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Negative Propaganda and Political Warfare in Nigeria: A Theatrical and Cultural Discourse Analysis

Nnachi Okafor, PhD,

*Department of Advertising & Public Relations,
Enugu State University of Science & Technology (ESUT), Enugu,*

Odor Thomas Orukwa,

*Department of Economics,
Nasarawa State University, Keffi (NSUK).*

Abstract

This study critically investigates the effects of negative propaganda as an instrument of political warfare and national policy in Nigeria, examined through a theatrical performance and cultural discourse lens. Focusing on the first year of Late President Muhammadu Buhari's administration in 2016, the research adopts a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative data from 300 systematically selected respondents with qualitative insights drawn from interviews, literature, and content analysis. Guided by Cultural Norms Theory and Theatrical Performance Theory, the study explores how political actors weaponised ethno-religious narratives, symbolic imagery, and performative communication to influence public opinion, manipulate collective perception, and legitimise policy positions. Findings reveal that 78 per cent of the administration's political communication relied on biased or distorted messaging, and 65 per cent of respondents agreed that such propaganda negatively shaped national discourse, civic behaviour, and socio-political cohesion. These results align with scholarship arguing that propaganda functions through cultural codes and dramaturgical displays that script, dramatise, and amplify political narratives. Counter-arguments in the literature, however, suggest that propaganda may also stabilise governance by creating ideological clarity or mobilising national unity during crises; yet the Nigerian case shows that such benefits rarely materialised. The study concludes that negative propaganda contributed to political polarisation, weakened public trust, and undermined policy communication. It recommends adopting transparent strategic communication, culturally grounded public relations, and evidence-driven political messaging as sustainable alternatives for achieving national policy goals.

Keywords: Propaganda, Warfare, National Policy, Cultural Discourse, Performance

Introduction

For more than a century, governments, politicians, and political communicators across the world have deployed negative and pernicious propaganda to influence public opinion, consolidate power, and secure political legitimacy. These tactics – ranging from half-truths and misinformation to media manipulation and orchestrated rhetorical performances – have become deeply embedded in both democratic and authoritarian systems. Nigeria is not exempt from this trajectory. An examination of the country's media culture, political history, sociocultural diplomacy, and party competition reveals a long-standing and troubling reliance on propaganda by political actors and public officeholders. Scholars in political communication argue that the contemporary information environment is increasingly characterised by strategic ambiguity, selective disclosure, and distortion designed to play on citizens' emotions rather than illuminate policy (Jowett and O'Donnell 34; McQuail 146). These dynamics have become even more pronounced in the Nigerian political landscape.

The use of negative propaganda as an instrument of political warfare and national policy is neither new nor diminishing. Empirical evidence shows that a significant proportion of political communication – both globally and locally – is circulated through multimedia networks that enable rapid dissemination and emotional saturation (Forest 16). Historically, information has been weaponised to shape perceptions, incite fear, and suppress dissent. Forest references the Chinese Civil War (1945–49), where opposing factions used rumours, falsified documents, and exaggerated narratives to weaken morale and gain military and political advantage (16). Nigeria exhibits similar patterns, as political narratives are frequently infused with insinuations, authoritarian rhetoric, culturally charged appeals, and inflammatory messaging that fuel polarisation.

The consequences of these practices are far-reaching. Negative propaganda has contributed to Nigeria's sociopolitical instability, exacerbating pre-existing crises such as hyperinflation, insecurity, ethno-religious tension, poor infrastructure, and distrust in governance. The rise of digital communication platforms has amplified these effects, enabling political actors to target specific groups with divisive narratives and rehearse ethnopolitical grievances through social media. Scholars caution that digital propaganda entrenches prejudice, institutionalises misinformation, and undermines democratic cohesion (Olorunfoba 52). In Nigeria's fragile political climate, these dynamics manifest as orchestrated attempts to frame political opponents as enemies, manipulate historical grievances, and stir anxiety among citizens.

Against this backdrop, the first year of President Muhammadu Buhari's administration in 2016 provides a compelling context for examining how negative propaganda shapes political behaviour and public engagement. Buhari's "change mantra" inspired significant optimism among Nigerians, particularly regarding his promises of anti-corruption reforms, transparent governance, and a reinvigorated economy. However, early months of his tenure quickly revealed an administration marked by evasive communication practices, selective truthfulness, ethnocentric undertones, and inconsistent narratives. While some supporters viewed official communication as necessary strategic positioning for national stability, critics interpreted these tactics as deliberate manipulation designed to obscure administrative shortcomings and suppress dissent. This tension reflects a central concern in propaganda scholarship: although propaganda can unify populations under coherent ideological frames during crises, its misuse in contexts of diversity and weak institutions can deepen mistrust, distort civic decision-making, and erode social cohesion (Jowett and O'Donnell 78).

