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AI-Forged Cultural Weapons: Deepfake Memes, Platformed Political Manipulation, and Democratic Harm in Nigeria's 2023 Elections

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ABSTRACT

Nigeria's 2023 general elections unfolded within an increasingly complex digital information environment characterised by political humour, manipulated media, identity-based narratives, and rapidly circulating online content. While debates on deepfakes have largely focused on technologically sophisticated synthetic videos, the Nigerian experience suggests that democratic harm frequently emerges through more culturally intelligible forms of political manipulation. Images, voice notes, edited screenshots, captions, and internet memes often proved more electorally consequential because they travelled easily across platforms and resonated with existing political anxieties and partisan identities. This article conceptualises deepfake memes as AI-forged cultural weapons whose political significance lies not only in their synthetic properties but also in their capacity to transform cultural symbols into instruments of political persuasion, ridicule, and reputational injury. Drawing on qualitative multimodal discourse analysis and the secondary re-analysis of verified scholarly and institutional materials relating to Nigeria's 2023 elections, the study examines how manipulated political artefacts acquire democratic significance through synthetic manipulation, memetic packaging, cultural weaponisation, and platform amplification. The findings suggest that the most influential forms of manipulated political content were not necessarily those that achieved perfect synthetic realism but those that successfully combined humour, visual salience, cultural familiarity, and cross-platform circulation. The article advances a four-layer model of AI-forged electoral meme weaponisation and argues that responding effectively to emerging forms of political manipulation requires moving beyond technological detection towards greater attention to multimodal literacy, platform accountability, and culturally informed approaches to democratic resilience..

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary electoral contests are increasingly fought across digital spaces where political meaning is manufactured as much through images, humour, and platform cultures as through campaign speeches and party manifestoes. The democratic consequences of this transformation extend beyond the circulation of misinformation to encompass new forms of political manipulation capable of shaping what citizens regard as believable, shareable, and worthy of public trust. Political actors no longer require elaborate propaganda infrastructures to influence public judgement. A manipulated image shared within trusted networks, a synthetic voice note circulated through messaging applications, or a seemingly humorous

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political meme capable of activating existing social anxieties may prove equally consequential for democratic life. Consequently, contemporary concerns about electoral integrity must increasingly account for the convergence of artificial intelligence, participatory digital cultures, and platformed political communication (Chadwick, 2013; Chesney & Citron, 2019; Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020).

Nigeria's 2023 general elections offer an important illustration of this transformation. Beyond rallies, televised debates, and legal contests, the elections unfolded within an information ecosystem characterised by manipulated images, screenshots, memes, short-form videos, parody accounts, and politically charged voice notes circulating across Facebook, X, TikTok, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, blogs, and online news platforms. This digital environment acquired particular significance because it intersected with longstanding concerns relating to institutional trust, ethno-religious politics, economic uncertainty, and the country's history of highly contested elections. Within such contexts, manipulated political content need not persuade entire electorates to become democratically consequential. Its influence frequently lies in its capacity to confirm existing suspicions, reinforce partisan loyalties, and shape political conversations long after factual corrections have emerged (Badmus & Kilani, 2023; Centre for Democracy and Development [CDD], 2023a, 2023b; European Union Election Observation Mission [EU EOM], 2023).

Much of the existing scholarship on deepfakes has understandably focused on technologically sophisticated synthetic media, particularly AI-generated videos capable of imitating the appearance, voice, or behaviour of public figures. Such concerns remain important because synthetic media challenge the evidentiary value traditionally associated with audiovisual materials and create significant democratic vulnerabilities relating to misinformation, reputational harm, and institutional trust (Chesney & Citron, 2019; Westerlund, 2019). Yet limiting contemporary electoral manipulation to technically advanced deepfakes risks overlooking the broader ecology within which political deception frequently operates. The Nigerian experience demonstrates that manipulated political artefacts exist along a continuum that includes doctored photographs, edited screenshots, synthetic audio, false-context media, AI-enhanced images, and culturally situated meme practices that derive their influence less from technical sophistication than from social recognisability and emotional resonance (Paris & Donovan, 2019; Ekpang et al., 2023).

This article therefore employs the concept of *deepfake memes* to capture the intersection between synthetic or manipulated political representations and memetic forms of communication. Deepfake memes are understood here as digitally circulated political artefacts that combine technological manipulation with the communicative properties of internet memes, including humour, remixability, repetition, intertextuality, cultural symbolism, and rapid social circulation. Their political effectiveness consequently derives not merely from questions of authenticity but from their capacity to package political narratives within culturally intelligible forms that invite participation, emotional investment, and collective interpretation. The synthetic dimension challenges evidential certainty, while the memetic dimension facilitates cultural accessibility and social transmission. Together, they produce what this article conceptualises as **AI-forged cultural weapons**: communicative artefacts that mobilise cultural symbols and technological affordances to delegitimise political actors, intensify identity-based divisions, and shape public perceptions of democratic processes (Milner, 2016; Shifman, 2013; Adebomi, 2025).

Importantly, the democratic significance of deepfake memes cannot be adequately understood through technological explanations alone. Electoral communication operates through socially shared meanings rather than isolated technological events. Images acquire

political significance through captions; humour derives its persuasive force from cultural familiarity; and manipulated representations frequently succeed because they resonate with pre-existing political narratives concerning competence, religion, corruption, ethnicity, morality, and national belonging. Multimodal discourse analysis is particularly valuable in this regard because it foregrounds the interaction between visual, textual, and cultural resources in the production of political meaning. Rather than treating images and captions as merely decorative features, multimodal approaches recognise them as constitutive elements through which political realities are constructed, contested, and circulated within digital publics (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Forceville & Urios-Aparisi, 2009; Unuabonah & Oyebode, 2021).

