

AI-Driven Misinformation, Psychological Vulnerability, and Democratic Resilience in West African Civic Ecosystems

Ezeh, Chukwuebuka Samson

Abstract

In recent years, young Africans' ability to access information and engage in public discourse has increased via civic digitalization and political life. Civic digitalization and political life have impacted how they access information and engage in public discourse and democratic processes. These have opened new opportunities for civic engagement and political participation but have also led to the spread of misinformation, emotional manipulation, information overload, and mentally difficult communications. In the study of misinformation and digital governance, there has been a growing focus on this phenomenon. Still, little attention has been paid to the psychological factors that shape susceptibility to manipulative information and their implications for democratic resilience. The purpose of this paper is to examine the link between psychological vulnerability, susceptibility to misinformation and democratic resilience in the civic ecosystems of youths in West Africa. The research was conducted using a qualitative systematic review method, which brings together evidence from the fields of Psychology, civic technology, digital behaviour, AI governance, and democratic studies. The review highlights how emotional vulnerability, information overload, stress responses, and online behavioural conditioning can affect civic reasoning, trust-building, political participation, and susceptibility to misinformation. It also shows that resilient democratic citizens are challenging for all citizens, not just for institutional capacity but also for emotion regulation, critical evaluation of information, and reflective engagement in digitally mediated environments. The paper's main argument is that, to tackle current democratic challenges, digital governance should be grounded in a psychologically informed framework. It therefore recommends boosting AI literacy, civic psychoeducation, digital well-being programs, ethical governance programs, and civic Education for resilience. The study proposes that fostering psychologically resilient civic cultures is a key element in strengthening democratic stability and informed civic participation in the fast-changing digital landscape in West Africa.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Psychological Vulnerability, Democratic Resilience, Civic Technology, West Africa

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1.1 Background to the Study

In Africa, youth engagement has been expanding rapidly across civic engagement, political communication, identity-building, and public discourse, all of which are on the rise amid the continent's connectivity (GSMA, 2023). Over the last 10 years, the proliferation of Internet connectivity, the swift adoption of mobile phones and the emergence of mobile-first communication cultures have had a tremendous influence on both the social and political lives of Africa's youth (Annual Report, 2024). Social media platforms such as TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube serve not only as spaces for entertainment but also as important arenas where opinions are formed, civic identities are negotiated, and public sentiment is shaped (Camara, Banu & Abeck, 2023). In many African cities, digital platforms have become primary sources of news and political information, shaping how young people understand political developments and develop a sense of social and civic belonging (Digital News Report, 2024). This is also supported by the growing presence of mobile devices in rural and semi-rural areas and their declining costs (GSMA, 2023).

As with the digital revolution, artificial intelligence has become increasingly integrated into contemporary digital communication systems. Recommendation systems, predictive engagement technologies, personalised content delivery mechanisms, and behavioural targeting strategies, based on algorithmic systems, are now staples of modern-day social media platforms, aimed at engaging, retaining, and attracting as many users as possible. So, digital settings have become far removed from being "neutral communication spaces" (Abro et al., 2025; Jacob & Vajjhala, 2025). AI systems do not simply affect which stories are visible to users; they may also influence which stories are more or less visible, and some types of content may be highlighted while others are not (Okolo, 2024). AI-mediated platforms frequently prioritise emotionally provocative content because such material tends to generate stronger engagement and wider dissemination (Borotov, 2025). The reason is that these stories are more likely to be believed than stories of introspection or neutral language. If there is a feeling of rage, emotionally charged political rhetoric, or fear appeals, the stories are even more likely to be believed. The diffusion of generative AI and automated propaganda systems has intensified the production and circulation of synthetic political content that can influence public perception and undermine the credibility of information (Romanishyn, Malytska, & Goncharuk, 2025).

The effects of these changes are particularly critical for the social, emotional, and political experiences of young people in Africa, where their lived experiences are increasingly shaping digital spaces. Existing research suggests that many young people who engage in political activities online are often already politically interested and active within conventional offline political spaces (Dzisah, 2018). Social media sites are spaces of information, emotion, and identity affirmation. In times of economic difficulty, unemployment, political instability, and social conflict, digital spaces can offer recognition, belonging, acknowledgment, and comfort, helping create a sense of community (Camara et al., 2023). Developmental factors associated with adolescence and emerging adulthood, including identity formation, emotional sensitivity, and the need for social validation, may increase young people's vulnerability to manipulative digital environments. In an emotionally charged environment (Gross, 1998), processes of emotional sensitivity, identity formation, peer validation, and ongoing engagement with digital environments can exacerbate exposure to emotionally charged misinformation and algorithmically reinforced political narratives. On the other hand, the number of different types of information can cause "cognitive overload", "emotional fatigue", and "anxiety", particularly in "politically charged digital spaces" (Folkman, 2013).

