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RESEARCH ARTICLE

AI-ENHANCED SELFIES, SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION: OPPORTUNITIES, RISKS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRACY

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ABSTRACT

The increasing use of artificial intelligence (AI) in social media has changed how visual content is made and shared. It has also created new ways for political actors to present themselves and to engage the public. One growing example is the AI-enhanced selfie, where political actors and ordinary citizens use AI tools to change, improve or rebuild their own pictures. This paper examines the opportunities, risks and democratic effects of AI-enhanced selfies in modern political communication, with special attention to Nigeria. The paper uses Impression Management Theory and a conceptual review of the related literature to explain how AI-enhanced selfies shape political identity, visual self-presentation, audience engagement and ideas about authenticity. It argues that these tools can improve political visibility, personal connection and citizen involvement. It also argues that their misuse can create false impressions, make it hard to tell real political images from edited ones, and reduce public trust. The paper further shows what these developments mean for Nigeria, where social media is now an important channel for election communication and political mobilization. It concludes that the democratic value of AI-enhanced selfies depends on responsible use, openness about editing, media and AI literacy, and clear ethical rules.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, AI-enhanced selfies, political communication, visual self-presentation, social media, political identity, democracy.

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Introduction

Social media has greatly changed modern political communication. It has changed how political actors present themselves, how they speak with citizens and how they take part in public debate. Unlike traditional mass media, social media allows politicians to reach audiences directly through personal, visual and interactive content. Images have become especially important because they show political identity, personality and openness to the public in ways that formal campaign messages cannot. Many political actors now use pictures and videos to build and manage their public image, which shows that social media platforms have become key spaces for political image-making (Farkas & Bene, 2021; Steffan, 2020).

The growing importance of visual communication has also made selfies popular in politics. A selfie is more than a personal photograph. It can help a politician look friendly, ordinary and close to the people. Through carefully chosen images, politicians can give the impression that they are simple, involved and easy to reach. Šimunjak (2023) explains that political selfies are tools of personalized politics through which political actors perform authenticity and build links with audiences. This means that selfies are not just casual photos. They can be planned tools for building political identity and managing public image.

The arrival of AI adds a new layer to this practice. AI tools now allow users to change and create images more easily and with greater skill. With these tools, a person can change his or her face, background, clothes, lighting and other details, so that the final picture may look very different from the original photograph. In political communication, this gives politicians more control over how they appear to the public. At the same time, it raises serious questions about honesty, openness and the trustworthiness of political images. If a politician can easily change a picture, voters may not know whether what they see is real, and this can affect how they judge the politician.

Recent research shows that audiences may find it difficulties in distinguishing AI-generated political images from real photographs, particularly when such images are not labeled. In two pre-registered experiments, Harff (2026) found differences in people's ability to identify AI-generated images. While participants in the first experiment, who were mostly young and highly educated, demonstrated relatively strong detection skills, findings from the second experiment showed that the average person could struggle to identify AI-generated images without appropriate labels. The study further found that labeling could improve detection, although it could also reduce message and source credibility among people distant from the political centre. These findings demonstrate that AI-generated political images raise concerns not only about image authenticity but also about public trust and the credibility of political communication.

These issues matter even more in countries where social media plays a large role in election campaigns, political mobilization and public debate. In Nigeria, digital platforms are now key channels through which political parties, candidates, supporters and citizens share political information and discuss elections. However, the same platforms have also helped to spread false and misleading political information. In their study of the 2023 Nigerian presidential election, Ibrahim and Ekdale (2026) show how political campaigns responded to information disorder, including disinformation. This gives an important background for understanding how AI-enhanced political images may add to the challenges facing Nigeria’s digital political communication space.

Earlier studies have looked at political selfies, visual self-presentation, AI-generated images and political disinformation. However, the point where these issues meet needs more attention. There is a need to show how AI-enhanced selfies build on older practices of political self-presentation, and how their growing use may affect political identity, audience perception and

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trust in democracy. It is also important to separate AI-enhanced selfies from fully AI-generated images and deepfakes, because the amount of change and the reasons behind it may be very different.

Against this background, this paper examines AI-enhanced selfies as a new part of political communication on social media. Specifically, it looks at their role in political self-presentation and identity building, discusses the opportunities and challenges that come with their use, and assesses what they mean for political trust, citizen participation and democratic processes, with special reference to Nigeria. The paper argues that AI-enhanced selfies offer new chances for political visibility, creativity and audience engagement, but their democratic value depends on responsible use, openness, and the ability of citizens to judge technology-edited political images with care.