Nigeria's 2023 elections equally illustrate the limitations of framing democratic harms solely in terms of electoral outcomes. Manipulated political content may not determine election results directly, yet it can contribute significantly to reputational injury, heightened political polarisation, weakened institutional trust, and diminished confidence in shared standards of evidence. Democratic harm therefore extends beyond questions of who wins or loses elections to encompass the quality of public deliberation itself. Political memes and synthetic media frequently occupy ambiguous communicative spaces where satire, misinformation, humour, and political hostility become difficult to disentangle. Their effects consequently emerge not only through deception but also through their capacity to normalise suspicion, amplify existing grievances, and organise political identities around emotionally compelling narratives (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020; CDD, 2023b).

Against this background, this article addresses three interrelated questions. First, how did manipulated political content and deepfake meme practices fit within the broader misinformation ecology of Nigeria's 2023 elections? Second, what multimodal and cultural features contributed to their effectiveness as instruments of political weaponisation? Third, what implications do these developments hold for electoral governance, democratic resilience, platform accountability, and future scholarship on AI-mediated political communication in Nigeria? Rather than reproducing ethically sensitive electoral artefacts, the study addresses these questions through the qualitative analysis of verified scholarly materials, institutional reports, and published datasets relating to Nigeria's 2023 electoral experience.

The central argument advanced throughout this article is that deepfake memes should be understood not merely as synthetic media artefacts but as AI-forged cultural weapons whose democratic effects emerge through four mutually reinforcing processes: synthetic manipulation, memetic packaging, cultural weaponisation, and platform amplification. Appreciating this intersection between technology, culture, and political communication is indispensable for understanding both the vulnerabilities and the future resilience of democratic discourse in digitally mediated electoral environments.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations

AI-Forged Cultural Weapons and Democratic Harm

The relationship between digital technologies and democratic politics has become increasingly complex in recent years. Contemporary concerns about political communication extend beyond questions of misinformation and disinformation to include the growing capacity of artificial intelligence and participatory digital cultures to reshape how citizens construct political realities. Electoral communication is no longer confined to institutional gatekeepers such as newspapers, broadcast organisations, and political campaigns. Rather, digital platforms have enabled political information to emerge simultaneously through formal

and informal communicative practices characterised by humour, visual symbolism, emotional appeals, and algorithmically amplified participation (Chadwick, 2013; Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Consequently, democratic harm increasingly manifests not simply through false political claims but through the strategic manipulation of what citizens see, hear, share, and ultimately regard as politically credible.

Existing scholarship has understandably conceptualised deepfakes principally as synthetic audiovisual artefacts generated through artificial intelligence technologies capable of replicating human appearances, voices, and behaviours (Chesney & Citron, 2019; Westerlund, 2019). Such technological capabilities undoubtedly pose important challenges for democratic societies because they undermine the traditional evidentiary value attached to audiovisual materials and complicate citizens' capacities to distinguish authentic representations from manipulated political content. However, reducing democratic vulnerabilities to technologically sophisticated deepfakes alone risks obscuring the broader communicative ecosystems within which political manipulation frequently operates. Electoral misinformation rarely succeeds because of technological sophistication alone. Rather, manipulated political content derives much of its influence from its ability to resonate with culturally intelligible narratives, reinforce partisan identities, and activate emotionally salient political concerns (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020; Paris & Donovan, 2019).

Contemporary political communication scholarship increasingly recognises that digital misinformation operates as a socially embedded phenomenon rather than an exclusively technological problem. Citizens do not encounter political messages in isolation but interpret them through pre-existing political commitments, cultural understandings, and social relationships. Consequently, manipulated political artefacts frequently acquire democratic significance through their capacity to participate meaningfully within collective political conversations (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Freelon & Wells, 2020). Images become politically persuasive because they align with culturally recognisable political narratives, while humour simultaneously facilitates participation and lowers critical resistance to political misinformation. Political manipulation therefore frequently succeeds because it appears socially believable before it becomes factually persuasive.

Nigeria's digital political environment illustrates this relationship particularly well. The country's electoral processes have historically been characterised by highly contested political narratives relating to ethnicity, religion, regional identities, corruption, economic governance, and institutional legitimacy. The increasing integration of social media into political communication has consequently expanded opportunities for both democratic participation and political manipulation. During the 2023 elections, manipulated images, satirical political memes, edited screenshots, synthetic voice notes, and false-context media circulated extensively across multiple digital platforms, frequently acquiring political influence because they resonated with existing partisan anxieties rather than because they exhibited sophisticated technological characteristics (CDD, 2023a; EU EOM, 2023; Premium Times Centre for Investigative Journalism, 2023).

Against this background, this article conceptualises manipulated political artefacts as **AI-forged cultural weapons**. The concept deliberately moves beyond technologically deterministic understandings of political misinformation by foregrounding the interactions among artificial intelligence, multimodal communication, platform cultures, and culturally situated political narratives. AI-forged cultural weapons are therefore understood as manipulated political artefacts whose democratic consequences emerge not merely from their synthetic characteristics but from their capacities to weaponise cultural symbols, emotional appeals, and digital affordances for political purposes. Their effectiveness consequently

depends simultaneously upon technological manipulation, cultural intelligibility, and platform-mediated amplification.

