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RESEARCH ARTICLE

POLITICAL CONTENT GRATIFICATION AND MISINFORMATION SUSCEPTIBILITY IN KENYAN SOCIAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

Social media users' gratification with the online political information influences their exposure and sharing of political misinformation, disinformation and malinformation. This study sought to answer two questions: firstly, to what extent does political content gratification influence susceptibility to political misinformation exposure and sharing; and secondly, to what extent do heuristic processing, content bias, fear of social isolation, and the cultivation of political beliefs and attitudes mediate the relationship between political content gratification and susceptibility to political misinformation among Kenyan social media users. The study employed purposive and snowball sampling to collect data from 400 respondents active in online political participation. The results indicate that most Kenyans use Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Telegram and news aggregators to access political information. Content bias and gratification were identified as facilitators of misinformation, while heuristic processing and cultivation effects amplified users' vulnerability to false information, subsequently increasing exposure and sharing. The analysis revealed that fear of social isolation had no significant effect on either exposure to or sharing of misinformation. However, the negative beta coefficient suggests a potential inverse relationship between fear of social isolation and misinformation-related behaviors, this relationship was not statistically significant.

Keywords: Political participation, Content gratification, Misinformation, Heuristic processing, Content bias, Fear of social isolation, cultivation theory.

INTRODUCTION

Social media users around the world share and discuss content that they enjoy and believe it would resonate with their social circles. Sharing political content on social media allows individuals to express their values, beliefs, and political affiliations to their social network, shaping their online identity and projecting a desired image. Social media platforms afford rapid and informal way of sharing information. Most social media users derive satisfaction from accessing political information online which significantly influences their susceptibility to exposure and sharing of political misinformation. This implies that Social media users' gratification with the online political information influences their exposure and sharing of political misinformation.

Political information is defined as the acquisition of knowledge regarding specific political facts and ideas, coupled with an awareness of recent significant political events (Zannettou et al., 2019). Political information sharing can be categorized according to the intent behind its dissemination. Political misinformation is inaccurate information shared without malicious intent, however disinformation is the deliberate spreading of false information for deceptive purposes, whereas malinformation is sharing information with the express intent to inflict harm (Watts, 2020; Steen, 2011; Scheufele & Krause, 2019; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). However, misinformation can still have harmful consequences by distorting how people understand events or issues.

This study posits that there is a complex interplay between social media content users' gratification and political misinformation susceptibility through unintended exposure and eventual sharing. That is, social media users' gratification with partisan content can lead to unintended exposure to, and eventual sharing of political misinformation. The main objective of this study was to explore the role of content gratification on political misinformation exposure and sharing among Kenyan social media users. This study sought to address the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent does political content gratification influence susceptibility to political misinformation (both exposure and sharing) among Kenyan social media users?

RQ2: To what extent do heuristic processing, content bias, fear of social isolation, and the cultivation of political beliefs and attitudes mediate the relationship between political content gratification and susceptibility to political misinformation (exposure and sharing) among Kenyan social media users?

The proposition is that there exists a strong relationship between social media content gratification and the factors contributing to exposure and sharing of political misinformation. Specifically, these factors are heuristic processing, content bias, fear of social isolation, and the cultivation of political beliefs and attitudes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media platforms, including apps and websites, have become the modern gathering spaces where families, friends, adversaries, brands, influencers, and bloggers frequently interact throughout the day to exchange information, share updates, communicate, and engage in debates (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Wamuyu, 2020). Social media use and consumption has experienced significant growth in Kenya, mirroring global trends. Studies have shown that socio-demographic characteristics play a significant role in shaping social media usage patterns globally with variations observed in platform preference, usage frequency, purpose as well as age, gender, and education (Wamuyu, 2023; Quan-Haase, & Young, 2010; Wamuyu 2021; Blank & Groselj, 2014). Social media platforms have transformed how individuals engage in political discourse as they avail spaces for people to express their opinions, debate political issues and interact with politicians directly (Abbouda, Ajwangb & Lugano, 2024). In most cases, online political discussions lean towards viewpoints consistent with individual biases and which contribute to political polarization. Social media has also witnessed proliferation of misinformation and fake news (Tucker et al., 2018; Woolley & Howard, 2019). Social media platforms have become a breeding ground for misinformation and fake news making it difficult to distinguish between credible and false

information hence influencing public opinions and political discourses (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Wamuyu, 2023). This study draws upon a combination of theories to understand the complex relationship between social media content gratification and political misinformation susceptibility among Kenyan social media users.

Content Gratification

Over the years, many people have taken to social media for news, discussions, debates, civic participation and mobilization (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung & Valenzuela, 2012; Abbouda, Ajwangb & Lugano, 2024; Wamuyu, 2023; Boulianne, 2015). Social media users may consume online political information for entertainment purposes, to stay informed, engage in political discussions, share opinions, or just seeking out information that confirms their existing beliefs (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Wamuyu, 2023; Boulianne, 2015). This study defines content gratification as the satisfaction a user derives from the social media content they consume. Such content include political memes, cartoons and short videos, which are humorous in nature providing entertainment and sharing political views.