Conceptual clarification

AI-enhanced selfies are self-taken photographs that have been changed or improved with artificial intelligence. The changes may affect the face, clothing, background, lighting and other visual features. A normal selfie usually shows how a person looks at a particular moment. An AI-enhanced selfie gives the user much more control over how he or she appears. In political communication, this gives politicians a way to create and manage public images that show a chosen identity and a desired impression. These changes can be small, such as better lighting, or large, such as a new background or a changed face. The size of the change matters, because a small edit is very different from an image that gives a false picture of a person or event.

Political communication is the process through which political actors, institutions and citizens share information, state political positions and try to influence public opinion. Social media has widened this process by offering platforms for direct interaction, political self-presentation and audience engagement (Farkas & Bene, 2021). So, AI-enhanced selfies can be seen as a form of technology-assisted visual political communication through which political actors manage their appearance and send personal messages to audiences.

AI-enhanced selfies should, however, be separated from AI-generated images and deepfakes. AI-generated images are visual materials made mostly by artificial intelligence. Deepfakes are AI-generated or AI-changed pictures, videos or sounds that realistically show people, objects or events and may give a false impression. Rauchfleisch et al. (2025) explain that deepfakes are one specific type of synthetic media, while synthetic media covers a wider range of AI-generated and AI-changed content. Weikmann and Lecheler (2023) also describe different forms of visual disinformation, including changed photographs, misleading videos and deepfakes. Seeing these differences helps to avoid mixing up simple image improvement with serious deception.

For this paper, AI-enhanced selfies are understood as original self-photographs that have been changed through artificial intelligence to influence how a person appears to social media audiences. This definition sets the limit of the discussion. It allows the paper to study their use in political self-presentation without treating every AI-generated image or deepfake as an AI-enhanced selfie. The key point is that an AI-enhanced selfie starts from a real photograph of the person, while an AI-generated image or a deepfake may be built from nothing or may use the face of someone who never took part in the scene.

Theoretical framework

This paper is based on Impression Management Theory, which was developed by Erving Goffman (1959) in his book The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. The theory explains how people deliberately manage the impressions they make on others through their appearance, behaviour and way of presenting themselves. Goffman (1959) uses the idea of a theatre

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performance to show that people present themselves differently depending on their audience and the situation. In his view, a person has a "front stage", where he or she performs for others, and a "back stage", where the person relaxes and is less guarded.

A main idea of the theory is that people know how others see them, and so they use different strategies to shape those views. These strategies may include controlling personal information, managing appearance and showing only selected parts of one's identity in order to reach a social goal. Politicians are a clear example, because their success often depends on how voters see them.

In today's social media environment, the theory is still useful because digital platforms allow people to select and display pictures that show their preferred identities. Hogan (2010) builds on Goffman by explaining how social media lets people organize and display personal content for audiences beyond face-to-face contact. Rosenberg and Egbert (2011) also show that users apply impression management strategies when they present themselves on Facebook. These studies show that online self-presentation is planned and not accidental.

The theory is relevant to this paper because AI-enhanced selfies give political actors extra tools for managing their public image. Politicians can change their photographs to show attractiveness, openness, ability and familiarity, and so shape how audiences see them. However, too much editing may create a gap between the image shown and the real person, which raises concerns about authenticity and political sincerity. In Goffman's terms, AI can make the front stage look more perfect, but if the audience later finds out that the picture was heavily edited, trust in the performer may fall.

The theory therefore provides a useful way to understand how AI-enhanced selfies influence political self-presentation and audience perception. Its limit is that Goffman's original work was written long before modern AI tools and algorithm-driven social media. For example, it does not deal with machines that can change an image in seconds or with platforms that decide which images people see. Even so, its main ideas remain useful for studying how political identities are presented in digital spaces.

Methodology

This paper uses a qualitative conceptual review approach to examine AI-enhanced selfies, social media and political communication. It draws on relevant scholarly literature, academic publications and policy documents on artificial intelligence, visual political communication, political self-presentation, digital misinformation and democratic participation. The sources were chosen because they deal directly with political images, social media, AI-generated content or the information environment in Nigeria.

The literature is examined by theme to identify the opportunities, challenges and democratic effects of AI-enhanced selfies, with special attention to Nigeria. Impression Management Theory provides the base for explaining how AI technologies influence political self-presentation and audience perception. The paper relies on secondary sources and does not involve primary fieldwork. Its arguments are therefore based on a careful reading and joining together of existing literature and not on new empirical data.

AI-enhanced selfies and political communication

AI-enhanced selfies are a growing part of visual political communication, through which political actors use artificial intelligence to manage their public appearance and communicate with social media audiences. Political communication increasingly depends on visual images to build political identities, increase public visibility and create links with citizens. Farkas and Bene (2021) observe that politicians use image-based communication strategies on social media to influence

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how audiences see them. Similarly, Šimunjak (2023) explains that political selfies support personal political interaction by showing politicians in less formal and more approachable ways.