This conceptualisation contributes to contemporary debates on democratic harm in three important respects. First, it recognises that manipulated political content exists along a continuum extending beyond sophisticated deepfake videos to encompass politically consequential artefacts characterised by varying degrees of manipulation and authenticity. Second, it foregrounds culture as an indispensable analytical category for understanding why manipulated political content becomes persuasive within particular democratic contexts. Third, it conceptualises democratic harm as a cumulative communicative process rather than an isolated technological event. Political manipulation frequently operates incrementally through repetition, humour, selective amplification, and emotional resonance long before it produces measurable electoral consequences.

The democratic implications of this transformation are particularly significant because they extend beyond questions of electoral outcomes to encompass broader concerns relating to public trust, democratic deliberation, and institutional legitimacy. Democracies ultimately depend upon citizens' capacities to participate meaningfully within shared informational environments characterised by minimum standards of evidential accountability. Where manipulated political artefacts successfully undermine such environments, democratic institutions become increasingly vulnerable to political polarisation, diminished public trust, and weakened deliberative capacities (Sunstein, 2018; Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). Understanding democratic harm therefore requires sustained attention to both technological developments and the social conditions that enable manipulated political narratives to flourish.

Platformed Political Manipulation and Meme Weaponisation

Digital platforms have fundamentally transformed contemporary political communication by simultaneously expanding democratic participation and facilitating new forms of political manipulation. Rather than functioning as neutral technological intermediaries, platforms actively shape political communication through algorithmic recommendation systems, participatory cultures, and networked patterns of visibility. Political messages consequently derive influence not merely from their informational content but also from their capacities to circulate rapidly across interconnected digital environments (van Dijck et al., 2018; Gillespie, 2018).

Internet memes occupy a particularly significant position within these developments because they combine humour, visual simplicity, remixability, and cultural familiarity in ways that encourage widespread political participation. Contrary to popular assumptions that memes function principally as entertainment artefacts, contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises them as important instruments of political communication capable of shaping political identities, framing public debates, and mobilising collective action (Shifman, 2013; Milner, 2016). Political memes derive much of their persuasive power from their ability to compress complex political arguments into emotionally resonant visual narratives that remain readily accessible across diverse audiences.

Within highly polarised political environments, however, these communicative advantages may simultaneously facilitate political weaponisation. Memes frequently blur distinctions between satire, political criticism, misinformation, and hostility by presenting politically consequential narratives within apparently humorous or innocuous formats. Their political influence consequently extends beyond explicit persuasion to encompass agenda-setting

functions that shape how citizens interpret political actors, institutions, and democratic processes (Milner, 2016; Phillips & Milner, 2021).

The concept of meme weaponisation employed in this article therefore refers to ***processes through which manipulated political artefacts are strategically packaged and circulated to amplify particular political narratives, delegitimise opponents, and organise collective political judgements***. Their effectiveness frequently emerges through interactions among technological manipulation, memetic packaging, cultural resonance, and algorithmically enabled visibility across digital platforms. Platform amplification consequently transforms individual political artefacts into socially consequential communicative events capable of influencing broader democratic conversations.

Drawing upon these insights, this article advances a four-layer model of AI-forged electoral meme weaponisation comprising: (1) synthetic manipulation, (2) memetic packaging, (3) cultural weaponisation, and (4) platform amplification. The model proposes that manipulated political artefacts become democratically consequential not because they are technologically sophisticated in themselves but because they successfully integrate these mutually reinforcing communicative processes. Understanding democratic harm within digitally mediated electoral environments therefore requires sustained analytical attention to the interactions among technology, culture, and political communication rather than privileging any single explanatory variable.

Theoretical Foundations

This study is principally situated at the intersection of Multimodal Discourse Theory and the Hybrid Media System framework. Together, these theoretical perspectives provide important analytical tools for understanding how manipulated political artefacts acquire communicative significance, circulate across networked media environments, and produce democratic consequences within contemporary political systems (Chadwick, 2013; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Multimodal Discourse Theory emphasises that meaning is produced through interactions among multiple semiotic resources, including language, images, sounds, gestures, visual arrangements, and other communicative signs rather than through textual representations alone (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). Contemporary scholarship further recognises that digital communication is inherently multimodal because individuals simultaneously negotiate meanings across visual, textual, auditory, and interactive communicative modes (Forceville & Urios-Aparisi, 2009; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). Political communication within digitally mediated environments is therefore fundamentally multimodal because citizens interpret captions, images, visual symbolism, audio materials, humour, and platform-specific communicative practices collectively when constructing political meanings (Milner, 2016; Phillips & Milner, 2021). This perspective is particularly valuable for analysing manipulated political artefacts because it foregrounds the relationships among technological manipulation, visual representations, cultural interpretations, and audience participation in the production of political narratives.

Complementing this perspective, Chadwick's (2013) Hybrid Media System framework conceptualises contemporary political communication as an environment characterised by continuous interactions among older and newer media logics. Political actors increasingly navigate interconnected communicative spaces where institutional media organisations, digital platforms, political elites, and citizens collectively participate in shaping public narratives and democratic conversations. Consequently, political influence frequently emerges through the strategic circulation, remediation, and amplification of information

across multiple communicative environments rather than within isolated technological systems (Chadwick, 2013). More recent scholarship similarly demonstrates that digital platforms increasingly function as socio-technical infrastructures that shape political visibility, participation, and patterns of democratic engagement through networked communicative practices (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018). The circulation of manipulated political artefacts must therefore be understood not simply as individual acts of misinformation but as phenomena embedded within hybrid and platformed information ecosystems.

