confidence in their electoral body amongst students in Senegal and their overall more positive perceptions of their political environment, alongside suggestions that they were less vulnerable to believing disinformation, may tentatively suggest a link between positive perceptions of political stability in a country and a lower vulnerability to believing disinformation.

[2] Garrett R.K. Weeks B.E. (2017) Epistemic beliefs' role in promoting misperceptions and conspiracist ideation. PLoS ONE 12(9): e0184733. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0184733

1. Introduction

Recent research[3] suggests that while a strong majority of Africans believe that elections in their countries are "free and fair", there are growing signs of distrust in electoral systems and processes on the continent to properly represent the will of the people. In its latest survey of African countries Afrobarometer found that 57% of citizens in the 39 countries surveyed had little or no trust in their national electoral bodies. These include the four countries that are the focus of this study, where the survey found particularly low levels of trust.[4] The report also found that a third of respondents felt that the most recent elections in their countries were "not free and fair" or "free and fair with major problems" and that less than half of Africans believe that their country's elections ensure that those elected represent the views of voters, and that when officials do not work in their interests, elections allow them to be voted out of office.

Several reports and ad hoc analyses have highlighted the role disinformation may play in fueling this distrust in elections in Africa, including in the countries in this study.[5] The Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA), for example, has observed how disinformation campaigns "exploit existing social and political divisions" during elections in order to "sow discord and manipulate public opinion".[6] This is done with increasing sophistication, including through the use of technologies such as 'deep fakes', even though the potential of artificial intelligence (AI) to disrupt elections globally does not seem to have fully materialised.[7]

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[3] Afrobarometer (2024) *AD761: As Africans enter busy political year, scepticism marks weakening support for elections.* https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/ad761-as-africans-enter-busy-political-year-scepticism-marks-weakening-support-for-elections/

[4] In South Africa, 64% of respondents reported trusting their electoral bodies "just a little" or "not at all", in Kenya, 53% of respondents said the same, in Nigeria, where the lowest trust was found,76%, and in Senegal, 58%.

[5] See for example, *Tracking trends from REAL411*. Impact of Mis- and Disinformation on the 2024 General Elections in South Africa. https://www.mediamonitoringafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/ELECTIONSDisinfo_Report-1.pdf; Hussain M. (2024) 'IN-DEPTH | MK Party's disinformation campaign echoes July 2021 unrest tactics'. News24. https://www.news24.com/news24/opinions/analysis/in-depth-mk-partys-disinformation-campaign-echoes-july-2021-unrest-tactics-20240604; or Okongo'o J. (2022) 'Doctored newspaper front pages spread disinformation as Kenya elections draw near'. AFP. https://factcheck.afp.com/doc.afp.com.32C47U3.

[6] Nanfuka J. Kapiyo V. Mabutho V. and Wakabi W. (2024) A tapestry of actors, attitudes, and impact Countering disinformation in Africa. CIPESA. https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/publications/publication/did/a-tapestry-of-actors-attitudes-and-impact-countering-disinformation-in-africa

[7] The Guardian (2024) 'Meta says it has taken down about 20 covert influence operations in 2024'. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2024/dec/03/meta-says-it-has-taken-down-about-20-covert-influence-operations-in-2024

Although legislative remedies are proposed by some actors[8] and not by others for fear of the chilling effect disinformation laws can have on freedom of expression,[9] there appears to be common agreement that strengthening media and information literacy in schools, universities, and through government programmes is necessary to mitigate the public's vulnerability to being influenced by disinformation campaigns. But while reviews have suggested that media and information literacy interventions have had "positive effects on outcomes including media knowledge, criticism, perceived realism, influence, behavioural beliefs, attitudes, self-efficacy and behaviour",[10] others are more sceptical about the proven impact of these interventions. As Peter Cunliffe-Jones *et al* (2021) put it: "[E]vidence of the effects of teaching this form of broadly defined media literacy on young people's specific ability to identify and reject false information is limited".

It is within this context that this study investigates two areas: the circulation of what we call 'fake content' during the recent elections in South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria and Senegal; and the perceptions, attitudes, behaviours and beliefs of a cohort of media studies students in each country.

By inviting university students enrolled in media studies to participate in this research, we hoped to limit the impact of at least some variables that are thought to make the public vulnerable to disinformation such as low education and media and information literacy levels, but also the ability to know where to find information and to understand basic research, and – although we needed to ask this question of students – a lack of sufficient and "comfortable" online access and time to verify information if necessary. In this way we hoped to isolate potential perceptions, behaviours, attitudes and beliefs that – despite these mitigating factors just mentioned – sustain the credulity and vulnerability of students to accepting disinformation narratives, and which may require further consideration and attention by actors engaged in practically addressing the threat of disinformation to democracy.

It is the starting perspective of this study that the circulation of disinformation in African countries needs to be understood within the different cultural, socio-economic, political and other arrangements in those countries and the different media and information ecosystems that have emerged. Disinformation operates – is made for circulation – in a local context with, as Timke *et al* (2023) put it, "contextual variations".[11] While cross-country observations about disinformation can be made, and while the experiences of disinformation reported through studies in other regions do have bearing on how disinformation operates in Africa, it is "[a mistake

[8] Such as CIPESA or the Institute for Security Studies. See: Aikins E. Mahdi M. (2024) 'Five worrying signs of Africa's poor election quality'. https://issafrica.org/iss-today/five-worrying-signs-of-africa-s-poor-election-quality

[9] Amnesty International et al (2022). *Joint submission by Amnesty International South Africa, Campaign for Free Expression, Committee to Protect Journalists, Media Monitoring Africa, and the South African National Editors' Forum*. https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr53/5467/2022/en/

[10] Cunliffe-Jones P. et al. (2021) *Misinformation Policy In Sub-Saharan Africa: From Laws and Regulations to Media Literacy.* London: University of Westminster Press. https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/monographs/bv73c331q

[11] Timcke S. Orembo L. and Hlomani H. (2023) *Information Disorders in Africa: An Annotated Bibliography of Selected Countries.* Research ICT Africa. Information disorders in Africa: An annotated bibliography of selected countries – Research ICT Africa

to attempt] to universalise, project, and identify these dynamics in Africa".[12] Instead, the "the cultural logics of fake news must be situated within…local dynamics for explanation to have any credibility and coherence."[13]

This study in effect attempts to at least outline or give substance to some of these "contextual variations" or "cultural logics" in a context where much of the behaviour-related research on disinformation appears to have been done 'elsewhere'.[14]

The study of course has limitations. By looking at fake content – content making false claims that is deliberately constructed by unknown sources for circulation on social media – we are considering only part of the disinformation ecosystems in the countries. In the context of elections, these ecosystems typically involve an interweaving of several actors,[15] types of false or misleading claims, and sites of circulation (including 'word-of-mouth' – the informality of disinformation, or when its circulation goes 'offline', is a largely unexplored feature of its most potent potential impact).[16] What we call 'fake content' is just a slice of this disinformation ecosystem. Moreover, we only sample the total amount of likely fake content circulating in the four countries during the most recent elections in those countries. In some countries, such as South Africa, it may be a more representative sample,[17] in others, such as Senegal, likely to be only illustrative.

The scope of this research also meant we could conduct only one focus group session with students in each country, whereas comparable sessions may have been useful. Nevertheless, these sessions were in-depth and included a substantial questionnaire with 95 questions we asked students to complete, the most relevant responses which are reported on here.

Lastly, while this can be considered a behavioural study, it makes no claims to the rigours required of the discipline of psychology. It is in this respect more of a testing ground, an indication of trends and tendencies of how the students might behave, think, or perceive of their political surrounds, and, potentially, the wider public. By doing this it hopes to at least identify starting points for further exploration and study, while also contributing to our understanding of how disinformation works in the African context.

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[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid. See also: Mare, A. Mabweazara, H. M. and Moyo, D. (2019) "Fake News" and Cyber-Propaganda in Sub-Saharan Africa: Recentering the Research Agenda. *African Journalism Studies* 40(4): 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1080/23743670.2020.1788295

[14] For useful summaries of the findings of research see: Eisele I. (2023) 'Fact check: Why do we believe fake news?' Fact check: Why do we believe fake news? – DW – 07/08/2023; and Beauvais C. (2022) *Fake news: Why do we believe it? Joint Bone Spine*. ScienceDirect. Jul;89(4) https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1297319X22000306

[15] Such as politicians, celebrities, church groups, trade unions, or any other influential actor in the political landscape, as well as the media, influencers and supporters of political parties.

[16] A point suggested by Africa Check fact checker based in Nigeria, Allwell Okpi, interviewed as part of this study.

[17] Suggested by Africa Check staff in South Africa.

2. Objective of study

This study aimed to better understand the kinds of fake content that circulated during recent elections in South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria and Senegal, as well as the perceptions, behaviours, attitudes and beliefs of cohorts of media studies students in these countries with respect to election-related disinformation. By setting the analysis of election-related fake content alongside an account of the perceptions, behaviours, attitudes and beliefs of the students we hoped to be able to make observations between the kinds of disinformation that circulated and the propensity of the students to participate in this circulation, or to effectively act as disinformation 'gatekeepers', largely due their levels of media and information literacy and awareness. Implicit in this approach was the question of whether increasing the public's overall media and information literacy was sufficient to at least limit the impact of disinformation campaigns on citizens during election times and the threat to democracy these pose, or whether there were other behavioural factors that also needed attention.

3. Research group

The following researchers and consultants contributed to this study:

Alan Finlay was the project co-ordinator and lead researcher and analyst. He also conducted the focus group session in South Africa. His expertise lies in internet and media rights in the global South, and he is a Research Associate at the Wits Centre for Journalism.

The focus group session in Kenya was conducted by *Nazarene Makena*, a lecturer at Tangaza University, in Nigeria by *Busola Ajibola*, the Deputy Director of Journalism Program at the Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development, and in Senegal by *Tidiane Sy*, the Director of E-jicom. All three also contributed to the focus group methodology, provided a high-level analysis of their respective focus group sessions, and reviewed and contributed to this final research report.

The research methodology for the focus group sessions was also developed with the invaluable support of *Nicola Theunissen*.

4. Research methods

The methods used in the study were a sample content analysis, what we called focus group 'sessions' with media studies students and that included an in-depth questionnaire and focus group discussions, and interviews with fact checkers.

4.1. Sample content analysis

Election-related fake content was sampled in the four countries by collecting all reports of verified fake content during the recent elections in the countries from the Africa Check database. By 'fake content' we refer to content making false claims that is deliberately constructed by unknown sources for circulation on social media. Content was collected through a database search of the Africa Check archive, with different time periods used for each country in order to ensure reasonable samples. Only fake content was captured for the sample periods. Any review

of election manifestos or public statements by politicians or summaries done by Africa Check staff in the form of 'fact sheets', amongst others, were excluded from this analysis.

Categories for analysis we constructed to group the content. These were based on the most likely useful categories that might enable a cross-country analysis. Fake content could be assigned to more than one category or content type if necessary.

Given the different capacity constraints and country conditions of the Africa Check staff in each country, this sample is likely to be more representative of the kinds and even the amount of fake content that circulated during the elections in some countries, such as South Africa,[18] and less so in others, such as Senegal.

The table below shows the election dates for each country, the sample periods used, and the number of fake content items captured.

	Election date	**Period for total content collected**	**No. of fake content items captured**
South Africa	29 May 2024	11 April – 21 June (72 days)	21
Kenya	9 August 2022	14 July – 24 August (42 days)	36
Nigeria (presidential elections)	25 February 2023	10 February – 6 April (56 days)	49
Nigeria (state elections)	18 March 2023		
Senegal	24 March 2024	19 March – 16 April (29 days)	11

Table 1: Sample periods and number of fake content items by country

4.2. Focus group sessions

One focus group session was held at an institution of higher learning in each country. These sessions had two components: an in-depth questionnaire which students completed in-situ but online, and a focus group discussion.

4.2.1. Student participants

We used a combination of purposive and quota sampling for the sessions, intentionally selecting students in institutions of higher learning engaged in media studies in the four countries. By inviting the students to participate in the study we hoped to limit factors that are likely to increase an individual's tendency to share disinformation online, specifically low education levels,[19] a lack of access to important information or knowing where to find that information, and poor online access. This entailed us making several assumptions. These included that students engaged in media studies had access to information that was more than the average citizen, both through online access at the institution, and through access to libraries and other study texts and materials, and that the students would have at least what we called 'comfortable' online access

[18] It was felt by Africa Check staff that 'most' of the fake content that circulated during the recent elections in South Africa were captured.

[19] Studies have suggested that both low educational levels and low science knowledge increase the vulnerability to believing disinformation. Beauvais C. (2022) *Fake news: Why do we believe it? Joint Bone Spine*. Jul;89(4):105371. doi: 10.1016/j.jbspin.2022.105371. Epub 2022 Mar 4. PMID: 35257865; PMCID: PMC9548403.

through their institutions, although we needed to verify this. With respect to media and information literacy, we assumed that students enrolled in media studies had at least a curiosity of how their media and information environment worked, and that through their studies they would become more critically aware of this, be introduced to issues such as media ethics and journalism accuracy, and attain a greater understanding of disinformation and misinformation and how it impacts the media and information landscape. We assumed that first-year students would be less aware of these issues, and post-graduate students more aware.

To test this we constructed two focus group sessions with only first-year students, one with 'mixed' year students, and one with post-graduate students. Ten students were invited to participate voluntarily in each session, with some students not attending, and, in the case of Senegal, a higher number of students participating. We did not require a balance between genders who participated in each focus group session. However, given the importance of gender to our findings, we have used a percentage calculation to compare how different genders behave. In one instance a student identified as 'other' rather than as 'male' or 'female'. To respect this, we did not assign them to either male or female categories but excluded their contribution to the questionnaire in our gender analysis. Their responses to the questionnaire are however included in the country and year-of-study findings, and in the focus group discussion findings.

Because of the fluid dynamics of higher education learning on the continent and in regions, not all of the students who participated were nationals of the country in which their sessions were held.[20] Students were nevertheless asked to respond to the political, media and information environment they found themselves in.

In Senegal the focus group discussions were conducted in French, and the questionnaire translated for the students.

All ethical protocols were followed in constructing and running the sessions, and institutional and participant permissions obtained. Students participated anonymously, and in order to ensure their anonymity, the institutions where the focus group sessions were held are not named.

The following table shows the number of students that participated in the focus group sessions in their country, as well as their gender.

	Total	**Male**	**Female**	**Other**	**Average level of study**
South Africa	8	3	4	1	Post-graduate
Kenya	9	7	2		First year
Nigeria	10	3	7		First year
Senegal	13	2	11		Mixed
	40	**15**	**24**	**1**	

Table 2: No. of social media accounts by country

[20] In the case of South Africa, two students were not South African nationals, in the case of Kenya all students were Kenyans, in the case of Nigeria, one student was not a Nigerian, and in the case of Senegal, three students were not Senegalese.

4.2.2. Questionnaire

The in-depth questionnaire, which the students completed online during the focus group sessions, was constructed drawing on findings of previous behaviour studies with respect to disinformation, as well as the initial findings of the sample content analysis. Intuitive questions were also asked based on the researchers' experience in the African context in order to test multiple areas which were felt to be relevant to determining students' perceptions, behaviours attitudes and beliefs with respect to election-related disinformation. The questionnaire contained 95 questions, the majority of which were answered using a combination of a numerical Likert scale responses from 1 to 5, for example recording the extent to which a student agreed with a statement or whether they trusted an actor or an institution, and "strongly disagree", "strongly agree" or "neither agree nor disagree" and "always", "often", "sometimes", or "never responses to statements. The questionnaire on average took the students 30 minutes to complete, and only the key findings are reported on here.

Aside from asking for relevant demographic information, the questionnaire was divided into four sections: a) questions assessing their perceptions of their political environment, their engagement in this political environment; similar questions relating to their information context and environment; and questions relating to what we called their 'trust' environment, or the extent to which they trusted different actors, institutions, groups, or information types;[21] b) questions relating to the students' social media use and sharing behaviours; c) questions assessing their attitudes to forwarding election-related false content; and d) a set of questions testing what we called their 'credulity', or their likely vulnerability to believing disinformation and conspiratorial thinking.

With respect to the final set of questions, we used a method developed by Garrett and Weeks[22] that tests the epistemic beliefs of respondents, or their cognitive biases.[23] The framework consists of three sets of four questions, which require a "strongly disagree", "strongly agree" or "neither agree nor disagree" response. The questions test three aspects of how people process reality, which they call *Faith in Intuition for Facts*, *Need for Evidence*, and *Truth is Political*. As has been described by Patrice Georget, these aspects test whether respondents "trust their intuitions to 'feel' the truth of things", the extent to which they "believe that facts are not sufficient to call into question what they believe to be true", or "consider that all truth is relative to a political context".[24] These sets of questions provide an indication of the likelihood of the students' vulnerability to believing disinformation as well as conspiratorial thinking:

> Individuals who view reality as a political construct are significantly more likely to embrace falsehoods, whereas those who believe that their conclusions must hew to available evidence tend to hold more accurate beliefs. Confidence in the

[21] As in the case of whether or not they trusted 'statistics'.
[22] Garrett R.K. Weeks B.E. (2017) Epistemic beliefs' role in promoting misperceptions and conspiracist ideation. PLoS ONE 12(9): e0184733. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0184733
[23] Others have conducted similar studies, such as Rudloff, J. P., & Appel, M. (2022). When Truthiness Trumps Truth. Epistemic Beliefs Predict the Accurate Discernment of Fake News. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1037/mac0000070
[24] Georget P. (2023) 'Can we develop our intuition to counter misinformation?'. Polytechnique Insights. https://www.polytechnique-insights.com/en/columns/digital/can-we-develop-our-intuition-to-counter-misinformation/

> ability to intuitively recognize truth is a uniquely important predictor of conspiracist ideation.[25]

As mentioned above, in order to compare the responses by gender, a percentage calculation was used. Similarly, for reporting on the results of the Garrett and Weeks test, a percentage calculation is used. Likert scale results and other responses are also averaged for each focus group session in order to provide a meaningful analysis. It can be assumed that there were divergencies from these averages amongst individual students.

4.2.3. Focus group discussions

The questions for the focus group discussions elaborated on what we felt might be important areas for further exploration based on the questionnaire. While the discussions were open-ended, they were guided by our interest in five areas: a) whether the students thought about election-related information differently to other information in terms of how it should be treated; b) their attitudes to forwarding 'unchecked' information and whether or not they felt it was more or less important to verify different types of information before forwarded it; c) how these attitudes to unchecked information applied to election-related disinformation; d) whether there was a gender dynamic to the confidence with which students' shared political information and spoke out online about political issues; e) and their 'gut' or immediate response to examples of fake content shown to them. With respect to the examples of fake content shown to them, these were taken from the sample content analysis discussed above. The original fake content was used stripped of any commentary or verification codes used by Africa Check.

4.3. Interviews

Interviews to help orientate and understand some of the study findings were conducted with Africa Check staff in the four countries, and with a fact checker from Dubawa, the fact-checking organisation with a presence in five countries in West Africa.[26] The perspectives shared during these interviews inform this study throughout and are highlighted in specific moments when appropriate.

5. Country profiles

5.1. South Africa

South Africa has a population of 60.4 million. It has twelve official languages,[27] with English predominating in politics, business, institutions and the media. It is defined as an upper-middle

[25] Ibid.

[26] Africa Check interviewed for this study were Keegan Leech (South Africa), Makinia Juma and Dancan Bwire (Kenya), Azil Momar Lo and Dieynaba Thiombane (Senegal), and Allwell Okpi (Nigeria).
Silas Jonathan was interviewed from Dubawa.

[27] Including South African sign language.

income country.[28] Its youth literacy (97%), secondary school completion (97.2%) and tertiary enrolment rates (25.24%) are the highest amongst the countries in this study.

South Africa is considered 'free' according to the Freedom in the World report (2024).[29] However, state-level corruption, constant protests over issues such as poor service delivery for the poor, an extraordinary high level of targeted killings, and populist political attacks on media freedoms are also part of its democracy.[30] Frequent loadshedding and water supply challenges have also over time worsened the socio-economic climate, and become key points of political contention. While all elections since 1994 have been declared free and fair, South Africa has the second worst percentage (25%) of the public who are "fairly/very" satisfied with how democracy is working amongst the countries in the study, with dissatisfaction only worse in Nigeria. This is likely to be due to a complex of factors, such as those already mentioned, underpinned by a high rate of unemployment, the highest income inequality measurement in the world, and – up until the 2024 national and provincial elections – an effective political stalemate with the long-term political dominance of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) in elections since liberation. Despite high levels of corruption – which was endemic during a period of 'state-capture' under the former presidency of Jacob Zuma – South Africa has a better corruption perception score (41/100) than both Kenya and Nigeria.

The South Africa media sector is well developed, although increasingly facing financial sustainability challenges with many newspapers shutting down and staff layoffs. Recently the sustainability of online media has come under question. The country nevertheless has a strong online news presence, and a well-developed broadcast sector, dominated by the state broadcaster. Besides free-to-air, subscription, and community TV channels, the country has 40 commercial and public radio stations, and 284 community radio stations.[31]

About 75% of the population is online, even if intermittently due to poor services or the cost of data. The country's Electoral Act (1998) sanctions officials or politicians who make intentionally false statements[32] while in 2020 a regulation under the Disaster Management Act, which was only in operation during the Covid-19 pandemic, criminalised false information. The Cybercrimes Act 19 (2020) also criminalises the disclosure of harmful data and can be read in the context of false information.[33]

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[28] World Bank. Country classifications by income level for 2024-2025. https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/opendata/world-bank-country-classifications-by-income-level-for-2024-2025

[29] Freedom House (2024) *Freedom in the World*: South Africa. https://freedomhouse.org/country/south-africa

[30] Finlay A. (2023). *The landscape is darkening*. A review of freedom of expression (2018-2023). Campaign for Free Expression. https://freeexpression.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/State-of-FOE-in-SA-Report-Digital-06-Nov.pdf

[31] Bosch, T. (2022) 'Radio is thriving in South Africa: 80% are tuning in'. The Conversation. https://theconversation.com/radio-is-thriving-in-south-africa-80-are-tuning-in-176846

[32] Cunliffe-Jones P. et al. (2021) *Misinformation Policy In Sub-Saharan Africa: From Laws and Regulations to Media Literacy*. London: University of Westminster Press. https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/monographs/bv73c331q

[33] Amnesty International et al (2022). *Joint submission by Amnesty International South Africa, Campaign for Free Expression, Committee to Protect Journalists, Media Monitoring Africa, and the South African National Editors' Forum*. https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr53/5467/2022/en/

Indicator	Details	Total, percentage, score
Population	2023[34]	60,414,495
Literacy	Literacy rate, youth total (% of people ages 15-24) (2022)[35]	97%
Secondary school completion	Lower secondary completion rate, total (% of relevant age group) (2022)[36]	97.2%
Tertiary enrolment	% of eligible youths (2021)[37]	25.24%
Internet access	Individuals using the internet (% of population) (2022)[38]	75%
Democracy	Satisfaction with democracy (2022)[39]	25%
Corruption	Corruption perception score (2023)[40]	41/100
Media freedoms	Media freedoms ranking (2024)[41]	38/180

Table 3: Key country indicators

Sources: World Bank, The Global Economy, Reporters Without Borders, Afrobarometer, Transparency International

5.2. Kenya

Kenya has a population of 55.1 million. Its official languages are English and Swahili. It is considered a lower-middle income country.[42] Compared to both Nigeria and Senegal, its youth literacy rate (89%) is high, and it also has a high secondary school completion rate (81.5%). Tertiary enrolment is said to be just over 20% of those eligible.

Kenya is considered 'partly free' according to the Freedom in the World report (2024).[43] Media freedoms are considered dependent on the economic and political context,[44] and journalists and civil society activists struggle under various forms of restriction and face intimidation by authorities. Like the other countries in this study, corruption is considered a serious problem, with perceptions amongst businesses and analysts rating it worse than both South Africa and Senegal (31/100). Perceptions of corruption extend to the political arena where distrust of

[34] World Bank. Data for Senegal, South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria. https://data.worldbank.org/?locations=SN-ZA-KE-NG
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] The Global Economy. South Africa Tertiary school enrolment. https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/South-Africa/Tertiary_school_enrollment/
[38] World Bank. Data for Senegal, South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria. https://data.worldbank.org/?locations=SN-ZA-KE-NG
[39] Afrobarometer (2024) South Africa: Country democracy scorecard. https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/south-africa-country-democracy-scorecard/
[40] Transparency International (2023) Corruptions Perceptions Index. https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023/
[41] Reporters Without Borders (2024) World Press Freedom Index. https://rsf.org/en/index
[42] World Bank. Country classifications by income level for 2024-2025. https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/opendata/world-bank-country-classifications-by-income-level-for-2024-2025
[43] Freedom House (2024) *Freedom in the World*: Kenya. https://freedomhouse.org/country/kenya
[44] Reporters with Reporters Without Borders (2024) World Press Freedom Index: Kenya. https://rsf.org/en/country/kenya

electoral processes is often expressed through widespread protests, which are also a feature of the general political landscape.

