Social Media Misinformation in Europe and Africa: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract. In an era of rapid digital transformation, social media has emerged as a dominant source of information and is also used for misinformation. This creates a significant challenge because misinformation can influence public perceptions and behaviours related to online security. As a result, this paper compared how misinformation spreads on social media in Europe and Africa. Exploring the key factors influencing misinformation dynamics, the role of regulatory frameworks, and the effectiveness of fact-checking initiatives in both regions. It also assessed deepfakes' role in strengthening the spread of misinformation. A systematic literature review was used to gain these insights, which included exploring social media's role in spreading misinformation. The results highlighted the need for awareness and exposed the threat posed by deepfakes. Furthermore, the results also yielded that to tackle misinformation in this digital era, there is a need for a multi-stakeholder approach and cross-regional collaboration and use of deepfake detection tools to foster a more informed digital society.

Keywords: Misinformation, Social media, Disinformation, Cybersecurity, Africa, Europe

1. Introduction

Today, in this digital era, the world is experiencing a surge of manipulated information. This manipulated information is often referred to as misinformation; however, two other related terms are associated with manipulated information, which are fake news and disinformation. Misinformation is defined as false or misleading information distributed without intent to deceive (Aïmeur, Amri and Brassard, 2023). Fake news refers to misinformation presented as news articles. In addition, fake news is defined as incorrect or misleading information published as news, frequently to deceive (Aïmeur, Amri and Brassard, 2023). The key difference between misinformation and disinformation lies with the intent of the spreader. Misinformation is usually shared unintentionally, while disinformation is deliberately created to deceive, often targeting specific groups. Moreover, many researchers have noted that determining the intent behind the information is often challenging (Wu, Morstatter and Liu, 2019; Onigbinde and Oloyede, 2024). Therefore, this review uses "misinformation" as a broad term to encompass all instances of false or misleading information.

The spread of misinformation can often lead to serious consequences across various aspects of society, including politics, security, and the economy (De Jager, Marivate and Modupe, 2023). This may include a decline in trust in institutions, the spread of fear and panic, and, in some cases, the erosion of democracy (Onigbinde and Oloyede, 2024). However, misinformation is not a new phenomenon; it has been around for decades. Mahlasela et al (2024) in their investigation of the impact of artificial intelligence and machine learning on media manipulation, they noted that the creation and distribution of manipulated content will continue to rise due to the increasing accessibility of technology and the ease of spreading information through social media platforms. An observation that is also noted by (Aïmeur, Amri and Brassard, 2023).

Misinformation has evolved in many ways over the years (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales, 2019). In Europe, which is the focus of this study, research examining misinformation from various fact-checking organizations across different continents found that many European countries are frequently targeted by political misinformation, particularly regarding foreign politics (Cazzamatta, 2024). However, this has not always been the case. BBC News (2025) reported on a social media misinformation campaign that went viral, fuelling conspiracy theorists and social media speculation. This campaign involved the false claim of the passing of Queen Elizabeth II.

In Africa, which is also a focus of this study, misinformation campaigns have primarily been used to influence political agendas (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales, 2019). In South Africa, one of the countries in Africa, (Mare, Mabweazara and Moyo, 2019) [9] noted the use of bots in a misinformation campaign by the Guptas to divert attention from state capture. Chenzi (2021) highlighted how social media platforms are gradually becoming a key factor in South Africa's contemporary xenophobia challenge. Finally, more recently, as part of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) peacekeeping force, a misinformation campaign gained traction,

falsely claiming that South African National Defence Force (SANDF) soldiers were held captive or hostage by the M23 rebels (Van Tilburg, 2025).

A similar observation was noted during Russia's invasion of Ukraine, highlighting how disinformation can spread rapidly and have a significant impact, particularly through social media (Morosoli et al., 2025). During the invasion, Russia used this tactic to spread false claims, such as the Ukrainian president surrendering, Ukrainian soldiers laying down their arms and waving a white flag, and justifications for the invasion aimed at swaying public opinion and garnering support from other countries (Baloyi et al., 2024). This conflict underscored how, when combined with false information, social media can go beyond its original purpose as a communication tool and become a powerful weapon capable of shaping public perception, influencing opinions, and ultimately affecting real-world events.