Together, these theoretical perspectives facilitate a more nuanced understanding of democratic harm within digitally mediated electoral contexts. Multimodal Discourse Theory explains how manipulated political artefacts acquire cultural and communicative significance, while the Hybrid Media System framework illustrates how such artefacts circulate across interconnected political information environments characterised by multiple actors, technologies, and communicative logics (Chadwick, 2013; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). Their integration therefore provides an appropriate analytical foundation for examining how deepfake memes become AI-forged cultural weapons within Nigeria's contemporary electoral landscape. More importantly, the combined theoretical framework foregrounds the proposition advanced throughout this article that democratic harms emerge not solely from technological manipulation itself but from the interactions among technological affordances, cultural meanings, and networked communicative practices that render manipulated political content socially intelligible and politically consequential.

3. **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative multimodal discourse analytical approach supported by the secondary re-analysis of verified scholarly and institutional materials relating to Nigeria's 2023 general elections. The methodological choice is informed by the study's central concern with understanding how manipulated political artefacts acquire democratic significance through interactions among technological manipulation, cultural symbolism, and platform-mediated political communication. Rather than seeking to establish causal relationships between particular artefacts and electoral outcomes, the analysis is principally concerned with interrogating the communicative processes through which democratic harms emerge within digitally mediated political environments (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tracy, 2020).

Qualitative approaches are particularly appropriate for examining political communication phenomena characterised by complexity, contextuality, and multiple layers of meaning because they facilitate sustained engagement with how social realities are socially constructed, negotiated, and interpreted across diverse communicative contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Multimodal discourse analysis similarly enables researchers to examine relationships among visual, textual, cultural, and symbolic resources embedded within communicative artefacts while remaining attentive to their broader socio-political environments (Forceville & Urios-Aparisi, 2009; Jewitt, 2014; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). The approach is particularly valuable for studies of political misinformation because manipulated political artefacts frequently derive their influence not from isolated textual claims but from interactions among images, symbols, humour, captions, and culturally situated interpretations (Phillips & Milner, 2021; Shifman, 2013).

The study relies exclusively upon ethically sourced and publicly available materials comprising peer-reviewed scholarly publications, institutional reports, election observation documents, fact-checking reports, and verified datasets relating to political misinformation and digital political communication during Nigeria's 2023 general elections. Principal sources

include publications produced by the Centre for Democracy and Development, the European Union Election Observation Mission, Premium Times Centre for Investigative Journalism, Africa Check, and Dubawa alongside contemporary scholarship on artificial intelligence, political misinformation, and electoral communication within African democracies (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2023a, 2023b; Dubawa, 2023; European Union Election Observation Mission, 2023). The analysis deliberately excludes unverified or ethically problematic electoral artefacts whose reproduction may inadvertently contribute to their further circulation, legitimisation, or normalisation within public discourse.

Secondary re-analysis was adopted because it permits rigorous engagement with previously verified materials while facilitating theoretical reinterpretation through alternative analytical frameworks and research questions (Heaton, 2008; Johnston, 2017). Institutional reports and scholarly materials are therefore not treated merely as descriptive sources but are systematically interrogated to identify recurring communicative patterns relating to manipulated political representations, cultural narratives, and platform-mediated amplification practices. This approach is particularly appropriate for studies concerned with understanding the meanings and democratic implications of communicative phenomena rather than establishing linear causal explanations (Tracy, 2020).

Data analysis proceeded through iterative thematic and multimodal coding informed by the study's four-layer conceptual framework. Particular analytical attention was devoted to identifying patterns relating to synthetic manipulation, memetic packaging, cultural weaponisation, and platform amplification across documented electoral communication practices. The analytical objective was not to catalogue individual misinformation incidents exhaustively but to illuminate broader communicative processes through which manipulated political artefacts become democratically consequential within contemporary electoral environments (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Finally, the study maintains strict ethical commitments by privileging verified institutional materials and avoiding the unnecessary reproduction of manipulated political content. This approach recognises that scholarship on political misinformation must remain attentive to the possibility that academic analyses may inadvertently amplify harmful communicative artefacts. Ethical restraint therefore constitutes both a methodological and normative commitment throughout the present analysis and aligns with contemporary recommendations for the responsible governance and ethical deployment of emerging technologies and digital information systems (Creswell & Poth, 2018; UNESCO, 2021).

4. Findings and Results

The findings of this study suggest that the democratic consequences of manipulated political content during Nigeria's 2023 general elections cannot be adequately understood through technologically deterministic explanations that privilege sophisticated deepfake videos alone. Rather, the evidence points towards a more complex communicative ecology in which political manipulation emerged through the interaction of technological affordances, cultural narratives, participatory digital practices, and platform-mediated amplification. The most politically consequential artefacts were frequently not those that exhibited the highest degrees of synthetic realism but those that successfully combined emotional resonance, cultural familiarity, and extensive cross-platform circulation. Consequently, democratic harm emerged cumulatively through mutually reinforcing processes of synthetic manipulation, memetic packaging, cultural weaponisation, and platform amplification.