Beyond misinformation, digitally powerful, ubiquitous AI-driven misinformation is affecting the emotions of youth and their civic engagement. However, misinformation is not the only means of propagation; it can also be spread through emotional manipulation in the digital world (Abro et al., 2025; Borotov, 2025). Propaganda, algorithmically amplified conspiracy narratives, and fear-based communication may weaken reflective civic reasoning and encourage emotionally driven political judgement (Borotov, 2025). Prolonged exposure to emotionally charged political content may contribute to heightened political hostility, increased distrust of institutions, and more reactive forms of civic engagement within online communities. Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises misinformation as an informational, psychological, and democratic challenge because of its capacity to shape emotional responses, political attitudes, and civic behaviour (Borotov, 2025; Romanishyn et al., 2025). Too much emotionally driven information can shape attitudes and behaviours around confidence,

increase anxiety, and undermine confidence and meaningful civic engagement, thereby weakening the democratic system and, in turn, impacting democratic resilience (Borotov, 2025).

These are especially pertinent in the context of West Africa, where they overlap with the emergence of the younger generation into digital space, the lack of good governance, electoral tensions, and the lack of digital regulation and digital illiteracy (ECOWAS, 2022; Okolo, 2024; Camara et al., 2023). Across countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, and Sierra Leone, digital platforms and messaging networks, particularly WhatsApp and social media, have become increasingly important channels for political communication, information exchange, and civic engagement (Shiundu, 2026). Persistent institutional distrust and political polarisation may increase susceptibility to misleading narratives and unverified information. In this context of weak democratic institutions, uneven public trust, and partly immature digital governance, misinformation can manifest in various forms, including AI-generated content. Considering all the above, West Africa provides a particularly important context for examining the relationship between AI-driven misinformation, psychological vulnerability, and democratic resilience because of its expanding digital ecosystem, youthful population, evolving governance structures, and persistent challenges relating to misinformation and institutional trust.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Over the past few years, there has been significant research across all areas of civic engagement and digital communication, and AI has recently become more relevant to civic involvement. Existing scholarship has largely focused on technologizing in nature, in the sense that they have been on technological innovations, algorithmic systems, and digital infrastructures, while studies on misinformation have been mainly on electoral interference, media manipulation, and information disorder in internet environments (Jacob & Vajjhala, 2025; Okolo, 2024). Existing studies on youth digital participation frequently examine online activism, civic mobilisation, political engagement, and the use of social media as a platform for democratic participation (Dzisah, 2018). Although these strands of scholarship provide valuable insights, they remain insufficiently integrated to explain the psychological and emotional consequences of AI-mediated digital environments for young people in fragile democratic contexts.

The psychology of an AI-based digital ecosystem about civic participation in Africa remains under-researched. However, discussions on misinformation and digital political communication do not yet delve into topics like emotional vulnerability, anxiety and stress reactions, cognitive overload, online behavioural conditioning and emotional regulation (Gross, 1998; Folkman, 2013). However, in a digital world, children and youth are exposed to content that can be emotionally manipulative, influence perception, cause psychological stress, and lead to reactions that shape behaviours (Borotov, 2025; Gross, 1998; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It is highly noticeable in rapidly digitalising societies in West Africa, with low levels of trust in institutions, limited digital literacy, and politically polarised information.

This gap has important democratic implications, including how psychological vulnerability may affect civic reasoning, increase susceptibility to manipulation, intensify political hostility, and weaken trust in democratic institutions (Romanishyn et al., 2025; Borotov, 2025). Despite growing concern about AI-driven misinformation, limited attention has been paid to how psychological vulnerability and democratic resilience intersect in West African digital ecosystems. This study addresses that gap by examining how AI-mediated digital environments shape psychological vulnerability and democratic resilience among youths in West Africa.

1.3 Research Objectives

The overall objective of this study is to explore the link between the AI-connected digital environment, psychological susceptibility, and democratic resilience in civic spaces amongst youths in West Africa. The study aims to:

1. Examine how AI-mediated digital ecosystems influence political perception and civic behaviour among African youths.
2. Analyse the relationship between psychological vulnerability and susceptibility to misinformation within digitally mediated civic spaces.
3. Evaluate the implications of AI-driven misinformation for democratic resilience and institutional trust in West Africa.

4. Propose psychologically informed policy and governance strategies for strengthening digital resilience among youths.

1.4 Research Questions

1. What is the impact of AI-based digital environments on young people's civic engagement and political attitudes in Africa?
2. What is the relationship between psychological vulnerability and participants' vulnerability to misinformation and emotional manipulation in digital civic spaces?
3. What effects are we seeing from the use of AI to spread misinformation on the resilience of democracies and trust in institutions in West Africa?
4. What interventions are there that can be psychologically informed to increase digital resilience and democratic participation of youths in Africa?