Social media users have a tendency of having superficial engagement, often devoid of in-depth critical analysis, when experiencing gratification from contents that aligns with their preferences (Ardèvol-Abreu, Costa-Sánchez & Delponti, 2024; Pennycook & Rand, 2019; Teng & Khong, 2015; Shao, 2009; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). This include content which aligns with their existing beliefs or biases, is highly relevant to their interests or identity, or that evokes strong emotions. Social media users engaging with their preference-aligned contents typically do not critically evaluate its credibility or accuracy. Therefore, content gratification leads to uncritical acceptance of information when the content is emotionally appealing, and aligned with a user's preferences. Therefore, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1: Social media users' content gratification positively influences uncritical acceptance of political information when the content is emotionally appealing, aligns with their existing beliefs, and caters to their preferences.

Social media users obtain content gratification from consuming contents that reinforces their existing beliefs, this leads to confirmation bias, which is the tendency to favor information that confirms one's preconceptions. As users seek content that aligns with their views, they create echo chambers that amplify their biases. This selective exposure to agreeable information strengthens content bias, as individuals preferentially engage with content that validates their perspectives. Empirical evidence supports the notion that content gratification on social media can exacerbate confirmation bias (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2024; Gupta et al., 2021; Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2018; Pennycook & Rand, 2019; Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015). Therefore, Social media users are more likely to engage with and share content that aligns with their viewpoints, creating echo chambers that reinforce existing biases. This behavior not only limits exposure to diverse perspectives but also fosters an environment where misinformation can thrive, as users uncritically accept information that conforms to their beliefs. Consequently, we hypothesize that:

H2: Social media users' content gratification positively influences political biases by increasing users' likelihood of engaging with and accepting information that aligns with

their pre-existing beliefs, preferences, and emotional inclinations, thereby reinforcing echo chambers.

Social media users are less likely to express dissenting opinions when they perceive their views as unpopular. This is influenced by the fear of social sanctions hence their willingness to express their minority opinions both online which reinforces the spiral of silence among social media users. Studies have shown that spiral of silence theory applies to social media, with users less likely to express opinions they perceive as unpopular due to their fear of isolation, which influences their willingness to express dissenting views (Kim, 2021; Fox, & Warber, 2015; Neubaum & Krämer, 2017; Gearhart & Zhang, 2015). Social media users' fear of isolation and desire for social acceptance influences their desire to express dissenting opinions and are likely to endorse majority opinions (Del Vicario et al., 2016). Social media users may also share content for social validation, to signal group affiliation or gain approval from their social circles. Social media users, who seek to avoid social isolation may align with the perceived majority and, may engage and disseminate content without critical evaluation. This reinforces the Spiral of Silence. Hence, the study proposes the following hypothesis:

H3: Social media users' fear of isolation positively influences their content gratification with information that aligns with perceived majority opinions, leading to increased engagement with and endorsement of such content to avoid social ostracism and gain social acceptance.

Social media users usually engage with the content that satisfy their desires which leads to prolonged exposure to particular content. This sustained exposure, over time, influences a user's perception and attitudes of their worldview, as proposed in the cultivation theory. Studies have indicated that repeated exposure to media content, including social media, can shape users' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors over time (Geiger & Swim, 2023; Valkenburg, Peter & Walther, 2016; Hille, 2023). The repeated exposure of social media users to content that aligns with their preferences, and are happy with it; it gradually shapes their attitudes and perceptions. This prolonged exposure to enjoyable, preference-aligned content can reduce critical thinking and shift their attitudes of their worldview. Thus, we hypothesize that:

H4: Frequent enjoyment of social media content, cultivates specific beliefs and attitudes over time, by reinforcing preference-aligned information which gradually shaping users' perceptions.

Exposure and Sharing Misinformation

Social media platforms facilitate interactive engagement and content co-creation, enabling users to maintain online political discussions and debates through features such as likes, shares, and reposts Obadă & Dabija, 2022). This increases the likelihood of the users' encountering and sharing false and misleading information, amplification of sensational or emotionally charged content and formation of echo chambers (O'Brien & Freelon, 2020; Pariser, 2011; Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018).

Studies have shown that individuals who do not critically engage with social media content are more susceptible to believing and sharing false information (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018;

Pennycook & Rand, 2019; Gupta et al., 2021). Social media users may see and share false and misleading information because of the popularity of a post or the perceived credibility of its source. In politically charged environments, individuals who fail to evaluate critically online content are more likely to encounter and propagate false or misleading political information (Pennycook & Rand, 2019; Del Vicario et al., 2016). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H5: Uncritical acceptance of information on social media content significantly increases exposure to and sharing of political misinformation.

Politically biased misinformation spreads rapidly because social media users are quick in dismissing accurate information that contradicts their beliefs, but are more likely to accept and share information that aligns with their ideologies, even if it is false, inaccurate or misleading (Pennycook & Rand, 2019; Brady et al., 2017). Social media users unwittingly contribute to the spread of political misinformation due to their pre-existing political biases and ideologies shaped by their political affiliations over the years. This leads to the hypothesis that:

H6: Social media users' political bias significantly influences political misinformation exposure and sharing.