Synthetic Manipulation Beyond Deepfake Videos

One of the most significant findings of this study is that synthetic political manipulation during Nigeria's 2023 elections extended considerably beyond technologically sophisticated deepfake videos. Contemporary discussions on artificial intelligence and electoral misinformation frequently privilege highly realistic synthetic media as the principal democratic threat. However, the Nigerian experience demonstrates that manipulated political artefacts increasingly occupy fluid positions along a continuum comprising edited screenshots, synthetic audio recordings, AI-enhanced visual materials, false-context images, digitally altered campaign materials, and politically motivated meme practices (CDD, 2023a; EU EOM, 2023).

Importantly, political misinformation did not always depend upon citizens' inability to distinguish authentic materials from manipulated ones. In many instances, political artefacts achieved significant circulation because they aligned persuasively with pre-existing partisan assumptions regarding political actors and institutions. Manipulated content was therefore frequently consumed less as objectively verifiable information than as socially meaningful political narratives that reinforced existing beliefs and ideological commitments. The democratic consequences of synthetic manipulation consequently arise not merely from technological deception but from its capacity to participate effectively within broader political conversations (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020).

Fact-checking organisations documented numerous instances of digitally manipulated political materials circulated throughout the electoral period, including misleading visual representations, edited campaign footage, fabricated electoral claims, and contextually distorted political narratives targeting major political actors and institutions (Africa Check, 2023; Dubawa, 2023). Significantly, many of these artefacts possessed relatively modest technological characteristics when compared with contemporary concerns surrounding highly sophisticated deepfake technologies. Their political influence instead emerged through accessibility, familiarity, and rapid dissemination across interconnected digital environments.

This finding challenges conventional assumptions that democratic vulnerability necessarily increases in proportion to technological sophistication. The most consequential forms of political manipulation frequently succeeded because they appeared culturally plausible rather than technologically convincing. Political misinformation proved particularly influential when manipulated artefacts appeared consistent with existing perceptions concerning corruption, ethnicity, competence, religion, or electoral misconduct. Synthetic manipulation should therefore be understood less as an isolated technological phenomenon than as a socially situated communicative practice embedded within broader political cultures.

Consequently, the first layer of the proposed framework suggests that synthetic manipulation constitutes an important but insufficient explanation for understanding democratic harm. Manipulated political artefacts become democratically consequential principally when technological interventions intersect productively with cultural meanings and communicative practices that facilitate their political intelligibility and social circulation.

Memetic Packaging and Political Persuasion

The findings further demonstrate that political memes functioned as important communicative resources through which electoral narratives were simplified, personalised, and emotionally amplified during Nigeria's 2023 elections. Far from functioning merely as humorous digital artefacts, political memes increasingly operated as instruments of political

persuasion capable of organising collective political judgements and shaping citizens' interpretations of electoral events.

Internet memes derive considerable communicative advantages from their simplicity, adaptability, and cultural accessibility. Their political significance frequently lies not in the information they communicate explicitly but, in their capacity, to compress complex political arguments into emotionally resonant visual narratives capable of encouraging participation and social engagement (Shifman, 2013; Milner, 2016). Contemporary political memes simultaneously perform multiple communicative functions by informing, entertaining, ridiculing, and mobilising audiences across interconnected digital environments.

The Nigerian electoral context proved particularly conducive to these communicative dynamics. Political humour, satire, and visual symbolism became increasingly prominent features of online electoral conversations as supporters and opponents of competing political actors utilised memes to frame campaign promises, institutional controversies, electoral outcomes, and broader questions concerning democratic legitimacy. Manipulated political artefacts frequently acquired enhanced persuasive capacities once incorporated into familiar meme cultures characterised by repetition, remixability, and collective participation (CDD, 2023b).

Importantly, memetic packaging frequently obscures distinctions between political criticism, satire, misinformation, and reputational harm. Citizens encountering politically charged memes are often simultaneously invited to laugh, judge, share, and participate in broader political conversations. Consequently, political persuasion frequently operates indirectly through humour and emotional engagement rather than exclusively through explicit argumentative appeals. The persuasive effectiveness of manipulated political content therefore depends substantially upon its ability to become socially engaging before it becomes politically consequential.

This communicative ambiguity possesses important democratic implications because it frequently complicates conventional approaches to misinformation governance. Political memes seldom present themselves as straightforward factual claims requiring simple verification or falsification. Rather, they occupy fluid communicative spaces where humour, irony, political hostility, and misinformation frequently coexist simultaneously. Democratic harm consequently emerges not only through deception but also through sustained participation in communicative environments characterised by emotional polarisation and diminished evidential accountability.

The findings therefore suggest that memetic packaging constitutes the second indispensable layer within the proposed framework. Synthetic political artefacts frequently achieve democratic significance only after they have been translated into culturally intelligible and emotionally compelling communicative forms capable of encouraging collective participation and widespread circulation.

Cultural Weaponisation and Identity Politics

A third significant finding concerns the centrality of cultural narratives in shaping the democratic consequences of manipulated political content. Political misinformation did not circulate within culturally neutral environments. Rather, electoral communication was deeply embedded within longstanding political conversations concerning ethnicity, religion, generational identities, regional affiliations, corruption, economic governance, and democratic legitimacy.

Nigeria's political history has frequently been characterised by the mobilisation of identity-based political narratives that extend considerably beyond immediate electoral contests. Consequently, manipulated political artefacts acquired particular significance when they successfully activated existing cultural anxieties and collective political memories. Political manipulation frequently proved effective because it recruited culturally recognisable symbols and narratives capable of organising public interpretations of political events (Cheeseman, 2018).