1.5 Significance of the Study

The interdisciplinary research approach is significant because it brings together Health Psychology, civic technology, civic literacy and civic engagement in Africa, AI governance, digital behaviour research and studies how digital ecosystems (AI) impact the emotional wellbeing of young people and their civic thinking, civic action and civic resilience in West African societies. The study further proposes that citizens' emotional resistance to the digitally hyper-charged context is the most crucial One for democracy's stability and has practical implications in the context of AI regulation, misinformation governance, digital literacy, wellbeing of youth, institutional trust, election integrity, ethical design of platforms, digital accountability and human-centred governance.

2.0 Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Conceptual Clarifications

2.1.1 Artificial Intelligence in Civic Ecosystems

AI is also a tool that has impacted political communication in digitally mediated societies, shaping emotions in the communication process and the public's perception (Borotov, 2025; Romanishyn & Malyska, 2025). Today, the systems that enable information organisation and distribution on social media are primarily recommender systems, predictive engagement systems, personalised content curation, behavioural targeting systems, and automated moderation and generative AI technologies (Abro et al., 2025). These systems not only influence the content seen online but also the frequency of content, the emotional impact of specific stories, and the prominence of political information in digital environments (Borotov, 2025). AI is not simply infrastructure anymore; it is a business tool. With the use of AI, it is no longer a technology infrastructure; it is a business strategy. AI-mediated information systems increasingly influence how information is encountered, interpreted, and acted upon within democratic environments (Romanishyn et al., 2025). Sensationalism, fear, controversial topics, and outrage are more likely to be favoured by algorithms because they encourage greater user interaction and longer engagement with the content. Recommendation systems are therefore involved in reinforcing the "echo" chambers constructed digitally, where emotionally resonant political narratives are constantly fed to users and are now shaping their ideological views and social identities.

This is further compounded by the emergence of generative artificial intelligence (AI) that is creating synthetic political content, tampering with audiovisual content, producing 'deepfake' images, and developing 'automated propaganda' that can mislead or obscure information (Romanishyn et al., 2025). The extent of these changes has significant civic implications in African societies, where social media is rapidly becoming an important source of news and political information. Lack of appropriate regulation of AI-mediated communication systems, lack of harmonization of fact-checking processes, low institutional trust, and digital illiteracy (Okolo, 2024; Romanishyn et al., 2025) are cited as factors shaping the impact of AI-mediated communication systems on political consciousness and democratic participation. This exposure to misinformation and this emotional destabilization in online communities are exacerbated by the virality dynamics within the platforms, as well as by the influencers and the algorithmic "visibility structures" they create.

2.1.2 Psychological Vulnerability

This study employs the concept of psychological vulnerability to conceptualize emotional vulnerability and behavioural reactions of young people (Folkman, 2013). Psychological vulnerability is an increased likelihood of emotional, cognitive, social and maladaptive reactions to environmental stressors and pressures (Gross, 1998). Exposure to information, emotional overload, social comparison, lack of identity, and uncertainty in an Artificial Intelligence (AI)-generated Digital Environment

increase an individual's vulnerability. In this context, Afro-Youth (particularly) may be exposed to extreme talk, propaganda, crisis communication and politicised fear-mongering, which may lead to heightened emotional reactivity and anxiety (Borotov, 2025).

The sensationalization of stories seems to be more entertaining content perceived as a fear process, in which the story content triggers fear, enhancing the probability of a fear interpretation and triggering emotional contagion (Gross, 1998). Political tension and crisis narratives, violent images, and polarizing language (Folkman, 2013) can make economically, socially and politically vulnerable young people more susceptible to the effects of chronic stress and emotional fatigue. The other theme is psychological vulnerability in the digitally mediated civic context, namely, cognitive overload. Excessive information exposure may overwhelm cognitive processing capacity, thereby reducing individuals' ability to evaluate information effectively and engage in reflective judgement (Sweller, 1988). An emotional context is more likely to lead to quick conclusions than to critical evaluation of information, making people more prone to misinformation.

Psychological vulnerability is also affected by mobile social circles and identity insecurity. Consequently, there is an escalating process of negotiating belonging, recognition and ideological affiliation in the public sphere, via digital platforms (Camara et al., 2023). In the online space, youth can adopt ideologies that hold emotional hegemony in society to gain social acceptance and inclusion. Pressures can result in emotional control issues such as impulsive responses, sharing the anger, emotional escalation and active political involvement. These conditions reflect processes of stress appraisal, coping and adaptation, emotional regulation, and behavioural adjustment from a Health Psychology perspective in technologically mediated contexts.

2.1.3 Democratic Resilience

This resilience is understood as the stability of political institutions; as citizens' and democratic institutions' ability to resist democratic processes of misinformation, manipulation, polarization and destabilisation; as their ability to be informed; as their ability to participate in the democratic process; as their trust in civic institutions and their belief that they are legitimate in their democratic process (GSMA, 2023). Democratic resilience increasingly depends on citizens' emotional stability, critical thinking capacities, and ability to process information reflectively within complex digital environments (Borotov, 2025). The potential impact of the misinformation ecosystem can include emotional distrust and political suspicion, which can manifest as diminished trust in elections and institutions, and perceptions of institutional legitimacy. Thus, civic reasoning becomes a vital aspect of democratic life, as it enables people to critically assess information, resist emotionally manipulative appeals, and engage in reflective political deliberation.