Naturally, there is a tendency for individuals to follow majority opinion and avoid backlash, criticism, or exclusion in both online and offline discussions. This fear of social isolation or rejection makes individuals less likely to express their opinions if they perceive them to be in the minority and hence self-censor their dissenting views to maintain social acceptance and avoid negative social repercussions. Among social media users, the pressure to conform can lead to a spiral effect, where minority voices are silenced, resulting to creation of echo chambers (Moy, Domke & Stamm, 2001; Vaccari, Valeriani & Barbera, 2016; Hayes, Glynn & Shanahan, 2005; Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018; Sunstein, 2018). In these spaces, alternative perspectives diminishes, potentially leading to a skewed representation of public sentiment thereby shaping public discourse in digital spaces. This leads to the hypothesis that:

H7: Social media users are more likely to share majority opinions due to the fear of social isolation, which in turn significantly increases their exposure to and sharing of political misinformation.

When individuals get repeatedly exposed to ideologically congruent information on social media, it contributes to cultivation of specific political attitudes and reinforcing of existing political orientations (Bakshy, Messing & Adamic, 2015; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016; Pariser, 2011; Brady et al., 2017). This makes the users more susceptible to accepting and sharing information, including misinformation that aligns with their cultivated beliefs. This continuous engagement with and liking of social media content over time significantly increases an individual's exposure to and sharing of political misinformation. Thus, the hypothesis is:

H8: Cultivating certain political beliefs and attitudes through use and like of social media content over time, significantly increases individual's exposure to and sharing of political misinformation.

Social media users seek political content for information, engaging with like-minded individuals as well as expressing their opinions Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009; Kim, Y., Chen, & Zúñiga, 2013; Pennycook & Rand, 2021). This political content gratification, whether informational, emotional, or social, drives users to spend more time engaging with political posts, videos, and discussions. This gratification from political content leads to greater exposure to political misinformation and an increase in the likelihood of sharing misinformation. Consequently, we hypothesize that:

H9: Social media users' political content gratification significantly increases individual's exposure to and sharing of political misinformation.

The conceptual framework for this study, as depicted in Figure 1, is theoretically grounded in an integration of constructs drawn from the Uses and Gratifications Theory, the Elaboration Likelihood Model, Confirmation Bias Theory, the Spiral of Silence Theory, and Cultivation Theory, as well as relevant literature on how people use social media for political purposes.

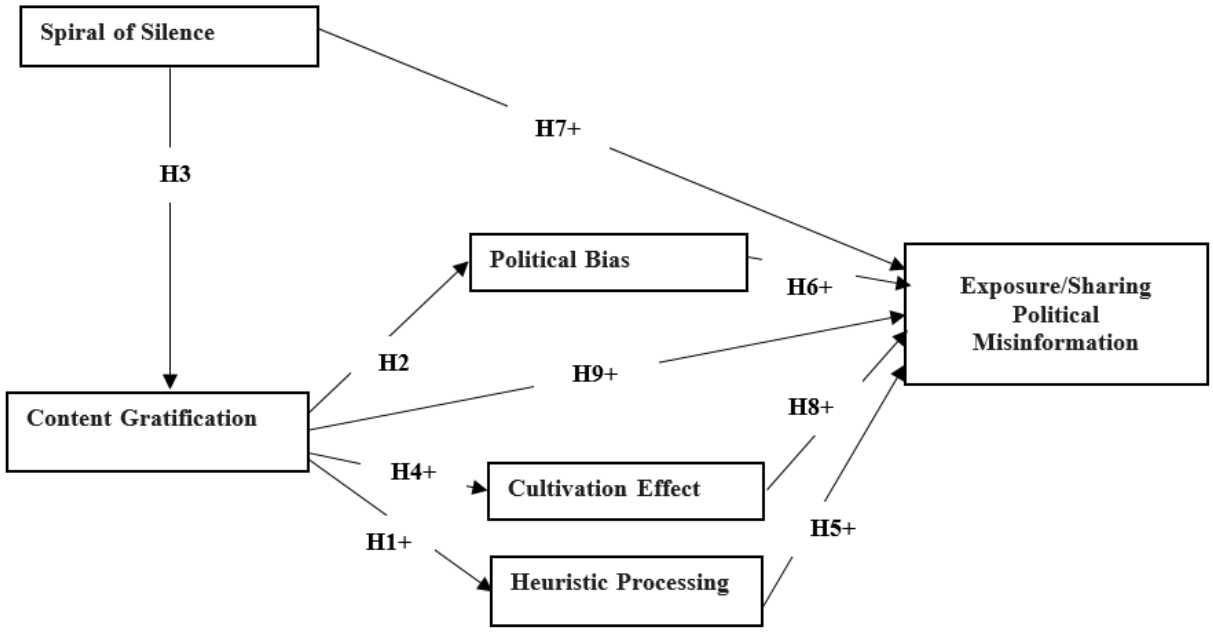

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

METHODS

The study employed a quantitative research methodology to investigate the research problem, for data collection and statistical analysis techniques. An online questionnaire was used as the primary data collection tool. To enhance the clarity, reliability and validity of the questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted. The pilot study was a tryout of the questionnaire, aimed at identifying and addressing any unclear, problematic or ambiguous statements in the questions. During the pilot study, a pre-tested survey questionnaire was hand-delivered to twenty respondents randomly

selected from the PhD Information Systems and Technology (IST) Students at USIU-Africa. Sixteen questionnaires out of the twenty delivered during the pilot study were filled out properly and were used for revising, refining and improving the questionnaire.