During 2007 and 2008, violent protests against the announcement of the winner of the presidential elections led to the deaths of nearly 1 000 people. In 2024, ongoing anti-government and youth-led protests against tax increases led to protestors invading the parliament building, several deaths, and newly elected president William Ruto dissolving his cabinet.[45]

Amongst the countries in this study, Kenya nevertheless has the highest percentage of the public who are "fairly/very" satisfied with how democracy is working in their country (51%). Nearly 60% of the country consider Kenya a democracy with at the most only minor problems.

The broadcasting sector in the country is well developed, rich and diverse. The country has over 100 radio stations and close to 50 TV channels with many broadcasting in local languages. It only has a few daily newspapers in circulation.[46]

Over 40% of the population is online. However, shutdowns have started to become a feature of the internet landscape, with suspicions that the government throttled the internet during the recent 2024 tax protests.[47] The country has three laws that impact on the circulation of false information: the Penal Code (1930), the Computer Misuse & Cybercrimes Act (2018) and the Elections Offenses Act (2016).[48] The criminalisation of false or misleading statements or publishing false or misleading data is a feature of the first two laws. The Kenya Information and Communications Amendment Bill (2021) meanwhile proposes penalties for spreading false information on social media, but has raised freedom of expression concerns. Amongst other initiatives, the National Action Plan Against Hate Speech, which was launched in 2022, seeks to address the circulation of disinformation, especially during election periods.[49]

Indicator	**Details**	**Total, percentage, score**
Population	2023[50]	55 100 586
Literacy	Literacy rate, youth total (% of people ages 15-24) (2022)[51]	89%

[45] Access Now (2024) 'Authorities in Kenya must immediately restore internet access and #KeepItOn throughout protests and unrest'. https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/kenya-protests-internet-shutdown/

[46] Reporters with Reporters Without Borders (2024) World Press Freedom Index: Kenya. https://rsf.org/en/country/kenya

[47] Access Now (2024) 'Authorities in Kenya must immediately restore internet access and #KeepItOn throughout protests and unrest'. https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/kenya-protests-internet-shutdown/

[48] Cunliffe-Jones P. et al. (2021) *Misinformation Policy In Sub-Saharan Africa: From Laws and Regulations to Media Literacy.* London: University of Westminster Press. https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/monographs/bv73c331q

[49] Sugow A. Mungai B. and Wanyama J. (2024) 'The regulation of fake news in Kenya under the coronavirus threat'. Strathmore University. https://cipit.strathmore.edu/the-regulation-of-fake-news-in-kenya-under-the-coronavirus-threat/

[50] World Bank. Data for Senegal, South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria. https://data.worldbank.org/?locations=SN-ZA-KE-NG

[51] Ibid.

Secondary school completion	Lower secondary completion rate, total (% of relevant age group) (2022)[52]	81.5%
Tertiary enrolment	% of eligible youths (2022)[53]	20.48%
Internet access	Individuals using the internet (% of population) (2022)[54]	41%
Democracy	Satisfaction with democracy (2024)[55]	51%
Corruption	Corruption perception score (2023)[56]	31/100
Media freedoms	Media freedoms ranking (2024)[57]	102/180

Table 4: Key country indicators

Sources: World Bank, The Global Economy, Reporters Without Borders, Afrobarometer, Transparency International

5.3. Nigeria

Nigeria has a population of nearly 224 million, the largest country in terms of population size in the study. Its official language is English, but several indigenous languages are also spoken.[58] It is considered a lower-middle income country.[59] Its youth literacy rate is 75% and it has the second lowest secondary school completion rate (45.9%) and the lowest tertiary enrolment rate (11.81%) amongst focus countries in this study.

Nigeria is considered 'partly free' according to the Freedom in the World report (2024).[60] Since its transition to democracy in 1999, the quality of its elections is reported to have improved. They have nevertheless been beset with problems, including frequent postponements, in 2019 due to logistic challenges. While the elections in 2007 were not considered credible by observers due to voter fraud and violence, the 2011 elections were considered a success, despite violence erupting in the northern parts of the country.

Nigeria has the worst corruption perception score amongst the countries in this study, and corruption is considered endemic to the petroleum industry in particular.[61] The country is also beset by ongoing security problems including insurgencies, kidnappings, and sectarian violence.[62] Like South Africa public perceptions of the strength of its democracy show poor

[52] Ibid.
[53] The Global Economy. Kenya economic indicators. https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Kenya/
[54] World Bank. Data for Senegal, South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria. https://data.worldbank.org/?locations=SN-ZA-KE-NG
[55] Afrobarometer (2024) Kenya: Country democracy scorecard. https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/kenya-country-democracy-scorecard/
[56] Transparency International (2023) Corruptions Perceptions Index. https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023/
[57] Reporters Without Borders (2024) World Press Freedom Index. https://rsf.org/en/index
[58] Such as Yoruba, Igbo, Ibibio, Kanuri, and Tiv.
[59] World Bank. Country classifications by income level for 2024-2025. https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/opendata/world-bank-country-classifications-by-income-level-for-2024-2025
[60] Freedom House (2024) *Freedom in the World*: South Africa. https://freedomhouse.org/country/nigeria
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid.

results. Only 21% of Nigerians consider the country a democracy with at the most only minor problems.

Its media landscape is considered vibrant, rich and diverse. The country has several hundred radio stations and TV channels, with about 100 newsprint publications. Most of the country's 36 states all have a state-controlled newspapers.[63] The country is nevertheless considered one of the most difficult and dangerous for journalists to work in.[64] Criminal defamation legislation is often used in the frequent attacks on the media.

Some 35% of the population is online, the lowest percentage amongst the countries in this study. However, as with other indicators here, given Nigeria's population size, it has a greater number of people who are literate, educated and online than the other countries in this study. The country has four laws that impact on the circulation of false information: the Criminal Code (1990), the Electoral Act (2010), the Cybercrimes Act (2015), and the Broadcasting Code of Conduct (2016).[65]

Indicator	Details	Total, percentage, score
Population	2023[66]	223,804,632
Literacy	Literacy rate, youth total (% of people ages 15-24) (2022)[67]	75%
Secondary school completion	Lower secondary completion rate, total (% of relevant age group) (2022)[68]	45.9%
Tertiary enrolment	% of eligible youths (2018)[69]	11.81% (2018)
Internet access	Individuals using the internet (% of population) (2022)[70]	35%
Democracy	Satisfaction with democracy (2024)[71]	21%
Corruption	Corruption perception score (2023)[72]	25/100
Media freedoms	Media freedoms ranking (2024)[73]	112/180

[63] Reporters with Reporters Without Borders (2024) World Press Freedom Index: Nigeria. https://rsf.org/en/country/nigeria
[64] Ibid.
[65] Cunliffe-Jones P. et al. (2021) *Misinformation Policy In Sub-Saharan Africa: From Laws and Regulations to Media Literacy.* London: University of Westminster Press. https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/monographs/bv73c331q
[66] World Bank. Data for Senegal, South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria. https://data.worldbank.org/?locations=SN-ZA-KE-NG
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.
[69] The Global Economy. Nigeria Tertiary school enrolment. https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Nigeria/Tertiary_school_enrollment/
[70] World Bank. Data for Senegal, South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria. https://data.worldbank.org/?locations=SN-ZA-KE-NG
[71] Afrobarometer (2024) Nigeria: Country democracy scorecard. https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/nigeria-country-democracy-scorecard/
[72] Transparency International (2023) Corruptions Perceptions Index. https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023/
[73] Reporters Without Borders (2024) World Press Freedom Index. https://rsf.org/en/index

Table 5: Key country indicators

Sources: World Bank, The Global Economy, Reporters Without Borders, Afrobarometer, Transparency International

5.4. Senegal

Senegal has a population of over 18 million, with French the official language in the administrative and education system, although several other languages have the status of national languages.[74] By population size it is the smallest country in our study. It is a considered a lower-middle income country.[75] Its youth literacy rate (78%) is on par with Nigeria's, but its secondary school completion rate (38.8%) is the lowest amongst the focus countries (38.8%). Tertiary enrolment is 16.81% of eligible candidates.

Senegal is rated 'partly free' according to the Freedom in the World report (2024).[76] While some consider it a model democracy,[77] politically motivated prosecutions and violent protests are also a feature of the political landscape. Most recently, protests erupted in 2023 following the imprisonment of *Patriotas Africanos de Senegal por el Trabajo, la Ética y la Fraternidad* (PASTEF) opposition leader Ousmane Sonko on a rape charge that was said to be politically motivated, and in 2024 following an attempt to postpone the presidential elections. Internet shutdowns have become more common during the protests. In 2024 the internet was shut down due to the "dissemination of several hateful and subversive messages relayed on social networks in the context of threats and disturbances to public order".[78] Private TV station Walf TV was also taken off air due to its coverage of the protests.

Senegal has the best corruption perception score amongst the countries in this study, and the second highest percentage of the public who are "fairly/very" satisfied with how democracy is working (48%). However, as in other countries in this study, corruption is a key political and social concern and some 73% of Senegalese said in a recent survey that it had increased over the previous year.[79] A decrease in satisfaction with democracy has also been recorded.[80]

The country has a diverse media environment with some 20 TV channels, more than 200 radio stations (including community stations), and 45 newspapers.[81] The media is considered relatively independent, but harassment including the arrest and detention of journalists in the

[74] Wolof, Balanta-Ganja, Jola Fonyi, Mandinka, Mandjak, Mankanya, Noon, Pulaar, Serer, and Soninke

[75] World Bank. Country classifications by income level for 2024-2025. https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/opendata/world-bank-country-classifications-by-income-level-for-2024-2025

[76] Freedom House (2024) *Freedom in the World*: Senegal. https://freedomhouse.org/country/senegal

[77] Jepsen Q. (undated) 'Democracy as an Identity in Senegal'. ORB International. https://orb-international.com/democracy-as-an-identity-in-senegal/

[78] Article 19 (2024) 'Senegal: Urgent call to maintain connectivity'. https://www.article19.org/resources/senegal-restore-digital-rights/

[79] Afrobarometer (2024) Senegal: Country democracy scorecard. https://www.afrobarometer.org/countries/senegal/

[80] Freedom House (2024) *Freedom in the World*: Senegal. https://freedomhouse.org/country/senegal/freedom-world/2024

[81] Reporters with Reporters Without Borders (2024) World Press Freedom Index: Senegal. https://rsf.org/en/country/senegal

context of political unrest has become more frequent.[82] Reporting, particularly in newspapers, is said to be "heavily politicised". [83]

Around 60% of the small population is online. The country does not have an access to information law, and its general information environment in terms of the availability of public data and information can be considered poor. The circulation of false news has always been considered illegal in terms of Article 255 of its Penal Code.[84] The publishing of polls during election times is prohibited by law.

Indicator	Details	Total, percentage, score
Population	2024[85]	18,126,390
Literacy	Literacy rate, youth total (% of people ages 15-24) (2022)[86]	78%
Secondary school completion	Lower secondary completion rate, total (% of relevant age group) (2022)[87]	38.8%
Tertiary enrolment	% of eligible youths (2022)[88]	16.81%
Internet access	Individuals using the internet (% of population) (2022)[89]	60%
Democracy	Satisfaction with democracy (2022)[90]	48%
Corruption	Corruption perception score (2023)[91]	43/100
Media freedoms	Media freedoms ranking (2024)[92]	94/180 (2024)[93]

Table 6: Key country indicators

Sources: National Statistics and Demographics Agency (ANSD), World Bank, The Global Economy, Reporters Without Borders, Afrobarometer, Transparency International

[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Cunliffe-Jones P. et al. (2021) *Misinformation Policy In Sub-Saharan Africa: From Laws and Regulations to Media Literacy.* London: University of Westminster Press. https://www.fulcrum.org/concern/monographs/bv73c331q
[85] National Statistics and Demographics Agency. Population data. https://www.ansd.sn/Indicateur/donnees-de-population
[86] World Bank. Data for Senegal, South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria. https://data.worldbank.org/?locations=SN-ZA-KE-NG
[87] Ibid.
[88] The Global Economy. Senegal Tertiary school enrolment. Senegal Tertiary school enrollment - data, chart
[89] World Bank. Data for Senegal, South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria. https://data.worldbank.org/?locations=SN-ZA-KE-NG
[90] Afrobarometer (2022) Senegal: Country democracy scorecard. https://www.afrobarometer.org/articles/in-senegal-context-for-postponed-election-is-strong-popular-support-for-democracy-growing-dissatisfaction-with-its-workings/
[91] Transparency International (2023) Corruptions Perceptions Index. https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2023/
[92] Reporters Without Borders (2024) World Press Freedom Index. https://rsf.org/en/index
[93] Ibid.

6. Analysis of election-related fake content

6.1. South Africa: the 2024 national and provincial elections

The South African national and provincial elections took place on 29 May 2024. A total of 70 parties and 11 independent candidates contested the elections, the first year that independent candidates were able to do so. The elections were also contested by the newly formed uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK Party), led by former president Jacob Zuma, which split the support base for the incumbent African National Congress (ANC). In May 2024 however the Constitutional Court ruled that Zuma himself was not eligible to run due to a 2021 jail sentence for refusing to appear before the Zondo Commission of inquiry into state capture. While it was an important election in which the ANC was expected to lose its majority for the first time, voter turnout (58.64%) was substantially below the average for previous elections. The ANC received 40.18% of the votes but did not attain the 50% required for a parliamentary majority, forcing it to form a coalition government with opposition parties.

Key election information	
Registered voters	27 782 081[94]
Voter turnout (2024)	58.64%[95]
Average voter turnout for elections	73.59%[96]
Electoral body	Electoral Commission of South Africa

Main parties contesting the elections	
African National Congress	The incumbent party at the time of the elections
Democratic Alliance	The main opposition party
uMkhonto we Sizwe (MK Party)	A newly formed party headed by former president Jacob Zuma
Economic Freedom Fighters	A populist party, previously the main threat to the ANC's voter base

Key election themes or topics	Corruption; service delivery; the energy crisis; the National Health Insurance Bill which had been met with fierce opposition but signed into law just ahead of the elections; crime; Illegal immigration; unemployment; housing; land reform; cadre deployment,[97] secession.[98]

Table 7: Election information, main candidates and parties and election themes
Sources: International Foundation for Electoral Systems, various

[94] International Foundation for Electoral Systems. Election guide: South Africa. https://www.electionguide.org/countries/id/198/
[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid.
[97] In February 2024 the Constitutional Court ruled that the ANC had five days to hand over their cadre deployment records to the opposition Democratic Alliance.
[98] Two parties campaigned for the independence of the Western Cape province.

The large majority of fake content items in South Africa sought to undermine the integrity of the elections, with the incumbent ANC being the primary target of disinformation attacks. In this respect it can be said to have drawn on and fueled a narrative of corruption in the ruling party, and encouraged public uncertainty of the ANC's reaction should it lose its majority as was expected. All content supporting a political party supported the newly formed MK Party, which was only marginally the subject of fake content attacks. This could suggest that the origin of at least some of the disinformation during the elections was from supporters of the MK Party.

6.1.1. Content categories

The table below categorises the 21 fake content items captured from the Africa Check database into key content categories. As mentioned in the methodology, a content item may be assigned to more than one category.

	Count	%
Claims about the election process	9	42
Claims explicitly attacking or undermining candidates or parties	8	38
Claims attributed to candidates or parties	4	19
Claims of support for candidates or parties	3	14
Click-bait and scams	2	9
Claims drawing on religious or ethnic issues or tensions	2	9
Claims about the potential for election violence	1	4

Table 8: Content count by category

Claims about the election process

The majority of fake content items in South Africa made false claims about the election process (42%). All of these claims suggested the election results were not credible, with most suggesting some form of collusion between the ruling ANC and the Electoral Commission of South Africa (IEC), and election corruption. These claims started emerging ahead of the elections, but intensified around and after the election date. Ahead of the elections, false claims included one drawing on the xenophobia in the country and that used a video from a Mozambican voting registration drive as part of elections that were also to be held in that country in 2024 as evidence of Mozambicans being "imported" to vote in the South African elections;[99] bizarre conspiratorial claims such as messages circulating on social media that voters needed to take black ballpoint pens to vote because the ink from the pens at the polling booths evaporated;[100] and photographic "evidence" that ballot papers have been found already marked with votes for the ANC.[101] Post elections, and with the MK Party threatening to reject the election outcome without a recount, claims of the elections being 'rigged' included a video showing "destroyed" ballot boxes in a

[99] No, video of Mozambican migrants registering for their country's 2024 elections – not 'imported' to vote for South Africa's ruling party - Africa Check

[100] South Africa's electoral commission dismisses claims that voters must have their own pens at voting stations - Africa Check

[101] No, 'mystery' ballot papers have not been 'discovered' pre-filled with votes for South Africa's ruling ANC - Africa Check

municipality in Limpopo;[102] a video 'proving' "ballot box stuffing" which in fact showed the IEC's special voting process[103]; a video claiming it was evidence of sealed and hidden ballot boxes full of uncounted votes[104]; a claim from a group aligned with the MK Party that alleges collusion between the ANC and the main opposition party, the DA, in electoral fraud;[105] a claim that the IEC tampered with the vote count;[106] and photos of a man described as the "player and the referee", one of him in an ANC t-shirt, and another in an IEC t-shirt, implying the lack of independence of the IEC from the ruling party.[107]

Claims explicitly attacking or undermining candidates or parties

Some 38% of the claims explicitly attacked opposition political parties, with the ANC the subject of these attacks in all of the fake content items (in two instance the DA was attacked alongside the ANC in the false claims). These included the claims of election corruption mentioned above; an AI-generated shallow fake of US President Joe Biden threatening to place sanctions on the country if the ANC won the elections;[108] and much more serious claims, such as a voice recording falsely attributed to Bheki Mtolo, the ANC's provincial secretary for KwaZulu-Natal, where he says in isiZulu that he wants to poison the "rotten old Zulu women" who voted for the MK Party in the province.[109]

Three of the claims attacking parties gestured at key electoral campaign issues and issues of prominent public concern. These were a fake X post by the Western Cape Premier Alan Winde saying South Africa had signed a COVID-related agreement with WHO which he described as "more important than South Africa's sovereignty" (in the context of the controversy around the National Health Insurance Bill);[110] a photo of an unenclosed public toilet saying it was built by the ANC when it was actually built by the DA in 2009 (in the context of poor service delivery in communities across the country);[111] and the fake content item, already mentioned, claiming

[102] FALSE: South Africa's electoral commission dispels claim of 'destroyed' ballot boxes and votes in Limpopo province - Africa Check

[103] No, nothing suspicious about this video of special voting ballots being collected - Africa Check

[104] Zero evidence video shows boxes of 'hidden', 'uncounted' votes cast in South Africa's 2024 elections - Africa Check

[105] Zero evidence video shows boxes of 'hidden', 'uncounted' votes cast in South Africa's 2024 elections - Africa Check

[106] FALSE: South Africa's electoral commission debunks claims around 'changing' vote numbers on results dashboard - Africa Check

[107] No, person dressed in South Africa's ruling party colours does not also work for electoral commission - Africa Check

[108] US president Joe Biden did not warn of South African sanctions if ruling ANC wins 2024 elections – ignore AI-generated video - Africa Check

[109] South Africa, don't believe recording of man posing as ANC's Bheki Mtolo, threatening to poison 'rotten Zulu grannies' - Africa Check

[110] No, South Africa hasn't signed WHO pandemic treaty – post from parody X account and treaty still a draft - Africa Check

[111] No, open public toilet not installed by South Africa's ruling African National Congress, but from opposition-controlled City of Cape Town in 2010 - Africa Check

Mozambiquans were brought into the country to vote for the ANC (in the context of high levels of xenophobia in South Africa).

Claims attributed to candidates or parties

Some 19% of the fake content items made false claims attributed to a major political party. Topics included false claims about the DA's post-election negotiating strategies for forming a government of national unity in an apparently fake internal memo;[112] the voice impersonation of Mtolo mentioned above; the false claim about the signing of an agreement with WHO also mentioned; and a headline poster for The Star newspaper which suggested that the ANC felt threatened by an MK victory at the polls.[113]

Claims of support for candidates or parties

All the false claims of support of a political party were supportive of the newly formed MK Party, and occurred ahead of voting day. These involved another 'shallow fake' video, this time of former US president Donald Trump encouraging South Africans to vote for the MK Party;[114] claims that the singer Lira had endorsed or joined the party;[115] and a statement on an official National Union of Metalworkers (NUM) letterhead that the trade union had told its members to vote for the party.[116]

Claims drawing on religious or ethnic issues or tensions

There were two clear claims that drew on the potential for tensions between isiXhosa and isiZulu ethnicities in KwaZulu-Natal. The first was the impersonation of Mtolo in the voice of mentioned above, and the second, a claim that the US security agency the CIA planned to secretly start a civil war in the province and accuse the MK Party of fomenting the violence.[117]

Click-bait and scams

Two fake content items opportunistically drew on the election period for financial scams. One, which appeared in different forms on Facebook, claimed that there was sensationalistic news about Economic Freedom Fighters leader Julius Malema, including his "tragic end". However,

[112] South Africa, don't trust fake memo claiming opposition Democratic Alliance intends to undermine 'coalition' government - Africa Check

[113] South Africa's ruling ANC 'appeals' with former president Jacob Zuma? No, newspaper front page is fake - Africa Check

[114] No, former US president Donald Trump has not backed South Africa's newly formed uMkhonto weSizwe Party – video doctored - Africa Check

[115] No, South African singer Lira has not joined or endorsed newly formed political party uMkhonto weSizwe - Africa Check

[116] Beware, South Africa! Ignore viral statement claiming influential trade union has instructed members to vote for the MK Party – it's a fake - Africa Check

[117] South Africa, don't fall for fake headline claiming the CIA will start a war in KwaZulu-Natal and frame Zuma's uMkhonto weSizwe Party - Africa Check

this clicked through to e-commercial websites.[118] The second advertised job opportunities at the IEC that did not exist and linked to an unrelated site that asked for CVs to be submitted.[119]

6.1.2. Content types

The table below shows the different kinds of content types used as strategies to lend authority or credibility to the fake claims.

	Count	Subcategory (1)	Subcategory (2)	% of total
Identity theft	10			48
Impersonation		4		19
AI			2	9
Social media fake account			1	4
Fake voice recording			1	4
Branding		6		28
Misuse of image or video to give veracity to claim	8			38
Other	3			14

Table 9: Content count by type

The majority of fake content items involved a form of identity theft. Forms of impersonation included two instances of AI-generated videos (of Trump and Biden), a fake social media post on X attributed to the Western Cape premier, and the voice recording falsely attributed to the ANC's provincial secretary in KwaZuluNatal. Forms of institutional branding used included fake DA and NUM letterheads, the use of news website links to lend credibility to a scam, and a fake headline poster for The Star newspaper. All of the claims attributed to a political party incorporated one or other form of identity theft.

The majority of claims that the elections had been rigged produced forms of 'evidence' that this was the case. These included the sharing of video 'evidence' (four instances),[120] photographic 'evidence' (2),[121] and the apparently deliberate misreading of a screenshot of the IEC's results dashboard.[122]

6.2. Kenya: The 2022 general elections

The Kenyan general elections took place on 9 August 2022 and were contested by four presidential candidates. Prior to the 2022 elections, the political landscape had been dominated by two families or 'political dynasties' – the Kenyattas and Odingas – with ethnic affiliations to the Kikuyu and the Kalenjin communities. However, Willian Ruto, campaigning under the Kenya Kwanza Alliance, and who was deputy president at the time of the elections, sought to break this

[118] Ignore bogus 'shocking news' posts about South African celebrities. They contain links to dodgy e-commerce sites - Africa Check

[119] No, South Africa's electoral commission not advertising jobs on Facebook - Africa Check

[120] For example, No, nothing suspicious about this video of special voting ballots being collected - Africa Check

[121] For example, No, 'mystery' ballot papers have not been 'discovered' pre-filled with votes for South Africa's ruling ANC - Africa Check

[122] FALSE: South Africa's electoral commission debunks claims around 'changing' vote numbers on results dashboard - Africa Check

status quo. He framed his campaign as a contestation between "hustlers" and "dynasties" and, although a Kalenjin, distanced himself from tribal politics. His campaign had a strong Christian moral platform and focused on issues that would appeal to ordinary citizens such as economic difficulties.[123]

Several incidents raised concerns about the election process. These included fears of foreign interference which were raised in July 2022 when three Venezuelans were detained at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi apparently with official Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) stickers that included administrative details about polling stations. Ruto meanwhile claimed ahead of the elections that his Telegram account has been hacked by an Israeli businessman said to have been involved in election interference in other countries. The electronic voter registration system used by the IEBC also raised concerns about the possibility of manipulation.