The study further concludes that there is a connection between PS and DR: Conditions that may lead citizens to believe conspiracy theories, be anxious and cognitively fatigued, or lack trust in others may lead to political manipulation and anti-democratic mobilization, an increase in risk for them (Romanishyn et al., 2025; Gross, 1998; Sweller, 1988). This means that psychological strategies for responding to emotional reactions, critical processing of information on the internet, and individuals' capacity to increase reflective civic engagement in emotionally polarized communication cultures have become increasingly important to the resilience of democracy.

2.1.4 Misinformation and Disinformation

Misinformation and disinformation One among the civic dynamics in the digitally mediated sphere. Wardle, Derakhshan, Burns & Dias (2017) distinguish between misinformation and disinformation by defining misinformation as false or inaccurate information shared without the intention to deceive. In contrast, disinformation refers to deliberately fabricated or manipulated information strategically disseminated to influence perceptions, behaviour, or political outcomes. Propaganda is also a form of strategic communication directed towards ideology, emotion, and political action. Algorithmic amplification also plays its part in the dissemination of misinformation in the AI-mediated sphere, as it obscures what it does not wish the viewer to see and creates sensational stories (Okolo, 2024; Abro et al., 2025). In short, misinformation can not only be spread but also amplified.

They are very well captured in Africa, and in West Africa, the propagation of rumours with a political agenda, such as the WhatsApp-based "communique" networks and the few, unreachable fact-checkers, all contribute to shaping the West African information ecology. The increasing trend in digital participation leaves Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, and Sierra Leone with a shortage of digital literacy due to weak regulatory systems. In these contexts, the political and psychological consequences of AI-driven

misinformation are heightened, with emotionally charged narratives having the potential to quickly spread through digitally networked communities, contributing to trust, shaping political actions and perceptions, and influencing democracy.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Three theoretical models are employed in this study; they complement each other and, in combination, help explain the relationship between AI and a digital environment, psychological vulnerability and exposure to misinformation, and how these factors affect the outcome of democracy amongst African youths. It is possible to use the theoretical framework to understand digital behaviour, emotions, and civic participation in technologically overloaded environments. Selected theories are linked in ways that can explain the psychological tension created by information overload, the psychological reaction to exposure to digitally mediated stressors, and the effect of emotionally mediated communication environments on political views and democratic behaviours. All of these concepts and ideas are interdependent and can serve as a framework for capturing the overall concept of AI-powered civic ecosystems in West Africa.

2.2.1 Cognitive Load Theory

Cognitive Load Theory posits that individuals possess limited cognitive processing capacity and may experience overload when confronted with excessive information demands (Sweller, 1988). The theory proposes that human cognitive systems are resource-limited in their capacity to process information, especially when competing information is present. Teens are constantly hearing, seeing, and thinking about the rapid flow of information, emotionally charged political debates, multiple definitions, content prioritised by algorithms, and media overload in an AI-mediated digital world. These computer worlds can cause information overload, attention-span problems, and cognitive fatigue. Users can start to lose some reflective or critical thinking skills when attempting to represent more than One story at a time. Such cognitive overloading can leave politically engaged consumers more vulnerable to information verification and manipulation, and lead to less thoughtful civic judgments in politically charged digital spaces. Therefore, the theory is especially important for understanding the transmission of misinformation in emotionally amplified digital environments, as overloaded people are prone to fall back on emotional responses and heuristic processing rather than thoughtful analysis. Cognitive Load Theory subsequently provides a compelling explanation for the link among algorithmic content overload, emotional fatigue, and susceptibility to misinformation among African youths in the AI-driven civic space.

2.2.2 Stress and Coping Theory

Stress and Coping Theory provides the principal psychological theory through which this study examines the relationship between AI-mediated digital environments, psychological vulnerability and democratic resilience (Folkman, 2013). The theory conceptualizes stress as a dynamic process arising from an individual's appraisal of environmental demands and their perceived ability to cope with those demands. It is particularly relevant to understanding the psychological consequences of digitally mediated civic environments characterized by political polarization, information uncertainty, emotional intensity, and continuous exposure to online content.

The increasing integration of artificial intelligence into digital communication systems has expanded young people's exposure to crisis-oriented narratives, emotionally provocative political messages, online conflict, and misinformation that can generate psychological strain (Borotov, 2025; Okolo, 2024; Romanishyn et al., 2025). Stress and Coping Theory suggests that individuals respond differently to such pressures depending on their emotional regulation capacities, coping strategies, resilience, and access to social support networks. Consequently, exposure to emotionally charged information may contribute to anxiety, emotional exhaustion, stress responses, and maladaptive coping behaviours among some users, while others may demonstrate greater resilience and adaptive engagement (Gross, 1998; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

The theory is particularly useful for explaining how psychological vulnerability may influence engagement within AI-driven civic ecosystems. Repeated exposure to emotionally intense content can encourage emotional reactivity, digital withdrawal, cynicism, or increased dependence on online communities for social validation and a sense of belonging (Gross, 1998). Stress and Coping Theory therefore provides a valuable framework for understanding how digitally mediated stressors shape emotional wellbeing, behavioural responses, and civic participation among African youths. It also underscores the importance of psychological resilience in supporting critical information processing,

emotional regulation, and constructive democratic engagement within increasingly complex digital environments.