The individuals behind misinformation campaigns vary. A study by Cazzamatta (2024) found that a significant portion of false information originates from unidentified or seemingly ordinary social media users. This was evident in the case of Queen Elizabeth II's rumoured death, where an ordinary account initially spread the false claim, which was later amplified by fake accounts (BBC News, 2025). However, misinformation is not always spread by individuals alone; in some cases, digital technologies such as bots, which are automated software designed to perform repetitive tasks online, play a crucial role in fuelling these campaigns (Mare, Mabweazara and Moyo, 2019). The extent to which social media contributes to misinformation warrants an investigation, particularly in Africa and Europe, which are the focus of this review.

2. Problem Statement

The main research problem is that the current understanding of how misinformation spreads on social media platforms in Europe and Africa is currently underexplored, which could potentially leave everyday social media users in both regions susceptible to misinformation campaigns. The following research objectives (RO) guided the study:

RO1: *To analyse the key factors influencing the spread of misinformation on social media platforms in Europe and Africa.*

RO2: *To identify similarities and differences in misinformation trends, propagation mechanisms, and audience susceptibility in Europe and Africa.*

RO3: *To assess the effectiveness of current misinformation detection and mitigation strategies across the two regions.*

R04: *To propose a framework for a more comprehensive approach to combating misinformation, considering regional differences and best practices.*

3. Methodology

A systematic literature review (SLR) is carried out to address the main research problem, which investigates existing literature on how social media influences misinformation in Europe and Africa. As indicated, the aforementioned research objectives guided this study. The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic and Meta-analysis (PRISMA) framework was used to target publications between 2020 and 2025 with search terms ("misinformation" AND "social media" AND "Europe" AND "Africa" AND "cybersecurity") (Page et al., 2021). The following databases were used: Scopus, Elsevier, Google Scholar, and Taylor and Francis Online for comprehensive results.