Voter turnout (64.77%) was marginally lower than the average turnout in elections. Ruto narrowly defeated Raila Odinga, who campaigned under the banner of the Azimio la Umoja coalition, receiving 50.5% or the vote compared to Odinga's 48.85%. This led to Odinga contesting the results in the Supreme Court, a challenge which was rejected by the court. Odinga later said that he had hired hackers to try produce evidence that the election had been manipulated following his loss.

In 2023, protests against the rising cost of living and alleged fraud in the elections by Azimio la Umoja led to the deaths of over 16 people.[124] A national dialogue committee subsequently recommended and review of the elections and changes to the selection panel of the IEBC.[125]

Key election information	
Registered voters	22,120,458[126]
Voter turnout (2022)	64.77%[127]
Average voter turnout for elections	69.94%[128]
Electoral body	Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission

Main parties or candidates	
Raila Odinga	Orange Democratic Movement, campaigning under the Azimio la Umoja coalition
William Ruto	United Democratic Alliance, campaigning under the Kenya Kwanza Alliance. Deputy president at the time of the elections

[123] Musambi E. (2022) 'Kenya election result: William Ruto defies the odds for victory'. BBC. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-62485332; Gathara P. (2019) 'Dynasties vs hustlers in Kenya'. Aljazeera. https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/9/24/dynasties-vs-hustlers-in-kenya

[124] Human Rights Watch (2023) Kenya: Events of 2023. https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/kenya

[125] Freedom House (2024) *Freedom in the World*: Kenya. https://freedomhouse.org/country/kenya/freedom-world/2024

[126] International Foundation for Electoral Systems. Election guide: Kenya. https://www.electionguide.org/countries/id/112/

[127] Ibid.

[128] Ibid.

George Luchiri Wajackoyah	Roots Party Kenya
David Mwaure Waihiga	Agano Party

Key election themes or topics	Corruption; economic revival; cost of living; youth unemployment; access to healthcare.

Table 10: Election information, main candidates and parties and election themes
Sources: International Foundation for Electoral Systems, various

Most of the fake content in the sample attempted to undermine Ruto's campaign and chances at the polls by building a sustained narrative of him being unfit to govern. Many of these attacked the moral foundation claimed by his campaign. Claims that attempted to undermine the impartiality of institutions during the elections were another notable feature. As in other countries in this study, these included claims about the electoral process and the independence of the country's electoral body. However perceptions of the church's role as a neutral arbiter in the elections were also attacked, as were the perceived impartiality of the central bank as an institution trusted to manage Kenya's economic stability. A significant amount of fake content used the branding of formal media outlets to lend their claims authority.

6.2.1. Content categories

The table below categorises the 34 fake content items captured from the Africa Check database into key content categories. A content item may be assigned to more than one category.

	Count	%
Claims explicitly attacking or undermining candidates or parties	18	52
Claims attributed to candidates or parties	8	23
Claims drawing on religious or ethnic issues or tensions	6	16
Claims about the election process	5	14
Claims of support for candidates or parties	5	14
Claims about the potential for election violence	2	5
Other	3	8

Table 11: Content count by category

Claims explicitly attacking or undermining candidates or parties

The majority of false content in Kenya can be categorized as content attacking a particular political party of candidate (52%). A total of 14 of these (77%) explicitly attacked Ruto, the United Democratic Alliance (UDA), or the Kenya Kwanza Alliance. As can be seen in the discussion below, these attacks cut across a number of the content categories in the table. Individual examples included the reproduction of a doctored certificate from the University of Nairobi purportedly awarded to Ruto (in the context of controversies around allegations that several candidates submitted fake degrees to the IECB);[129] a claim of the arrest of a senator campaigning

[129] No, Kenya's deputy president didn't graduate with 'second class honours - lower division' - Africa Check

under the UDA ticket for links to organised crime and money laundering;[130] a highly personal attack claiming that Ruto's son ran a male prostitution ring;[131] and two claims of poor public support for Ruto (one involving a edited video of a crowd chanting in Kiswahili "everything is possible without Ruto" where the crowd in the source video were in fact referring to incumbent president Uhuru Kenyatta.[132]

Fake content attacking Odinga included a claim that a candidate from Azimio la Umoja was withdrawing from the race due to there being little support for the party and he wanted to avoid embarrassment; [133] a graphic quoting the head of the Anglican Church of Kenya, Archbishop Jackson Ole Sapit, doubting whether Odinga was baptised into the church;[134] and, post-elections with Odinga challenging the results in court, a fake Time magazine cover with main cover line, "The Man Who Will Never Be President"[135]; and a claim, alongside a photo that was actually taken previously at an airport in Malaysia, that a trade union head and Odinga supporter was fleeing Kenya after Ruto's win.[136] Both these last content items can be read as ways of mocking Odinga's loss and court challenge, the second possibly in response to the head of the trade union mocking and challenging Ruto during the election campaign. In this respect, they can be seen as introducing elements of satire or humour, rather than necessarily being expected to be taken seriously.

Claims attributed to candidates or parties

Fake content attributed to our about candidates or parties (23%) included a claim about a defection;[137] about an independent candidate bowing out of the race;[138] and, after the elections and in the context of disputes over the results,[139] a claim that a former member of parliament and governor candidate threatened to shoot an IEBC observer if Ruto lost.[140] A incident in June in which a teargas canister was thrown by a police offer during a stadium rally where Odinga's running mate Martha Karua was speaking was capitalised on by fake content targeting Ruto in an

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[130] Arrest warrant issued for Nairobi senator and governorship candidate Sakaja? No, viral graphic fake - Africa Check

[131] Male prostitution ring run by son of Kenyan president-elect Ruto? No, newspaper front page fake - Africa Check

[132] Crowd in Kenya singing 'everything is possible without Ruto'? No, video altered - Africa Check

[133] No, Kenyan politician Igathe didn't tell electoral commission he was withdrawing from Nairobi governorship race - Africa Check

[134] No, Kenya's Anglican archbishop didn't say church had no record of presidential candidate Odinga being a member - Africa Check

[135] Disregard fake Time magazine cover deriding Kenyan politician Raila Odinga - Africa Check

[136] Atwoli Didn't Flee After Ruto's Win | Africa Check

[137] From the Wiper Democratic Movement to the United Democratic Alliance (UDA). No, 'betrayed' former Nairobi governor Mike Sonko hasn't decamped to Kenya's UDA party - Africa Check.

[138] Kenya's Kirinyaga county candidate has withdrawn from election? No, graphic with Nation branding is fake - Africa Check

[139] Four of the seven electoral commissioners disowned the results despite Ruto being declared president elect on August 15.

[140] No, graphic fake – former MP didn't threaten to shoot Kenyan elections observer for hinting Ruto might lose - Africa Check

interesting way. In the first,[141] fake content claimed that Ruto's running mate Rigathi Gachagua congratulated the police officer for disrupting the rally. In the second,[142] in an attempt to draw on the potential for ethnic tensions, a photo of the arrested police officer deliberately misnames him using a surname common in Ruto's Kalenjin ethnic community.

Claims drawing on religious or ethnic issues or tensions

In total three fake content items used senior members of the clergy to provide legitimacy to their claims. These include the fake quote attributed to Archbishop Sapit questioning whether Odinga had been baptised mentioned above; a claim undermining the election results and Ruto's win attributed to Catholic archbishop Anthony Muheria and accusing Kenyans of "normalis[ing] theft to an extent of attempting to steal elections";[143] and a quote attributed to Timothy Njoya,[144] a retired minister in the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, which was supportive of Odinga. The strategy of associating fake claims with senior clergy exploits the trust Kenyans place in religious leaders and seeks to weaponize the moral authority they embody. By invoking the clergy, the disinformation gains a layer of credibility, particularly among devout Christian communities who may see moral integrity as a critical criterion for leadership. This tactic could however also polarise the electorate further, as it risks undermining the church's role as a neutral arbiter. While the two claims supporting Odinga (by Muheria and Njoya) implicitly challenged the strong moral Christian foundation of Ruto's campaign, similarly, the claims of corruption within the UDA, or that Ruto's son ran a male prostitution ring attempted to cast doubt on the moral authority claimed by his campaign.

Besides misnaming the police officer arrested for setting off teargas cannister at the rally of Odinga's running mate, two other false content items attempted to stoke ethnic tensions over the election period. One claim on an official police letterhead banned peaceful protests following the relocation of the Maasai community living in the Ngorongoro conservation area[145] (it also identifies Kenya's central bank governor as amongst those fuelling the protests); and the other, in which a video of a speech given by Ruto is manipulated, claimed that Ruto incited supporters in the Kalenjin community, threatening the displacement of ethnic communities in the Uasin Gishu[146] county if they did not vote for him.[147] These attacks on Ruto occurred in the context of his campaign deliberately attempting to distance itself from traditional tribal and ethnic politics.

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[141] Kenyan deputy presidential candidate Gachagua didn't congratulate police officer for disrupting political meeting – quote fabricated - Africa Check

[142] Is man suspected of lobbing teargas during Kenyan politician Karua's rally from rival Ruto's Kalenjin community? No - Africa Check

[143] Did Catholic archbishop say Kenyans have become so used to theft they even try to steal elections? No, viral graphic fake - Africa Check "It's unfortunate that Kenyans have normalised theft to an extent of attempting to steal elections. May we ask God to forgive our sins," the quote reads.

[144] No, viral graphic quoting Kenyan pro-democracy Presbyterian minister Njoya is fake - Africa Check

[145] No, statement banning demos against eviction of Maasai from world famous Tanzanian reserve not by Kenya's police - Africa Check

[146] Uasin Gishu in the Rift Valley region is Ruto's political stronghold and a historically volatile multi-ethnic region. The threat of displacement disrupts the delicate ethnic balance in the region, reignites fears from past conflicts, and undermines Ruto's campaign narrative of unity and economic inclusion.

[147] Doctored video with fabricated subtitles doesn't show Kenyan deputy president William Ruto threatening voters in Uasin Gishu county - Africa Check

With respect to the claim that the central bank governor instigated the protests, the claim is strategic as it targets the perceived impartiality of the central bank, an institution trusted to manage Kenya's economic stability.

Claims about election the process

Five fake content items (14%) made false claims about the election process. One involved false claims about voting in Australia with shifting statements of the outcome[148] (a feature also seen in Senegal where voting by the diasporic community is seen as an opportunity for false claims); and one item, in the context of the post-election court challenge by Odinga, claimed that votes had been mistakenly credited to him (ostensibly inspired by a legitimate IEBC correction to votes that were mistakenly added to Ruto's tally).[149] Two content items involved the vice chairperson of the IEBC, Juliana Cherera. In the first, ahead of the election, she is accused of corruption and the claim made that her bank account had been frozen after receiving a payment from the Mombasa county government where she previously was chief officer in the strategic delivery unit;[150] and in the second, post-election, a fake Facebook account attributed to her made wild claims that the election had been stolen, and that Ruto's victory would be nullified.[151] A similar claim undermining the results is attributed to Muheria, mentioned above

Claims of support for candidates or parties

The four false claims of support were all in favour of Odinga's campaign. They included the quote attributed to Njoya mentioned above; a statement falsely attributed to former Kenyan chief justice Willy Mutunga;[152] a fake poll (the only instance of a poll being created) claiming a victory for Odinga's campaign following a debate between presidential running mates;[153] and fake Twitter and Facebook accounts attributed to media tycoon Samuel Kamau Macharia showing strong support for Odinga.[154] The majority of these false claims of support occurred in the lead-up to the elections.

Claims about the potential for election violence

Although false claims stoking ethnic tensions have the potential to fuel election violence, only two content items were monitored as false claims about election violence or the potential for election violence. The first, mentioned above, involves the misnaming the police officer arrested for setting off a teargas cannister at the Azimio la Umoja rally. The second, a statement purportedly from the US Embassy in Kenya with a US state department seal, apologised to

[148] Kenyans living abroad voted in 12 countries, but not in Australia - Africa Check

[149] Kenya's elections agency flagged thousands of votes mistakenly given to presidential candidate Odinga? No, article screenshot fake - Africa Check

[150] No, KTN News didn't tweet that Kenyan electoral commission vice chair's bank account has been frozen – screenshot fake - Africa Check

[151] No, Kenya's electoral commission vice chair Cherera not on Facebook – beware imposter page - Africa Check

[152] No, former chief justice Mutunga didn't say Kenya's presidential 'election was won' when Odinga appointed Karua as running mate - Africa Check

[153] Beware of fabricated 'Nation' graphic showing opinion poll results of Kenya's running mates debate - Africa Check

[154] Ignore fake social media accounts impersonating Kenyan media tycoon SK Macharia - Africa Check

"members of the public and political class who may have been hurt"[155] by an earlier actual warning to US citizens of possible election violence in the popular tourist destination of Kisumu. Kisumu is in a region considered Odinga's political stronghold and in which election-related violence previously occurred. While the US embassy did issue an update, the fake post followed the city governor reassuring US citizens they would be safe in Kisumu.

Other types of claims

Two fake content items categorised as 'other' are worth mentioning. The first claimed to a Facebook group that Odinga had died, a post with potentially serious consequences except that it could be easily refuted.[156] The reach of this claim was concerning given that the Facebook group was said to have a million followers, and may have led, even if short-lived, to a level of citizen uncertainty, anxiety and alarm. The second included a screengrab of a dramatic photo of an eagle in mid-flight catching a drone, which was actually taken during a police exercise in the Netherlands in 2016. The drone was falsely said to belong to Citizen TV covering Odinga's final election rally.[157] Police were also said to have tried to shoot down the bird in an attempt to recover the drone. This fake content, alongside those identified above, introduces an element of humour to the disinformation landscape in Kenya.

6.2.2. Content types

The table below shows the different kinds of content types used as strategies to lend authority or credibility to the fake claims.

	Count	Subcategory (1)	Subcategory (2)	% of total
Identity theft	27			79
Impersonation – social media fake accounts		2		5
Branding		25		73
Media branding			21	61
Other			4	12
Misuse of image or video to give veracity to claim	4			12
Doctored videos		2		5
Other	3			9

Table 12: Content count by type

The overwhelming number of fake content items used forms of identity theft to create convincing and authoritative content, most notably appropriated branding. Most of these were the branding of news websites (e.g. Kenyans.co.ke.), TV stations (e.g. NTV Kenya), and newspapers (e.g. Star, Nation, The Standard). However, as mentioned, the cover design for Time magazine was also copied, a letterhead for the Kenya police and the seal for the US State Department used, and a University of Nairobi certificate altered. Fake social media accounts were created for two fake

[155] No, US embassy in Kenya didn't apologise for Kisumu travel restrictions set before elections - Africa Check

[156] Ignore false post claiming Kenya presidential candidate Raila Odinga has 'been found dead' - Africa Check

[157] Kenyan police shoot at eagle that grabbed TV drone during Odinga's rally? No, photo snapped in the Netherlands in 2016 - Africa Check

content items. Two videos were edited to support false assertions impacting negatively on the Ruto campaign.

6.3. Nigeria: The 2023 general elections

The 2023 presidential and national assembly elections were held on 25 February 2023, with state or gubernatorial elections held on 18 March (postponed from the initial date of 11 March). It was an election marred by a dispute over the results, as well as the harassment and arbitrary arrest of journalists.[158] Ethnic and religious identities played a strong part in campaigning, with Peter Obi from the Labour Party the only Christian candidate among the four Muslim front-runners. A total of 18 candidates campaigned for the presidency and voter turnout was the lowest in years (26.72%).

Despite a new biometric system implemented to verity voters, numerous reports of irregularities in the election process emerged, including fraud, the buying of votes, and voter intimidation. Although all 18 candidates were approved by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the qualifications of the candidates were a topic for public debate, with the accusation that one candidate did not have a school certificate which is required for presidential candidates. INEC also did not upload the full results prior to their announcement as required by law, fuelling suspicions of fraud.[159]

Bola Tinubu from the All Progressives Congress (APC) was elected president with 36.61% of the vote, while the APC secured the highest number of seats in the national assembly (67) followed by the People's Democratic Party (PDP) with 40 seats. The state elections resulted in all three of the main parties, the APC, PDP and Labour Party, winning 12 states each.[160]

Due to the irregularities, Obi, Atiku Abubakar from the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and Rabiu Kwankwaso from the New Nigeria People's Party rejected the presidential results when they were announced on February 28. Calls were made for the elections to be re-run, which led to accusations by the Tinubu campaign of the PDP inciting public violence. Following the confirmation of Tinubu's victory on March 1, the main opposition candidates said they would challenge the outcome, a challenge which was ultimately rejected by the Appeal Court.[161]

Key election information	
Registered voters	93,469,008[162]
Voter turnout (2023)	26.72%
Average voter turnout for elections	46.09%[163]

[158] Reporters with Reporters Without Borders (2024) World Press Freedom Index: Nigeria. https://rsf.org/en/country/nigeria

[159] Premium Times (2023). Editorial. 'The highs and the lows of Nigeria's 2023 presidential election'. https://www.premiumtimesng.com/opinion/editorial/587427-editorial-the-highs-and-lows-of-nigerias-2023-presidential-election.html

[160] BBC (2023) ''Nigeria presidential election results 2023: State by state breakdown of presidential result as INEC announce Bola Tinubu as president-elect'. https://www.bbc.com/pidgin/tori-64780492

[161] BBC (2023) 'Election tribunal rejects Nigeria presidential election challenge'. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-66727354

[162] International Foundation for Electoral Systems. Election guide: Nigeria. https://www.electionguide.org/countries/id/158/

[163] Ibid.

Electoral body	Independent National Electoral Commission

Main parties or candidates	
Bola Tinubu	All Progressives Congress, the incumbent party at the time of the elections
Atiku Abubakar	People's Democratic Party
Peter Obi	Labour Party
Rabiu Kwankwaso	New Nigeria People's Party

Key election themes or topics	Corruption, insecurity, the economy, national unity.[164]

Table 13: Election information, main candidates and parties and election themes
Sources: International Foundation for Electoral Systems, various

Most of the fake content was driven by a contestation between Tinubu, a Muslim representing the incumbent party, and the Obi, the only Christian challenger to the presidency. In contrast few attacks focused on Abubakar, also a Muslim, and who emerged as runner up in the presidential polls. This is an indication of the extent to which religion was a key catalyst for disruption rather than the most immediate political threat at the polls. Several fake content items sought to perpetuate the narrative that the presidential election results were not credible. Nigeria also had the highest percentage of fake content drawing on the potential for election violence.

6.3.1. Content categories

The table below categorises the 48 fake content items captured from the Africa Check database into key content categories. A content item may be assigned to more than one category.

	Count	**%**
Claims attacking or undermining candidates or parties	18	37
Claims about the election process	13	27
Claims drawing on religious or ethnic issues or tensions	10	20
Claims attributed to candidates or parties	9	18
Claims of support for candidates or parties	8	16
Claims about the potential for election violence	7	14
Claims linked to economic insecurity	6	12
Click-bait and scams	2	4
Other	1	2

Table 14: Content count by category

Claims attacking or undermining candidates or parties

The majority of fake content items (37%) attacked or sought to undermine a candidate or political party. At least half of these claims (50%) attack Tinubu or the APC, closely followed by attacks on Obi and his Labour Party (38%). In comparison attacks on Abubakar and his PDP and

[164] Africa Check (2022) 'FACTSHEET: What you need to know about Nigeria's pivotal 2023 general elections'. https://africacheck.org/fact-checks/factsheets/factsheet-what-you-need-know-about-nigerias-pivotal-2023-general-elections

Kwankwaso's New Nigeria People's Party were infrequent (each account for one content item each). This is despite the PDP posing a significant electoral threat to the APC, with Abubakar emerging as runner up in the presidential polls.

As the discussion below shows, the claims cut across the categories used for analysis here, such as a claim that Tinubu was to take a Muslim wife, drawing on fears of the Islamisation of Nigeria;[165] or that "over 1.5 million" Chadians who were to vote for the APC had been intercepted at the border.[166] Some of these content items drew on election themes or topics, such as the fragile state of the economy (categorised here) and corruption. For example, this is the case in the claim that the financial crimes commission had seized "new naira notes" in a raid on Tinubu's home.[167] Content items also included claims of political violence involving attacks on candidates, or violent public responses to their victory at the polls, a feature which is less prominent in the other countries in this study.

As the state elections drew nearer, the focus of fake content attacks shifted to governors. These included two attacking the Labour Party candidate for Lagos – claims that he did not have a degree from a US university despite saying he had,[168] and had misregistered his name at INEC;[169] and a memo with a forged signature claiming that the Kaduna state government in northern Nigeria had bribed Muslim clerics.[170] One attack claimed that a photo of a woman smoking a Shisha water pipe was the Labour Party's deputy governor candidate for Lagos state Islamiyat Oyefusi.[171] This attack occurred in the context of misogynistic attacks on Oyefusi on social media and elswhere.[172]

Claims about the election process

Some 27% of the fake content involved false claims about the election process. Ahead of the elections content claimed that voters would not need a permanent voters card to vote;[173] that the elections could be delayed by two weeks, citing insecurity in the southeast and northeast of the country and the burning of INEC offices;[174] and, as voting was about to start, a claim that Boko Haram had invaded INEC offices in the states of Kano and Kaduna in northern Nigeria, using a

[165] Bola Tinubu Not Shoving Christian Wife | Africa Check

[166] No, former president Obasanjo did not stop a million Chadians from voting for Nigeria's governing party - Africa Check

[167] No, Nigeria's financial crimes commission hasn't raided the ruling party's presidential candidate's home nor found N400 million in new naira notes - Africa Check

[168] Evidence supports Nigerian governorship candidate's claim of degree from prestigious US university - Africa Check

[169]; No, Nigeria's Labour Party candidate for Lagos governor will not be disqualified over 'missing' name - Africa Check

[170] Misleading Post About Nigeria's Government | Africa Check

[171] No, photo circulating in Nigeria of woman smoking shisha is not candidate for deputy governor of Lagos state - Africa Check

[172] Interview.

[173] Nigeria's electoral commission debunks misleading post about voting without a permanent voters card - Africa Check

[174] Nigeria's Electoral Commission Postponed | Africa Check

stock photograph of an office fire as evidence of this.[175] Following the announcement that Tinubu won the presidential election on March 1, and in the context of the results being challenged in court,[176] the nature of the fake content claims shifted towards building a narrative that the elections results were not credible. These included claims of the election being rigged due to uncounted votes[177] or a minister having privileged access to election results;[178] a claim that the results would be cancelled;[179] claims that international observers had called for a disqualification of the results;[180] a claim that the INEC results portal in fact showed that Obi had won the presidential race;[181] and, amidst the controversy of the challenge to the results, a claim that the head of the electoral body had resigned.[182] Close to the day of the state elections, election violence is again insinuated through a claim that a Labour Party candidate for Lagos state had been attacked.[183] After the state elections, fake content continued to feed the narrative of the presidential election results not being credible. Claims included two alleging the presidential results had been tampered with, one involving an apparent statement made in the UK parliament,[184] and the second involving a Russian hacker who was said to have hacked the INEC website and found that Obi had won the election.[185]

Claims drawing on religious or ethnic issues or tensions

Claims drawing on religious or ethnic tensions and issues (20%) were cross-cutting. Examples of claims drawing on religious contestation included the claim that Obi, the only Christian candidate among the four front-runners in the race for the presidency, had bribed churches;[186] a claim that the Christian Association of Nigeria had asked Nigerians in Kaduna to vote for the PDP, which included a signed letter to this effect on an official Association letterhead;[187] a claim that the sultan of Sokoto, the ruler of the formerly independent Islamic caliphate in northwestern

[175] Old, unrelated photos used in false claim Boko Haram took over election commission offices in northern Nigerian states - Africa Check

[176] The court declared Tinubu winner on 26 October 2023.

[177] No, Nigeria's electoral commission didn't record zero votes for Labour Party presidential candidate in Obot Akara, Akwa Ibom state - Africa Check

[178] No, circulating image does not show Nigerian minister in front of electoral commission's election portal - Africa Check

[179] No, Nigeria's president Muhammadu Buhari didn't approve former president's request to cancel February elections - Africa Check

[180] European Union and US observers demand Nigeria's president-elect Tinubu and electoral chief Yakubu step down? No, statement fabricated - Africa Check

[181] False: Nigeria 2023 Election Portal | Africa Check

[182] No, the chair of Nigeria's electoral commission, Mahmood Yakubu, hasn't stepped down - Africa Check

[183] Nigeria's Labour Party candidate for Lagos assembly bloodied during attack by thugs? No, photo old, unrelated - Africa Check

[184] No, UK parliament did not say Nigeria's presidential election was rigged - Africa Check

[185] No, Nigeria's electoral commission website was not hacked by a 'Russian boy' who has released the 'authentic' election results - Africa Check

[186] No evidence Nigeria's Labour Party presidential candidate Obi bribed major churches with N2 billion in return for votes of the faithful - Africa Check

[187] No, the Christian Association of Nigeria did not ask Kaduna state to vote for the Peoples Democratic Party - Africa Check

Nigeria, had endorsed the Labour Party;[188] that Tinubu had taken a Muslim wife, and, drawing on the threat of religious extremism, the false claim of Boko Haram's attack on INEC offices in the north. Significantly, both Tinubu and Obi were the primary focus of disinformation attacks. This suggests that many of the disinformation attacks were driven by the contestation between the most likely Muslim candidate to win the presidential elections (Tinubu) and the Christian challenger to the presidency (Obi), an indication of the extent to which religion was a key catalyst to these attacks.