Nigeria's pluralistic nature intensifies this problem. With its complex mosaic of ethnic identities, religious affiliations, historical allegiances, and political

subcultures, the country is especially susceptible to propaganda that exploits cultural codes and amplifies division. Political rhetoric during Buhari's first year frequently drew on stereotypes, selective cultural histories, and emotive appeals that played into ethno-religious sensitivities. These patterns align with literature suggesting that propaganda in multi-ethnic societies often functions by embedding itself within cultural narratives that shape how citizens interpret political events. As a result, propaganda under Buhari's administration significantly influenced national conversations on security, governance, the economy, and identity politics.

In addition to shaping perception, propaganda during this period contributed to a climate of institutional fragility. Citizens increasingly perceived key institutions – media agencies, security bodies, and policy communication organs – as extensions of partisan propaganda rather than neutral public authorities. This perception weakened trust in democratic accountability, fuelled civic apathy, and diminished confidence in electoral processes. Such institutional decline is particularly concerning in a context already facing structural challenges: poverty, unemployment, insurgency, farmer–herder conflicts, and socio-economic inequality.

Given these tensions, this study investigates how negative propaganda functioned as a tool of political warfare and policy manipulation during Buhari's first year in office. It interrogates the dramaturgical, cultural, and strategic dimensions of propaganda and how these elements intersected with Nigeria's complex political environment. Specifically, the study analyses how propaganda shaped public attitudes, legitimised controversial policies, manipulated national discourse, and influenced perceptions of governance. In doing so, it identifies the urgent need for alternative communication models grounded in transparency, ethical strategic communication, cultural sensitivity, and civic engagement.

By synthesising theoretical insights, empirical evidence, and cultural analysis, this study positions negative propaganda as both a communicative and performative force that reshaped Nigeria's political landscape in 2016. It argues that understanding propaganda within this broader cultural-theatrical framework is essential for developing more effective governance communication, countering misinformation, and strengthening democratic accountability in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Understanding the effects of negative propaganda as an instrument of political warfare and national policy formulation in Nigeria requires a multidimensional engagement with scholarship across political communication, cultural discourse, media studies, and theatrical performance. The literature demonstrates that propaganda in contemporary societies is not a merely informational tool but a culturally coded, psychologically driven, and performatively enacted strategy used by political actors to manipulate public perception, legitimise power, and shape national narratives. This section synthesises theoretical, conceptual, and empirical insights from the original manuscript to provide an integrated foundation for analysing propaganda under President Muhammadu Buhari's administration during the first year of his tenure in 2016.

Negative propaganda occupies a central place in political communication scholarship. In the Nigerian political context, it refers to the deliberate use of distorted, selective, or emotionally charged information designed to influence public perception and direct civic behaviour toward outcomes desired by political actors. Scholars describe it as a strategic form of persuasion that privileges one-sided messaging over balanced information, often relying on symbolic cues, stereotypes, and emotive appeals to shape attitudes (Hasan 420; Nelson 64). In Nigeria, these practices frequently exploit ethno-religious sentiments, grievance narratives, and historical tensions, making

propaganda not merely a communication strategy but a cultural and psychological instrument embedded in political discourse. While some researchers argue that propaganda may occasionally facilitate ideological clarity or mobilise national consensus in times of crisis, most agree that its misapplication in volatile societies deepens division, erodes trust, and distorts democratic engagement (Jowett and O'Donnell 78).

Political warfare builds on these dynamics by framing communication as a competitive struggle for influence, legitimacy, and strategic advantage. It encompasses the deployment of speeches, policies, symbols, diplomatic gestures, and media narratives to weaken opponents, shape public orientation, or reinforce the authority of those in power. Nigerian political history reflects this pattern, as politicians, campaign teams, and state machinery frequently engage in rhetorical battles, performative posturing, and symbolic dramatisation to consolidate support. Forest notes that political warfare historically includes spreading rumours, falsifying information, and crafting narratives designed to destabilise adversaries, a pattern evident in Nigeria's electoral cycles and policy debates (16).

Although closely related, psychological warfare differs in its primary objectives. It focuses on demoralising, confusing, or manipulating target populations by disseminating disinformation or emotionally provocative narratives. Classical definitions describe it as the application of psychological principles to political or military objectives, employing propaganda in both overt and covert forms to weaken morale or influence perception during conflict. In Nigeria, moments of heightened insecurity such as insurgency, farmer–herder crises, or episodes of electoral tension, have witnessed the circulation of psychologically charged messages intended either to reassure supporters or delegitimise opponents. Yet scholars caution that psychological warfare, when normalised in civilian governance, blurs ethical boundaries and undermines democratic communication norms.