After the pilot study, the respondents were purposely selected based on their relevance to the study, particularly their active use of social media platforms in political participations for the main data collection. The respondents were approached and informed about the purpose of the survey, and were given the link to the online questionnaire. The link was initially shared with twenty (20) people selected based on their relevance to the study, particularly their use of social media. The initial respondents, included workmates, friends, and family who met the study criteria. To expand the reach and ensure a diverse sample, a snowball sampling technique was employed, whereby the initial respondents were asked to refer others who met the study criteria. This approach proved effective for reaching a broader and more diverse pool of participants. Data collection continued until a target of four hundred (400) respondents was achieved and the sharing of the link was stopped.

Out of the four hundred (400) individuals who received the link to the study online questionnaire, three hundred and eighty-six (386) responses were successfully collected, yielding a high response rate of 96.5%. This strong response rate underscores the effectiveness of the sampling strategy and the engagement of the participants, thus strengthening the reliability and generalizability of the study's findings. Ethical considerations were strictly followed to protect participants' rights and confidentiality. Rigorous ethical protocols were adhered to, ensuring participant rights, privacy and confidentiality. To maintain anonymity, participants were explicitly prohibited from including their personal identities or the names of the individuals who had given the link to the study questionnaire. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University Institutional Review Board, and research authorization was granted by the Kenya National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI).

RESULTS

Demographics

Data was collected from three hundred and eighty-six (386) respondents. Data was analyzed using statistical software SPSS version 30 and WarpPLS version 8. Frequencies and percentages were used to summarize the demographic and behavioural characteristics of the respondents, while advanced statistical techniques were employed to examine relationships between variables

The demographic and behavioural characteristics of the respondents are summarized in Table 1. Out of the total participants, 173 (44.8%) were female, while 211 (54.7%) were male. In terms of age distribution, 39% of the participants were aged 35–44 years, 29% were 25–34 years, 23% were 45–54 years, 6% were 18–24 years, and 4% were 55 years or older. On using social media use for political purposes, the 79% (305) uses the platforms daily for political purpose, 15% (n=57) access platforms several times a week, 2% (n=9) access once a week while 4% (n=15) less than once a week

Table 1: Profile of the Respondents

Profile of the respondents			
Variable		**Frequency**	**Percentage %**
Gender	Male	211	54.7%
	Female	173	44.8%
Age	18-24	22	6%
	25-34	111	29%
	35-44	149	39%
	45-54	88	23%
	55+	16	4%
Use Social Media for Political Purposes	Daily	305	79%
	Several times a week	57	15%
	Once a week	9	2%
	Less than once a week	13	2%

On which social media platforms the participants use most frequently for political news and information, Facebook emerged as the most widely used platform, with 60.1% (n=232) of participants reporting its use. WhatsApp followed closely, being utilized by 53.9% (n=208), while Twitter was reported by 50.8% (n=196) of respondents. YouTube was also a significant source, with 45.3% (n=175) of participants accessing it for political content. TikTok was used by 26.9% (n=104), Instagram by 23.8% (n=92) and Telegram with only 10.9% (n=42) of respondents indicating their use for political news and information.

In addition to these mainstream social media platforms, respondents also reported using other sources for political news and information. These included LinkedIn, media house websites, newspaper websites (such as Daily Nation and Standard Newspaper), newspaper feeds, news aggregators (Opera News, Tuko.co.ke, and traditional broadcast media (radio, TV news apps). This diversity in platform usage underscores the complex and multifaceted nature of political information consumption, with individuals leveraging both traditional and digital media to stay informed.

There is a growing influence of social media platforms as key channels for political communication and information sharing in Kenya. Political actors use social media to deliberately spread false information to influence public opinion. Algorithms also play a significant role in shaping what content users see, engage with, and share. Social media platforms normally show content that aligns with users' preferences, behaviors, and past interactions. They are designed to promote content that is likely to go viral, often without regard for its accuracy which can lead to the rapid spread of misinformation across platforms. Social media platforms are designed to ensure users see information even when they are not actively searching for information. The study participants were surveyed to determine the frequency with which they encounter political information on social media while engaged in other online activities, even when they are not actively seeking or particularly interested in political content. The results, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Frequent exposure to political information even when not actively seeking for it

How often do you encounter political information on social media while engaged in other online activities, even you are not actively seeking or particularly interested in political content?	Frequency	Percent
Daily	271	70.2
Several times a week	63	16.3
Occasionally	40	10.4
Rarely	12	3.1

Two hundred and seventy-one (271) respondents, representing 70.2% of the sample, reported encountering political information on social media platforms on a daily basis even when they are not actively seeking political content, while substantial portion of the respondents indicated frequent exposure, with 63 individuals, or 16.3% of the sample, encountering such information several times per week.