Fake content drawing on ethnic tensions included a claim that elders in northern Nigeria, a political stronghold for Abubakar and the PDP, had drafted a list of preferred cabinet members in exchange for their support (the claim was made in a fraudulent letter on the official letterhead of a PDP member and former national security adviser);[189] a claim that the Lagos governor (APC) had promised Igbos that he would release Biafran secessionist leader Nnamdi Kanu if re-elected;[190] that the same governor held special dinners for "Igbo captains of industry" to curry favour;[191] and an "open letter" purportedly from an army general who had however died in 2017 critical of the "Yoruba nation" in the southwest of the country.[192]

Claims attributed to candidates or parties

False claims attributed to political parties (18%), included Tinubu accusing incumbent president Muhammadu Buhari also from APC of working against his campaign by creating an artificial fuel scarcity and the new naira notes crisis (the post includes a video of Tinubu speaking in Yoruba at a campaign rally);[193] in the context of the contested presidential results, claims that both Obi[194] and Atiku Abubakar[195] had withdrawn from the election; the claim, mentioned above, that the Lagos governor would release Kanu if re-elected;[196] a claim that a minister had defected back to

[188] No, the sultan of Sokoto Alhaji Muhammad Sa'ad Abubakar has not endorsed Nigerian presidential candidate Peter Obi - Africa Check

[189] No evidence letter is Nigerian presidential hopeful Abubakar's proposed list of cabinet members - Africa Check

[190] No, Nigeria's Lagos state governor Babajide Sanwo-Olu didn't promise to release pro-Biafra leader Nnamdi Kanu to the Igbo people if re-elected - Africa Check

[191] No, Nigeria's Lagos state governor didn't invite Igbos to dinner to get their votes - Africa Check

[192] No, former military governor did not write a message to Nigeria's president-elect in 2023 - Africa Check

[193] Nigerian governing party APC's Bola Tinubu denies blaming his own government for fuel and currency shortages - Africa Check

[194] No, Nigeria's Labour Party presidential candidate Obi hasn't withdrawn from election and declared support for the PDP's Abubakar - Africa Check

[195] No, PDP candidate Abubakar didn't withdraw from Nigeria's presidential race - Africa Check

[196] No, Nigeria's Lagos state governor Babajide Sanwo-Olu didn't promise to release pro-Biafra leader Nnamdi Kanu to the Igbo people if re-elected - Africa Check

the PDP;[197] and, while the presidential election results were under court scrutiny, a claim about Tinubu's foreign policy in relation to the US and China threatening closer relations with China.[198]

Claims of support for candidates or parties

False claims of support for political parties (16%) include a claim that a prominent TV personality had endorsed Tinubu;[199] a claim of financial support for Tinubu from a leading African bank headquartered in the country, insinuating that Tinubu had support from the captains of industry in the context of the economic crisis, and which also gestures to the controversy around the issuing of "new naira notes" and temporarily making the old notes invalid;[200] and an internationally lauded Nigerian-American professor of history saying he hoped Tinubu – who had by then been declared the winner of the presidential elections – would restore the country's "stolen mandate", while also referring to Obi as "My President elect".[201]

A number of these false claims of support drew on religious and ethnic issues or tensions. These included the rumours that the sultan of Sokoto had endorsed Obi, that elders in northern Nigeria were backing Abubakar, both mentioned above, and a claim that the Christian Association of Nigeria had asked Nigerians in the northern state of Kaduna to vote for the PDP, which included a signed letter to this effect on an official Association letterhead.[202]

Claims about the potential of for election violence

Some 14% of the fake content items raised the threat of election violence in the country. Amongst other tactics, these drew religious and ethnic themes, as well as on the economic discontent of the youth in the country. For example, this is seen in the claim that Boko Haram attacked INEC offices in the north already mentioned; in a similar claim about the burning of the INEC offices and insecurity in the country's southeast and northeast as reasons for postponing the vote;[203] in a claim that a video circulated depicts youths in northern Nigeria, angry at the outcome of the presidential election, attacking the home of the electoral body's chairperson;[204] and in a claim that provides photographic "evidence" that the helicopter of incumber president Buhari's was attacked by "angry youths" in Kano state in the north (the photo was in fact taken in Kenya in

[197] No, Nigeria's mining minister Gbemi Saraki hasn't left the ruling party for the opposition - Africa Check. Originally a PDP member, the minister had defected to the ruling APC party in 2015.

[198] No, Nigeria's president-elect Bola Tinubu didn't say he'd look to China instead if US president Joe Biden didn't congratulate him. - Africa Check

[199] No, Channels TV's Okinabaloye hasn't endorsed Nigerian presidential candidate Tinubu - Africa Check

[200] No, banking exec didn't say his bank gave Nigeria's president-elect Tinubu millions of new naira notes - Africa Check

[201] No, US$300,000 history prize winner Saheed Aderinto didn't ask Nigeria's president-elect Bola Tinubu to restore the country's 'stolen mandate' - Africa Check

[202] No, the Christian Association of Nigeria did not ask Kaduna state to vote for the Peoples Democratic Party - Africa Check

[203] Nigeria's Electoral Commission Postponed | Africa Check

[204] Nigeria's electoral body says viral video doesn't show an attack on its chair's house - Africa Check

2022).[205] Other fake content items include a video that is falsely claimed to be of a market in flames in Lagos following the announcement that Obi had won the vote of the people of Lagos,[206] and a Facebook post linked to a video published on a blog with the claim it shows supporters of Kwankwaso being attacked by supporters of his rival, Abdullahi Ganduje (which was in fact advertising click-bait).[207] In possibly one of the most bizarre constructions of a fake content item, a photo of a bloodied Labour Party candidate for Lagos State, Olumide Oworu, was circulated as evidence that he was attacked. However Oworu is an actor who starred in a popular TV series, and the photo was taken on set.[208]

Claims linked to economic insecurity

Some 12% of the fake content drew on widespread public concerns about the fragility of the Nigerian economy. These included the suggestion that particular candidates had the support of business leaders, such as the CEO of Guaranty Bank which was said to have given millions to Tinubu;[209] or, as mentioned above, that the Lagos governor (APC) held special dinners for "Igbo captains of industry".[210] Also mentioned above, one fake content item suggested a fallout in the governing party just weeks away from the election over the economic crisis, with Tinubu apparently accusing the incumbent president of artificially creating fuel shortages and the currency crisis;[211] and, in the context of the currency crises, another painted Tinubu as corrupt by claiming his home had been raided by the financial crimes commission where new naira notes were seized.[212] Two content items had the apparent intention to create panic and public alarm. The first involved a claim that the banking system would be shut down just days before the presidential election;[213] and the second that the banking regulator was to shut down digital financial apps and service providers, many of whom are not registered in Nigeria.[214]

Click-bait and scams

As in South Africa, and a feature not prominently evident in the other two countries in this study, two false content items leveraged the elections as an opportunity either for generating advertising revenue or as an attempt to access the private data of internet users. These drew on

[205] No, photo of damaged chopper snapped in Kenya – doesn't show attack on outgoing Nigerian president Buhari - Africa Check

[206] No, video doesn't show fire at Lapido market two days after Nigeria's 2023 presidential election – incident from 2022 - Africa Check

[207] Video of attack on Nigeria's NNPP presidential candidate's supporters? No, it's just clickbait - Africa Check

[208] Nigeria's Labour Party candidate for Lagos assembly bloodied during attack by thugs? No, photo old, unrelated - Africa Check

[209] No, banking exec didn't say his bank gave Nigeria's president-elect Tinubu millions of new naira notes - Africa Check

[210] No, Nigeria's Lagos state governor didn't invite Igbos to dinner to get their votes - Africa Check

[211] Nigerian governing party APC's Bola Tinubu denies blaming his own government for fuel and currency shortages - Africa Check

[212] No, Nigeria's financial crimes commission hasn't raided the ruling party's presidential candidate's home nor found N400 million in new naira notes - Africa Check

[213] No, Nigeria's central bank will not shut down the banking system for elections - Africa Check

[214] No, Nigeria's central bank not planning to close digital finance companies - Africa Check

the themes of political violence and corruption. The first was a Facebook post of a video said to be of Kwankwaso being attacked, which linked to adverts when clicked on;[215] and the second a Facebook post alerting the public to vote-buying "gone to another level", but which led to an application form asking for private information, including banking details.[216]

6.3.2. Content types

The table below shows the different kinds of content types used as strategies to lend authority or credibility to the fake claims. A fake content item may use one or more content strategy.

	Count	Subcategory (1)	Subcategory (2)	% of total
Identity theft	13			27
Impersonation		8		26
Social media fake accounts			3	6
Other			3	6
Fake invitations			2	4
Branding		5		20
Misuse of image of video to give veracity to claim	12			25
Other	23			48

Table 15: Content count by type

Forms of identity theft (27%) and the misuse of photographs and videos as a form of evidence (25%) were the most common strategies to provide veracity to the false claims. However a significant number of fake content items (48%) did not use any particular strategy to make their claims more convincing, a higher total than in other countries in this study.

Some 16% of the claims using identity theft as a strategy used forms of impersonation, which included fake invitations (one to a business event, and one a digital invitation to Obi's supposed marriage to a Muslim woman); fake social media accounts; a fake email exchange; a forged signature on a memo; and a fake open letter from a dead person. Institutional branding was used to give claims authority, including two instances of the use church or association letterheads, and the use of the European Union logo. However, the use of media branding to create authority and trust in claims was noticeably absent.

Some 25% of the content items misused a photo or video to provide 'evidence' to their claims. These included a stock photograph of an office fire claiming to be INEC offices;[217] a photograph of a damaged helicopter claimed to be Odinga's damaged in election violence;[218] an image of

[215] Video of attack on Nigeria's NNPP presidential candidate's supporters? No, it's just clickbait - Africa Check

[216] Beware clickbait posts offering N10,000 from Nigeria presidential candidate Bola Tinubu's campaign - Africa Check

[217] Old, unrelated photos used in false claim Boko Haram took over election commission offices in northern Nigerian states - Africa Check

[218] No, photo of damaged chopper snapped in Kenya – doesn't show attack on outgoing Nigerian president Buhari - Africa Check

stockpiled new naira notes claimed to be seized in a raid on Tinubu's home;[219] a photo claiming to be of Nigeria's works minister viewing the electoral commission's server before election results became available, when he was in fact viewing the election monitoring dashboard of a non-governmental organisation;[220] as well as the photograph from the set of a popular TV programme suggesting Oworu had been attacked.

Misused videos included one of a market fire claimed to be Lapido market in Lagos that had been torched;[221] a video of members of parliament in the UK with false claims about what was being said;[222] a video claiming to be youths attacking the home of the electoral body's chairperson;[223] and a video misquoting Tinubu who spoke in Yoruba at a campaign rally. [224]

6.4. Senegal: The 2024 presidential elections

Presidential elections were held on 24 March 2024. The elections were contested by 19 presidential candidates, and there was a higher than average voter turnout.[225] Because of his rape conviction Sonko (PASTEF) was not eligible to run in the elections and was replaced by Bassirou Diomaye Faye.

Early in 2024, then President Macky Sall, though not running for a new term, announced his intention to postpone the election date. The reason given was a parliamentary investigation into two Constitutional Court judges where their integrity with respect to electoral processes was under question. This followed the exclusion of a candidate Karim Wade from the Senegalese Democratic Party from the elections due to his dual French citizenship. The announcement led to violent protests in the capital Dakar and other cities. Police were accused of using excessive force during the protests, which led to dozens of deaths.

The country's Constitutional Council ultimately overturned the postponement, forcing the government to set the March election date. However the postponement led to a great deal of political uncertainty and conflict between parties and the state, including the government ordering PASTEF to be dissolved, blaming it for the protests. It was the first time that presidential elections had been postponed in Senegal.

Faye won the elections with 54.28% of the vote in the first round, beating the candidate of the incumbent government Amadou Ba (35.79%).

Key election information	

[219] No, Nigeria's financial crimes commission hasn't raided the ruling party's presidential candidate's home nor found N400 million in new naira notes - Africa Check

[220] No, circulating image does not show Nigerian minister in front of electoral commission's election portal - Africa Check

[221] No, video doesn't show fire at Lapido market two days after Nigeria's 2023 presidential election – incident from 2022 - Africa Check

[222] No, UK parliament did not say Nigeria's presidential election was rigged - Africa Check

[223] Nigeria's electoral body says viral video doesn't show an attack on its chair's house - Africa Check

[224] Nigerian governing party APC's Bola Tinubu denies blaming his own government for fuel and currency shortages - Africa Check

[225] A total of 93 people registered to run for president, but many applications were rejected.

Registered voters	7,371,183[226]
Voter turnout (2024)	61.3%[227]
Average voter turnout for elections	54.82%[228]
Electoral body	National Autonomous Electoral Commission

Main candidates	
Amadou Ba	*Alliance pour la république* (Alliance for the Republic), incumbent party at the time of the elections
Bassirou Diomaye Faye	*Patriotas Africanos de Senegal por el Trabajo, la Ética y la Fraternidad* (Patriots of Senegal)
Idrissa Seck	Rewmi (meaning the Nation)
Mahammed Boun Abdallah Dionne	Independent
Aly Ngouille Ndiaye	Independent
Khalifa Sall	Former mayor of Dakar
Mame Boye Diao	Independent

Key election themes or topics	Youth unemployment; cost of living; migration; access to health and education; the management of domestic oil and gas production.

Table 16: Election information, main candidates and parties and election themes
Sources: International Foundation for Electoral Systems, various

The number of content items available for analysis was less in Senegal compared to other countries, which may have impacted the observations made below. The sample analysed nevertheless suggested unique characteristics with respect to the circulation of election-related disinformation in the country, including the frequent use of fake polls.[229] Disinformation also did not appear to be used as aggressively as in countries such as Nigeria and Kenya to attack competing candidates. Similarly, the use of potential ethnic or religious tensions to sow discontent was significantly lower, with these tensions seen to be a construction of a disinformation narrative in the previous presidential elections. There were fewer serious examples of fake content attempting to undermine the integrity of the elections in the sample, a key feature of the election-related disinformation in all three of the other countries in this study. This is with the exception of an unverified voice recording which implicates the governing party in election corruption, and is capitalised on by political actors and the media offering a good example of what fact checkers call 'rumour' in operation in the Senegalese disinformation environment.[230]

[226] International Foundation for Electoral Systems. Election guide: Senegal. https://www.electionguide.org/countries/id/190/
[227] Ibid.
[228] Ibid.
[229] BLOG - Senegalese presidential election of 2024: between attempts at manipulation and anachronistic law around opinion polls during election periods - Africa Check
[230] BLOG – Senegal's 2024 presidential election: vigilance and common sense can help limit disinformation during election time - Africa Check

6.4.1. Content categories

The table below categorises the 11 fake content items captured from the Africa Check database into key content categories. A content item may be assigned to more than one category.

	Count	%
Claims of support for candidates or parties	4	44
Claims about the election process	3	33
Claims attributed to candidates or parties	3	33
Claims explicitly attacking or undermining candidates or parties	2	22
Claims drawing on religious or ethnic issues or tensions	2	22
Claims about the potential for election violence	1	11

Table 17: Content count by category

Claims of support for candidates or parties

Four of the false content items made false claims of support for political parties. Three of these involved the creation of fake poll results which is a particularly prominent feature of the Senegalese election period. One of these polls shows Ba in the lead (representing the incumbent political) and attracting and overwhelming majority of public support compared to the other candidates (59% versus 8% and less for the others);[231] the second also has Ba in the lead, but suggests a close race between three candidates – Ba, Faye, and Fall;[232] and the third places Faye (PASTEF) significantly in the lead.[233] Two of the fake polls engaged in forms of identity theft (one claiming to be sourced from a French polling and marketing research company, and the second, insinuating the identity of Senegal Vote, a citizen voter education and monitoring campaign.[234] The third used an official-looking design in order to appear legitimate, and was claimed to be from the apparently fictitious International Centre for Political Studies. The fourth false claim of support for a party included a video of a crowd in the Futa Toro region showing its support for Ba who had started his campaign following several weeks of tensions due to the postponement of the elections.[235] However, the video is from a Facebook post by a radio station in 2021 and the crowd is supporting incumbent president Macky Sall (from the same party).

Claims about the election process

Three false claims were made about the election process. One, an infographic shared on WhatsApp, involved false claims above voting districts and registered voters in the departments of Matam and Pikine in Dakar;[236] and a second about polling stations in China opening (however

[231] Senegal's 2024 presidential election: fake poll puts Amadou Ba in the lead in voting intentions - Africa Check

[232] Senegal's 2024 presidential election: fake poll puts Amadou Ba in the lead in voting intentions - Africa Check

[233] Senegal's 2024 presidential election: beware, this so-called poll circulated on social networks is not authenticated - Africa Check

[234] Through altering the root domain of its website name, senegalvote.org (the poll links to sengalvote.sn)

[235] Senegal's 2024 presidential election: false, this video does not show a candidate's caravan campaigning in the north of the country - Africa Check

[236] Senegal's 2024 Presidential Election: Allegations about the electoral map of the Matam region verified - Africa Check

they did not exist given the low number of voting Senegalese in that country).[237] The third is a complex story involving what fact-checkers in Senegal call 'rumour' – or the interplay between unverified content, political opportunism, and media reporting. It is nevertheless monitored as an instance of fake content given that at the centre of the 'rumour' was an unverified audio recording leaked by the Senegalese Democratic Party[238] which claimed to be evidence of electoral corruption involving the ruling party. The voices on the recording were said to be those of Macky Sall, Ba, and two Constitutional Council judges. The 'leak' came in the context of the integrity of the electoral process being under question.

Claims attributed to candidates or parties

False claims were attributed to political parties in three cases. In the first the claim was made that Macky Sall had signed a decree repealing the dissolution of PASTEF,[239] a claim which was amplified by a journalist and by a politician (the dissolution of PASTEF would only later be repealed); in the second, a false list claiming to be of Faye's new cabinet was circulated;[240] and the third involved a US influencer stating that the newly elected president was to break relationships with France in favour of stronger ties with Russia.[241]

With respect to the role of influencers in the election period, while Africa Check staff noted a proliferation of new accounts on X in January 2024 all publishing identical campaign content, it said that this was not at that time seen to be the result of influencer campaigns orchestrated by foreign-run operations.[242]

Claims explicitly attacking or undermining candidates or parties

Two content items can be said to explicitly attack candidates or parties. The first involved the attack on the *Alliance pour la république* (Alliance for the Republic) in the leaked audio recording mentioned above; and the second involved Muslim religious leader religious leader Serigne Mountakha Bassirou Mbacké, the caliph of the Mouride brotherhood, apparently rejecting a proposal by Faye to move the capital to his region due to its economic abundance. This draws on the potential influence of religious leaders to sway voters in Senegal's elections, which was said to be a factor in previous elections but was not a significant feature of the 2024 elections.[243]

Claims drawing on religious or ethnic issues

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[237] Senegal's 2024 presidential election: there are no polling stations in China - Africa Check

[238] BLOG – Senegal's 2024 presidential election: vigilance and common sense can help limit disinformation during election time - Africa Check

[239] Senegalese 2024 presidential election: the so-called decree repealing the dissolution of opposition leader Ousmane Sonko's party does not exist (at this stage) - Africa Check

[240] Senegal: Beware of these publications that claim to show the list of the first government of the Bassirou Diomaye Faye era - Africa Check

[241] BLOG - Who is Jackson Hinkle, the American influencer who links the new Senegalese president to Russia? - Africa Check

[242] Israeli entity founded by former Cambridge Analytica employees.

[243] Interview with fact checkers from Senegal.

Two false content items drew marginally on religious and ethnic issues during the elections. These involve the false statement by caliph general of the Mouride brotherhood, and the incorrect infographic on voter registrations and districts, both mentioned above.

Claims concerning election violence

Only one fake content item related to the potential for election violence, involving the news of the repealing of the dissolution of PASTEF, overturning an earlier decree in 2023 where Sonko was arrested for "calling for insurrection and conspiracy against the authority of the state".[244]

6.4.2. Content types

The table below shows the different kinds of content types used as strategies to lend authority or credibility to the fake content. Strategies such as theft of branding were used in fake polls accounting for the double categorisation of some fake content items.

	Count	Subcategory	% of total
Identity theft	4		36
Possible impersonation – voice recording		1	9
Branding		3	27
Fake polls	3		27
Misuse of image of video to give veracity to claim	1		9
Other	5		45

Table 18: Content count by type

The creation of fake polls representing potential voting patterns amongst the Senegalese public is a specific feature of the Senegalese election landscape. These also engaged in forms of identity theft with respect to branding, such as creating a fake front page of the newspaper Le Quotidien, or one poll claiming it reflected the results from a French polling and marketing research company (Opinionway), and a second insinuating the identity of Senegal Vote. The case of possible impersonation involved the unverified voice recording of Macky Sall, Ba, and the two Constitutional Council judges. Amongst the content analysed, there was one instance of the misuse of a video to provide evidence of a claim – in the case of footage showing support for Macky Sall from 2021.

7. Findings of focus group sessions

The following sections report on the findings of the focus group sessions, which included a detailed questionnaire and focus group discussions with the student cohorts in each country. Section 7.1 discusses the students' perceptions and engagement in their political and information environments and what we refer to as their 'trust' environment. We then provide an account of the students' social media use and online behaviour, specifically with respect to the carefulness with which they share information to their social media profiles. Section 7.3 reports on the students' attitudes to forwarding unchecked information, including election-related

[244] Senegalese 2024 presidential election: the so-called decree repealing the dissolution of opposition leader Ousmane Sonko's party does not exist (at this stage) - Africa Check

disinformation, while the final section tests what we call 'credulity', or the extent to which it can be said the students are vulnerable to disinformation and conspiratorial thinking.

7.1. Political, information and trust environments

7.1.1. Perception of political environment

Students in South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria tended overall to have a negative perception of their political environment, with mixed perceptions evident in Senegal. The highest average negative score (5)[245] meant that political corruption was seen to be a significant problem in the country, that what politicians said could not be believed, and that there was a threat of political unrest if the opposition party won the elections. The highest positive score meant that students believed that democracy worked in their country and had faith in it, that election votes were counted properly, and that they trusted the political party that was in government.

The highest negative perception of the political environment was found amongst students in South Africa (4), with students in Kenya (3.8) and Nigeria (3.7) also having strong negative perceptions of their political environment. The lowest positive perceptions of the political environment was found amongst students in Kenya (2.1) and Nigeria (2.2.). Students in Senegal had the lowest average negative score (3.2), and the highest positive score (both 3.3). The score for the students in Senegal appears to align with the results of surveys mentioned earlier that suggest that around half the population in Senegal are "fairly/very" satisfied with democracy in the country, but which also record an increase in dissatisfaction with democracy.

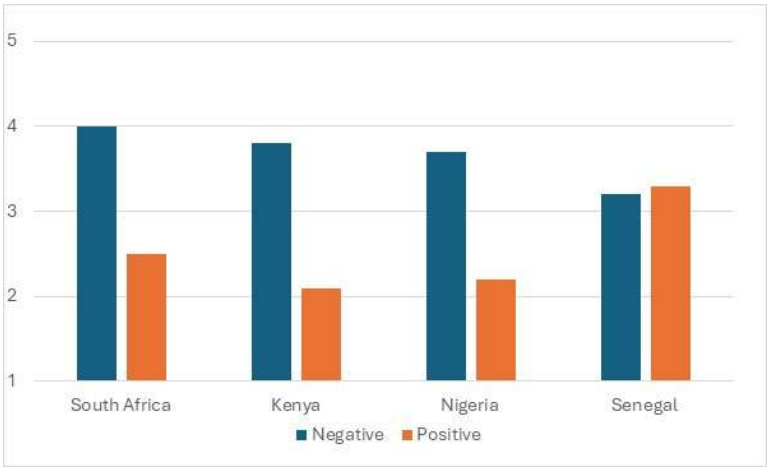


Figure 1: Perceptions of political environment

Both male and female students overall tended to have a higher negative perception of their political environment than a positive one, with very little distinction between the average

[245] Students were asked to rate questions on a numerical Likert scale from 1 to 5 , with 1= "I don't agree at all", and 5= "I agree completely with this statement". A tendency towards negative perceptions meant students rated 'negative' statements about their political environment on average above the median of 3 and a tendency towards 'positive' perceptions meant that students rated 'positive' statements about their political environment on average above the median of 3.

perceptions of genders. Female students (3.7) showed a slightly greater negative perception of their political environment than male students (3.5).