National policy, by contrast, represents the formal expression of a state's strategic priorities, formulated to address socioeconomic, political, and cultural concerns. It provides a framework for collective action, guiding decisions across sectors such as security, economy, diplomacy, and cultural affairs. Ideally, policy communication should be transparent, evidence-driven, and anchored in public interest. However, in practice, Nigerian policy processes often intersect with propaganda and political warfare, as actors use strategic narratives to legitimise controversial policies or secure compliance. This entanglement complicates public understanding of policy objectives and contributes to mistrust in state institutions.

Understanding Propaganda

This study is anchored on two interrelated theoretical frameworks, Cultural Norms Theory and Theatrical Performance Theory, both of which illuminate the sociocultural and performative dimensions of political propaganda in Nigeria. These theories offer a dual lens that explains not only how propaganda messages gain traction among citizens but also how political actors script, dramatised, and stage-manage such messages to influence perception and legitimise policy actions. Their synthesis reflects the multidisciplinary character of political communication in Nigeria, where public discourse is deeply entangled with cultural codes, symbolic performances, and dramaturgical displays.

Cultural Norms Theory, though without a singular authoritative originator, evolved from interdisciplinary contributions in psychology, sociology, anthropology, and political communication. Scholars such as Almond and Verba emphasise the centrality of cultural orientations in shaping political behaviour, noting that citizens interpret political messages through culturally embedded filters that structure their perceptions of authority, legitimacy, and identity (Almond and Verba 28). In this sense, political communication is never neutral; it is processed within symbolic frameworks that define what is plausible, persuasive, or threatening. In the Nigerian context where ethnic identity, religious affiliation, and historical memory heavily influence public life,

Cultural Norms Theory offers a compelling explanatory basis for understanding how propaganda resonates.

The theory's foundational assumption is that political behaviour and belief systems are shaped by shared cultural norms, traditions, values, and interpretive structures. When political actors craft messages, they often draw on these cultural reservoirs to evoke familiarity, solidarity, or fear. Nigerian political communication frequently relies on ethnoreligious narratives, stereotypes, and grievance histories that have long been internalised by various groups. Such narratives are not merely rhetorical embellishments; they operate as cultural codes that guide how citizens decode political content. Scholars argue that negative propaganda is particularly potent in environments where cultural narratives already function as identity anchors, amplifying perceptions of "us versus them" in political competition (Hasan 420; Nelson 64).

Key principles derived from Cultural Norms Theory demonstrate how cultural symbols, historical grievances, and implicit social rules shape the dissemination and reception of propaganda. First, the theory posits that individuals interpret political messages through internalised cultural schemas that determine what they perceive as credible or threatening. Second, it suggests that propaganda messages can weaponise these internalised norms by amplifying prejudices or reinforcing existing social cleavages. Third, the theory highlights the role of political socialisation, including religious institutions, family networks, ethnic associations, and local media, in transmitting cultural norms that predispose citizens to certain political narratives. Fourth, it contends that cultural norms influence collective political behaviour, including civic engagement, protest participation, and acceptance or rejection of policy actions. These principles explain why propaganda targeted at ethnoreligious identities often yields swift emotional responses in Nigeria.

Counter-arguments within cultural communication scholarship suggest that cultural norms do not deterministically shape political perception. Some scholars argue that urbanisation, digital media exposure, and global cultural flows increasingly dilute rigid cultural interpretations, providing citizens with alternative information sources that may counter propaganda. Yet in the Nigerian case, even digital communication often reinforces cultural identity frames rather than eroding them, as online discourse frequently reproduces ethnic and partisan polarisation.

The relevance of Cultural Norms Theory to this study lies in its ability to explain how negative propaganda under Buhari's administration drew legitimacy from culturally coded messages. Political actors and media aides frequently deployed narratives that invoked ethnic solidarity, religious anxieties, and historical suspicions. Decisions related to controversial policies such as the Ruga initiative, Fulani-farmer clashes, or security sector reforms, were often communicated through frames shaped by ethnocultural interpretations. Through this lens, political rhetoric was not merely instrumental but culturally performative, reflecting deep-seated assumptions about identity, power, and belonging. The theory thus provides a conceptual foundation for understanding why propaganda messages were assimilated quickly by some groups and rejected vehemently by others.

Theatrical Performance Theory complements this cultural understanding by framing political communication as a dramaturgical process in which political actors perform roles, stage narratives, and employ symbolic gestures to shape public perception. Rooted in performance studies and the work of scholars like Erving Goffman, the theory conceptualises political life as a stage where actors construct front-stage performances to influence audiences, while strategically managing backstage processes to protect credibility and maintain control of the narrative. In this frame, propaganda becomes a scripted tool, crafted, rehearsed, and enacted before diverse publics.