2.2.3 Social Amplification Theory or Media Dependency Theory

Social Amplification Theory explains how social and communication systems amplify public responses to information and shape collective perceptions of social and political issues (Kasperson, Renn, Slovic, Brown, Emel, Goble, Kasperson, & Ratick, 1988). The theory is particularly germane in today's digital age, where recommendation systems, content virality, repeated exposure, and networked circulation enhance its effect. With the advent of social media, the promotion of fear-based, outraged, unsure and controversial content has been rising, for it usually gets more engagement and reach. Content that evokes fear, outrage, uncertainty and controversy is engaging and reaches more people, so it is a favoured approach on social media. Emotional reactions are reinforced and amplified globally within a digital community through an algorithm. SALT may be used, as part of this study, to explore how AI-powered platforms have amplified and facilitated emotional contagion, political panic, polarisation, and distrust in civic contexts. There could be long-term effects on political perceptions, a declining sense of trust in institutions, polarization, and the younger generation's attitudes towards democracy. As a result, the theory provides insight into how digitally enhanced emotional contexts influence individual psychology and the stability and civic involvement of West African societies.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This paper adopts a qualitative systemic literature review design to examine the relationship between AI-driven misinformation, psychological vulnerability and democratic resilience within West African civic ecosystems. The method was deemed suitable because it enables the synthesis and critical evaluation of existing scholarly and policy discourses on the psychological, technological, and democratic aspects of AI-driven digital environments. A structured search of academic databases and institutional repositories, including Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and ResearchGate, was conducted to identify relevant literature. Similarly, other sources were drawn from policy and governance documents of various organisations, such as UNESCO, the African Union, ECOWAS, the Afrobarometer Annual Report, and the GSMA. The keywords used are AI, misinformation, psychological vulnerability, democratic resilience, social media, digital governance, civic technology, youth participation and West Africa.

The review included peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, governance frameworks, and scholarly publications covering various AI-related topics, misinformation, digital behaviour, psychological wellbeing, civic participation, and democratic resilience. Sources in English deemed relevant to African and/or global digital governance contexts were included. Publications not directly related to the thematic focus of the research and/or not supported by sufficient scholarly evidence were excluded. The thematic analysis method was used to analyse the selected literature. The themes identified, compared, and synthesized on key areas of concern surrounding AI-mediated misinformation, psychological vulnerability, emotional regulation, cognitive overload, civic participation, governance, and democratic resilience were instrumental in informing the analytical framework that guided the study. This analysis was conducted to identify the common themes, conceptual relationships, and debates in the literature applicable to the context of West Africa.

3.2 Literature Review

3.2.1 AI and Political Communication

With the rise of artificial intelligence in digital communication systems, modern political communication has been dramatically reshaped, especially on social media platforms, where algorithms now play a dominant role in how information is visible, interacted with, and discussed among the public (Jacob & Vajjhala, 2025). This claim is backed by existing research indicating that the output generated by AI-driven recommendation systems is emotionally stimulating and behaviourally predictable, leading to ideological similarity, echo chambers and emotional polarisation in digitally mediated civic spaces (Abro et al., 2025; Boratov, 2025). A focus on political micro-targeting and behavioural persuasion also demonstrates AI technologies' ability to deliver emotionally targeted political messaging that resonates with fears, anxieties, and identity affiliations (Romanishyn et al., 2025). The use of generative AI, deepfakes, and synthetic media in politics has also been accompanied by growing concerns about the spread of misinformation, the manipulation of narratives, and the loss of trust in digital information systems, as reported in recent studies (Romanishyn et al., 2025). However, existing

scholarship has extensively examined the technological and electoral dimensions of AI-mediated communication; comparatively little attention has been devoted to the psychological vulnerabilities and emotional experiences of young people in digitally mediated civic environments.

3.2.2 Psychological Effects of Digitally Saturated Environments

With the growing acceptance of the concept of digitally saturated environments, a new literature now links such contexts to anxiety, emotional instability, chronic stress responses, and cognitive fatigue, especially in the context of politically charged environments where outrage-oriented communication and emotionally provocative content are ubiquitous (Gross, 1998; Folkman, 2013). The study of information overload and digital fatigue indicates that digital overexposure may reduce reflective thinking and the capacity for reflective information processing, and increase vulnerability to misinformation due to cognitive fatigue and emotional burnout (Sweller, 1988; Gross, 1998; Folkman, 2013). Emotional contagion has also been noted as an important process in social media environments, where fear, outrage, hostility, and moral panic are quickly amplified and circulate through algorithmic processes and networked interactions among those who follow or engage with the same content (Kasperson et al., 1988; Boratov, 2025). Moreover, research on identity development and online validation suggests that young people may endorse emotionally charged narratives as a strategy for establishing their sense of belonging in online communities and upholding ideological uniformity (Gross, 1998). In total, this literature provides evidence that psychological well-being has become an increasingly important factor in political evaluation, trust-building, and democratic involvement in citizen-centred, AI-infused political spaces.