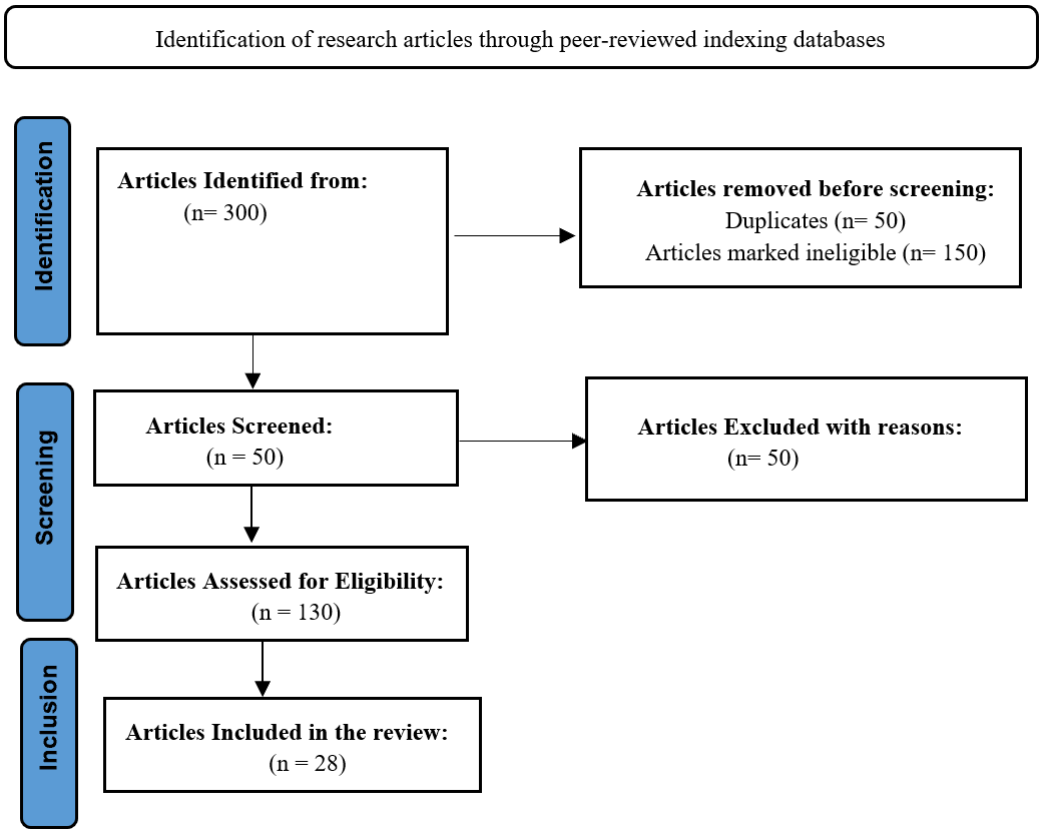

Figure 1: Representation of the PRISMA Framework

4. Literature Review

4.1 Factors Influencing the Spread of Misinformation

Social media algorithms prioritize engagement-driven content, often favoring sensational, emotionally charged, or polarizing information because such content tends to generate more interaction. This process may unintentionally spread misinformation. Although European platforms have taken steps to control material, there is still uneven enforcement of these regulations (European Commission, 2025). Effective content filtering in Africa is hindered by a lack of resources and issues with digital infrastructure (Mtsweni et al., 2023). Bolsonaro's usage of Telegram and YouTube is a prime example of how algorithms favor content that influences public opinion, even when it contains false information (Di Nubila et al., 2023). In this regard, social media algorithms reinforce divisions of opinion and spread false information by fostering the development of echo chambers and filter bubbles.

Political environments, including governmental structures, historical legacies, and media systems, significantly influence misinformation strategies. The rise of far-right populists like Guido Rios in Uruguay, Antonio Kast in Chile, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Javier Milei in Argentina demonstrates how these political leaders take advantage of political unrest to spread false information, particularly in areas with a history of authoritarianism and lax regulations (Kestler, 2022). Latin America's presidential systems and military dictatorship legacies influence the use of disinformation by both left- and right-wing groups, in contrast to Europe's corporatist and Mediterranean political systems (Kestler, 2022). Like Steve Bannon, leaders such as Santiago Abascal in Spain and Donald Trump in the United States have used disinformation as a weapon to attack democratic institutions and mainstream media (Hameleers and Minihold, 2022). While political media and state-sponsored disinformation are more prevalent in Europe, misinformation frequently spreads through informal networks like WhatsApp and local community discussions in Africa. This illustrates the various ways political contexts impact the dissemination of false information (Mtsweni et al., 2023).

4.2 Role of Social Media Platforms in Facilitating Misinformation

Social media platforms act as both enablers and mitigators of misinformation (Bhardwaj and Kumar, 2023). Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok have difficulty enforcing standards to prevent false information,

especially in areas where influence on politics is common. Research shows that where political forces restrict regulation or where content moderation is weak, disinformation thrives (The Guardian, 2025). Social media platforms play a pivotal role in the dissemination of misinformation, influenced by their design, algorithms, and user interactions. Developing solutions to counteract false information on the internet requires an understanding of these systems (The Guardian, 2025; Bhardwaj and Kumar, 2023).

One important contributing component is algorithmic amplification, where social media sites employ algorithms that rank information according to user involvement (Mtsweni et al., 2023). This frequently leads to the promotion of emotionally charged or dramatic posts, which can accelerate the spread of false information. Algorithm amplifications lead to filter bubbles, where users are mostly exposed to material that supports their preconceived notions, increasing their susceptibility to false information. Due in large part to algorithmic amplification, studies have shown that false information is more likely to be shared and spread more quickly and extensively than accurate information (Fraga-Lamas and Fernandez-Carames, 2020). Falsehoods can spread quickly before fact-checking procedures take effect as users transmit content across large networks with a single click (Shu et al., 2020). Furthermore, multimedia manipulation and deepfakes have become particularly troublesome types of disinformation. The detection of misleading information is made more difficult by the fact that these alterations, which are frequently powered by AI technologies like deep-fake videos or GAN-generated graphics, are very hard for users to spot (Mahlasela et al., 2024).

Another major issue on social media platforms is the lack of adequate content filtering. Platforms have implemented tools such as content flagging and collaborations with fact-checking groups, but these are sometimes insufficient. It is challenging to adequately control the vast amount of content being posted, and false information keeps spreading. This is demonstrated by the spread of misleading information on COVID-19 and vaccinations throughout the pandemic, which resulted in dangers to the public's health and vaccine reluctance (Demuyakor and Opata, 2022). The spread of social media misinformation emphasises the need for a diversified strategy to resolve the problem. This includes greater algorithm transparency, more effective content filtering, media literacy education, and rules that strike a balance between free expression and the need to protect public discourse (Shu et al., 2020).