The theory posits that political communication involves staging scenes, performing identities, and deploying symbolic artifacts that evoke emotional reactions. Nigerian

politics is replete with such performative elements: grand campaign rallies, choreographed dances, dramatic accusations, symbolic posturing in agbada regalia, strategic silences during crises, and media spectacles that function as public theatre. These performances are not incidental; they are integral to the communicative machinery of political power. By embedding messages within dramatic gestures or stylised cultural displays, political actors heighten emotional resonance and manipulate public imagination.

Under Buhari's administration, theatricality surfaced in political slogans, carefully staged interviews, crisis responses framed as heroic narratives, and rally performances designed to evoke moral authority or ethnic solidarity. Such dramaturgical acts align with scholars' observations that political leaders often employ symbolic performances to craft legitimacy or project moral superiority (Smith 204). Yet counter-arguments within performance theory caution that theatricality can also foster political engagement by making abstract policy issues emotionally accessible (Alexander 32). While this may hold in some democracies, Nigeria's experience shows that performative communication is more frequently used to obscure complexities, redirect criticism, or create exaggerated impressions of competence.

The relevance of Theatrical Performance Theory to this study stems from its capacity to capture how propaganda operates not only through message content but through embodied gestures, spatial arrangements, soundscapes, and symbolic spectacle. Political actors under Buhari's administration often staged narratives that dramatised achievements, downplayed failures, or projected adversaries as existential threats. These performances contributed to the polarisation of public discourse and influenced how policies were interpreted across different regions and communities.

Synthesising Cultural Norms Theory and Theatrical Performance Theory allows this study to analyse negative propaganda as a culturally coded and performatively enacted political strategy. The combined framework reveals that propaganda thrives in Nigeria not solely because of message content but because of its alignment with cultural identity structures and its embodiment in dramatic political performances. This dual-theoretical approach thus provides a nuanced foundation for examining the communicative environment of Buhari's administration and its implications for political warfare and national policy formulation.

Propaganda under Buhari's Administration

Empirical studies on political communication in Nigeria reveal that negative propaganda, deployed as an instrument of political warfare, has consistently shaped national discourse and influenced policy interpretation across sectors. Evidence from the first year of President Muhammadu Buhari's administration illustrates this pattern across economic narratives, party politics, security communication, anticorruption rhetoric, and social intervention programmes. The manuscript's findings – showing that 78 per cent of the administration's political communication relied on biased or distorted information and that 65 per cent of respondents believed such messaging adversely affected socio-political cohesion – reflect broader scholarly concerns regarding propaganda's destabilising effects in fragile democracies (Adeyemo and Oyeyipo 16; Forest 13–33).

Economic communication during Buhari's first year demonstrates how governments frame national challenges to maintain public confidence. Despite severe hyperinflation, currency devaluation, and recessionary pressures, administration officials presented optimistic narratives emphasising achievements in economic diversification, infrastructure revitalisation, and foreign investment attraction. These claims, though partially grounded in economic policy intentions, often obscured the magnitude of economic hardship faced by citizens. Oshikoya argues that globalised media ecosystems magnify the consequences of such economic misrepresentation, as filtered narratives reinforce international perceptions of instability while limiting the public's capacity for informed critique (385). The resulting tension between

government rhetoric and lived economic realities contributed to public scepticism and reduced trust in official communication.

Party politics and political campaigns further illustrate the deployment of negative propaganda as a tool for electoral dominance. The 2015 election season saw the All Progressives Congress (APC) employ extensive framing tactics that cast former President Goodluck Jonathan's administration as incompetent, corrupt, and directionless. In 2019, similar narratives resurfaced, with the APC constructing opposition candidate Atiku Abubakar as morally compromised and incapable of governing. Scholars observe that these messaging patterns reflect a broader trend in which Nigerian political contestation increasingly relies on cultural symbolism and theatrical performance, such as chants, dances, slogans, rented crowds, and staged media spectacles, to dramatise ideological tensions and evoke emotional loyalty (Danfulani 52). These performative elements magnify divisions, giving propaganda a visceral quality that resonates deeply within Nigeria's ethnoreligious fabric.

The administration's communication surrounding the Boko Haram insurgency further demonstrates the strategic use of propaganda to shape security narratives. Presidential spokespersons repeatedly described Boko Haram as "technically defeated," despite ongoing bombings, kidnappings, and displacement across the Northeast. This narrative strategy reflects what Forest identifies as a classic pattern in political warfare: portraying security threats as contained to bolster perceptions of state capacity, even when evidence on the ground suggests otherwise (16). By framing insurgents as weakened, the administration reinforced the image of decisive leadership while minimising public fear – yet this approach inadvertently undermined transparency and public trust when violent attacks persisted.

Buhari's widely publicised anticorruption campaign functioned as another arena for propaganda-driven communication. While the administration positioned itself as a moral crusader committed to transparency and accountability, critics noted that enforcement patterns appeared selective, disproportionately targeting opposition actors. This aligns with Jowett and O'Donnell's observation that anticorruption rhetoric can serve as a psychological and political weapon – enhancing perceived legitimacy while delegitimising dissent or political competition (91). Although some citizens initially embraced the administration's messaging, public confidence wavered as high-profile corruption cases stagnated and accusations of ethnic bias emerged, particularly regarding appointments and prosecutorial priorities.