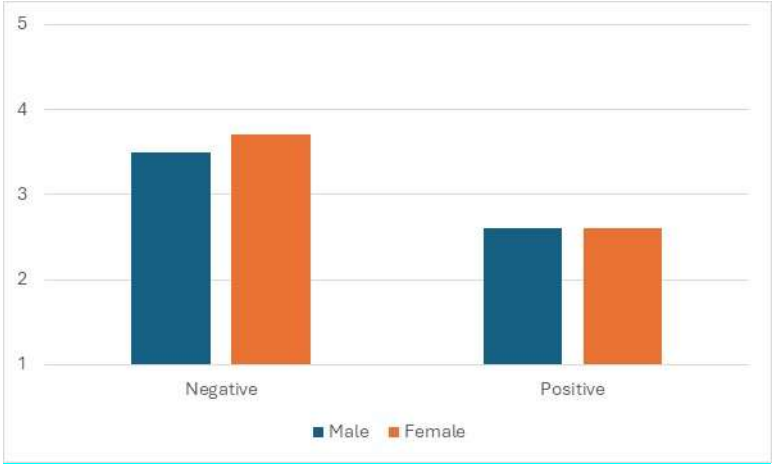


Figure 2: Perceptions of political environment by gender

The table below shows the clustered results of how students in each country described their political environment in a few words. As it shows, no strongly positive descriptions were provided by students in Kenya and Nigeria, and only one description which was read as positive by students in South Africa. Divergent descriptions were provided by students in Senegal, ranging from "hostile" and "full of tension" to "a healthy climate" with "no mood swings".

	Negative	**Mixed/neutral**	**Positive**
South Africa	• Politics in South Africa is a joke. It exploits the masses and only benefits the elite; • It is quite divided; • Filled with deceit to gain views; • Pretentiousness and fake.	• Tense, race focused, currently in a period of transition; • Left leaning with elements of socialism that occasionally overlap as well; • It is neutral, my social engage is not influenced by ethnographic dynamics.	• We just came from elections and there's been a great change.
Kenya	• Very confusing as betrayal is the order of the day; • Incompetent; • Struggles; • In a mess; • It's shaky. Needs to settle.	• Calm because the elections are not near; • For now the temperatures are not that high as we are not near electioneering period; • Interesting; • Not that sure.	
Nigeria	• A disaster; • It is very terrible if the government does not do anything about it; • I'm very neutral to a certain extent but I	• Just managing; • It's a work in progress; • Work in progress; • The whole political climate currently is a work in progress which can't	

	feel without a change in government there will be no country to govern.	undergo a major change for a while due to the drastic decline in the strategic management; • I'm not that interested in politics.	
Senegal	• Uncertain; • Hostile, full of tension; • I will say that the nerves are a little tense. The new regime is trying to win its place. But for now, it's complicated; • Tense; • The political climate in Senegal is tense and very divided, especially as elections approach.	• A sometimes calm and tense climate; • The political climate in Senegal seems very hectic to me during electoral campaigns, but I think it is also rather calm during elections, whether presidential or legislative; • After what we experienced before the presidential elections of March 2024, there is a certain lull. However, efforts remain to be made by this new government in the fight for social cohesion. Above all, avoid raising certain questions linked to the religious sensitivity of citizens.	• Stable, the legislative elections went well; • I would say rather stable; • It's a rather healthy climate with no mood swings; • Currently, the climate is quite calm apart from a few clashes during the legislative electoral campaign, which is not unusual in itself. Moreover, since the advent of the new regime almost no demonstrations have been noted; • Democracy is respected in some ways.

Table 19: Student descriptions of political environment

7.1.2. Engagement in political environment

Most students in all countries considered themselves "somewhat" politically aware and engaged (with this being the case for half the students in Senegal). Notably more students in Kenya considered themselves "very aware and engaged" (33%) compared to other countries, while the number of students who were not politically aware of engaged at all was lowest in Kenya (11%) and South Africa (13%). This suggests an overall higher level of political awareness and engagement amongst students in both Kenya and South Africa compared to the other countries.[246]

[246] This sense of political awareness and engagement may have been influenced somewhat by foreign nationals being amongst the student cohorts, as mentioned in the methodology. Students were asked to respond to the political context that they find themselves in.

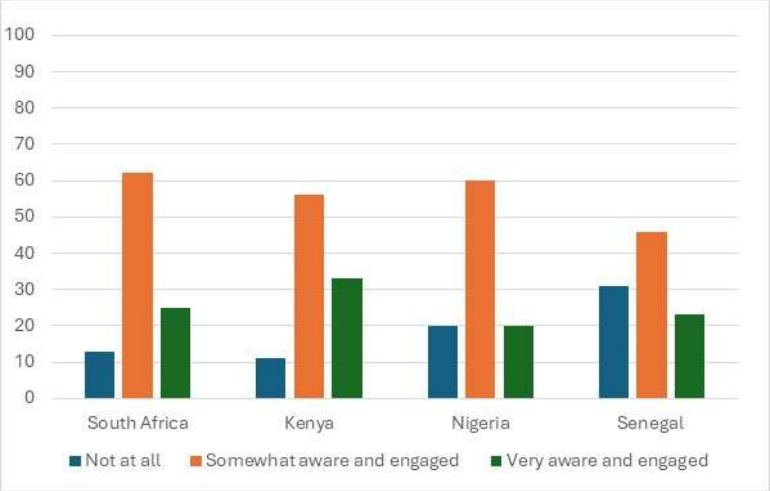


Figure 3: Politically awareness and engagement of students (%)

Neither age nor year of study appeared to be a strong correlating factor for whether students were very aware and engaged.[247] However, there was a marked difference between the gender of students who considered themselves politically aware and engaged, with overall a significantly greater percentage of male students (53%) considering themselves very aware and engaged in political issues than female students (8%). Some 25% of female students felt they were not aware and engaged at all (compared to 13% of male students), while 67% of female students were "somewhat" aware and engaged (compared to 34% of male students).

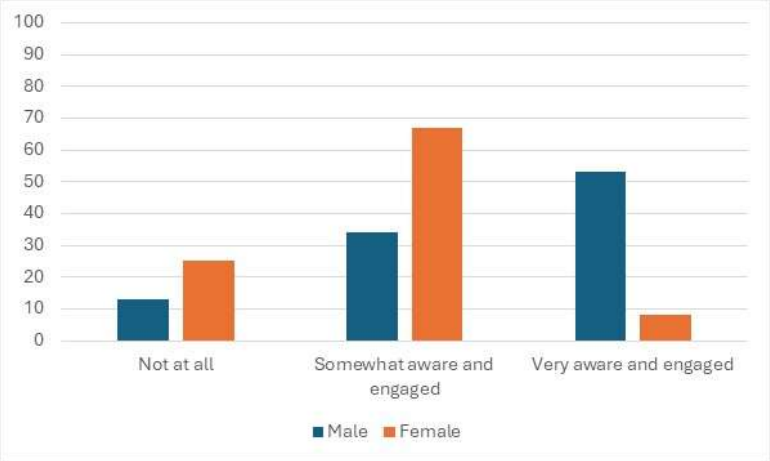


Figure 4: Politically awareness and engagement of students by gender (%)

[247] There were a roughly equal number of students that considered themselves very aware and engaged amongst students who were younger than 24 years old (five in total) compared to those who were 25-35 years old (5) and those in the first year of their studies (5) and those past their first year of study or post-graduate (5). There was however a suggestion of a greater correlation between age and those who considered themselves "not at all" politically aware and engaged, but no correlation between this and year of study. Of the eight students who rated themselves "not at all politically aware and engaged", six where younger than 24 years old, and two 25-35 years old. Only three of these students were first year students, with five in second year of higher, including two post-graduate students.

On average students marginally tended to agree with the statement that "women are less likely to post political information to their timeline than men". There was a slightly higher tendency amongst female students (3.5) to believe that this is the case than male students (3.1).

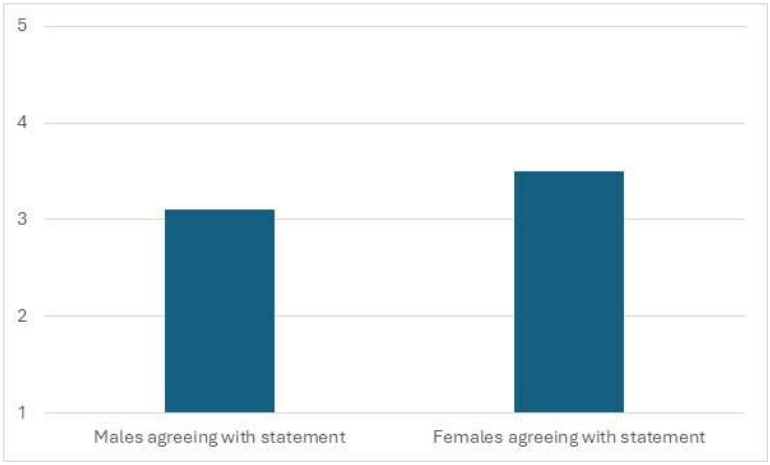


Figure 5: Rating of statement "Women are less likely to post political information to their timeline than men" by gender

Country context appeared to play a role in these perceptions. Figure 6 below shows that students in Kenya and Senegal (both 3.6) agreed more with the statement that "Women are less likely to post political information to their timeline than men", students in Nigeria agreed somewhat less with the statement (3.2), while students in South Africa felt that women tended to share political content more readily (2.8). The perceptions amongst students in South Africa may also suggest that year of study is a factor making it more likely for women to share political content on their timelines. However this was not convincingly the case given the results of the mixed cohort of students in Senegal in relation to the first-year cohorts in Kenya and Nigeria.

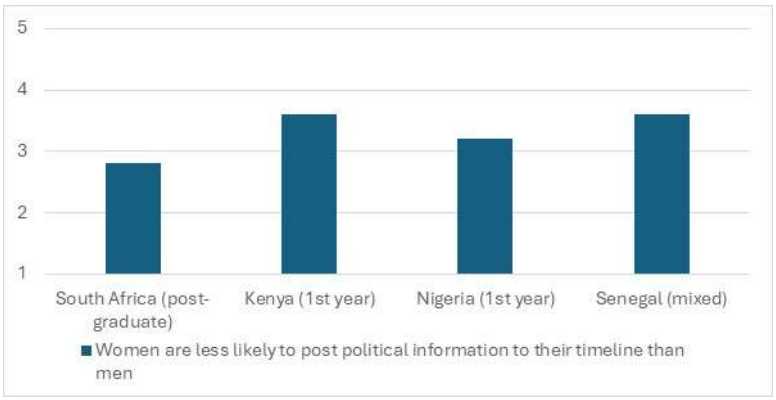


Figure 6: Rating of statement "Women are less likely to post political information to their timeline than men" by country and year of study

The focus group discussions provided more nuance to these findings on gender and political engagement. Students in South Africa, Nigeria and Senegal attributed the reticence of women posting political content to their timeline to the fear of being cyberbullied, while the socialisation of women and their marginalisation from politics in Kenya, Nigeria and Senegal appeared to be

strong contributing factors for why women were less likely to share political information than men.

There was a general sense of assertive interactions between some of the students of different genders in the post-graduate cohort in South Africa. One female student said that “women are speaking out on social media which is empowering” pointing out that “harassment also happens to men” too. However, others disagreed with this saying that as a woman there was a “backlash if you [did] something wrong”, linking speaking out critically with a sense of “doing something wrong”. Some female students felt that “women [were] bigger targets”.

In Kenya, female students in the focus group discussion, and who were in the minority, appeared shy, which might have influenced the dynamics of the discussion. The focus group frequently also referenced the recent “Gen Z” demonstrations in the country, highlighting that the young cohort of students, recently graduated from high school, had likely had their closest engagement with politics through these events rather than through previous elections. Both female students suggested that it was “harder” for women to speak out online about politics and said they generally preferred to avoid engaging in political discussions altogether. Male students expressed a stereotype in Kenya that "females don't support females in politics”. However, one female student disagreed, stating that women sometimes support political causes when a woman is involved, despite not being particularly interested in politics. This suggests the extent to which gender may influence political behaviour in Kenya, both with respect to speaking out on political issues, and with respect to support for candidates and parties.

In Nigeria students felt that women were socialised to not to be interested in politics. There was also consensus amongst students that women were less likely to share political information or engage in conversations around politics because they “fear being oppressed”. Three female students said they would rather avoid political discussions and would not share information about politics or elections because of the risk of been cyberbullied specifically by the supporters of politicians.

In Senegal, very few students thought men and women acted alike on social media when sharing political information. Women overall were seen to be less active and vocal on political issues, and even marginalised from the political sphere. Women were also not seen as being active in political conversations where they had a direct interest. It was felt that this was reflected in social media behaviour.

As the figure below suggests, on average female students scored themselves significantly higher than male students for questions testing their sense of disillusionment, despondency and disempowerment about the political future of their country (4.4 versus 2.3). This involved rating four statements on a scale of 1 to 5: “It is impossible to make democracy work in Africa”; “It is impossible to make long-lasting positive change when it comes to politics in my country”; “It is not worth voting because nothing changes”; and “I feel disempowered about my future”.

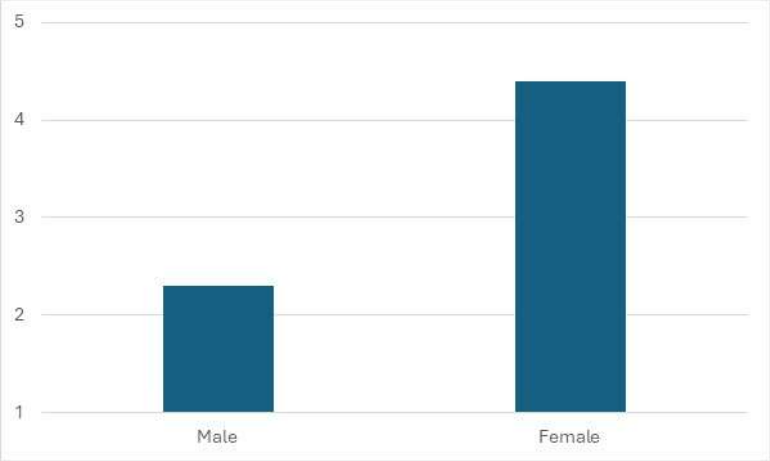


Figure 7: Disillusionment, despondency and disempowerment about political future of country by gender

7.1.3. Reliability of information environment

Overall students expressed a low confidence in the reliability of their information environment, with the strongest average reliability score in Senegal (2.8), and the lowest in Nigeria (2.4). A reliable information environment (a high score of 5) entailed students believing the media was good and relying on their reporting for information, that reliable statistics and research on important topics was produced in the country, and that the government quoted statistics accurately and provided citizens with access to reliable data and information.

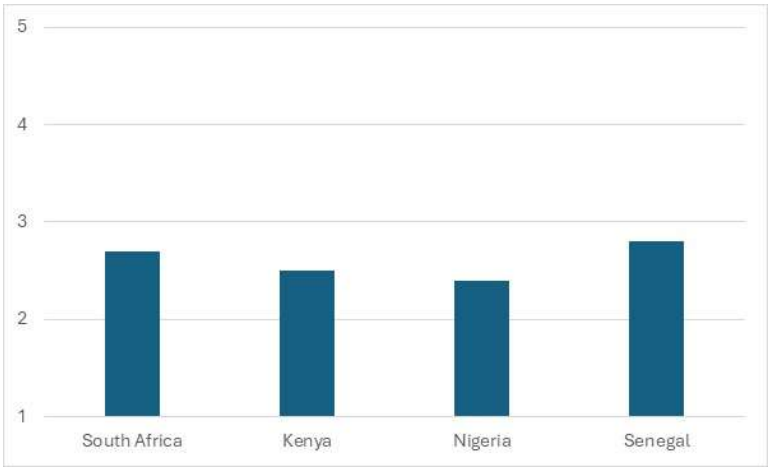


Figure 8: Reliability of the information environment

There was no strong difference between how reliable male and female students found their information environment. Male students (2.8) only marginally on average found their information environment more reliable than female students (2.5).

Despite the low reliability scores, overall students expressed a positive sense of agency with respect to their information environment, with some uncertainty about this amongst students in Kenya. A positive sense of agency related to students having enough comfortable access to the internet to fact check as much information as they wanted whenever they wanted to, knowing

where to go to find information on important topics to check if a social media post is true, and understanding simple statistics and percentages so that they know what researchers say. A negative sense of agency related to the cost of data preventing students being online as much as they would like to be, students not having enough time to check information in the way that they would like to, and being intimidated by statistics. That a positive sense of agency included students knowing where to find important information may suggest an overall disconnect amongst some students with this sense and how reliable they found their information environment.

Students in South Africa expressed on average the highest positive score (4.2) with respect to agency and their information environment, and the lowest negative score (2.2). Students in Nigeria also scored themselves strongly positive (3.8) but had the highest negative score for agency in their information environment (3). The highest negative scores were found amongst students in Kenya and Senegal (both 2.6), with the lowest positive score found amongst students in Kenya (3), which suggested a strong ambivalence amongst students in that country with respect to the questions asked about their agency.

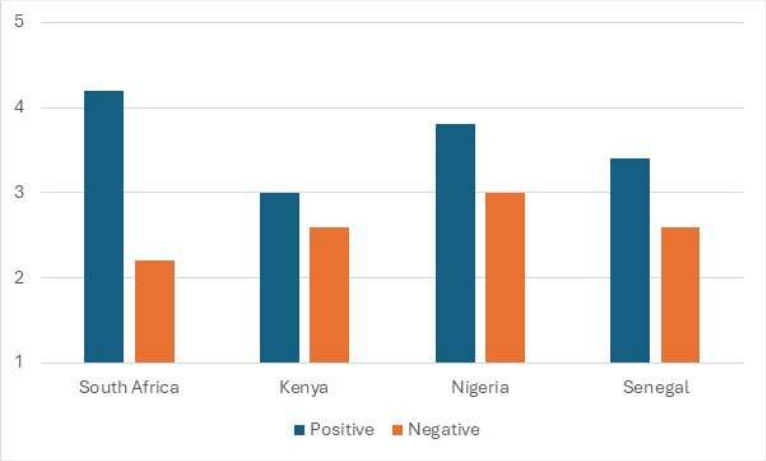


Figure 9: Agency in information environment by country

Overall, there did not appear to be a strong correlation between agency with respect to the information environment and year of study. While one might expect that level of education has a positive correlation to agency with respect to information, the results did not convincingly suggest this. Although post-graduate students in South Africa had the highest positive agency, first year students in Nigeria had a greater sense of positive agency compared to students in Senegal where only one student was in first year (or the equivalent of *Licence 1*). This suggests that agency with respect to information using these questions as indicators also involves other intersecting factors.

As Figure 10 shows, on average, male students scored themselves marginally higher than female students in terms of having a positive sense of agency in their information environment (3.8 versus 3.4 respectively), while female students scored themselves higher than male students with respect to having a negative agency in their information (2.8 versus 2.2 respectively).

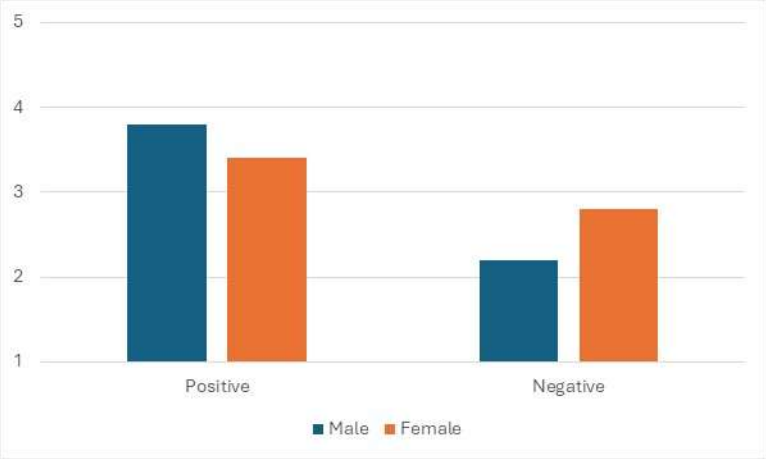


Figure 10: Agency in information environment by gender

7.1.4. Trust environment

Figure 11 shows the average overall scores from all four countries as to whether students trusted different groups, institutions, or, in the case of statistics, information types. Students had an above-median average trust in medical researchers (3.8), close family and friends (3.6)[248] and scientists (3.4), but were more ambivalent about whether they could trust statistics (3.1) and the media (3). Remarkably, students trusted people linked to their social media profiles (2.6) more than they trusted their country's electoral body (2.3), and celebrities and influencers (2) more than politicians (1.7), who were the least trusted overall.

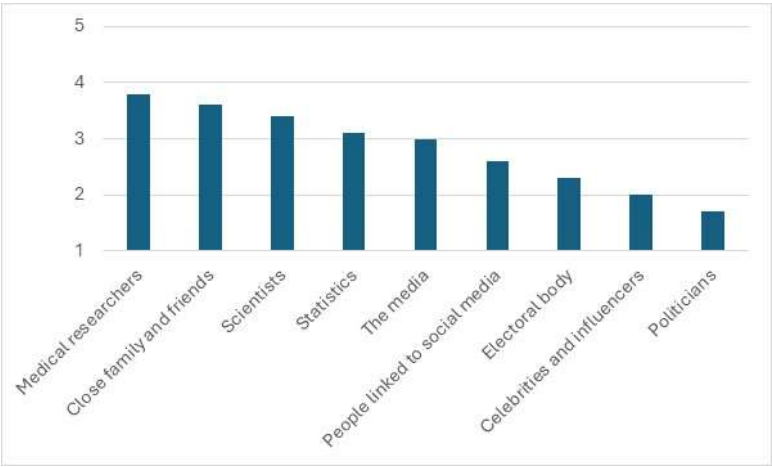


Figure 11: Trust of groups, institutions and information types

The table below breaks down the trust scores by country. As it shows, there were notable country-level differences when compared to the average trust scores. For example, in both South

[248] Other studies have found that close family and friends are an important influence on social media users, and important actors in what users believe or do not believe, and these findings are supported here. See, for example: Liu Y. (2009). *Social Media Tools as a Learning Resource*. Journal of Educational Technology Development and Exchange. 3. 101-114. 10.18785/jetde.0301.08. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/285086001_Social_Media_Tools_as_a_Learning_Resource

Africa (1.8) and Senegal (1.1) celebrities and influencers were trusted the least and trusted less than politicians. In contrast, celebrities and influencers were trusted more than the country's electoral body and politicians in both Kenya (2.1 versus 1.9 and 1.7 respectively) and Nigeria (3.1 versus 1.5 and 1.4 respectively), which showed a strong tendency to trust celebrities and influencers more. Remarkably, celebrities and influencers were the third most trusted group in Nigeria, and were even more trusted than scientists (2.3). The lowest trust in politicians was found amongst students in Nigeria and Senegal (a 1.4 average score for each). Notably students in Senegal had the highest trust in their electoral body (3), which they trusted more than the media (2.5). Kenyan students showed the strongest trust score in the media (3.7), which appears to correspond with the use of media branding to lend authority to fake content being most prominent in Kenya.

	Medical researchers	Close family and friends	Scientists	Statistics	The media	People linked to my social media profiles	Electoral body	Celebrities and influencers	Politicians
South Africa	3.5	3.7	3.6	3.6	2.9	2.8	2.8	1.8	2.1
Kenya	4.1	3.7	3.9	3.3	3.7	2.3	1.9	2.1	1.7
Nigeria	3.5	3.6	2.2	2.7	2.6	2.4	1.5	3.1	1.4
Senegal	4	3	4	2.7	2.5	2.5	3	1.1	1.4

Table 20: Trust of groups, institutions and information types by country

As the table below shows, while both male students (2) and female students distrusted politicians the most (1.3), they were more distrusted by female students. Interestingly, male students (2.3) were more likely to trust celebrities and influencers (1.7) than female students, which corresponds with discussions amongst students in the focus group session in South Africa who felt that male students were more likely to share gossip compared to female students, and that 'gossip' included what influencers such as Joe Rogan and Russell Brand said. Both male students and female students trusted the people linked to their social media profiles (2.6 and 2.5 respectively) more than they did the country's electoral body (2.5 and 2.3 respectively). There was a notably higher trust amongst male students of statistics (3.6) compared to female students (2.7), while female students trusted scientists and medical researchers more (3.6 versus 3.3 for the former, and 4 and 3.7 for the latter).