3.2.3 Youths, Social Media, and Civic Behaviour in Africa

The literature suggests that social media has increasingly become an important platform for civic engagement, political mobilisation, democratic participation, and public expression among African youth (Dzisah, 2018). Hashtag activism, youth-led protests, and online activism initiatives in Nigeria highlight how social media platforms such as X, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp are used to facilitate youth involvement in politics and public discourse (Camara et al., 2023). Additionally, there are more critical views in the literature on digitally connected youth, showing that they are also victims of misinformation, emotional manipulation, the dissemination of politically polarised narratives, and the amplification of propaganda (Okolo, 2024; Camara et al., 2023). African youths occupy a paradoxical position within contemporary digital environments, benefiting from expanded opportunities for civic participation while simultaneously facing increased exposure to misinformation, emotional manipulation, and psychologically demanding information ecosystems.

3.2.4 Misinformation Ecosystems in West Africa

The literature reviewed suggests that digitally mediated misinformation is increasingly intertwined with electoral politics, ethnic conflict, social polarization and weak democratic institutions in West Africa. Research indicates that misinformation is more prevalent during election periods, when campaign messages are manipulated, propaganda is used to manipulate voters emotionally, and political AI narratives can affect voter perceptions and trust in the electoral process (Boratov, 2025; Romanishyn et al., 2025). WhatsApp has emerged as a significant channel for the dissemination of misinformation because its encrypted communication structure poses considerable challenges for content moderation, verification, and fact-checking (Shiundu, 2026). Political influencers, online activists, and digital propaganda networks are also increasingly playing a role in people's emotional political involvement, according to research, across Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal and Sierra Leone. Consequently, the misinformation problem is not only a technological but also a social, political, and psychological challenge in the emotionally charged civic space of West Africa.

3.2.5 Gaps in Existing Literature

However, there is some evidence of links between AI research and issues of misinformation, political communication and digital governance, and youth civic engagement (Jacob & Vajjhala, 2025; Okolo, 2024; Camara et al., 2023). Analyses of the literature, however, show many deficiencies. Very few studies specifically focus on the emotional vulnerabilities and responses to misinformation, such as cognitive overload, emotional regulation and psychologically mediated democratic behaviour, with the little that does address the emotional aspects of misinformation viewing it as a technological or electoral issue (Gross, 1998; Folkman, 2013). Furthermore, few works in the fields of political communication, psychology, AI governance, and democratic theory exhibit any cross-fertilization or connections. Studies on the relationship between the spread of AI-driven disinformation and the

psychological vulnerability and democratic resilience of African youths in the digital environment in West Africa are also limited. This study addresses these gaps by integrating perspectives from Health Psychology, digital behaviour studies, AI governance, and democratic resilience scholarship to examine how AI-mediated civic ecosystems shape psychological vulnerability and civic outcomes among African youths.

4.0 AI-Mediated Civic Spaces and Psychological Vulnerability

4.1 Algorithmic Influence on Political Perception

Therefore, it is essential to be aware of the influence that an AI-powered recommender system can have on the type of media visibility it presents to users, their orientation toward it, and how exposure manifests in a digitized environment (Abro et al., 2025). Repeated exposure to emotionally aligned narratives may reinforce confirmation bias, strengthen ideological interpretation, and contribute to political polarisation within digitally mediated echo chambers (Borotov, 2025). Also, research on predictive behavioural analytics and emotional targeting indicates that emotionally charged content is more likely to elicit interaction and engagement due to responses such as fear, outrage, anger, and moral agitation, which translate into greater engagement (Abro et al., 2025; Borotov, 2025; Romanishyn et al., 2025). In West African contexts characterised by uneven digital literacy and democratic challenges, algorithmically amplified misinformation may influence political perceptions and civic engagement (Okolo, 2024).

4.2 Emotional Amplification and Outrage Cycles

AI-mediated digital platforms often generate emotional feedback loops in which user engagement increases exposure to emotionally provocative content, thereby reinforcing fear, outrage, uncertainty, and other affective responses. Emotionally provocative communication and feedback mechanisms that trigger emotional responses such as fear, outrage, uncertainty, and more are engagement-driven and fuel emotional reactions. Users can become hypervigilant and develop anxiety and emotional insecurity due to the frequency of hearing and seeing crisis stories and conspiratorial messages or due to electoral panic and politicised rumours (Gross, 1998). Further, research on outrage cycles indicates that increased political expression can actually increase hostility and intolerance, impatience and reduced civic empathy within digitally networked communities (Borotov, 2025). Emotional contagion in digitally networked spaces can lead to reduced reflective thinking, the spread of misinformation, and a general fragmentation of democracy within AI-mediated civic ecosystems.