Individuals share political information on social media for many reasons including: Sharing information to raise awareness about political issues; Sharing content that aligns with personal political beliefs to influence others; Sharing content to express political identity and connect with like-minded individuals; Promoting a particular candidate, party, or policy; Sharing content that evokes strong emotions, such as anger, outrage, or excitement; Sharing political memes or videos are shared simply because they are entertaining. The study participants were surveyed to determine their likelihood to share political information encountered on social media platforms. A significant portion of users (28.2%) indicated that they are very unlikely to share political information on social media while a notable percentage (17.9%) are very likely to share political information as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Likelihood of Sharing Political Information on Social Media

How likely are you to share political information you see on social media	F	%
Very unlikely	109	28.2
Somewhat likely	79	20.5
Neutral	75	19.4
Very likely	69	17.9
Somewhat unlikely	54	14

The motivations for sharing political content on social media such as informing others, expressing views, starting discussions, agreeing or disagreeing with viewpoints, and entertainment reflect the diverse ways users engage with political information. The majority of users use platform for information dissemination, self-expression, debate, and even entertainment. The study participants were surveyed to determine their motivations for sharing political content on social media. Majority of users (58%) share political content to inform others. The primary motivations behind why Kenyans share political content on social media is shown in Table 4. A segment of users also consciously abstains from sharing political content with 7.5% of the respondents explicitly stating that they do not share political content on social media.

Table 4. Motivations for sharing political content on social media

Why do you typically share political content on social media	F	%
To inform others	224	58
To express my own views	155	40.2
To start a discussion	96	24.9
To agree with a specific viewpoint	87	22.5
To disagree with a specific viewpoint	78	20.2
It's entertaining or funny	53	13.7

Based on the study results this far, we can conclude that respondents are more likely to engage with political content that evokes strong emotions, uses humor or satire, or confirms their existing beliefs. Others study participants enjoy sensationalized content, which drives sharing for some while many, avoid content that challenges their views. From the data collected, a majority (70.47%) of the respondents indicated that they find political humor or satire to be particularly engaging on social media. Additionally, 48.96% indicated that they liked content that evoking strong emotions, while 39.90% expressed a preference for sensationalized political content. These three groups expressed their propensity to share their content types on social media. Over half (51.81%) of the respondents prefer and share content confirming their beliefs, while 24.35% reported avoidance of content challenging their viewpoints.

Study Model Results and Validation

The study research model presented in Figure 1 is grounded on the premise that political content gratification influences susceptibility to political misinformation (both exposure and sharing) among Kenyan social media users. It also postulates that heuristic processing, content bias, fear of social isolation, and the cultivation of political beliefs and attitudes mediate the relationship between political content gratification and susceptibility to political misinformation (exposure and sharing) among Kenyan social media users. The study posits that there exists a strong relationship between social media content gratification and the factors contributing to exposure and sharing of political misinformation. Specifically, these factors are heuristic processing, content bias, fear of social isolation, and the cultivation of political beliefs and attitudes. The study adopted and operationalized constructs and their measurement scales from past established research ensuring the study's content validity and enhancing the credibility and robustness of the findings.

The conceptual framework was tested and evaluated using WarpPLS version 8, which is a tool used for Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM). WarpPLS uses Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability to test data for internal consistency through Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability and validity using convergent validity (Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and discriminant validity. For the structure model evaluation, WarpPLS use path coefficients to test hypothesized relationship between constructs, R^2 to measure variance explained in the dependent variables while hypothesis testing is achieved through the significance of the path

coefficients. The Goodness-of-Fit (GoF) is used to assess how well the model fits the collected study data.

Validity

A study instrument validity is the extent to which it accurately measures the intended construct and functions as designed. The validity of the study's conceptual framework constructs was evaluated using convergent validity and discriminant validity. In this study, convergent validity was assessed by calculating composite reliability, which examines the internal consistency of the indicators measuring each construct (Henseler et al., 2009). The composite reliability for each construct was more than 0.7, which is the minimum acceptance criterion (Hair et al., 2021; Henseler et al., 2009) as shown Table 5. Higher factor loadings are also used as a good indicator of excellent convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Steve (2002), Goffee and Jones (1996) indicate that, factor loadings above the recommended threshold of 0.6 demonstrate excellent convergent validity. The study's factor loadings, Table 6, ranged from 0.775 to 0.997, confirming acceptable convergent validity. Furthermore, Average Variance Extracted (AVE) value of at least 0.5 is considered an acceptable threshold for convergent validity. The study's AVE values ranged from 0.471 to 0.627, with most constructs exceeding the 0.5 threshold confirming acceptable convergent validity. AVE values are also used to determine discriminant validity. Discriminant validity is confirmed when the square root of the AVE for each construct is greater than the correlations between that construct and all other constructs in the model. Table 5 shows that the square root of the AVE (represented by the bolded diagonal values) for each construct exceeds the correlations between that construct and all other latent variables in the model. This is an indication of excellent discriminant validity.