The findings indicate that democratic vulnerability frequently increases where manipulated political artefacts successfully align technological interventions with culturally intelligible political narratives. Citizens rarely interpret political messages independently of broader social contexts. Instead, they actively negotiate political meanings through existing experiences, relationships, and ideological commitments. Manipulated political artefacts therefore derive much of their influence from their capacities to confirm rather than transform political assumptions.

This cultural dimension equally explains why apparently unsophisticated political materials may prove more democratically consequential than technologically advanced deepfakes. Images accompanied by emotionally charged captions, politically symbolic colours, or culturally familiar narratives frequently possess considerable persuasive capacities precisely because they require relatively limited interpretive effort from audiences. Their political influence consequently emerges through recognition and emotional resonance rather than technological sophistication alone.

The findings further suggest that cultural weaponisation frequently contributes to democratic harms extending beyond electoral outcomes themselves. Manipulated political artefacts may simultaneously intensify political polarisation, weaken institutional trust, normalise hostility towards democratic opponents, and diminish citizens' confidence in shared standards of political evidence. Democratic harm therefore manifests not exclusively through electoral consequences but equally through the gradual erosion of deliberative democratic cultures characterised by mutual accountability and institutional trust (Sunstein, 2018).

The third layer of the framework therefore conceptualises cultural weaponisation as the process through which manipulated political artefacts recruit socially shared meanings, symbols, and political identities for strategic communicative purposes. Understanding democratic vulnerability consequently requires sustained analytical attention to both technological developments and the cultural environments that render political manipulation socially intelligible and politically persuasive.

Platform Amplification and Democratic Harm

The final finding concerns the indispensable role performed by digital platforms in transforming individual communicative artefacts into democratically consequential political phenomena. Contemporary political manipulation operates fundamentally as a networked communicative process whose influence derives substantially from patterns of visibility, repetition, and amplification across interconnected digital environments.

Digital platforms simultaneously facilitate democratic participation and introduce new vulnerabilities relating to political misinformation and algorithmically mediated visibility. Political messages increasingly acquire influence because they travel rapidly across multiple communicative spaces rather than because they originate from traditionally authoritative institutional actors. Electoral conversations consequently emerge through complex interactions among citizens, political actors, journalists, influencers, and digital platforms

operating simultaneously across multiple media environments (Chadwick, 2013; van Dijck et al., 2018).

Nigeria's 2023 elections provide important illustrations of these developments. Political narratives frequently migrated across WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, X discussions, TikTok videos, blogs, and conventional news organisations, thereby acquiring enhanced legitimacy through repetition and widespread social engagement. Platform amplification consequently transformed otherwise marginal political artefacts into influential components of broader democratic conversations (EU EOM, 2023).

Importantly, amplification should not be understood exclusively as an algorithmic phenomenon. Citizens themselves participate actively in processes of political amplification through sharing practices motivated by humour, outrage, political solidarity, or civic engagement. Democratic vulnerability therefore emerges through interactions among technological infrastructures, communicative practices, and collective political behaviours rather than through platform technologies alone.

Collectively, these findings support the four-layer model advanced throughout this article. Manipulated political artefacts become democratically consequential principally when synthetic manipulation is successfully translated into memetic forms capable of cultural weaponisation and subsequently sustained through extensive platform-mediated amplification. Democratic harm consequently emerges as a cumulative communicative process rather than an isolated technological occurrence.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study contribute to contemporary scholarship on artificial intelligence, political communication, and democratic resilience by demonstrating that electoral manipulation increasingly operates through multidimensional communicative processes situated at the intersection of technology, culture, and platform politics. Existing discussions frequently conceptualise deepfakes principally as technological phenomena requiring technological solutions. While such interventions remain indispensable, the Nigerian experience suggests that democratic vulnerabilities frequently emerge from considerably broader communicative arrangements.

The four-layer model proposed in this article advances an alternative understanding of manipulated political content by conceptualising AI-forged cultural weapons as networked communicative artefacts whose democratic consequences emerge through interactions among synthetic manipulation, memetic packaging, cultural weaponisation, and platform amplification. No single layer independently explains democratic harm. Rather, manipulated political artefacts become politically influential principally when these communicative processes reinforce one another simultaneously.

This conceptualisation possesses important implications for contemporary understandings of democratic resilience. Electoral harms should not be measured exclusively according to demonstrable influences on voting outcomes because manipulated political content frequently produces broader democratic consequences relating to institutional trust, political polarisation, and diminished deliberative capacities. Democracies depend fundamentally upon citizens' abilities to participate meaningfully within shared informational environments characterised by minimum standards of evidential accountability. Consequently, sustained assaults upon such environments inevitably possess important democratic implications irrespective of whether they alter immediate electoral outcomes.

The findings equally suggest that technologically deterministic approaches to misinformation governance remain insufficient for addressing contemporary democratic vulnerabilities. Investments in deepfake detection technologies undoubtedly remain important, but democratic resilience ultimately requires complementary interventions relating to digital literacy, civic education, platform accountability, and culturally informed approaches to political communication. Citizens require not merely technological capacities for recognising manipulated political artefacts but equally the interpretive competencies necessary for understanding how political narratives mobilise humour, identity, and emotion within digitally mediated environments.

Finally, this study contributes to emerging African scholarship on artificial intelligence and democratic governance by foregrounding culture as an indispensable analytical category for understanding political manipulation within digitally mediated electoral environments. Manipulated political artefacts become influential not because technology operates independently of society but because technological interventions successfully recruit socially shared meanings and communicative practices for political purposes. Future scholarship on artificial intelligence and democracy within African contexts must therefore remain attentive to the mutually constitutive relationships among technology, culture, and political communication.