4.3 Europe vs Africa Comparative Analysis

Table 1: Comparative Analysis

Category	Europe (Selected Countries)	Africa (Selected Countries	References
Political Systems	Europe has a variety of democratic systems with strong institutions, while certain countries are experiencing rising populism and political polarization (e.g., Italy, Hungary, Czech Republic). The institutional strength varies, with persistent threats from far-right parties and Russian involvement in Eastern Europe.	African political systems are many, ranging from democracies with competitive elections (Ghana, Botswana) to hybrid regimes and authoritarian republics (Cameroon, Uganda). Institutional quality and governance differ significantly, affecting media freedom and misinformation dynamics.	(Jungherr and Schroeder, 2021; Africa Check, 2025; Tandoc, Lim and Ling, 2023)
Media Landscapes	Well-established public broadcasters (such as the BBC in the United Kingdom and Deutsche Welle in Germany) coexist with private media, which are controlled by national government to ensure standards and media integrity. However, media polarization and trust difficulties remain in several countries.	Media environments range from state-controlled outlets (e.g., Ethiopia) to vibrant independent media (e.g., South Africa, Kenya). Informal and digital media play a growing role, especially where traditional media access is limited. Press freedom varies significantly.	(Hameleers and Minihold, 2022; Africa Check, 2025; Tandoc, Lim and Ling, 2023)
Social Media Influence	Fact-checking organizations (e.g., Full Fact in the UK) actively monitor misinformation on platforms like Facebook and X (Twitter). Algorithmic amplification and political polarization contribute to misinformation spread, especially during elections.	Social media is a critical source of information, often filling gaps left by traditional media. WhatsApp and Facebook are widely used for news sharing, but weak regulation and lower digital literacy can accelerate misinformation spread, notably in countries like Nigeria and South Africa.	(Carmi et al., 2020; Africa Check, 2025; Tandoc, Lim and Ling, 2023)

Category	Europe (Selected Countries)	Africa (Selected Countries	References
Digital Literacy	High digital literacy rates are supported by formal education systems emphasizing media literacy. Citizens generally have awareness of misinformation tactics, though gaps remain among older populations	Digital literacy varies significantly; urban centers tend to have higher digital skills, while rural areas often have limited access and education on misinformation. Efforts to improve digital literacy are growing but uneven across countries.	(Carmi et al., 2020; Africa Check, 2025; Tandoc, Lim and Ling, 2023)
Disinformation Challenges	Europe faces sophisticated misinformation campaigns, including Russia-linked operations, deepfakes, and AI-generated fake news, particularly affecting Eastern Europe and during electoral cycles.	Challenges include political propaganda, state-sponsored disinformation, and misinformation spread through encrypted messaging apps. Conflict zones and politically unstable countries (e.g., Cameroon, Ethiopia) are especially vulnerable.	(Jungherr and Schroeder, 2021; Africa Check, 2025; Tandoc, Lim and Ling, 2023; UNESCO, 2025)
Fact-Checking & Regulation	Supported by comprehensive EU regulations such as the Digital Services Act (DSA) and GDPR, alongside active fact-checking networks across member states. Regulatory enforcement varies but overall frameworks are robust.	Regulatory frameworks are emerging but often underdeveloped. Initiatives like Africa Check and localized fact-checking efforts are growing, but enforcement and capacity remain limited in many countries. Regional bodies like the African Union are promoting media governance reforms.	(Hameleers and Minihold, 2022; Africa Check, 2025; Tandoc, Lim and Ling, 2023; UNESCO, 2025)

4.4 Role of Fact-Checking Initiatives in Both Regions

Fact-checking plays a significant role in reducing false beliefs as a way of combating the spread of misinformation. Fact-checkers are tasked with the role of checking whether content produced or posted online is factual. A study by Porter and Wood (2021) focused on assessing the effectiveness of global fact-checking, discusses how fact-checking can help deny false beliefs, but it is not enough to eliminate or reduce misinformation. A study by Badji, Orgeret and Mutsvairo (2024) on fact-checking practices in Ethiopia and Mali discusses how fact-checkers in these countries are often victims of harassment and online bullying, who self-censor and avoid working on sensitive topics due to fear of reprisal from the government. They further state how this leads to inaccessibility of reliable resources and their focus shifting to viral social media content rather than focusing on being truth keepers (Badji, Orgeret and Mutsvairo, 2024). Resource constraints in both regions are a challenge, as fact-checkers do not have access to the resources that will help in eliminating misinformation due to politics. Digital transformation is a challenge where there is a growing number of organizations that are responsible for fact-checking, but there is a lack of media literacy in both regions (García-Gordillo, Rivas-de-Roca and de-Lima-Santos, 2025).