The government's social intervention programmes, including the School Feeding Programme, N-Power, and Market Money initiatives, were similarly accompanied by propaganda-infused communication. Official narratives emphasised empowerment, employment, and poverty reduction, framing the initiatives as evidence of a benevolent and people-centred administration. Yet empirical reports and independent reviews indicated irregularities in implementation, concerns about transparency, and widespread accusations of political patronage. The manuscript accurately identifies these programmes as "more political, corrupt and diversionary strategies to divert public funds," aligning with broader scholarship arguing that publicised social interventions often generate symbolic political capital irrespective of their practical impact.

Across these policy and governance areas, Buhari's administration employed identifiable propaganda strategies that align with documented methods in political warfare. The method of presentation typically involved communicating partial truths, highlighting successes while minimising or obscuring contradictions. In addressing ethnic tensions, particularly the farmer-herder crisis and conflicts in Kaduna and Benue, government officials often simplified or reframed events to avoid accountability or to present the administration as neutral and peace-seeking.

Techniques for gaining attention included high-profile media chats, presidential speeches, letters of protest in diplomatic contexts, and orchestrated appearances

designed to project authority. These practices mirror global propaganda strategies, such as those observed in U.S.–Middle East relations or Israeli–Palestinian military posturing, where symbolic displays of strength aim to shape international and domestic perception. Government actors also relied on established methods for gaining compliance and acceptance, such as saturating media channels with curated narratives or leveraging state-controlled platforms to dominate political discourse. Even when censorship was not explicit, strategic timing, selective interviews, and the use of trusted surrogates shaped the flow of information.

The administration’s communication employed several classic propaganda techniques.

- Disinformation surfaced in conflicting military reports, contradictory economic statements, or unverifiable claims about social intervention outcomes.
- Half-truths appeared frequently in policy explanations that emphasised benefits while ignoring structural weaknesses.
- Slogans such as “Change” and “Next Level” functioned as powerful symbolic shorthand for the administration’s political identity.
- Testimonials featured endorsements from respected cultural leaders, clerics, and celebrities to bolster the credibility of government actions.
- Intentional vagueness appeared in broad statements about security strategies, economic reforms, or anticorruption efforts, allowing citizens to supply meaning in ways favourable to the administration.
- The bandwagon strategy manifested in images of jubilant crowds, choreographed demonstrations of unity, and repeated claims of widespread public support.

Taken together, these empirical patterns demonstrate that the Buhari administration’s propaganda environment was not accidental but orchestrated through structured narrative techniques, cultural cues, and dramatic performances. This fusion of strategic communication, political theatre, and cultural symbolism provides critical context for understanding how propaganda shaped public opinion, political behaviour, and national policy formulation during the period under review.

Effects of Negative Propaganda as an Instrument of Political Warfare and National Policy Formulation

Negative propaganda functions as a potent instrument of political warfare in Nigeria, shaping public consciousness and influencing national policy interpretation in ways that have far-reaching social, political, and economic consequences. Empirical findings from the study indicate that propaganda under President Muhammadu Buhari’s administration significantly distorted public opinion and conditioned civic attitudes toward government actions. This aligns with broader scholarship arguing that propaganda, when embedded in everyday political communication, can manipulate perceptions by selectively framing issues, amplifying fears, and constructing emotionally charged narratives that resonate with existing cultural norms (Jowett and O’Donnell 78; Hasan 420). Citizens exposed to such messaging often recalibrate their beliefs, not on the basis of empirical evidence, but through the emotional and symbolic force of repeated narratives. One of the most visible outcomes is sociopolitical polarisation, as propaganda exploits ethno-religious identities and grievance histories to divide citizens into antagonistic blocs. During Buhari’s first year, political rhetoric frequently mirrored this pattern, framing critics as enemies of progress or portraying certain ethnic groups as obstructive to national unity. Scholars warn that such polarising communication deepens collective suspicion, undermines civic solidarity, and heightens the likelihood of conflict in pluralistic societies (Oloruntoba 52). The performative and cultural resonance of divisive propaganda amplified these tensions, making political debates increasingly adversarial.

Negative propaganda also plays a central role in policy legitimisation, enabling

governments to frame controversial or unpopular policies in ways that suppress dissent. By presenting policies within selective ideological narratives, political actors generate an appearance of necessity or inevitability. During Buhari's administration, issues such as security reforms, anticorruption efforts, and grazing-related interventions were often justified using culturally coded appeals or simplified narratives that obscured complexity. This mirrors global observations that propaganda can manufacture legitimacy for state actions even when empirical justification is weak (Forest 21). The study further highlights the impact on political institutions, noting that propaganda-driven governance erodes institutional credibility by normalising misinformation and undermining transparency. Institutions responsible for communication, security, and accountability become perceived as extensions of partisan machinery, rather than neutral custodians of public interest. This institutional fragility reduces trust in electoral processes, weakens civic engagement, and fuels apathy – conditions already well-documented in Nigerian political culture.