Ultimately, Nigeria's 2023 elections demonstrate that the future of democratic resilience may depend less upon detecting increasingly sophisticated political falsehoods than upon strengthening the institutional, cultural, and communicative conditions that make democratic societies less vulnerable to their influence. The challenge confronting contemporary democracies is therefore not simply how to identify manipulated political artefacts but how to sustain informational environments sufficiently resilient to ensure that truth, accountability, and democratic participation remain collectively meaningful in an age of AI-mediated political communication.

6. Implications

The findings presented in this study carry important implications for electoral governance, platform accountability, democratic resilience, and future scholarship on artificial intelligence and political communication in Africa. More fundamentally, they suggest that contemporary democratic vulnerabilities can no longer be adequately conceptualised as technological problems alone. Electoral manipulation increasingly operates through the convergence of technological affordances, cultural narratives, and networked communicative practices. Consequently, effective responses must similarly transcend technological interventions to embrace multidimensional and contextually informed governance approaches (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Chadwick, 2013; UNESCO, 2021).

Implications for Electoral Governance

Perhaps the most immediate implication of this study concerns the future of electoral governance in digitally mediated democracies. Contemporary electoral regulations continue to privilege conventional concerns relating to campaign finance, political advertising, and electoral conduct while paying comparatively less attention to the increasingly sophisticated information environments within which democratic participation now occurs (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2023; UNESCO, 2021). Nigeria's 2023 elections demonstrate that manipulated political content may simultaneously influence public perceptions of candidates, institutions, and electoral processes without necessarily violating existing electoral regulations in straightforward or easily identifiable ways (Centre for

Democracy and Development [CDD], 2023a; European Union Election Observation Mission, 2023).

The four-layer model advanced in this article further suggests that democratic harm frequently emerges cumulatively through communicative processes that extend beyond formally defined electoral violations. Consequently, electoral governance frameworks should increasingly incorporate considerations relating to digital political communication, synthetic media governance, and multimodal misinformation practices (OECD, 2024; UNESCO, 2021). Regulatory interventions should not merely focus upon technologically sophisticated deepfakes but must equally acknowledge the democratic significance of politically consequential artefacts that combine manipulated representations with humour, cultural symbolism, and platform-mediated amplification.

This recommendation is particularly important because democratic vulnerabilities frequently emerge long before election day itself. Electoral integrity should therefore be conceptualised not merely as the successful administration of voting processes but equally as the preservation of informational environments capable of supporting meaningful democratic participation (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020; European Union Election Observation Mission, 2023). Citizens' capacities to make informed political judgements necessarily depend upon the quality and integrity of the communicative environments within which political conversations occur. Protecting electoral integrity consequently requires sustained investments in democratic institutions capable of responding effectively to evolving forms of political manipulation.

Implications for Platform Accountability

A second important implication concerns contemporary debates surrounding platform accountability and the governance of artificial intelligence. Digital platforms occupy increasingly influential positions within democratic societies because they shape patterns of visibility, participation, and political engagement across interconnected communicative environments (Chadwick, 2013; van Dijck et al., 2018). Political narratives frequently derive influence not solely from their substantive characteristics but from their capacities to circulate rapidly across multiple platforms characterised by differing communicative cultures and algorithmic architectures.

The findings of this study suggest that platform accountability should not be conceptualised exclusively in terms of content moderation practices. While the removal of demonstrably harmful political content remains important, democratic resilience equally depends upon greater transparency regarding platform amplification processes and meaningful collaborations among technology companies, electoral institutions, and civil society organisations (OECD, 2024; UNESCO, 2021). Contemporary democratic challenges frequently arise not because individual political artefacts exist but because they acquire disproportionate social visibility through cumulative processes of amplification, repetition, and participatory engagement.

Furthermore, the communicative ambiguities characterising political memes and manipulated visual artefacts present significant regulatory challenges for platform governance. Such materials frequently occupy fluid spaces between humour, satire, political criticism, and misinformation, thereby complicating binary distinctions between permissible and impermissible content (Phillips & Milner, 2021; Milner, 2016). Effective governance frameworks must therefore remain attentive to questions of context, communicative intent, and democratic consequences rather than relying exclusively upon technologically deterministic approaches to content regulation.

This study consequently supports growing calls for context-sensitive and democratically informed approaches to artificial intelligence governance capable of balancing commitments to freedom of expression, technological innovation, and democratic accountability (UNESCO, 2021; OECD, 2024). The governance of emerging technologies must increasingly acknowledge that democratic harms frequently emerge through socially embedded communicative practices rather than technological characteristics alone.

Implications for Democratic Literacy and Civic Education

The findings equally possess important implications for democratic literacy initiatives across emerging democracies. Contemporary approaches to digital literacy frequently emphasise citizens' abilities to distinguish authentic materials from manipulated content. While such competencies remain indispensable, the present study suggests that democratic resilience requires considerably broader interpretive capacities that encompass multimodal and critical media literacies (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; UNESCO, 2021)**.**

Citizens increasingly encounter political information through multimodal communicative environments where images, humour, captions, visual symbolism, and emotionally charged narratives interact simultaneously to shape political meanings (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Shifman, 2013)**.** Democratic literacy should therefore encompass citizens' capacities to interrogate not merely whether political materials are authentic but equally how they mobilise cultural assumptions, emotional appeals, and identity-based narratives to organise political judgements. Contemporary democratic participation consequently requires multimodal literacy as much as technological literacy.