4.5 Role of Deepfakes in Worsening Misinformation

The emergence of AI has made it easier for deepfakes to be more realistic, thus making it harder for people to distinguish between fake and real content (Mahlasela et al., 2024; Veerasamy and Pieterse, 2022). Due to the realistic nature of deepfakes, it has made it hard for people to tell what is right and wrong due to the realistic audio, videos and images. This has resulted in the rapid spread of deepfake content on social media as people do not verify the authenticity of the content (Baloyi et al., 2024; Luleci and Catbas, 2023). There has been the emergence of new tactics of spreading misinformation using people in high positions, politicians, due to the emergence of deepfakes. For instance, there was a case where a South African parliamentary platform was used to spread misinformation on how the parliament is in support of Bitcoin (Panchia, 2025). Deepfakes have made it easy for malicious actors to spread misinformation, as there will be new tactics that are used to spread information through social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook (Perez Dasilva, Meso Ayerdi and Mendiguren Galdospin, 2021).

According to Gregory (2022) social media has been used as a form of news media to reach the masses. Therefore, deepfakes have been used for media manipulation in spreading misinformation through the manipulation of images, voices, and videos of people in high positions or prominent figures to push a narrative. Veerasamy and Pieterse (2022) how deepfakes use prominent figures such as Donald Trump and Mark Zuckerberg to cause confusion among users or to create an influence. This further leads to distrust amongst users. Luleci and Catbas (2023) discuss how deep-fake technology poses challenges for detection due to the sophisticated nature of deepfakes, resulting in the spread of misinformation, as it is difficult to distinguish between real and manipulated content. False narratives are amplified using deepfakes to trigger emotional responses, create bias, and exploit societal views through manipulation (Luleci and Catbas, 2023).

4.6 Current State of Deepfake Technology and Detection

The discussion of how media manipulation is due to deep fakes is a growing concern due to the rise of Artificial intelligence (Mahlasela et al., 2024). The authors further discuss how creating more diffusion models is used to create realistic content for purposes that were not intended, such as image creation. Generative adversarial networks (GANs), a deep learning model used to create realistic images and videos, make it difficult to detect deepfakes due to their adaptability, which allows them to be used to train any data type (Mahlasela et al., 2024). Deepfake tools' ease of access and usage make it easy to create content, as anyone can have access to open-source tools (Mahlasela et al., 2024; Du et al., 2023). AI has made it easy for the creators of deepfakes to use new techniques and tools that can create realistic images, audio, and videos. AI has made creating deepfakes easy for anyone without experience or skill. Cinar (2023) further emphasizes how deepfakes are used during elections to push an agenda and affect democracy and the rights of citizens due to the creation of misleading images and videos of politicians spreading their agenda.

5. Discussion

The rapid spread of misinformation on social media presents distinct challenges in Europe and Africa that are shaped by the differences in the regulatory frameworks, digital literacy, political landscapes, and technological infrastructure. The spread and impact of misinformation vary significantly between Europe and Africa due to the distinct political, technological, and socio-economic factors. Political polarization and algorithmic amplification in Europe play a major role in driving misinformation. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter focus on engagement, which often amplify divisive content that seeks to reinforce ideological echo chambers (Hameleers and Minihold, 2022). While the European Union has implemented regulatory measures like the Digital Service Act (DSA) and the Code of Practice on Disinformation to increase platform transparency to ensure enforcement remains inconsistent (European Commission, 2022). Also, higher levels of digital literacy in Europe help mitigate misinformation, though ideological biases still influence media consumption (Van Kessel, Sajuria and Van Hauwaert, 2020).

On the other hand, Africa faces different challenges primarily due to reliance on informal networks and weak regulatory frameworks. Messaging platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp dominate with limited content moderation, allowing rumors and false information to spread unchecked (Mtsweni et al., 2023). In politically unstable democracies such as Nigeria and Kenya, misinformation is frequently weaponized during the elections, which often incites violence (Moyo, Mare and Mabweazara, 2020). Fact-checking initiatives like Africa Check struggle with insufficient funding, while governments sometimes resort to extreme measures such as internet shutdowns to curb misinformation (Yussif et al., 2024). These disparities highlight how regional differences in technology, governance and media literacy shape the spread of and control of misinformation.

The emergence of deepfakes has led to manipulation, confusion and mistrust in organizations by users. A study by (Mahlasela et al., 2024) focused on the impact of artificial intelligence on the realism and prevalence of deepfakes. As emphasized in this study, GANs, FBMs and ARs are used to create realistic images and videos, which makes it difficult to detect deepfakes (Mahlasela et al., 2024). The advancement in AI has made it easy for threat actors to create undetectable deepfakes. Cinar (2023) in their study emphasized how deepfakes are used to push an agenda, such as during elections, where videos and images of politics are used to create a narrative. This poses a threat as these deepfakes are used to spread misinformation.