Relatedly, propaganda contributes to the institutionalisation of a cult of personality by constructing political leaders as infallible, visionary, or morally superior. Buhari's administration witnessed this dynamic in portrayals of the president as incorruptible and uniquely suited to "rescue" the nation. At the same time, propaganda demonised opposition figures as saboteurs, traitors, or embodiments of national decline. Such messaging delegitimises alternative viewpoints and narrows democratic space for debate. Finally, the economic effects of sustained propaganda are considerable. Misrepresentation of economic conditions, exaggerated claims of progress, or minimisation of hardship distort market confidence and inhibit effective public planning. Oshikoya observes that misinformation in globalised media environments worsens economic vulnerability by eroding investor trust and obscuring structural deficiencies (385). The study's findings affirm this trend, showing that propaganda during Buhari's first year contributed to public disorientation, reduced trust, and weakened national cohesion.

Public Relations (PR) and Strategic Communication as Alternative Instruments for Attaining National Policy Goals

Public Relations (PR) and strategic communication provide constructive alternatives to the dysfunctional patterns associated with negative propaganda by promoting transparency, stakeholder inclusion, and culturally grounded engagement in national policy processes. PR offers governments a structured means of building public support and trust by communicating policies with clarity, sincerity, and factual accuracy. Rather than relying on distortion or emotive manipulation, PR emphasises truthful messaging, open channels of information, and responsive communication practices that encourage citizens to understand and evaluate policy objectives on their merits. This aligns with scholarship asserting that authentic communication enhances legitimacy and strengthens democratic accountability (McQuail 146).

Equally important is the role of PR in managing public perception and controversy, particularly in politically polarised environments. Effective crisis communication, grounded in evidence and empathy, allows governments to address misinformation, correct rumours, and engage constructively with criticism. Strategic communication expands this capability by integrating research-driven audience analysis, scenario planning, and message testing, thereby enabling policymakers to respond to emerging issues with coherence rather than defensiveness.

Meaningful stakeholder engagement also lies at the core of PR practice. By involving citizens, media practitioners, community leaders, and civil society actors in policy deliberation, governments foster broader consensus and reduce alienation. Strategic communication complements this through systematic

stakeholder mapping, ensuring that diverse voices, especially those in marginalised groups, are incorporated into decision-making processes. Scholars note that inclusive communication not only strengthens policy outcomes but also promotes long-term social cohesion (Almond and Verba 28).

PR and strategic communication further contribute to influencing public attitude and behaviour through targeted information, education, and behavioural messaging. Tools such as public campaigns, community outreach, and social media engagement can motivate constructive civic behaviour, counteract divisive rhetoric, and promote responsible participation in national development. Finally, PR serves as a vital instrument of cultural diplomacy, enabling governments to use cultural exchange, storytelling, and media-driven representations to foster mutual understanding, national unity, and international cooperation. When grounded in cultural values and respectful representation, PR enhances Nigeria’s diplomatic posture and strengthens internal cohesion far more effectively than propagandistic campaigns.

Methodology

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to investigate the effects of negative propaganda as an instrument of political warfare and national policy formulation during the first year of President Muhammadu Buhari’s administration in 2016. The design enabled the researcher to capture the perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of a diverse respondent group at a single point in time while integrating both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. This mixed-methods approach aligned with the study’s objective of examining propaganda not only as a political communication tool but also as a culturally and theatrically performed practice. Survey data provided empirical measurements of exposure, perception, and attitudinal patterns, while interview insights and documentary reviews enriched the analysis by grounding it in contextual detail and lived experience.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process. Participation was strictly voluntary, and respondents were informed of the study’s purpose, expected duration, and procedures prior to completing the questionnaire or participating in interviews. Informed consent was obtained, and participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. No identifying information was included in the reporting of results. All responses were handled securely, and participants had the freedom to withdraw at any stage without repercussions. These procedures ensured adherence to ethical standards governing research involving human subjects.

The study population comprised 3,000 individuals drawn from journalists in public and private media organisations, politicians, government officials, media aides, and members of professional bodies such as the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) and the Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria (APCON). These groups were selected because of their proximity to political communication processes and their professional understanding of propaganda, strategic messaging, and public discourse. From this population, a proportionate allocation technique was used to derive a sample size of 300 respondents, representing 10 per cent of the total population. This sampling approach ensured balanced representation across professional categories and reduced the risk of disproportionate bias in data interpretation.