This recommendation possesses particular significance for societies characterised by political polarisation and historically contested democratic institutions. Manipulated political artefacts frequently prove influential because they resonate persuasively with existing social anxieties and political commitments rather than technological sophistication alone (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020; Bennett & Livingston, 2018)**.** Democratic resilience will therefore depend substantially upon citizens' capacities to engage critically with political narratives irrespective of whether such narratives are technologically authentic or synthetically manipulated.

Educational interventions should similarly recognise that democratic literacy extends beyond formal educational institutions. Civil society organisations, fact-checking initiatives, media organisations, and electoral institutions collectively perform important democratic functions by cultivating cultures of evidential accountability and critical political engagement. Investments in democratic resilience must consequently remain collaborative, continuous, and contextually responsive.

Implications for Future Research

This article contributes to emerging scholarship examining the intersections among artificial intelligence, political communication, and democratic governance within African contexts. Nevertheless, important opportunities remain for future research. Comparative studies examining electoral communication across African democracies may provide valuable insights regarding the cultural specificities and shared characteristics of digitally mediated political manipulation (Cheeseman, 2018; Chadwick, 2013)**.** Similarly, longitudinal analyses examining the evolution of manipulated political artefacts across successive electoral cycles would substantially strengthen contemporary understandings of democratic resilience and institutional adaptation.

Future scholarship should equally continue interrogating relationships among platform governance, artificial intelligence regulation, and culturally situated political communication practices. The concept of AI-forged cultural weapons advanced in this article may prove particularly useful for examining how manipulated political artefacts acquire democratic significance across diverse socio-political environments characterised by differing institutional arrangements and communicative cultures.

Finally, this study demonstrates the continuing relevance of multimodal and interdisciplinary approaches to contemporary democratic challenges. Artificial intelligence, political communication, and democratic governance increasingly intersect in ways that resist disciplinary boundaries (UNESCO, 2021; OECD, 2024). Understanding such developments consequently requires sustained scholarly engagements capable of integrating technological, cultural, political, and ethical perspectives simultaneously.

7. Conclusion

This article has argued that contemporary democratic vulnerabilities cannot be adequately understood through technologically deterministic accounts of political misinformation that privilege sophisticated deepfake technologies alone (Chesney & Citron, 2019; Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Nigeria's 2023 general elections demonstrate that manipulated political artefacts frequently become democratically consequential not because they achieve perfect synthetic realism but because they successfully combine technological manipulation, cultural resonance, emotional engagement, and extensive platform-mediated circulation. Electoral manipulation within digitally mediated environments therefore emerges fundamentally as a communicative and cultural phenomenon as much as it does a technological one (Chadwick, 2013; Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020).

Drawing upon qualitative multimodal discourse analysis and the secondary re-analysis of verified scholarly and institutional materials, this study has conceptualised deepfake memes as **AI-forged cultural weapons** whose democratic consequences emerge through four mutually reinforcing communicative processes: synthetic manipulation, memetic packaging, cultural weaponisation, and platform amplification. The four-layer model proposed throughout this article consequently advances an alternative understanding of manipulated political content that foregrounds interactions among technology, culture, and political communication rather than privileging any single explanatory variable.

The findings further demonstrate that democratic harm frequently extends considerably beyond questions concerning electoral outcomes themselves. Manipulated political artefacts may simultaneously weaken institutional trust, intensify political polarisation, diminish confidence in shared standards of evidence, and undermine citizens' capacities to participate meaningfully within democratic conversations (Sunstein, 2018; Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Democracies depend fundamentally upon informational environments characterised by minimum standards of transparency, accountability, and evidential integrity (UNESCO, 2021; OECD, 2024). Sustained assaults upon such environments therefore constitute important democratic concerns irrespective of whether they demonstrably influence immediate electoral outcomes.

Importantly, this article does not suggest that technologically sophisticated deepfakes are insignificant or that conventional approaches to misinformation governance should be abandoned. Rather, it argues that contemporary democratic challenges increasingly require broader analytical and regulatory frameworks capable of acknowledging the socially embedded nature of political manipulation. Effective responses must therefore extend beyond investments in detection technologies to encompass democratic literacy initiatives, platform

accountability mechanisms, culturally informed governance frameworks, and sustained commitments to institutional resilience (UNESCO, 2021; OECD, 2024; Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020).

Nigeria's 2023 elections equally provide important lessons for emerging democracies navigating rapidly evolving digital information environments. Artificial intelligence technologies will undoubtedly continue transforming political communication practices across the globe. However, the democratic consequences of such transformations will depend substantially upon the institutional, cultural, and communicative environments within which these technologies operate (UNESCO, 2021; van Dijck et al., 2018). Political manipulation succeeds most effectively where technological interventions intersect productively with existing social vulnerabilities and communicative practices.

Ultimately, the future of democratic resilience may depend less upon constructing perfect technological defences against political misinformation than upon strengthening societies' collective capacities to preserve meaningful democratic conversations. Truth, accountability, and democratic participation remain fundamentally social achievements sustained through resilient institutions, informed citizens, and communicative cultures committed to evidential integrity (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Sunstein, 2018; UNESCO, 2021). Understanding how manipulated political artefacts become AI-forged cultural weapons is therefore not merely an exercise in technological analysis but an indispensable component of contemporary efforts to safeguard democratic life in an increasingly AI-mediated world.

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