Table 5. Validity and Reliability Analysis

				Square roots of average variances extracted (AVEs) shown on diagonal					
Construct	Cronbach Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted	Spiral of Silence	Content Gratification	Political Bias	Cultivation	Heuristic Processing	Exposure and Sharing
Spiral of Silence	0.72	0.819	0.488	**0.699**	0.084	0.008	0.032	0.11	0.004
Content Gratification	0.802	0.86	0.51	0.084	**0.714**	0.239	0.567	0.448	0.511
Political Bias	0.85	0.893	0.627	0.008	0.239	**0.792**	0.218	0.396	0.45
Cultivation	0.625	0.781	0.471	0.032	0.567	0.218	**0.687**	0.292	0.345
Heuristic Processing	0.734	0.834	0.557	0.11	0.448	0.396	0.292	**0.747**	0.497
Exposure and Sharing	0.825	0.877	0.589	0.004	0.511	0.45	0.345	0.497	**0.767**

Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) is used as a measure of the how much the variance of a regression coefficient is inflated due to multicollinearity among the predictors (Hair et al., 2021; Henseler et al., 2009). VIF and Full Collinearity VIFs, were used to test whether the study model was free

from multicollinearity, hence more accurate and reliable results for both the structural model (relationships between constructs) and the measurement model (relationships between indicators and constructs). The study's VIF and Full Collinearity VIF values are below the recommended thresholds < 5, and < 3 respectively, confirming the absence of multicollinearity.

Reliability

A reliable study instrument should give consistent and reliable results across different situations or over time under similar conditions. Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability coefficients are the two most common measures used to evaluate a study instrument's reliability. Table 5, indicates that the Composite reliability coefficients for all constructs are well above this recommended threshold of 0.7 (Hair et al.,2021). These results confirm that the measurement model exhibits adequate reliability and construct validity, ensuring that the constructs are consistently and accurately measured. While all the other constructs have their Cronbach alpha greater than the required threshold of 0.7, Cultivation Effect construct has a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.625, which is slightly below the 0.7 threshold. Despite this, the composite reliability for the Cultivation Effect construct is 0.781, which exceeds the recommended threshold, suggesting that the construct still demonstrates acceptable internal consistency.

Table 6. Confirmatory factor analysis and multicollinearity test

Scale Item	Spiral of Silence	Content Gratification	Political Bias	Cultivation	Heuristic Processing	Exposure and Sharing	Full Collinearity VIFs
SOS1	0.988						
SOS2	0.982						
SOS3	0.985						1.021
SOS4	0.775						
SOS5	0.889						
CG1		0.865					
CG2		0.989					
CG3		0.987					1.875
CG4		0.994					
CG5		0.982					
CG6		0.941					
PB1			0.978				
PB2			0.989				1.33
PB3			0.981				
PB4			0.991				
PB5			0.997				
CE1				0.932			
CE2				0.971			1.492
CE3				0.987			
CE4				0.821			

HP1	0.971		
HP2	0.943		1.519
HP3	0.986		
HP4	0.953		
ES1		0.981	
ES2		0.903	
ES3		0.984	1.719
ES4		0.997	
ES5		0.953	

Note: Results are presented as normalized pattern loadings and cross-loadings obtained using oblique rotation and Kaiser Normalization as reported by WarpPLS 8.0.

Structural Model Analysis

The structural model analysis was conducted using WarpPLS 8.0 and the results are shown in Figure 2. The figure shows the predictive capabilities of the model, highlighting the relationships between the constructs. Figure 2 also shows the path coefficients along with their corresponding significance levels, providing insights into the strength and direction of the hypothesized relationships. The results of the hypothesis testing are summarized in Table 7 which presents a detailed overview of the statistical findings and their implications. This analysis confirms the robustness of the structural model and its ability to explain the relationships among the constructs (Kock, 2024; Hair et al., 2021).

There is a significant interrelationship between political content satisfaction and political biases, cultivation effect and uncritical acceptance in the context of sharing misinformation on social media. Specifically, users who derive high levels of satisfaction from political content on social media demonstrate a pronounced tendency to accept political information without thorough analysis, as evidenced by a strong and statistically significant relationship ($\beta = 0.47$, $p < 0.01$). This suggests that emotional gratification and enjoyment of content may reduce users' critical evaluation of information, making them more susceptible to believing and sharing misinformation (Pennycook & Rand, 2021). This finding is consistent with the dual-process theory of cognition, which posits that heuristic thinking often leads to less accurate judgments compared to systematic, analytical thinking (Kahneman, 2011). Additionally, the study highlights the role of pre-existing political biases in shaping user behavior. These biases significantly influence both exposure to and sharing of misinformation, as demonstrated by the statistically significant relationship ($\beta = 0.25$, $p < 0.01$). This finding aligns with prior research indicating that individuals are more likely to engage with information that aligns with their political beliefs, even if it is inaccurate, due to confirmation bias (Fessler et al., 2017). These findings are consistent with the dual-process theory of cognition, which posits that heuristic thinking often leads to less accurate judgments compared to systematic, analytical thinking (Kahneman, 2011). Furthermore, there is a statistically significant relationship between content satisfaction and the Cultivation Effect ($\beta = 0.58$, $p < 0.01$). This indicates that users who are highly enjoy political content on social media are more likely to be influenced by the Cultivation Effect, whereby prolonged exposure to media content shapes their perceptions of reality, including their acceptance of misinformation. This finding underscores the role of media

consumption habits in reinforcing beliefs and behaviors related to misinformation sharing (Gerbner et al., 2002).