Table 1: Population of the Study Showing Characteristics of Respondents

S/No	Characteristics of the Respondents	Population Frequency	Proportionate Allocation Technique	Sample Size (Percentag
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			(10%)	e)
1.	Journalists in Government/Private Media Organisations	1500	150	50.00
2.	Politicians, government officials, communication aides, etc.	700	70	33.33
3	Media Practitioners in Embassies, UN Agencies, NGOs, etc.	500	50	16.67
4	Professional Bodies, i.e., Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR), & Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria (APCON).	300	30	10.00
	Total	3000	300	100.00

Source: Field survey data, Okafor, 2025.

Both purposive and convenience sampling techniques were used in selecting respondents. Purposive sampling enabled the inclusion of individuals with direct exposure to political communication, while convenience sampling facilitated access to participants within the study period. These techniques were appropriate given the professional nature of the target population and the need for respondents capable of providing informed insights.

Data collection involved the administration of structured questionnaires consisting of two sections: Section A captured demographic characteristics, while Section B addressed the research objectives, research questions, and hypotheses. The questionnaire combined Likert-scale items, closed-ended questions, and brief open-ended prompts to accommodate quantitative measurement and qualitative nuance. To complement this, qualitative data were sourced through interviews, literature review, and documentary analysis, providing richer contextual grounding for interpreting the statistical findings. A total of 325 questionnaires were distributed, out of which 300 were completed and returned, representing a response rate of 90.23 per cent. This high return rate increased the reliability of the findings and strengthened the generalisability of the conclusions within the boundaries of the study population.

Table 2 Here: "Questionnaire Distributed and Sample Size Determined"

Groups	Questionnaire Distributed	Questionnaire Returned	Questionnaire Not Returned
1.	325 Questionnaire	300 (90.23%)	25 (9.77%)

Source: Field survey data, Okafor, 2024.

Data analysis was conducted using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics – including frequency distributions, means, variances, and standard deviations – were used to summarise respondents' perceptions of propaganda-related communication under Buhari's administration. Inferential statistics such as Chi-square (χ^2) tests and Spearman's Rank-Order Correlation Coefficient were applied to test the study's hypotheses and determine the relationships between exposure to propaganda and respondents' attitudes toward national policy communication. These analytical tools were appropriate given the categorical nature of many variables and the study's emphasis on association rather than prediction.

Qualitative responses from interviews and literature were analysed through thematic content analysis, allowing the researcher to identify patterns, rhetorical

devices, and cultural cues embedded in political messages disseminated during the period under review. This triangulation strengthened the study by ensuring that statistical results were interpreted within the cultural, political, and performative context of Nigerian political communication.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality was assured throughout the data collection process. Respondents were informed of the study's purpose and were free to decline participation at any stage. Data were reported anonymously, and all materials were handled responsibly to protect participant privacy. Overall, the methodological approach integrated empirical rigour with contextual sensitivity, enabling a robust understanding of negative propaganda as a strategic, cultural, and performative instrument in Nigerian political life.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a complex interplay between negative propaganda, cultural discourse, theatrical performance, and political strategy during the first year of President Muhammadu Buhari's administration. The quantitative results – showing that 78 per cent of the administration's political communication relied on biased or distorted messages and that 65 per cent of respondents believed these messages negatively shaped public opinion and national discourse – reinforce the argument that propaganda functioned not merely as a communication tool but as an instrument of political warfare. This aligns with Forest's view that propaganda is most potent when it merges strategic messaging with cultural awareness and emotional manipulation (13–33). Within Nigeria's pluralistic society, where ethnoreligious identity remains central to political interpretation, propaganda messages gained additional force by tapping into historically charged narratives that citizens had already internalised through cultural norms and political socialisation.

Qualitative insights further demonstrate that political actors employed dramaturgical tactic such as stage-crafted narratives, symbolic gestures, orchestrated rallies, emphatic slogans, and choreographed images of support, to construct persuasive public performances. These forms of political theatre amplified the emotional resonance of propaganda, allowing narratives to circulate quickly and embed themselves in public consciousness. Respondents' interpretations of the administration's messaging suggest that such performative strategies not only shaped attitudes but also influenced perceptions of legitimacy, crisis severity, and policy intent. This observation corresponds with Goffman's front-stage theory of performance, in which actors deliberately manage impressions to achieve strategic goals.

The findings also highlight the consequences of propaganda-driven political communication. Persistent reliance on selective disclosure, emotive framing, and cultural symbolism fostered polarisation, deepened mistrust, and heightened ethnopolitical tensions. Respondents noted that propaganda during the period under review often legitimised controversial policies, obscured the government's accountability obligations, and created conflicting interpretations of national challenges such as insecurity, anticorruption efforts, and economic hardship. These outcomes echo literature on political polarisation, which cautions that propaganda entrenches adversarial identities and reduces citizens' willingness to engage in constructive civic deliberation (Oloruntoba 52).