4.3 Digital Fatigue and Cognitive Overload

Today, in the era of the explosion of AI-mediated communication systems, digitally connected young people are experiencing information overload, cognitive fatigue, and emotional overload (Sweller, 1988; Okolo, 2024; Borotov, 2025). Today's political social media landscape is One where users are bombarded with information, emotionally charged content, multiple perspectives, and information demands that exceed their cognitive processing capacity (Folkman, 2013). Further researchers suggest that digitally saturated environments distract and fragment attention, allow superficial engagement, provoke anxiety, emotional exhaustion and maladaptive coping (e.g. 'compulsory' use of the device, such as compulsive scrolling), and emotional disengagement (Gross, 1998). Emotionally charged political climates can erode citizens' trust in government, civic engagement, and efforts to combat misinformation over time.

4.4 Identity, Belonging, and Online Behavioural Conditioning

African youths are now using digital platforms as spaces to negotiate identity, gain recognition, and build political belonging in the current civic environment (Camara et al., 2023). Previous studies have shown that algorithmic platforms yield ideologically polarized feeds, digital tribalism, and emotionally homogenized online communities due to the constant consumption of emotionally similar messages and concerns (Borotov, 2025). Online communities can provide emotional security, social validation, and a sense of belonging. However, emotional reliance on an online community may also make a person more vulnerable to ideological manipulation, misinformation, and even social exclusion and group-based pressure (Gross, 1998). AI-based engagement also influences behaviours by algorithmically incentivizing content engagement (through social norms and virality) and by incentivizing emotions, political stances, and civic behaviour. Hence, AI-enabled civic ecosystems increasingly influence the emotions, cognition, identity, and behaviour of African youth in digitally rich democratic contexts.

5.0 Democratic and Governance Implications

Digital civic spaces are becoming increasingly important for democratic engagement, public discourse, and governance within West Africa (Okolo, 2024). Current scholarship demonstrates how emotionally charged internet contexts affect the political communication, emotional regulation, trust, and civic resilience of emotionally engaged citizens (Borotov, 2025). In contexts of rapid digitalization, low institutional trust, and unequal digital literacy, misinformational ecosystems can further instill low levels of civic trust, polarization, and democratic fragility (Okolo, 2024; Romanishyn et al., 2025). For it is the citizens' psychological capacity for critical analysis of information and rejection of digital manipulation attempts that is emerging as significant as the institutions for the constitution of a sense of democratic resilience. In this respect, building institutional capacities is important, but so is the capacity of citizens to critically process information and not be easily manipulated by the digital world, in order to create a sense of democratic resilience.

5.1 Institutional Trust and Democratic Erosion

Citizens' trust in public institutions is a key precondition for democratic legitimacy, as citizens' participation in civic life, electoral stability, and cooperation in public governance depend on it (Romanishyn et al., 2025). The aforementioned scholarship suggests that repeatedly engaging with emotionally charged stories fosters ideological interpretation, heightens bias, and increases polarization of political positions within emotionally engineered echo chambers (Borotov, 2025). Existing scholarship suggests that polarization often leads to political cynicism, anti-government sentiment, and democratic apathy due to exposure to distrustful messages (Borotov, 2025). Perceptions of electoral legitimacy and institutional credibility are affected by misinformation campaigns and the production of fake propaganda using artificial intelligence. They are increasingly influencing the democratic landscape in West Africa, particularly in Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, and Sierra Leone, where they spread in the emotionally charged digital sphere.

5.2 AI Governance Gaps in West Africa

However, the adoption of AI in West Africa is progressing much faster than the capacity to build adequate governance and regulatory frameworks to manage digital harm, misinformation, and algorithmic manipulation (ECOWAS, 2022; Okolo, 2024). There are still gaps in laws, policies, and institutional frameworks in many States to comprehensively regulate AI, ensure algorithmic transparency, and establish coordinated systems to address misinformation, which can lead to the spread of manipulative political information and synthetic media content without adequate oversight (UNESCO, 2023). This is evident in existing scholarship that focuses on the inadequacies of governance stemming from capacity constraints, fragmented digital governance structures, inadequate cybersecurity, and policy ambiguities (Okolo, 2024). However, the vision and practice of governance in West Africa still do not reflect the principles of ethical innovation, transparency and accountability, and the protection of digital rights, as embodied in the African Union AI Strategy and the UNESCO AI Ethics Framework. Thus, governance is not only a technical issue but also a psychological and democratic One: the digital ecosystem is growing and increasingly shaped by actors capable of exploiting emotional and informational vulnerabilities.