	Medical researchers	Close family and friends	Scientists	Statistics	Media	People linked to social media profiles	Electoral body	Celebrities and influencers	Politicians
Male	3.7	3.5	3.3	3.6	2.8	2.6	2.5	2.3	2
Female	4	3.5	3.6	2.7	3	2.5	2.3	1.7	1.3

Table 21: Trust of groups, institutions and information types by gender

7.2. Social media use and sharing behaviours

Questions were asked about the social media behaviour of students and the processes they went through before and after sharing information to their social media profiles. These questions related to what we considered the 'carefulness' of sharing online information, with the assumption that the greater the care shown, the less likely students would be to share disinformation. We also asked questions about whether or not students corrected others online who posted information they thought was untrue to try provide an account of the extent to which they mediated the circulation of fake content online.

Table 22 below shows the number of students who participated in the focus group sessions in each country, their year of study, and average number of social media accounts. Students each had at least two social media accounts, with the highest being nine (a second-year or *Licence 2* female student in Senegal). A total of 19 students (or nearly 50% of the students who participated in the study) had five or more social media accounts.

	Number of students	**Level of study**	**Average number of social media accounts**
South Africa	8	Post-graduate	3.8
Kenya	9	First year	3.3
Nigeria	10	First year	5
Senegal	13	Mixed	4.8
	40		

Table 22: No. of social media accounts by country

As Table 23 shows, female students on average had more social media accounts than male students. While the majority of students (74%) spent more than two hours on social media each day, a significantly higher percentage of female students (58%) spent more than three hours on social media each day compared to male students (27%).

	Av. number of social media accounts	**Less than 1 hr/day (%)**	**1 to 2 hrs/day (%)**	**2 to 3 hrs/day (%)**	**3 to 4 hrs/day (%)**	**More than 4 hrs/day (%)**
Male	4	0	40	33	20	7
Female	4.4	8	8	25	21	38

Table 23: No. of social media accounts and time using social media by gender

However, male students were more likely to make their social media accounts publicly accessible. Male students tended to have more 'public' social media accounts, with a higher level of open interaction with these accounts. Most female students (71%) had 'high privacy' or 'moderate privacy' settings on their social media accounts. 'High privacy' settings meant limiting online circles to a small group of close friends and family, with permission needed to view a profile, while 'moderate privacy' settings meant that anyone could read the student's profile, but that the student aimed to limit 'friends' or followers to small groups of people that they knew. A noticeably greater percentage of male students had 'public' or 'very public' social media accounts (53%) compared to female students (29%). Having 'public' accounts meant a student was not restrictive about people who followed them and accept all 'friend' requests. 'Very public' social media accounts meant that a student considered themselves as having reached influencer-level audience numbers on many of the social media platforms they used. Each

student cohort had at least one student with 'very public' social media accounts, with the greatest number of students with 'very public' accounts in the Nigeria student cohort (3).

	High privacy (%)	Moderate privacy (%)	Public (%)	Very public (%)
Male	20	27	33	20
Female	17	54	17	12

Table 24: Privacy of social media accounts by gender

Figure 12 below shows how often students forwarded or posted information to their social media profiles. While most students "sometimes" shared information on their profiles, a greater number of male students did so (53% versus 41%), and "often" did so (27% versus 13%). In contrast, a notably greater percentage of female students (33%) "never" shared information on their social media profiles compared to male students (7%). As seen with the students who had 'very public' social media accounts in Table 24, there were outliers in both genders. Some 13% of both genders actively posted and shared information (they considered themselves "always" doing this). However, there was no correlation between students with 'very public' social media accounts and students who 'always' shared information on their timeline (i.e. even students with high privacy settings were very active sharers of information).

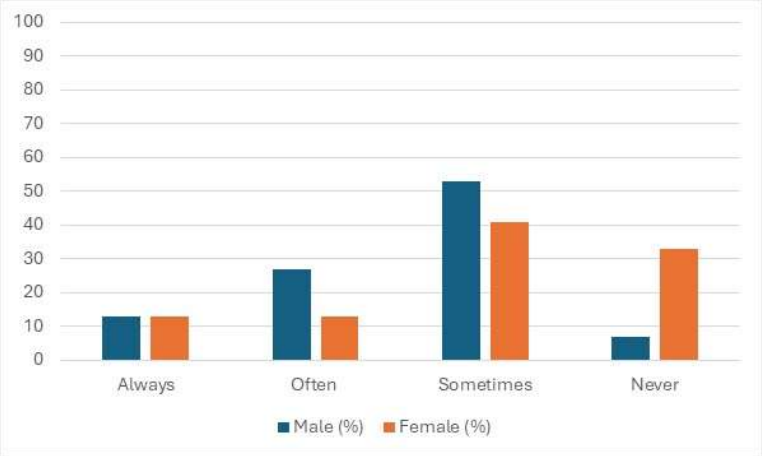


Figure 12: How often students shared information on social media by gender (%)

7.2.1. Carefulness of sharing information

There were striking similarities between the behaviours of male and female students with respect to how careful they were when sharing information online, with some points of divergence in their sharing practices. A high percentage of both male and female students "always" read an entire article before forwarding it, with more male students (73%) than female students (63%) doing this. A notable percentage of female students (29%) only "sometimes" did this. This difference could relate to the time students had to be online, which appears to be a factor that impacted a greater percentage of female students than male students (see below). Both male students (73%) and female students (75%) nevertheless said they thought carefully why they were forwarding content before doing so, which suggests for most forwarding content was a considered behaviour.

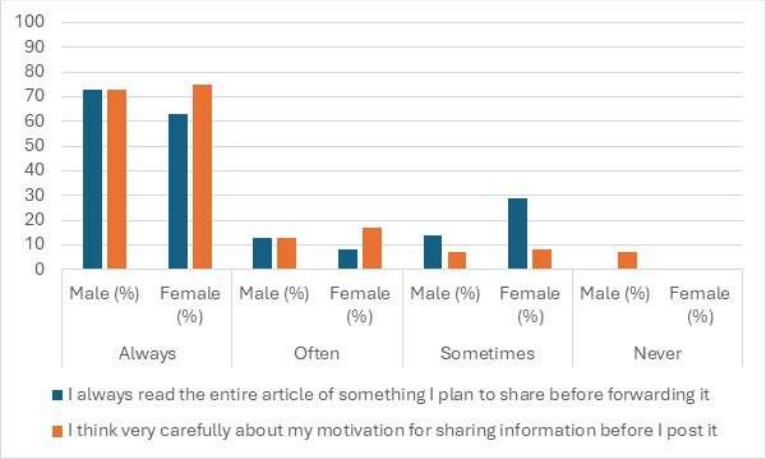


Figure 13: Understanding and considering motivation before sharing content by gender (%)

A greater percentage of male students (67%) "always" checked if information was true (only half of the female students said they always check if information was true before forwarding it). However a percentage of male students (7%) "never" checked if information was true before forwarding it, suggesting a somewhat wider range of behaviours amongst male students with respect to checking if information was true. Fewer male and female students wrote an explanation to their posts so that others would understand why they had forwarded it, with more male students (33%) than female students (25%) always doing this, and 25% of female students "never" doing this.

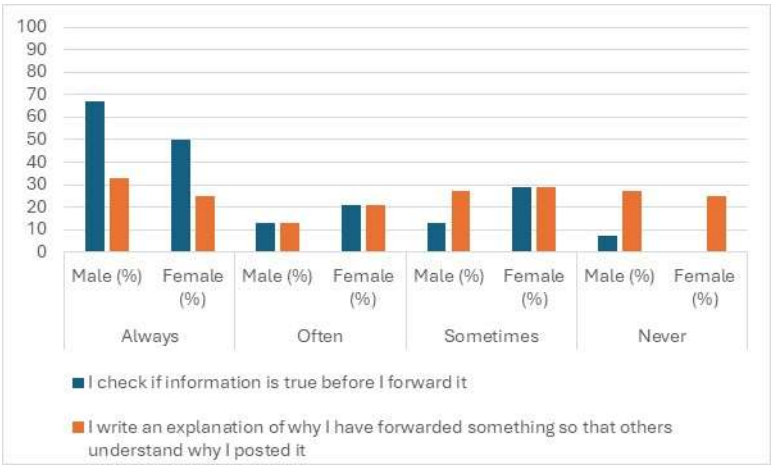


Figure 14: Verifying and explaining content shared by gender (%)

More male students (53%) than female students (38%) let others know if they were uncertain about the veracity of information they were sharing. However a noticeable percentage of both male (27%) and female (25%) students did not communicate this uncertainty when posting content.

A very high percentage of female students however "always" self-edited and went back to correct a post their realised was 'untrue' (83% said they would, compared to 53% of male students), although this was also "often" done by male students (33%).

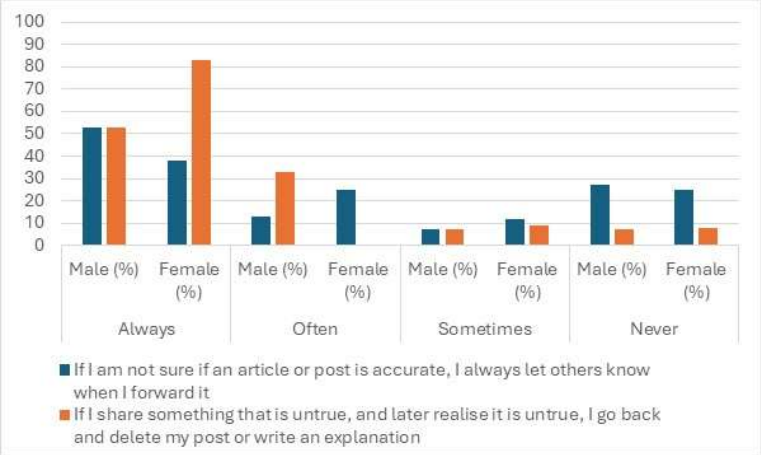
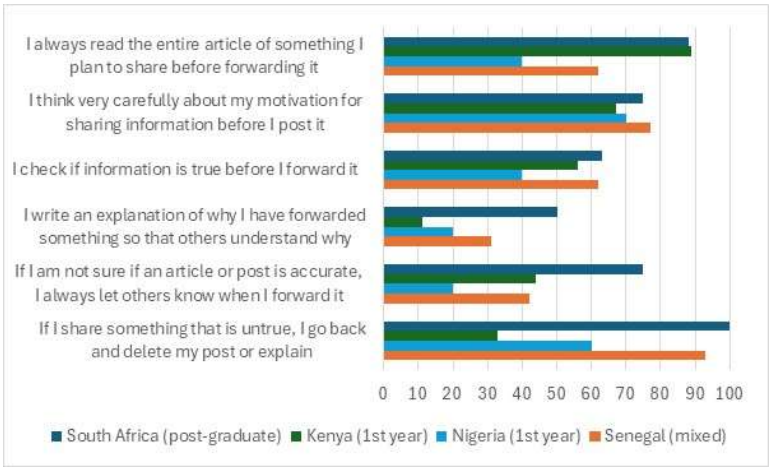


Figure 15: Explaining uncertainty and self-editing of content shared by gender (%)

With respect to the carefulness of online behaviour and year of study, there appears to be a correlation between year of study and the percentage of students in each cohort that were more careful with their online behaviour. For four out of six questions in Figure 16 below, a greater percentage of students in South Africa and Senegal (the cohorts both higher than first year of study) "always" practiced more careful sharing practices. Overall the South African cohort of post-graduate students (75%)[249] showed a higher percentage of students "always" being careful with the information they shared, while a high percentage of students practicing these online behaviours was also found in Senegal (61%). In comparison, the percentage of students practicing these online behaviours in Kenya was 50%, and in Nigeria 42%. This may suggest that a greater awareness of how the media and information environment worked, exposure to issues such as ethical reporting, as well as discussions on disinformation produces more careful online practices. However, there were also notably difference in behaviours amongst first year students in Kenya and Nigeria, suggesting that the carefulness of online behaviour is also likely to intersect with country dynamics (or how others behave online) and can be independent of media education levels.



[249] The aggregate percentage was calculated for all six questions.

Figure 16: Students who "always" practiced careful online behaviour by country and year of study (%)

Questions requiring a rating score confirmed some of these findings on the carefulness with which students handled information posted to their social media profiles. Both male and female students showed a high level of concern about how others might understand and interpret what they forwarded (on average scoring 4.5 and 4.4 respectively for the statement assessing this). Both genders also showed an extremely high average awareness and concern with the implications of what they forwarded (4.7 for both). Moreover, having enough time to check information before forwarding it did not on average appear to be a significant factor impacting whether or not students were able to do this before sharing the information. However, it was more likely to be a factor for female students (2.4) compared to male students (1.7), even though female students tended to spend more time online.

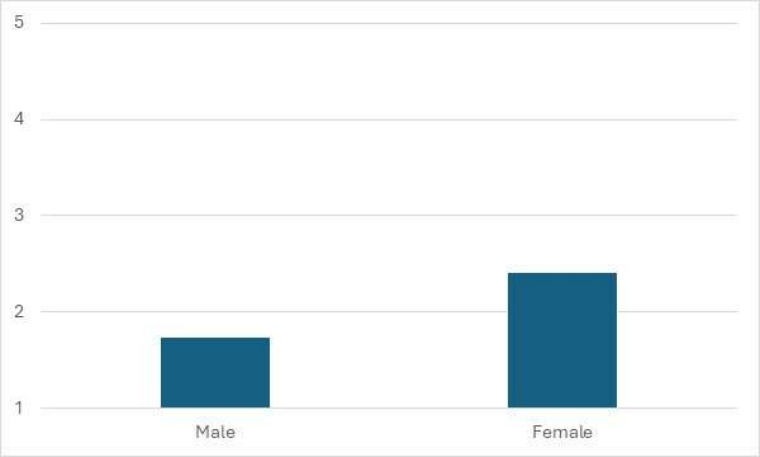


Figure 17: A lack of time preventing students verifying information before sharing by gender

7.2.2. Correcting others online

Both country and gender dynamics appeared to play a part in whether or not students felt inclined or confident enough to corrected others online when they posted information to social media they thought was untrue. However, unlike the findings on the carefulness of online behaviour, the percentage of students who said they would correct others online did not appear to be related to year of study.

As Figure 18 below shows, a notable percentage of students in South Africa (37%) would "never" do this, and a similar percentage of students in Senegal (39%) would "always" do this. A greater percentage of students in Kenya would "always" or "often" do this (44%) compared to students in South Africa who would "always" or "often" do this (38%). That 85% of students in Senegal would "always" or "often" do this suggests an outspokenness with students overall in that country with respect to receiving false content on their timeline.

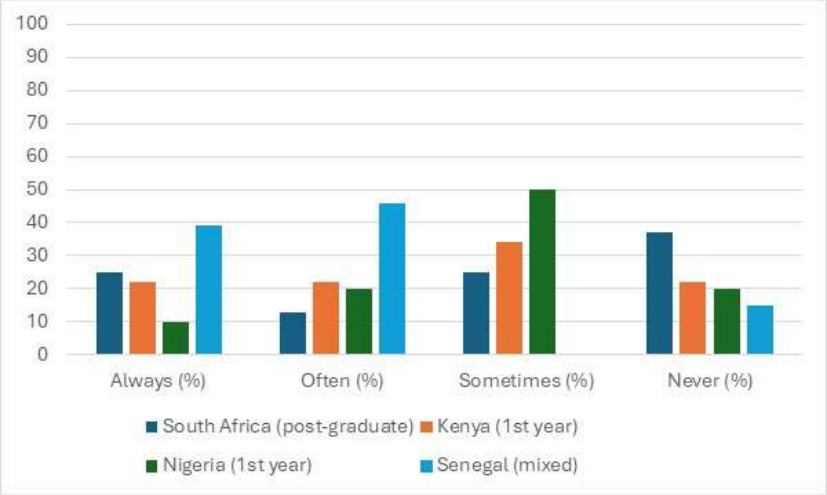


Figure 18: Rating of statement: "I correct someone who posts information I think is untrue" by country and year of study (%)

With respect to gender, just over half of both male and female students (54% of each gender) corrected someone who posted information they thought was untrue "always" or "often". However, there was a notably higher percentage of female students who never did this (29%) compared to male students (13%).

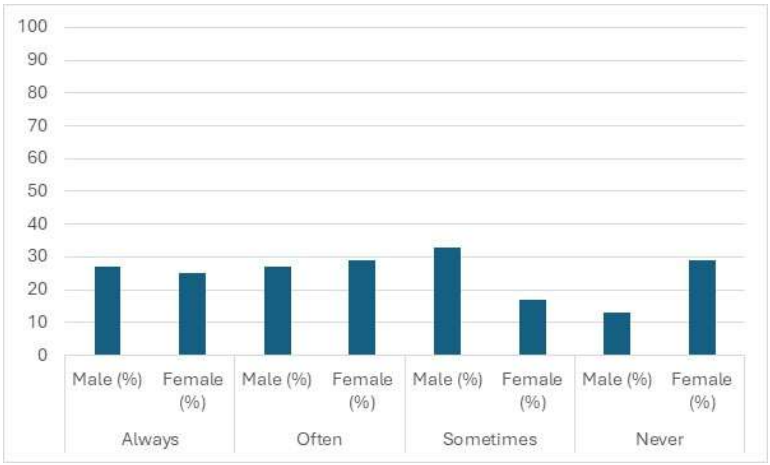


Figure 19: Rating of statement: "I correct someone who posts information I think is untrue" by gender (%)

The focus group discussions elaborated on and provided nuance to these findings. The reticence amongst some female students in South Africa to be politically assertive online because they are "bigger targets" (see Section 7.1.2) can be contrasted to the confidence of one male student in the focus group who said he would "call you out immediately" if you posted fake content on social media. This assertiveness was partly attributed by female students to men "[getting] praised for rebellion" and contrasted to female students feeling they were "doing something wrong" if they spoke out. Students also suggested that both genders were cautious about correcting the opposite gender online due to "confusing" social dynamics. One female student said that if men are "called out online in a particular way it could emasculate them", while a

male student said he was afraid to correct women because “men can be misinterpreted as being misogynistic”.

In Kenya, rather than correct someone online, overall students preferred to share similar or aligned information as a response to fake content being posted, and in doing so to advance their own political positions. Notably this was the case even if the information they shared was false.

In Nigeria gender were found to be a prominent reason why students said they would refrain from questioning or correcting fake content publicly. While all of the female students preferred not to question or correct someone who posts fake content online, at least two of the male students said they would do so.

In Senegal, although students rated themselves most positively in the questionnaire regarding correcting others online, the focus group discussions suggested much more reticence in being assertive online. There was also a tendency to only correct other people that they trusted. The students’ said their main concern with correcting others online was a fear of “online clashes”, a fear or being considered “pretentious”, or being attacked in other ways. Students said they had had experiences of pointing out that content shared by others was fake which had led to responses such as “now you consider you are a great journalist” or “you think you know more than others know about what reliable information is”.

7.3. Attitudes to forwarding election-related fake content

As suggested above, most students felt it was important to check if information was true before forwarding it. While a total of 74% of students overall said they did this “always” or “often”, this also meant that some students did not “always” check if information was true, only did this “sometimes”, or, for one male student, “never”. A reason for this was that students felt that not all information had the same importance. The focus group discussions showed that types of content that fell into the category of less important information that did not need to be verified was content that was humorous or that would make people laugh; content that they could relate to, or that captured occurrences in the students’ daily lives; and content shared by celebrities (because this was difficult to verify), although many students were disinclined to share celebrity gossip.

It was also considered acceptable by a number of students to share more serious content without verifying its accuracy. This included what was considered useful information, such as health advice, particularly if a student knew that a friend or person linked to their profile needed advice on a health issue and with the expectation that they would fact check the content; and information on a missing person (both when they were “lost” and “found”).

Crime stories were shared without verifying, and some students felt that they would share information about violence or an emergency such as a fire without checking if it was true because of the urgency of the situation. Some students also said they mostly shared this kind of information with their family or very close relationships to make sure they are safe.

As the figure below shows, on average female students felt strongly that some information was more important than other information to check if it was true before they forwarded (4.25), while male students showed a more ambivalent response to this question (2.9).

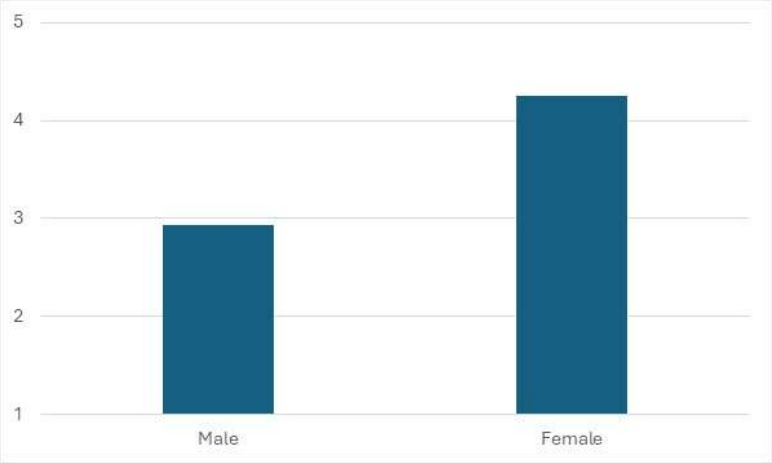


Figure 20: Tendency to think that it was more important to fact check some information and not other types of information by gender

There were nevertheless divergent opinions that made up these scoring averages by gender. For example, two female students in the South African focus group discussion were emphatic that under "no conditions was it okay" to forward something without checking if it was true first, a position they attributed to it being unethical to do this. With respect to celebrity gossip, for instance, privacy issues and the objectification of celebrities were raised ("they are real people"). Students in this focus group discussion also felt that male students were more likely to share general gossip compared to female students, and that a culture had emerged where "men gossiping was made to seem okay".[250]

There were also more extremes evident in the responses from male students across the cohorts to the question of whether or not some information was more important to verify than other information, with about half of them scoring this question 1 (or "I don't agree at all" with this statement) and about the same number scoring it 5 (or "I agree completely with this statement").

Many students tended to put political and election-related information in a different category to other kinds of information, believing that it needed to be treated more sensitively. As a student in the focus group discussion in South Africa also put it: "In the case of politicians, I don't care about them personally, but democracy impacts everyone". At least two students in the focus group discussion in Kenya expressed hesitation about forwarding unverified political content. For one, an adult learner who ran a Christian radio station despite being a first-year student, this was linked to his ethical codes of conduct both as a broadcaster and a Catholic priest,[251] while the other had completed a diploma in communication studies prior to enrolment for his first year of university. In the focus group discussion in Nigeria, almost all students agreed that election-related information should be treated differently from other kinds of information shared online. They felt that while other information might not affect the general public, election-related

[250] The examples were given of Joe Rogan and Russell Brand, whose content they said was however not "packaged as gossip".

[251] As a broadcaster, he had a significant following on both radio and social media which influenced his sense of caution in sharing unverified information. As a Catholic priest, he was required to follow rules of political impartiality.

information could. Election information was described as “serious”, “sensitive” and “capable of inciting”. Similarly, in Senegal, students predominantly felt that an election was too serious for election-related information to be treated like any other information because it had to do with the “national” or “public” interest, and with both the individual’s and the country’s future. As students put it, “[t]his is not information like any other…we are talking about the National Assembly [so] it can determine the future of a country, the decisions we make [and] is important” and “it arouses public interest so this information cannot be compared to others”.

However, despite these perspectives, it was also apparent that students felt that it was not necessary to verify all types of political and election-related information before forwarding it. One reason for this was political bias and belief, which appeared to be influenced by country dynamics. For example, in Nigeria, most students expressed a willingness to share information around corruption, election malpractices or rigged elections because they had long-held opinions of this being a norm in the country. While overall in response to the questionnaire both male and female students were cautious about forwarding gossip about politicians, even if the students might not like the politician (as Figure 21 shows, on average scoring themselves 1.6 and 2.1 respectively), the focus group discussions revealed that most students in Kenya did not express concern about sharing fake content if it supported their preferred candidate. There the students appeared to be more interested in promoting their own political preferences than verifying the accuracy of the information they shared. As suggested earlier, this was seen as a tactic to respond to disinformation posted online which was preferred to correcting or objecting to the fake content when it was shared. Students were in effect willing to participate in the contestation of disinformation narratives as an expression of their political voice, as these quotes illustrate:

> For me, if something is in my concern, I must respond on it. And, if maybe politically you have attacked me, I'll also have my tactics over here. I will also come up with another fake thing to surpass you also. So I cannot just be attacked. (*Male student, Kenya*)

> I will do anything I can to support my man [the politician], whether it is to true or fake. Because even if you don't do it, the other team is doing it only against you. So you better do it to spoil the efforts. (*Male student, Kenya*)

There was also strong ambivalence amongst students as to whether or not it was important to first verify information that might impact on the safety of family or friends (scored 2.9 for male students, and 3.3 for female students on average). This suggests that there was a higher likelihood that reports of election-related violence that could impact on the safety of family or friends would be forwarded ‘just in case’ it was true and so that they would be aware of the possible danger, although students in South Africa felt that “disclosure was important” and it was necessary to state that the information had not been verified.