Spiral of Silence theory posits that individuals are less likely to express opinions they perceive to be in the minority due to fear of social isolation. The analysis revealed that fear of social isolation had no significant effect on either exposure to or sharing of misinformation ($\beta = -0.03$, $p = 0.30$). Although the negative beta coefficient suggests a potential inverse relationship between fear of social isolation and misinformation-related behaviors, this relationship was not statistically significant. This finding contradicts the expectations of the Spiral of Silence theory in the context of misinformation dissemination. This could be attributed to the differences in contexts between social media environments and the traditional media. On social media, users often operate within echo chambers or filter bubbles, where they are primarily exposed to like-minded individuals and content (Pariser, 2011). In such environments, the fear of social isolation may be less pronounced, as users are less likely to encounter dissenting opinions that could trigger this fear. Additionally, the anonymity and distance provided by online platforms may reduce the perceived risk of social isolation, further diminishing the relevance of the Spiral of Silence in this context (Hampton et al., 2014). However, the study found that the Spiral of Silence significantly influences political content gratification ($\beta = 0.14$, $p < 0.01$). This suggests that individuals who fear social isolation are more likely to derive gratification from consuming and engaging with political content that aligns with the perceived majority opinion. This relationship highlights the role of social conformity in shaping media consumption behaviors, as users may seek out and engage with content that reinforces their sense of belonging and reduces the risk of social isolation (Hayes et al., 2005).

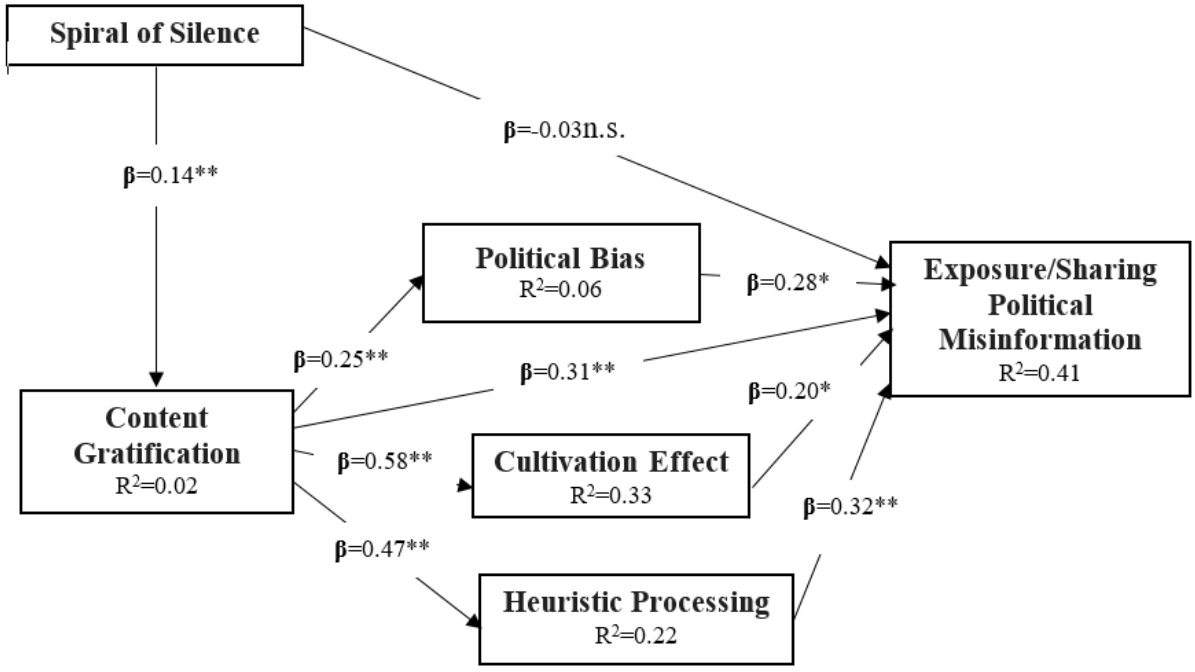

Figure 2. PLS analysis of the structural model

Path significance: *** p<0.001, ** p<0.01, * p<0.05, n.s. not significant

Furthermore, the study results indicate that political content gratification (β = 0.31, p < 0.01) significantly influence misinformation exposure and sharing on social media and content gratification may reduce users' critical evaluation of information, making them more susceptible to believing and sharing false or misleading content. The results also indicate that social media users engage in heuristic processing (β = 0.32, p < 0.01) are more likely to accept and share information without thorough verification. Also, pre-existing political biases significantly influence both exposure to and sharing of misinformation (β = 0.28, p < 0.01). This reflects the role of confirmation bias, where individuals are more likely to engage with information that aligns with their political beliefs, even if it is inaccurate (Pennycook & Rand, 2021). Political biases create echo chambers that reinforce misinformation sharing. Prolonged exposure to political content on social media cultivates beliefs and attitudes that increase susceptibility to misinformation (β = 0.20, p < 0.01). Repeated exposure to media content shapes individuals' perceptions of reality over time. This cultivation effect (β = 0.20, p < 0.01) normalizes misinformation and reduces the users' ability to discern factual information, which significantly influence sharing of misinformation.