5.3 Civic Participation and Democratic Resilience

Citizens' capacity to assess information critically, resist emotional manipulation, and engage reflectively in civic life has become increasingly important for democratic participation (Borotov, 2025; Romanishyn et al., 2025). Past research indicates that the factors supporting democratic resilience are not solely institutional and that cognitive, emotional, digital, and reflective civic skills are increasingly integral to it (Gross, 1998). However, cognitively overloaded, emotionally charged digital environments, where outrage grows louder, fear is enlisted, and critical thinking dwindles (Sweller, 1988; Borotov, 2025), have the potential to disrupt critical thinking and deliberative engagement. Digital citizenship, in turn, calls for responsible sharing of information; responsible and media-literate online interaction; and ethical sharing of information that can help enhance the integrity of information and democratic participation. Most importantly, existing scholarship suggests that psychological resilience is a critical part of democratic resilience, as emotionally self-regulated citizens are more likely to resist the spread of misinformation, exercise reflective judgement, and engage constructively within democratic systems.

6.0 Recommendations

To address misinformation and democratic vulnerabilities in West Africa's digital spaces, UNESCO (2023) suggests a multifaceted strategy that combines psychological resilience, civic

Education, governance upgrades, technical and digital literacy, and the ethical regulation of AI. The recommendations reflect the idea that, as democratic resilience has become increasingly dependent on institutional transformation, it is also reliant on citizens' emotional and cognitive resilience and on their ability to engage in reflective digital citizenship.

6.1 AI Literacy and Civic Psychoeducation

A component of building democratic resilience is psychologically informed digital literacy that can foster critical engagement with emotionally charged information environments (Romanishyn et al., 2025; UNESCO, 2023; Gross, 1998). Critical digital reasoning, skills for checking the veracity of misinformation, and civic psychoeducation should be embedded in curricula and youth development programmes in educational institutions and civic organisations to build citizens' abilities to identify manipulative narratives, understand the influence of algorithms and resist emotionally reactive online behaviours (Okolo, 2024; UNESCO, 2023). Digital literacy, therefore, should not only involve the technical aspects of using digital devices and the Internet, but also emotional awareness, stress management and reflective civic reasoning.

6.2 Youth-Centred Digital Wellbeing Interventions

African youth are increasingly being subjected to emotional stress, anxiety, cognitive overload and psychological exhaustion to deal with misinformation and politically charged interactions online in civic spaces (Okolo, 2024; Gross, 1998; Folkman, 2013). Governments, educational institutions, and civic organisations should strengthen the structures of Mental Health Services, resilience-building programmes, and digital wellness initiatives to help develop emotional coping mechanisms and reduce susceptibility to manipulative narratives (Gross, 1998). Emotionally supportive peer networks and psychologically healthy digital communities can also foster democratic resilience by creating emotional stability and positive civic engagement.

6.3 Ethical AI Governance Frameworks

Transparency and accountability, psychological safety, and democracy in digitally mediated societies would be key emphases in ethical AI governance frameworks (ECOWAS, 2022). To improve algorithmic amplification practices and misinformation governance, technology companies based in West Africa should enhance moderation systems, prioritize language responsiveness, and be transparent about the systems in place to identify and mitigate misinformation and algorithmic amplification (Romanishyn et al., 2025; UNESCO, 2021). There is further need to promote AI governance policies, ethical oversight policies, and digital rights protections for Africa's digital ecosystems, particularly through regional institutions, such as ECOWAS and the African Union, which can provide support in managing trans-border misinformation and algorithmic manipulation in the region, in a more harmonised way (ECOWAS, 2022; Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy -African Union, 2024; UNESCO, 2021).

6.4 Strengthening Democratic Resilience

To enhance the resilience of democracy, it is essential to strengthen civic Education and introduce clear governance frameworks, media literacy initiatives, and public communication processes that foster trust in institutions and help reduce misinformation (Romanishyn et al., 2025). Programs in civic Education should also strengthen critical thinking and civic awareness and prepare young people to navigate an information environment that includes emotional content (Romanishyn et al., 2025; UNESCO, 2023). To begin, psychological resilience should be increasingly recognized as a democratic infrastructure, in which citizens who can control their emotional responses and critically assess information are more likely to be active and participatory in democratic processes.

6.5 Conclusion

The analysis presented in this paper suggests that AI-driven digital ecosystems increasingly influence political perceptions, emotional responses, civic behaviour, and democratic participation among African youth in West African contexts. The literature increasingly suggests that misinformation in AI-mediated environments extends beyond technological concerns and has significant psychological and democratic implications, particularly regarding emotional vulnerability, cognitive strain, and civic behaviour (Borotov, 2025; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Sweller, 1988). As such, emotional management, critical digital thinking, psychological well-being, and ethically navigated digital environments that allow for reflective civic participation and confidence in institutions are emerging characteristics of democratic resilience. The future of democratic resilience in Africa will depend not only on technological innovation and regulatory reform but also on cultivating psychologically resilient civic

cultures that navigate emotionally saturated, algorithmically mediated digital environments with critical awareness, emotional stability, and democratic responsibility.

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