Due to the increasing use of social media, threat actors have found new ways of targeting their victims. Deepfakes help with the spreading of misinformation due to the sophisticated nature of deepfakes (Al-Khazraji et al., 2023). This leads to mistrust and confusion amongst users as they are unable to verify real and fake content. Open-access tools have made it easy for anyone to create deep fakes. This leads to an increase and improvement of deepfakes, which makes it hard to detect what's real and fake. As emphasized in the studies by Baloyi et al., 2024; Al-Khazraji et al. 2023), deepfakes have made it difficult for users to detect what's real and fake, thereby sharing unverified content online on social media. This further leads to bias, emotional triggers and exploitation of societal views through manipulation (Al-Khazraji et al., 2023).

6. Misinformation Framework

Social media has made it easy to spread misinformation, and with the popularity of deepfakes, misinformation has worsened (Al-Khazraji et al., 2023). This section discusses the proposed misinformation framework as illustrated in Figure 2 on how to combat misinformation and educate society on how not to fall victim to misinformation.

Figure 2: Proposed Misinformation Framework

6.1 Multi-Stakeholder Partnership

Misinformation calls for a multi-stakeholder partnership with different stakeholders. This includes governments enforcing laws and regulations that will protect the citizens and promoting media literacy on identifying misinformation. Private sector organisations, mainly focusing on technology, can develop detection tools that will be used to detect deep-fakes, which will create a media-literate society. These will help with transparency purposes when accessing social media platforms. Media organisations will play a massive role in engaging in more fact-checking efforts and accurate reporting by discarding fake social media platforms aimed at disseminating misinformation and ensuring adherence to ethical standards. In addition, educational institutions could include a curriculum on media literacy. Research institutions can conduct more research on misinformation and develop new detection techniques while collaborating with media organisations to share educational content through the media platforms. This will create a more digitally literate society where people know how to identify misinformation.

6.2 Cross-regional Collaboration

Collaboration has been seen as an essential approach when faced with challenges. This will include sharing information between the two regions, such as making information open access so that people in different regions have access to it. A study conducted by Badji, Orgeret, and Mutsvairo (2024) shared how fact-checking organisations do not have access to resources that can be used to eliminate misinformation in politics. Sharing detection techniques in both regions will help tackle misinformation, with instances where Africa will learn from European organisations on deepfake detection techniques. Collaboration in research aimed at experts in the regions, coming together to study misinformation, will tackle misinformation. This can also include different experts who specialise in misinformation and develop solutions that will tackle misinformation. Fostering global partnerships between educational institutions, research institutions, international organizations, and governments to combat misinformation globally will help create an informed global society. International organisations should collaborate to develop international standards and laws that are aimed at addressing misinformation.

6.3 Deepfake Detection Tools

Governments in both regions should invest in research efforts to develop advanced deepfake detection tools. This will further promote collaboration between Europe and Africa, where different stakeholders work together to develop and implement deepfake detection tools. Private sector organisations can partner with public sector organisations to create deep-fake detection tools that can be integrated into social media platforms. These detection tools should abide by the laws and regulations that will ensure the effective implementation of deepfake detection tools.

6.4 More Informed Digital Society

Globally, countries should emphasise the importance of taking media literacy programs starting from primary school. These programs will educate the public on how to identify misinformation and disinformation, follow the right social media platforms that disseminate information, detect deepfakes, and evaluate information sources, including fact-checking efforts. This will empower citizens to participate in misinformation elimination efforts by creating misinformation advocates who are tasked with raising awareness on how to identify misinformation. This can include providing free access to tools that can verify information and encouraging fact-

checking before sharing information online. Emphasis on the consequences of sharing information without verification can encourage citizens to create awareness of misinformation, especially during elections.

7. Conclusion and Future work

This study analysed the key factors influencing the spread of misinformation on social media platforms in Europe and Africa. It further investigated the role of social media, users, bots, and other digital tools in amplifying misinformation. In addition, it aimed to identify similarities and differences in misinformation trends, propagation mechanisms, and audience susceptibility in Europe and Africa. The results indicated that it is essential to implement the proposed framework to combat misinformation and eliminate the continuous spread of misinformation on social media. For future work, researchers can further explore how misinformation affects Africa by comparing specific countries in Africa that are developing and developed.

Ethical declaration: No ethical clearance was required as this study involved a systematic literature review.

AI declaration: No AI tools were used in the development of this research paper.

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