From a governance standpoint, the study found that negative propaganda weakened institutional credibility by normalising evasiveness and undermining transparency in official communication. Respondents' perceptions indicate that key institutions – media agencies, security actors, policy communication organs – were increasingly viewed as political instruments rather than impartial platforms. This institutional weakening has long-term implications, as diminished trust in institutions erodes public cooperation, reduces electoral

participation, and complicates the implementation of development policies.

Despite these challenges, the study offers critical contributions to scholarship. First, it expands the analytical boundaries of propaganda research in Nigeria by integrating Cultural Norms Theory and Theatrical Performance Theory, offering a dual-lens framework that accounts for both the cultural coding and performative enactment of political messaging. While earlier studies largely analysed propaganda through journalistic or political science frameworks, this study positions propaganda within the broader field of cultural discourse and performance. This approach acknowledges that political communication in Nigeria is rarely a purely verbal exercise; it is embodied, staged, and symbolically dramatised.

Second, the study contributes methodologically by demonstrating how empirical data – both quantitative and qualitative – can be integrated with cultural and performance analysis to produce a multidimensional understanding of political communication. The triangulation of survey results, interviews, and content analysis strengthens the reliability of the findings and provides a template for future research exploring political propaganda in culturally diverse societies. Third, the study offers a conceptual bridge between media studies, political communication, cultural diplomacy, and theatre studies. By showing how political actors script, dramatised, and perform propaganda narratives through rallies, campaign spectacles, symbolic gestures, and cultural displays, the study underscores the performative dimension of governance in Nigeria. This insight invites interdisciplinary scholarship on how performance, identity, and narrative shape political mobilisation and policy communication across African democracies.

Finally, the study provides practical implications for policymakers, communication practitioners, and civic educators. Its findings support the need for transparent, evidence-driven strategic communication that counters disinformation, supports national cohesion, and enhances public trust. It also highlights the importance of strengthening media literacy, critical thinking, and cultural awareness among citizens to mitigate the harmful effects of propaganda. Overall, the discussion reveals that negative propaganda during Buhari's first year not only shaped public perception but also influenced national policy debates, institutional credibility, and cultural discourse, underscoring its profound and enduring impact on Nigerian political life.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this study demonstrates that negative propaganda played a decisive role in shaping political communication, public perception, and national policy debates during the first year of President Muhammadu Buhari's administration. Empirical findings revealed that a significant proportion of official messaging relied on biased, selective, or distorted narratives that influenced public attitudes, heightened sociopolitical divisions, and contributed to a climate of mistrust. These outcomes affirm the central argument that propaganda, when deployed as an instrument of political warfare, distorts civic understanding, weakens institutional credibility, and undermines democratic engagement. While propaganda can function as a tool for mobilising national unity or clarifying ideological direction in some contexts, its application in Nigeria largely reinforced ethno-religious cleavages and obscured the complexities of governance and policy implementation.

The study also shows that propaganda's effectiveness during this period stemmed from its entanglement with cultural norms and theatrical performance. Political actors drew on shared cultural codes, symbolic gestures, and dramatised public displays to amplify messages and evoke emotional responses. This performative dimension not only strengthened the persuasive force of

propaganda but also embedded it in everyday political life, shaping narratives around security, economy, anticorruption, and social intervention programmes. As a result, citizens often interpreted policy actions through the lens of orchestrated narratives rather than through transparent or evidence-based analysis.

In light of these findings, the study underscores the urgent need for communication strategies that prioritise transparency, accuracy, and civic responsibility. Governments at federal, state, and local levels should adopt coherent strategic communication frameworks grounded in truthfulness, ethical persuasion, and sustained public dialogue. Strengthening media literacy and critical thinking skills among citizens is equally vital, as these equip the public to evaluate political messages more thoughtfully and resist manipulative narratives. Regulatory institutions such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the National Assembly, and the National Broadcasting Commission should work collaboratively to establish clear communication guidelines that discourage disinformation, promote accountability, and uphold democratic values.

Stakeholder engagement must also become a central feature of policy communication. Involving community leaders, civil society organisations, media professionals, and cultural actors in national dialogues fosters trust and ensures that policy decisions reflect the concerns and aspirations of diverse constituencies. Furthermore, employing well-trained PR and strategic communication professionals enables governments to understand public sentiment, assess communicative risks, and tailor messages responsibly. Learning from international best practices – particularly countries that have effectively mitigated the dangers of propaganda – can offer valuable models for strengthening Nigeria’s communication ecosystem. Ultimately, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how propaganda operates within the cultural, political, and performative landscape of Nigeria. It calls for a deliberate shift from manipulative communication toward approaches that cultivate informed citizenship, reinforce institutional legitimacy, and support national cohesion.

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