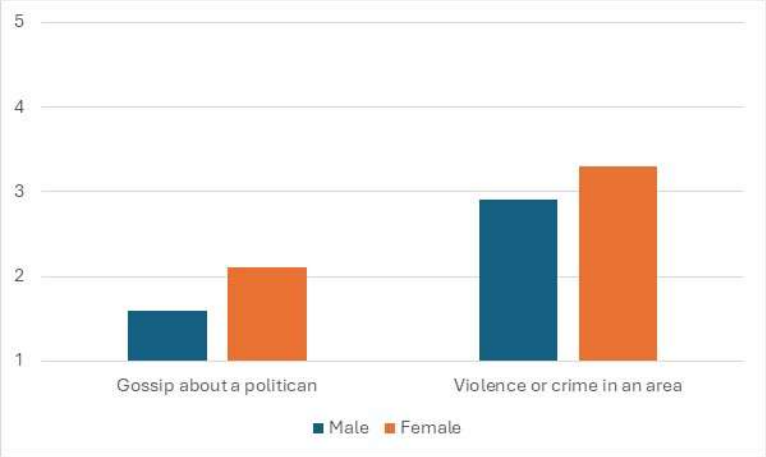


Figure 21: Tendency to think it was okay to forward gossip about politicians and information about violence or crime in an area where friends of family lived by gender

The willingness to entertain others was a motivation for students forwarding political and election-related fake content at least some of the time. Nearly half (47%) of the male students "always", "often" or "sometimes" did this, with 37% of female students doing the same. Fewer students did this "often" or "always", but notably 20% of male students said they used political information, including untrue information, to entertain all of the time, compared to 8% of female students who said they did this all of the time. The absurdity of some election-related fake content was a reason for forwarding it at least "sometimes" by 40% of male students and 34% of female students.

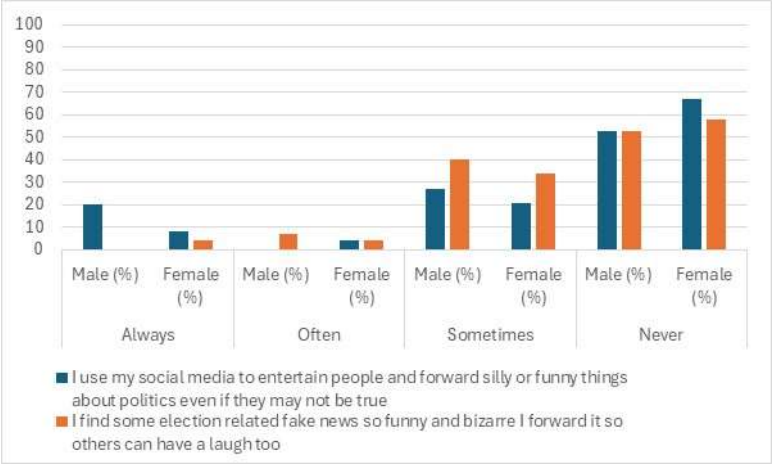


Figure 22: Forwarding unverified political and election-related information to entertain by gender (%)

However, the use of political and election-related fake content to entertain others appeared to be strongly impacted by year of study. As Figure 23 below shows, the percentage of students who said they would "never" do this was notably higher in both South Africa (75% for each of the respective questions) and Senegal (92% and 69%), as opposed to the first-year cohorts in Kenya (33% for each) and Nigeria (30% and 40%). This suggests that a greater understanding of disinformation, as well as issues such as media ethics, may increase the likelihood of students

being more circumspect of the impact of sharing fake political or election-related information even for 'fun'. The high percentage of students who would never forward "silly or funny" political content to entertain others in Senegal suggested that this also intersected with country dynamics.

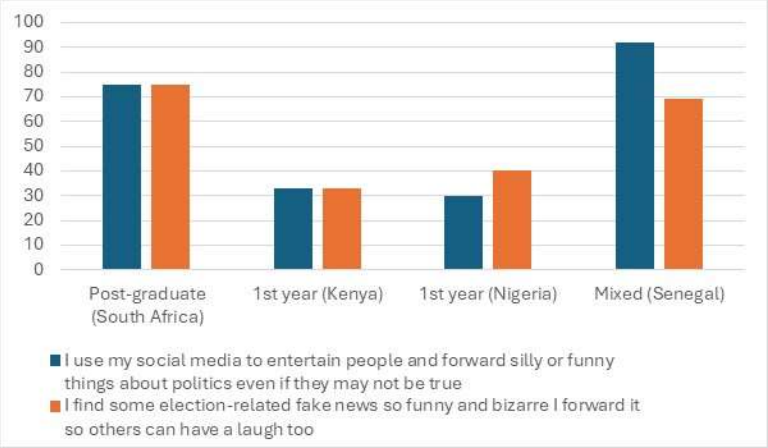


Figure 23: Percentage of students who would "never" forward political or election-related content to entertain by country and year (%)

7.4. Credulity: An account of the tendency of students to believe fake content

The Garrett and Weeks test was used to assess what we called the 'credulity' of students, or their tendency to believe disinformation, and, according to the test, their overall propensity for conspiratorial thinking. It this way we hoped to get at least some indication of the vulnerability of students to accepting the claims in fake content.

The tendency of the students to believe disinformation was evident in our focus group discussions. When shown examples of fake content and asked if they thought they were true, at least 'some' and at times 'most' students in the cohorts in Kenya, Nigeria and Senegal believed that this was the case. While post-graduate students in South Africa were mostly sceptical when shown examples of fake content, most also said they had at least once in the past believed fake news, only to find out later in discussion with others that it was untrue.

The focus group discussions also suggested that systemic issues such as gender discrimination, including religious and cultural assumptions about women, trust in institutions such as the media, and, conversely, a distrust in the political economy of institutions such as the media, played their part in this tendency to believe fake content.

In Kenya, students appeared to be inclined to believe a story was true if it came from mainstream media, which made them particularly vulnerable to the frequent use of media branding in that country to lend authenticity to fake claims. When it was explained that the examples of fake content shown to them that used media branding were false, some students expressed shock or surprise and felt the need to rethink their assumptions about the news and media production.

In Nigeria, two examples of fake content involving female politicians were believed because they reinforced popular religious and cultural beliefs on discrimination against women occupying

leadership positions, and because they aligned with general observations about the discrimination that women politicians are exposed to. As suggested earlier, students in Nigeria also showed a tendency to share information around corruption, election malpractices or rigged elections because they believed that these were the norm in the country.

In Senegal, while students tended to be predominantly analytical in their assessment of the fake content shown to them, at least some students believed the examples were true. Similar to the students in Kenya, for one they based their belief on whether or not they trusted the news outlet whose branding the content had appropriated for authenticity.

An exchange between two students in the South African focus group session serves as an example of how the categories developed by Garrett and Weeks might operate. A fake content item that included a video[252] that it claimed to be evidence of unopened boxes of votes that had not been counted,[253] and therefore evidence of the elections being 'rigged', drew two sharply distinct reactions from the students, one male and one female. The female student's reaction appeared strongly grounded in the need for evidence before she could accept the authenticity of the claim. For her, in effect, that the boxes were unopened, and it was not confirmed that their contents were actually votes that had been uncounted, meant that what the fake content item presented as 'evidence' was in fact not evidence. Based on this lack of real evidence she suggested she would not believe the fake content item. This perspective is strongly aligned with what Garrett and Weeks categorise as a "need for evidence".

While the male student agreed that the 'evidence' was not convincing as evidence, he based his reaction to the fake content item on his personal experience of what he called a "sabotage" of the voting process he said he had personally observed. Drawing on this experience he "believed the elections were not free and fair". As a result, he said that while he might query the authenticity of the fake content item, he believed the "general idea" being presented in the content; that is, that the elections in South Africa had been 'rigged', with his reasoning being that if the voting processes he had observed had been "sabotaged", they, or those doing the sabotaging, "might have tried other things". This student also had a strong distrust in the "narrative of the media". His interpretation of the fake content item appeared to be based both on what Garrett and Weeks describe as a "need for evidence" and a tendency to believe that "truth is political", the second suggesting a tendency to believe disinformation. For this student, there was a mixed sense of whether or not he would have forwarded the fake content item shown to them. On the one hand he felt that "if they actually opened the boxes in the video [it would have been more believable]" and he would have forwarded it. On the other, he said "some things we just don't know, so you forward something if it is close to what you believe".

The responses to the Garrett and Weeks test, which was part of the questionnaire completed by the students, suggested that overall while students placed a strong value on evidence, they nevertheless remained vulnerable to believing disinformation and had a tendency towards conspiratorial thinking. This vulnerability appeared to be higher amongst male students and strongly influenced by country dynamics. There was only some indication that this vulnerability was impacted by year of study, even though the focus group discussions as reported above did

[252] Zero evidence video shows boxes of 'hidden', 'uncounted' votes cast in South Africa's 2024 elections - Africa Check

[253] The video was in fact of resealed ballot boxes which are required by law to be retained for six months.

suggest an overall greater tendency amongst the more senior student cohorts in South Africa and Senegal to be sceptical about the fake content that was shown to them.

7.4.1. Responses by gender

There was a strong alignment between genders regarding the need for evidence and trusting in facts and data rather than "hunches" and "instincts" for something to be true, even though there appeared to be a greater tendency amongst female students to be ambivalent about this. As Figure 24 shows, both male and female students in the cohorts "strongly agreed" with the four statements testing the "need for evidence" – an average of 81.75% across the statements for male students and 72% across the statements for female students – although the average percentage of female students (22.75%) who were ambivalent about this was almost double that of males (11.75%).

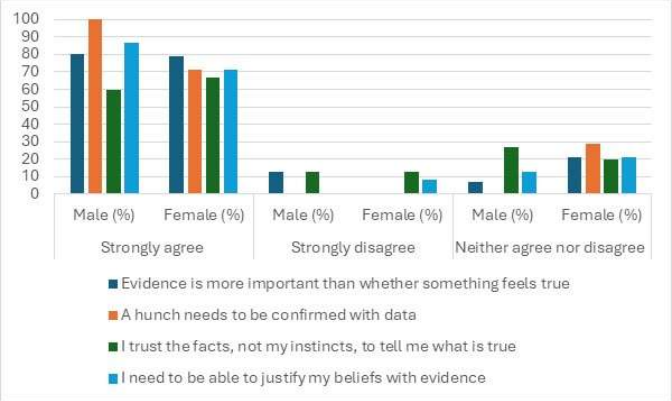


Figure 24: Statements testing a "need for evidence" by gender (%)

With respect to the two sets of statements that tested "faith in intuition for facts" and "truth is political" (see Figures 25 and 26), there was greater overall ambivalence amongst the students compared to the statements testing their "need for evidence". There also appeared to be a stronger tendency for students to "trust their intuitions to 'feel' the truth of things",[254] or to respond more strongly in agreement with statements that tested "faith in intuition for facts". A higher percentage of male students trusted their intuitions (an average across the four statements of 47% "strongly agreed" with the statements) compared to female students (34%), while female students showed a greater ambivalence to the statements than male students (an average across the four statements of 46% of female students "neither agreed nor disagreed" with the statements compared to 34% of male students). The potential reasons for this were not explored, but they may relate to a greater self-confidence amongst male students suggested in some of the focus group discussions.

[254] Georget, P. (2023) 'Can we develop our intuition to counter misinformation?' Polytechnique Insights

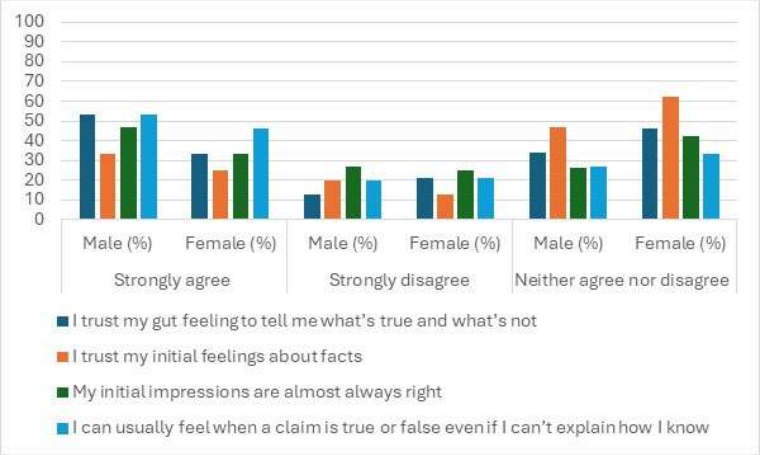


Figure 25: Statements testing "faith in intuition for facts" by gender (%)

The results were more mixed with respect to whether they considered that "all truth is relative to a political context".[255] While there was a higher average percentage of each gender "strongly disagreeing" with the set of statements (35% for male students and 39% for female students), the average percentage of male and female students who "strongly agreed" with the statements was only slightly lower (33% for male students, and 32% for female students).

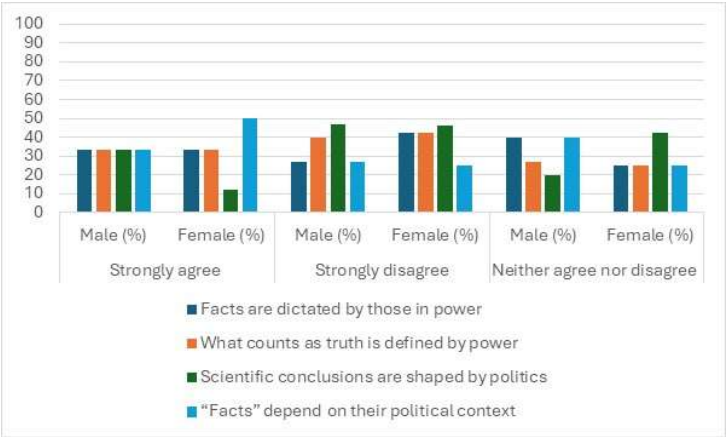


Figure 26: Statements testing if "truth is political" by gender (%)

7.4.2. Responses by country and year of study

The responses to these three sets of statements by Garrett and Weeks appeared to also be influenced by country dynamics. As the average percentages for the responses to the sets of statements by country suggest in the figures below, there was strong agreement on the "need for evidence" in all four countries. However, at least half of the students in Kenya and Nigeria showed a strong "faith in intuition for facts", with Nigerian students showing the strongest

[255] Ibid.

agreement that "truth is political". Overall the findings suggest that students in Senegal were the least vulnerable to disinformation.

As Figure 27 shows, the highest percentage of students who "strongly agreed" with the set of statements that tested a "need for evidence" was in Senegal (86%) and the lowest in Nigeria (60%).

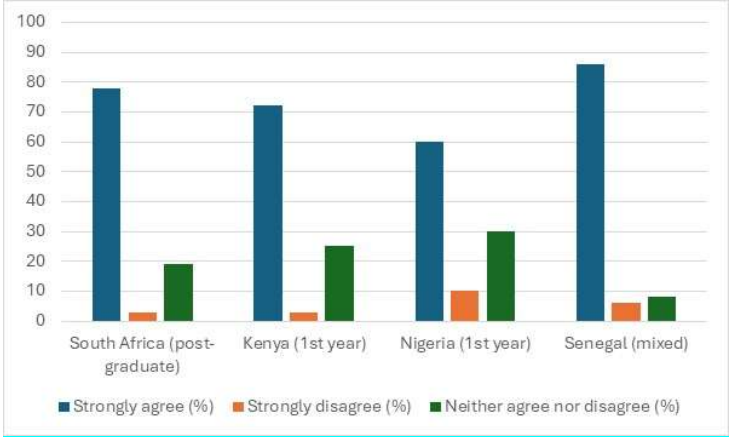


Figure 27: "Need for evidence", average % for four statements by country and year of study

Figure 28 below shows mixed country results for the sets of statements that tested the students' "faith in intuition for facts". While students in South Africa were largely ambivalent about these statements (most, or an average of 41%, "neither agreed nor disagreed"), students in Senegal showed the strongest average disagreement with the statements (33%) and the least agreement (only 21% "strongly agreed" with the statements). In contrast, students in Kenya and Nigeria tended to "strongly agree" with the set of statements (an average of 50% and 55% respectively). These findings suggest that year of study may influence the extent to which students trusted their intuitions over evidence in that a lower percentage of students in both the post-graduate students in South Africa and mixed cohort in Senegal tended to "strongly agree" with the statements. However, the differences in the results between the two countries also suggests that country dynamics played a potentially more significant role in how students interpreted reality.

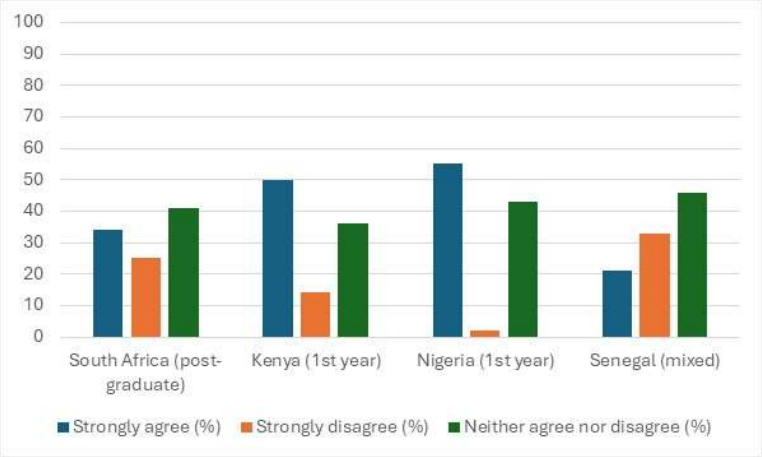


Figure 28: "Faith in intuition for facts", average % for four statements by country and year of study

With respect to statements relating to whether or not "truth is political", the country results were mixed. While the average percentage of students who agreed with these statements was highest in Nigeria (45%), most students in Kenya showed strong disagreement (58%), also suggesting that country dynamics were a stronger determining factor than year of study in the student responses. A greater overall ambivalence about whether students agreed with the statements was found in South Africa (and average of 63% "neither agreed nor disagreed" with the statements), while in Senegal there was overall strong disagreement with the statements (40%), balanced by an average across the statements of 31% of students who "strongly agreed" and 29% who "neither agreed nor disagreed".

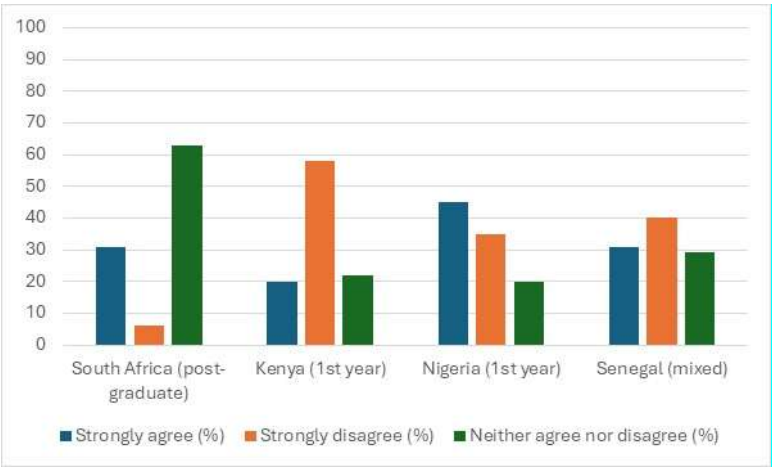


Figure 29: "Truth is political", average % for four statements by country and year of study

7.4.3. Testing belief in common disinformation narratives

Finally, students were also asked if they "strongly agreed", "strongly disagreed" or "neither agreed nor disagreed" with a set of statements on topics where there has been a significant amount of disinformation and conspiratorial thinking. The set of statements was constructed

independently of the Garrett and Weeks test, although they build their methodology using similar examples.[256]

As the graph below suggests, there was overall a reasonably strong tendency for students of both sexes to be ambivalent with respect to these statements. While most male (80%) and female (96%) students in effect believed that climate change was real, and most male students (73%) believed western medicines 'worked' in Africa, these beliefs dropped below the 50% mark for both genders with respect to whether or not the moon landing was real (27% male, 21% female), and whether Covid-19 vaccines work (49% male, 29% female). Only 42% of female students believed western medicines worked in Africa. This suggests a strong disconnect between the students' self-perceptions of trust (as our results showed earlier medical researchers and scientists were amongst the most trusted groups for students), and the uncertainty they felt about key issues of scientific consensus. Notably, a significant number of male students believed the photographs of the 1969 moon landing were faked (40%).

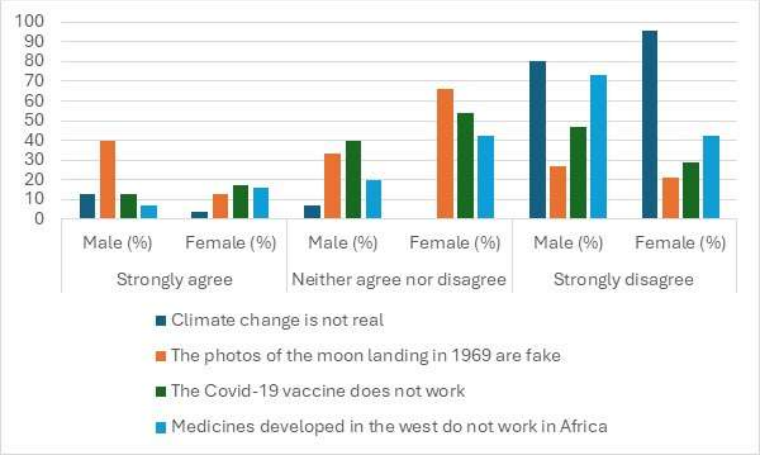


Figure 30: Belief in common areas of disinformation and conspiracies by gender (%)

8. Discussion of findings

Few of the fake content analysed in our sample directly engaged the substance of key election campaign issues and topics such as a country's energy crisis, access to housing, the state of the economy, or youth unemployment. In this regard it worked differently to disinformation or misinformation that might be put out in campaign manifestos or repeated by politicians in interviews, and which require fact checkers to analyse the extent to which different claims made are "correct", "incorrect", "unproven" or "misleading". Instead the fake content can be said to draw on often intersecting fault lines in the four countries to build narratives that fuel an environment of uncertainty, suspicion, and public alarm during the election periods, while also

[256] For example, while also asking about the Apollo 11 moon landing, they asked if AIDS was deliberately created to harm homosexuals, or if the US government authorised the 9/11 attacks. See Georget, P. (2023) 'Can we develop our intuition to counter misinformation?' https://www.polytechnique-insights.com/en/columns/digital/can-we-develop-our-intuition-to-counter-misinformation/

encouraging skewed perceptions of support (or lack of support) for particular parties or candidates.

As our analysis suggests, these fault lines may be 'systemic' and include ethnic or religious tensions; 'periodic', such as the threat of election violence; what we might call 'structural', such as distrust in the election process; 'temporal', such as in Nigeria where a prominent fault line in the elections was the country's economic instability; or 'endemic', such as widespread corruption. In the case of corruption, this could easily have been analysed separately in the categories we developed and crosscuts these categories as a fault line common to all four countries in this study. To a lesser extent, other systemic fault lines are at least partly drawn on in our sample analysis of fake content, such as issues of xenophobia,[257] homophobia,[258] and misogyny and gender biases.[259]

This is not to say politicians themselves only debate points of policy when they take the podium. The central issues of contestation in each election takes on different hues, with policy only sometimes part of this contestation between parties or candidates. At the same time, as in the case of corruption or economic instability, these fault lines may or may not overlap with campaign policy issues of the day. But it appears to be in the nature of the fake content claims that they were deliberately detached from any concern with the specifics of policy proposals or government action or inaction on policy issues. Rather the fake content made repeated and similar claims from different angles along the seams of the fault lines, testing them to draw on their latent energy for disruption. In this way it attempted to build narratives, or, to appropriate Michael Warner's account of publics and counterpublics, engage in acts of "world making",[260] with the frequent circulation of the fake content items necessary for the political agency of this world making.