Social media political content gratification explains 22% (R^2 = 0.22) of the variance in heuristic processing, 33% (R^2 = 0.33) in the cultivation effect, and 6% (R^2 = 0.06) in political biases. This suggests that users who derive gratification from political content are more likely to rely on mental shortcuts when engaging with information, which increases their susceptibility to misinformation, while prolonged exposure to gratifying political content significantly shapes users' beliefs and attitudes, making them more likely to accept and share misinformation over time. The relatively small proportion of variance explained by content gratification on political biases suggests that there are other factors, such as pre-existing ideological leanings or social influences that plays a huge role in reinforcing political ideologies. When combined, political biases, content gratification, cultivation effect, and heuristic processing collectively explain 41% (R^2 = 0.41) of the variance in misinformation sharing. This highlights the synergistic effect of these factors in driving the spread of misinformation on social media platforms. Political biases and content gratification create a fertile ground for misinformation, while heuristic processing and cultivation effects amplify users' vulnerability to believing and sharing false information.

Hypothesis Testing

Table 7 shows a summary of hypothesis testing. The table outlines the hypothesized relationships between the constructs, the corresponding path coefficients (β), p-values, and the statistical significance of each relationship.

Table 7. Summary of the study model hypothesis testing.

Hypothesis	Path	β Coefficient	P Value	Decision
H1	Content Gratification ➔ Heuristic Processing	0.47	p < 0.01	Supported
H2	Content Gratification ➔ Political Biases	0.25	p < 0.01	Supported
H3	Spiral of Silence ➔ Heuristic Processing	0.14	p < 0.01	Supported

H4	Content Gratification ➔ Cultivation Effect	0.58	$p < 0.01$	Supported
H5	Heuristic Processing ➔ Exposure or Sharing Political Misinformation	0.32	$p < 0.01$	Supported
H6	Political Biases ➔ Exposure or Sharing Political Misinformation	0.28	$p < 0.01$	Supported
H7	Spiral of Silence ➔ Exposure or Sharing Political Misinformation	-0.027	$p < 0.30$	Not Supported
H8	Cultivation Effect ➔ Heuristic Processing	0.20	$p < 0.01$	Supported
H9	Content Gratification ➔ Exposure or Sharing Political Misinformation	0.31	$p < 0.01$	Supported

DISCUSSION

Every day, in most democratic or even less democratic societies, political discussions happen either on new media, traditional mainstream outlets or even behind closed doors and in discreet private interactions. Social media offers new avenues for engagement, mobilization, and information dissemination transforming the way communities and individuals participate in political discussions. Social media facilitates political participation by enabling users to engage in political discussions, share information, react to what has been shared as well as participating in organizing collective actions. From the study, Kenyans mostly use Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Telegram and news aggregators, to access political news and information, which supports prior findings by Wamuyu (2023), Valenzuela, Correa & Zúñiga (2019), Wamuyu (2021) and Boulianne (2015).

The study findings also support prior studies which indicate that individuals who use social media to access political news and information often encounter misinformation (Pennycook & Rand, 2021; Pariser, 2011; Tandoc et al., 2018; Guess et al., 2020; Guess, Nyhan & Reifler, 2020). The study also found out that political content gratifications increases political engagement and participation on social media which supports earlier research which indicate that other studies social media gratifications significantly influence political engagement and participation (Kim et al., 2013; Ruggiero, 2000; Vergeer, Hermans & Sams, 2013). Therefore, the study findings successfully answer the study question that political content gratification influence susceptibility to political misinformation exposure and sharing among Kenyan social media users as it creates vulnerabilities that can are exploited by those seeking to spread misinformation. The study finding also did answer the second research question that uncritical acceptance of information, political content bias and cultivation of political beliefs influence the link between users' gratification from political content and their likelihood of being exposed to and sharing misinformation.

CONCLUSION

In this study, the primary focus was to explore the role of content gratification on political misinformation exposure and sharing among Kenyan social media users. This was validated using the study model which identified and tested nine hypotheses plus six constructs. Thus, enhancing the practical and theoretical understanding of the spread of misinformation among the Kenyan social media users from an academic perspective, the study's contribution is in the development and

testing a model on content gratification and misinformation in Kenya. This model could be integrated with other models or models' variables to improve on its exploratory power.

The study was able to successfully test how political content gratification influences exposure and sharing of political content among Kenyan social media users as well as the extent to which the mediating factors (uncritical acceptance of information, political content bias and cultivation of political beliefs) explain the relationship between political content gratification and misinformation susceptibility. This provides strategic foundation for policymakers to develop interventions aimed at promoting media literacy and combating the spread of misinformation in Kenya.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The Spiral of Silence did not receive empirical support for the proposed hypothesis that, social media users are more likely to share majority opinions due to the fear of social isolation, in this study, the findings highlight the need for further research to explore how fear of social isolation operates in digital environments, particularly in relation to misinformation. Future studies could investigate whether specific conditions, such as the level of anonymity or the composition of social networks, influence the applicability of this theory in online settings. The study findings, also highlight conditions and factors necessary for misinformation exposure and sharing among the Kenyan social media users. Future studies could investigate specific interventions that could be developed to mitigate the dissemination of misinformation within Kenya.

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