That many of these narratives were driven by 'evidence' – such as a misappropriated video, a photograph, an internal memo using party branding, or even 'deep fake' voice recordings – that cannot easily be verified by the layperson, or even the media and fact checkers, leaves the public vulnerable. In the recent elections in South Africa, for example, considerable resources were taken up in newsrooms in an effort to verify the disinformation that journalists were confronted with, which, along with online attacks on journalists, were the two main threats to reporting on the elections.[261] Similarly, one fact checker interviewed for this study described how he had spent many hours and had to use sophisticated software to try determine – ultimately

[257] As in the claim in South Africa that Mozambicans were being "imported" to vote in the elections.
[258] For example, the claim in Kenya that William Ruto's son ran a male prostitution ring.
[259] For example, as pointed out by one fact checker, in Nigeria fake content capitalised on the misogynistic treatment the Labour Party's deputy govern candidate for Lagos state had already been subjected to, which itself was a result of gender discrimination present in Nigerian society. In this way it drew on the narrative energy already present in the media and online to further malign public opinion of the Labour Party at the polls. This reading of the fake content item was confirmed by the Nigerian focus group discussion.
[260] Warner M. (2002) *Publics and Counterpublics*. Zone Books, New York.
[261] Hunter Q. (2024). Journalists under fire online. In *State of the Newsroom*. State of the Newsroom | Journalism.co.za

unsuccessful – whether a voice recording that claimed to be evidence of a plot to 'rig' the Nigerian elections, and which was widely shared on social media, was a 'deep fake' or real.[262]

The study supports arguments that disinformation in Africa needs to be understood within the specific cultural, socio-economic, political and other arrangements in countries, or what have been called their "contextual variations".[263] It draws on the nuances of these environments, even while cross-country similarities in the way fake content works and how it circulates may be observable. For example, while false claims drawing on religious or ethnic issues or tensions were common to the four countries here, the nature and frequency of these claims depended on how these fault lines emerged in each country, and the different characteristics of the fault lines.

Both Kenya and Nigeria suggested a higher frequency of fake content items drawing on religious and ethnic tensions. However, in Nigeria, a country often riven by a Muslim-Christian divide, the claims centred on the tensions between the three Muslim presidential candidates and Peter Obi, the only Christian candidate amongst the four front-runners, while also drawing on fears of the Islamisation of the country. In Kenya, a predominantly Christian country, claims attacked the strong Christian moral platform of the challenging candidate William Ruto, casting doubt on the moral authority of his campaign, as well as on the church as being a neutral arbiter in the elections. In Senegal, a country known for its religious tolerance, this 'fault line' was only marginally drawn on, if at all. Disinformation that attempted to disrupt the elections by amplifying any religious or ethnic discontent was said to be more evident in previous elections in that country, and largely manufactured.

With respect to ethnicity, the local resonances of the claims are inevitably very specific to countries. In Nigeria, claims were attributed to "elders" in the north of the country, evoked historical tensions around Biafran secessionism, and involved "Igbo captains of industry" and the "Yoruba nation". In Kenya there were claims involving the Masaai, ethnic communities in the Uasin Gishu county, and the misnaming of a police officer arrested after throwing a teargas cannister at a campaign rally using a surname common in the Kalenjin community where the challenging candidate, Ruto, is from. In South Africa fake content attempted to stoke ethnic tensions in the province of KwaZuluNatal which has deeply rooted history of political violence, but appeared largely ineffective,[264] with the main focus of attacks in the country attempting to undermine the integrity of the electoral system.

These examples of 'contextual variation', and the intersection of sometimes two or more fault lines in a single fake content item, means that despite fake content often making claims in crude and apparently simplistic ways, what it signifies can be nuanced and complex. Because of these nuances, reading the multiple and intersecting ways fake content draws on country fault lines can be difficult for an outsider.

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[262] The fact checker from Dubawa, Silas Jonathan, ultimately could not convincingly establish its authenticity, although others claimed it was doctored. See: The Nation (2023) 'FACT CHECK: Viral audio of Atiku, Tambuwal and Okowa plotting to rig election is doctored' FACT CHECK: Viral audio of Atiku, Tambuwal and Okowa plotting to rig election is doctored | TheCable

[263] Timcke S. Orembo L. and Hlomani H. (2023) *Information Disorders in Africa: An Annotated Bibliography of Selected Countries.* Research ICT Africa. Information disorders in Africa: An annotated bibliography of selected countries – Research ICT Africa

[264] The view also held by Africa Check staff in South Africa.

Common to South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria, and only marginally evident in Senegal, were claims that sought to undermine the integrity of the elections in different ways, with these claims driving the majority of election-related fake content in South Africa. They largely sought to cast doubt on the electoral processes in the countries, and the reliability and veracity of the results, creating fertile ground for contesting the results and, potentially, public support for this contestation. The claims, which occurred before, during and after voting took place, are closely linked to claims of election violence which also sought to destabilise the election environment.

Our sample analysis also shows that not all candidates or parties that participated in the elections were the subject of fake content – whether being attacked or supported – and typically a contestation of fake claims was set up amongst two or maybe three candidates or parties to the exclusion of others, even if they were serious contenders for votes. The reasons for this appear to often intersect with the fault lines mentioned above. For example, in Nigeria attacks focused on Bola Tinubu, a Muslim representing the incumbent party, and Obi from the Labour Party, the Christian challenger to the presidency. Significantly fewer fake content items focused on Atiku Abubakar from the PDP, who emerged runner-up in the presidential polls. In South Africa, the incumbent ANC was the subject of all fake content attacks on political parties, with only two of them embroiling the main opposition, the DA, in the attacks. In contrast, all fake claims of support for a party were for the newly formed MK Party, headed by the former president and leader of the ANC, Jacob Zuma, who split from his historical political home. The contestation between narratives was therefore set up primarily between the ANC and MK Party, with fake content attacks ostensibly aimed not only at securing votes for the MK Party for the first time, but doing this by enacting the tensions implicit in a split in the ANC's support base, including drawing on regional political and ethnic tensions in Zuma's home province of KwaZuluNatal.

The extent to which it was the supporters of the competing parties or the parties themselves who created the fake content, or outsiders attempting to sow discord in the electoral processes, can mostly only be suspected. But, for example, in South Africa, that the majority of the claims attacked the ANC, and the majority of the claims of support for a party supported the MK Party is suggestive, aligning with observations that both the MK Party's supporters and the party itself were active in spreading disinformation on social media during the elections.[265]

As this study shows, fake content employs at least two content strategies to lend itself authenticity. Mentioned above is its use of 'evidence' to support a claim, such as misappropriated videos or photographs, and which often cannot easily be verified by laypersons. The second strategy is what we call forms of "identity theft", which includes impersonation, as well as appropriating the branding of media outlets, political parties, institutions or groups, which others have also observed.[266] Forms of impersonation included using fake social media accounts, 'shallow fake' videos which are easily identified as fake – such as of Biden and Trump

[265] Hussain M. (2024) 'IN-DEPTH | MK Party's disinformation campaign echoes July 2021 unrest tactics'. News24. https://www.news24.com/news24/opinions/analysis/in-depth-mk-partys-disinformation-campaign-echoes-july-2021-unrest-tactics-20240604

[266] Okongo'o J. (2022) 'Doctored newspaper front pages spread disinformation as Kenya elections draw near'. AFP. https://factcheck.afp.com/doc.afp.com.32C47U3

– and, more worryingly, 'deep fake' voice recordings that are especially difficult to verify.[267] The use of these content strategies appears influenced by country dynamics, such as the notably more frequent use of media branding in Kenya compared to other countries to provide authenticity to the claims in our sample. As we found in our focus group sessions, trust in the media was higher amongst students in Kenya compared to the other student cohorts, and in the discussion with the students they expressed surprise when they were told the fake content items shown them which used media branding as a strategy were false.[268] What the sample suggests is unique content strategies were also evident, such as the use of fake polls in Senegal. Although an example of a fake poll was also found in Kenya, and their use might be more ubiquitous,[269] the apparently higher frequency of their use in Senegal in our sample suggests that they can be more persuasive in that country.

While one of the primary objectives of much of the fake content analysed was to cast doubt on the reliability of the election process, it was notably that students who participated in this study tended to distrust the electoral bodies in their countries, and in the case of Kenya and Nigeria only marginally more than they trusted politicians. Perceptions of the political environment in countries, with the exception of Senegal, where students also trusted their electoral body more, were largely negative. Words and phrases such as "a joke", "filled with deceit", "betrayal", "incompetent", "hostile", "tense", "a disaster" and a "mess" were used by students to describe their environments.

They are environments in which many male students appeared to be more confident – but also more vulnerable to disinformation. There were marked differences in the political awareness and engagement across genders, with overall male students considering themselves notably more aware and engaged than female students. The fear of being cyberbullied, that women were "socialised" not to be interested in politics, and their marginalisation from the political sphere were given as reasons why female students would not post political information to their timelines. More than double the percentage of female students who participated in the focus group sessions would also not correct someone who shared disinformation online. This reticence to engage in their political environment appeared to translate into a higher sense of disillusionment, despondency and disempowerment about the political future of their country amongst female students.

Overall female students had more social media accounts compared to male students and spent more time each day using social media. However, this did not necessarily translate to a greater exposure to disinformation. Almost double the percentage of male students had "public" or "very

[267] Only some instances of what appeared to be 'deep fake' voice recordings were found in our sample. However, the interviews suggest this practice was possibly more widespread during the elections in some countries such as Nigeria.

[268] A fact checker interviewed for this study felt that the use of media branding to lend authority to a claim also works more convincingly in Kenya on platforms such as TikTok. She said the largely youthful user-base in that country take content on TikTok as their only source of information and are unlikely to venture outside of the platform to verify information they encounter.

[269] For example CIPESA found the frequent use of fake polls in Kenya in the 2022 elections, which our sample found little evidence of. See: Nanfuka J. Kapiyo V. Mabutho V. and Wakabi W. (2024) A tapestry of actors, attitudes, and impact Countering disinformation in Africa. CIPESA. https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/publications/publication/did/a-tapestry-of-actors-attitudes-and-impact-countering-disinformation-in-africa

public" social media accounts, which meant that they were not restrictive about who followed them and accepted all 'friend' requests. In contrast most female students tended to have at least moderate privacy settings on their profiles, limiting their 'friends' and followers to small groups of people they knew.

Students overall felt confident to navigate the complexities of the information environment they found themselves in. They felt they knew where to find important information if needed, that they could understand basic research, and that they had enough comfortable online access to find this information. However, this agency also appeared to intersect with country and gender dynamics. Moreover, while one might expect that level of education has a positive correlation to this sense of agency, the results did not convincingly suggest this. Although post-graduate students in South Africa had the highest sense of positive agency, first year students in Nigeria had a greater sense of agency compared to students in Senegal where only one student was in first year (or the equivalent of *Licence 1*).

Students also tended to be careful about what they posted to their timeline, including thinking about their motivations for sharing content, verifying whether information was true before sharing, and showing a high level of concern about what others might make of what they posted, and the potential implications. Most read and understood what they were sharing, and did not simply rely on headlines to determine if a content item was worth sharing, as research has found elsewhere.[270] Having enough time to check information before sharing was also not a significant factor impeding the carefulness with which students forwarded information, although it was more of a factor for female students than male students. The findings suggest that year of study impacts on this carefulness with more students in South Africa and Senegal (the more senior cohorts of students) always practicing more careful sharing practices.

This carefulness in sharing behaviour did not necessarily mean that students would not share election-related disinformation to their social media timelines or profiles, and in this way participate in the circulation of the false content described above.

While most students felt it was important to check if any information was true before forwarding it, there were exceptions, such as content that was humorous, content shared by celebrities, and health advice. Students felt that stories about crime or emergencies such as a fire did not need to be verified first, in the case of emergencies because of the urgency of the situation. This had implications for the tendency amongst students to share election-related fake content, even though most students felt that political and election-related information needed to be treated more sensitively than other types of information. For example – and with the exception of Kenya – while students overall were unlikely to forward gossip about politicians even if they did not like them, both male and female students were more likely to share unverified information about election violence that was said to have occurred in an area where friends of family lived for concern over their safety, and 'just in case' it was true. Therefore disinformation that provokes a concern for the safety of others had a greater likelihood of being shared unchecked.

[270] The Science Post (2018) 'Study: 70% of Facebook users only read the headline of science stories before commenting' Study: 70% of Facebook users only read the headline of science stories before commenting

In Kenya, first-year students were willing to contest the circulation of fake content by posting fake content supporting their own parties or candidates, rather than pointing out that the content shared with them was fake. This weaponisation of fake content correlates with what has been called the "disruption" and "partisan polarization" perspectives where "individuals who report hating their political opponents are the most likely to share political fake news and selectively share content that is useful for derogating these opponents".[271] That the students were young first-year students and mostly male may mean this is related to their age and possibly gender – but it also may be a characteristic particular to Kenya. This attitude was not evident in the other focus group discussions.

Nearly half of the male students also shared election-related disinformation at least sometimes to entertain others, with more than a third of female students doing this. As the content analysis showed, there is some fake content that can be read as intended to be humorous rather than seriously seeking to unsettle election environments, including fake content that made fun of losing candidates, most notably in Kenya. However this was in the minority. The sharing of election-related disinformation by students for entertainment was also not confined to this kind of 'humorous' fake content, but to any fake content they personally might find "silly", "funny" or "bizarre". While students were more likely to let others know that what they shared was fake content, at least a quarter of the students who participated in the study did not let others know if they thought content they shared was true or not. This desire to entertain aligns with observations that engaging on social media should be seen "primarily as a social interaction", and that

> [U]sers don't share fake news necessarily because they fall for it. Rather, they simply want to entertain and amuse themselves and others. Or they share content precisely because they do NOT believe it to be true.[272]

While a greater exposure through studies to how disinformation works appeared to make students more sensitive to sharing it for 'fun' or entertainment, education levels only partially appeared to impact on what we called the 'credulity' of the students, or their vulnerability to believing disinformation and conspiratorial thinking, which was more evidently impacted by country dynamics and gender.

Even though students overall strongly valued evidence and data over "hunches" and "beliefs" to determine if something was true at least some students in the focus group sessions in Kenya, Nigeria and Senegal believed that the election-related fake content examples shared with them and taken from the sample that we analysed were true. Students in South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria also showed an overall tendency to trust their intuitions when assessing if something was true or not (what Garrett and Weeks call "faith in intuition as facts"), which may also involve preconceived ideas about the extent to which politics and power dictates the 'truth of things' ("truth is political"). Both a "faith in intuition as facts" and the belief that "truth is political" was highest amongst students in Nigeria. While post-graduate students in South Africa and most students in the 'mixed' cohort in Senegal tended to be more analytical in their responses to the

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[271] Osmundsen, M., Bor, A., Vahlstrup, P. B., Bechmann, A., & Petersen, M. (2020). *Partisan polarization is the primary psychological motivation behind political fake news sharing on Twitter*. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055421000290

[272] Eisele I. (2023) 'Fact check: Why do we believe fake news?' Fact check: Why do we believe fake news? – DW – 07/08/2023

fake content we shared, students in South Africa had a strong tendency to believe that 'truth was political' or to at least be ambivalent about whether this was the case. In Senegal, more students "strongly disagreed" than "strongly agreed" with the statements that tested if they "trust their intuitions to 'feel' the truth of things"[273] or if they believed that "all truth is relative to a political context".[274] That studies have shown that the satisfaction with democracy is higher in Senegal than in the other countries in this study is suggestive of the possible link between perceptions of political stability and the students' vulnerability to disinformation.

Gender also appeared to be a factor in the vulnerability of students to believing disinformation, with male students likely to trust their intuitions more, perhaps attributable to a greater overall self-confidence.

The vulnerability of the students to accepting disinformation claims was seen in their ambivalence with respect to topics involving significant disinformation and conspiratorial thinking, including whether Covid-19 vaccines worked and whether or not the photos of the moon landing were faked (40% of male students believed that they were). Only just over 40% of female students believed that western medicines worked in Africa.

This vulnerability is also suggested by the institutions and groups that students trusted more than others. Remarkably, in Kenya and Nigeria students were more likely to trust what influencers said – paid influencers were used by political parties to spread disinformation during the Nigerian election[275] – before any statement or comment made by either the electoral body or politicians. Celebrities and influencers were the third most trusted group in Nigeria, and, like people linked to their social media profiles, were even more trusted by students than scientists. This aligns strongly with the "echo chamber" effect, which has been found to increase the circulation of disinformation in other studies.[276]

That students in South Africa and Senegal distrusted influencers more than the first-year cohorts in Kenya and Nigeria may suggest a correlation between year of study and shifts in the trust environment, however country dynamics also appear to impact who is trusted. The electoral body was only trusted more than the media, people linked to their social media profiles, and celebrities and influencers by students in Senegal.

9. Conclusion

This study set out to better understand the kinds of fake content that circulated during recent elections in South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria and Senegal, as well as the perceptions, behaviours, attitudes and beliefs of cohorts of media studies students in these countries with respect to election-related disinformation. Implicit in this approach was the question of whether increasing

[273] Georget P. (2023) 'Can we develop our intuition to counter misinformation?'. Polytechnique Insights. https://www.polytechnique-insights.com/en/columns/digital/can-we-develop-our-intuition-to-counter-misinformation/

[274] Ibid.

[275] Nwonwu C. Tukur F. and Oyedepo Y. (2023) 'Nigeria elections 2023: How influencers are secretly paid by political parties'. BBC. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-63719505

[276] Beauvais C. (2022) *Fake news: Why do we believe it? Joint Bone Spine*. Jul;89(4):105371. doi 10.1016/j.jbspin.2022.105371. Epub 2022 Mar 4. PMID: 35257865; PMCID: PMC9548403.

the public's overall media and information literacy was sufficient to at least limit the impact of disinformation campaigns on citizens during election times and the threat to democracy these pose, or whether there were other behavioural factors that also needed attention. The content analysis in this study can in some respects stand alone as an account of the circulation of fake content during election times in the four countries, and in this regard contributes to other similar studies, even though out findings are not necessarily the same likely due to our sampling method.[277] However, by setting this content analysis alongside what we called focus group 'sessions' that included an in-depth questionnaire and discussion with the students, we also hoped to be able to make observations between the kinds of fake content that circulated and the propensity of the students – educated at different levels and at least media 'curious' – to participate in this circulation, or to effectively act as disinformation 'gatekeepers', largely due their levels of media and information literacy and awareness.

This study suggests that an increase in media and information literacy increases the carefulness with which people share information on social media, and may have some impact on what we called 'credulity' or the vulnerability to believing disinformation. It does appear to shift the trust environment, with, for example, a greater understanding of issues such a journalism ethics and how disinformation works correlating with a lower trust in influencers. However, 'credulity' and the trust environment are both also likely to be influenced by country dynamics, and possibly even perceptions of political stability. In this respect this study cannot assert as boldly as others have done that "high digital literacy protects against believing fake news",[278] but suggests a more complex picture.

There appears to be a gender dimension to the reception and circulation of disinformation, with male students having fewer social media accounts overall, and using them less, but having more public accounts, considering themselves more politically aware and engaged, and showing more confidence online. They are also likely to be more vulnerable to believing disinformation and conspiratorial thinking, and, at least in a country like Kenya, where the students were young and in first year, engage in online disinformation contests to support their candidates.

Female students overall could be described as more politically reticent online, with more private social media accounts. Part of this involves socialisation – in Nigeria students felt women were not expected to engage in politics – but another factor was the threat of online harassment and gendered attacks, and that women were seen as "bigger targets" online. It is notable that female students were more despondent, disillusioned and disempowered about their political future than male students.

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[277] See for example, Nanfuka J. Kapiyo V. Mabutho V. and Wakabi W. (2024) A tapestry of actors, attitudes, and impact Countering disinformation in Africa. CIPESA. https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/en/publications/publication/did/a-tapestry-of-actors-attitudes-and-impact-countering-disinformation-in-africa. Likewise the use of media branding to lend authority to fake content items is said to be higher in Senegal than our sample suggests. See: Reporters Without Borders (undated) 'Senegalese newspaper front pages hijacked for political propaganda purposes'. https://rsf.org/en/senegalese-newspaper-front-pages-hijacked-political-propaganda-purposes

[278] Beauvais C. (2022) *Fake news: Why do we believe it? Joint Bone Spine*. ScienceDirect. Jul;89(4) https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1297319X22000306

These observations on gender should however be taken as generalisations. There were outliers in both genders, with for example, post-graduate female students in South Africa significantly more assertive than their first-year female counterparts in Kenya.

That the students' distrust in their country's electoral bodies correlates with election-related disinformation that seeks to undermine the reliability and integrity of electoral processes in the four countries in this study appears significant. This distrust aligns with surveys by Afrobarometer that have found low levels of trust in electoral bodies amongst Africans, and what it calls particularly low levels of trust amongst both young people (37%), and those with a secondary and post-secondary education (35%),[279] that is, the demographic of our focus group sessions. But whether election-related disinformation is at least one cause of this distrust or feeds off an already existing distrust cannot be said. As one fact checker interviewed for this study described it,[280] fake content tends to build its own narratives or build *on* narratives by exploiting sentiments, perspectives, doubts and stories already in the public domain.

What is nevertheless notable is that this distrust of the electoral bodies was the lowest amongst the first-year students in both Kenya and Nigeria, where many, despite being of voting age, were unlikely to have voted for their first time in elections in their countries. That is, they distrusted their electoral bodies without having any first-hand experience in voting.

In this regard, Senegal is an exception, with students trusting their electoral body the most, and even more than the media. Students in Senegal also had more positive perceptions of their political environment, despite emerging from three years of political instability and violence. This correlates with surveys which suggest a greater confidence in democracy in that country, even while there are signs of dissatisfaction. Overall students in Senegal also suggested a lower vulnerability to disinformation and conspiratorial thinking. Given these observations, this study tentatively suggests that perceptions of political stability lowers the public's overall vulnerability to believing election-related disinformation, and that a greater public faith in democracy may lower the propensity to believing disinformation that attempts to disrupt democratic processes. As research has found, Senegalese see "democracy not just as a means of governance, but as a crucial component to Senegalese identity". [281]

Evidence of the extent to which the students were vulnerable to disinformation and conspiratorial thinking can be contradictory, but they are contradictions that seem inevitably part of how many of us construct our 'liveable' belief systems in an often contradictory world. While some students doubted if the Covid-19 vaccine worked, or the efficacy of western medicines in Africa, most students also tended to trust medical researchers. A conviction that climate change was real sat alongside a strong belief by a notable percentage of male students that the photographs of the moon landing were faked. It is these lived contradictions that any media and literacy programme is unlikely to resolve.

Most students were also strongly grounded in the need for evidence for the 'truth of things' as their primary way of navigating reality. Garrett and Weeks suggest that this is our primary defence

[279] AD761: As Africans enter busy political year, scepticism marks weakening support for elections – Afrobarometer

[280] Dubawa, Silas Jonathan.

[281] Jepsen Q. (undated) 'Democracy as an Identity in Senegal'. ORB International. https://orb-international.com/democracy-as-an-identity-in-senegal/

against a vulnerability to disinformation claims and conspiratorial thinking. As this study shows, many fake content items attempt to produce such 'evidence' to support their claims, sometimes clumsily – fake content can be crude, as much as what it signifies can be complex – sometimes more convincingly, and often in a way that is difficult for the layperson to easily verify. While misappropriated photos or videos used in fake content in the election periods could, ultimately, be verified by the media or fact checkers, and while 'shallow fakes' such as videos of Biden or Trump making claims where easily dismissible as fake, more effective were apparently 'deep fake' audio recordings which were circulated widely on social media. It is in this production of sophisticated and believable types of 'evidence' that cannot easily be verified or even verified at all by fact checkers and the media, that the use of AI in disinformation campaigns could increasingly pose a threat to even stable elections in the future, catalysing their publics more effectively, and strengthening their disruptive political agency and world-making.

10. Appendix

The table below shows the average scores for the Garrett and Weeks test by gender as an illustration of the percentage scores per question.

	Strongly agree		Strongly disagree		Neither agree nor disagree	
	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
I trust my gut feeling to tell me what's true and what's not	53	33	13	21	34	46
I trust my initial feelings about facts	33	25	20	13	47	62
My initial impressions are almost always right	47	33	27	25	26	42
I can usually feel when a claim is true or false even if I can't explain how I know	53	46	20	21	27	33
Average (%)	46.5	34.25	20	20	33.5	45.75
Evidence is more important than whether something feels true	80	79	13	0	7	21
A hunch needs to be confirmed with data	100	71	0	0	0	29
I trust the facts, not my instincts, to tell me what is true	60	67	13	13	27	20
I need to be able to justify my beliefs with evidence	87	71	0	8	13	21
Average (%)	81.75	72	6.5	5.25	11.75	22.75
Facts are dictated by those in power	33	33	27	42	40	25
What counts as truth is defined by power	33	33	40	42	27	25
Scientific conclusions are shaped by politics	33	12	47	46	20	42
"Facts" depend on their political context	33	50	27	25	40	25
Average (%)	33	32	35.25	38.75	31.75	29.25

Table 25: Percentage scores for Garrett and Weeks test by gender

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