The use of AI takes these practices further by allowing politicians to change their photographs and build carefully designed visual images. Such images can show competence, confidence, friendliness and other qualities that voters like. From the view of Impression Management Theory, this is a planned effort to manage personal appearance in order to influence audience perception (Goffman, 1959). It is also easy and cheap to do. A politician or a supporter no longer needs a professional photographer or editor, because a phone application can do the work within a few minutes.

However, the growing editing of political images raises questions about the link between visual presentation and genuineness. When AI-enhanced photographs greatly change a person's real appearance or give a false impression of political activities, audiences may find it hard to tell real self-presentation from artificial production. Harff (2026) points out the difficulty audiences face in identifying AI-generated political images, which shows why openness is important in digitally mediated political communication. Therefore, AI-enhanced selfies should be seen not only as improved photographs but also as communication tools that can shape political identity, audience perception and the relationship between political actors and the public.

Opportunities of AI-enhanced selfies in political communication

AI-enhanced selfies give political actors new chances to improve visual self-presentation, strengthen political visibility and engage audiences on social media. Through image editing and creative presentation, politicians can produce visual content that shows the personal and political qualities they want to be known for. This builds on existing practices of political personalization, in which pictures are used to create familiarity and strengthen relationships with citizens (Šimunjak, 2023). A candidate who looks neat, confident and cheerful in every post may find it easier to be remembered by voters.

Another opportunity is higher audience engagement. Attractive and personal images can catch attention, encourage interaction and make political messages easier to fit different social media platforms. Thorlacius (2024) shows the importance of Instagram in presenting politicians' professional and personal identities, using the case of the Danish prime minister, Mette Frederiksen, and this shows how visual content supports modern political self-presentation. Images that people like and share can also carry a political message to more people than a long written statement.

AI-enhanced selfies may also widen citizen involvement. Individuals, including young people and political supporters, can use easy AI tools to create and share political expressions without advanced photography or graphic design skills. This can encourage creative participation in political discussion and give more citizens a way to show their political interests. For young people in particular, who spend much time on social media, such tools may make politics feel closer and more interesting.

These technologies may also support political branding by helping candidates keep a steady visual identity across social media platforms. A steady look helps voters to recognize a candidate quickly and to link the candidate with certain values. However, these opportunities should not automatically be seen as democratic benefits. Their value depends on whether they lead to meaningful political engagement and informed participation, and not to shallow attention or misleading self-presentation.

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Risks and challenges of AI-enhanced selfies in political communication

In spite of their possible benefits, AI-enhanced selfies bring challenges linked to authenticity, political manipulation and public trust. One major concern is the creation of misleading visual images. When photographs are heavily changed, they may show political actors in situations, appearances or activities that do not truly reflect reality. This can distort how audiences see them and damage the credibility of political communication. For example, a politician may be made to look more popular, more active or closer to ordinary people than he or she really is.

Another challenge is the possible misuse of AI technologies for political manipulation. Politicians, supporters or other actors may use edited images to create favourable impressions or to misrepresent political opponents. Barari et al. (2025) show that political deepfakes can be as believable as other forms of fake media, which points to the possible influence of synthetic visual content on political judgment. Although deepfakes are different from AI-enhanced selfies, the same tools and skills can be used for both, and a small edit can easily grow into a serious deception.

Public trust is also a serious concern. The growing supply of AI-generated and edited images may make citizens doubt visual information, including real photographs. Harff (2026) shows that identifying AI-generated political images can be difficult, which raises concerns about citizens' ability to judge the credibility of political messages. When people stop trusting what they see, a politician can even deny a real and embarrassing photograph by claiming that it was made by AI. This makes it harder to hold leaders accountable.

Furthermore, unequal access to digital knowledge and AI literacy may make some citizens more open to misleading visual content. People with low digital skills, little education or limited access to fact-checking services are less likely to notice an edited image. These challenges show that although AI-enhanced selfies can improve political self-presentation, their irresponsible use may weaken openness, informed political judgment and democratic trust.

AI-enhanced selfies and democratic participation

AI-enhanced selfies may influence democratic participation by giving political actors and the general public more ways to express political identities, share opinions and join online debate. Through social media platforms, individuals can use personal visual content to show political support, identify with particular movements and draw attention to public issues. This gives citizens chances to take part in political communication beyond the usual forms of participation, such as voting or attending meetings.

However, more visual participation does not always mean deeper democratic involvement. The popularity of AI-enhanced images may encourage political communication that puts appearance, emotional appeal and personal branding above serious discussion of public policy. Voters may end up choosing leaders because of how they look online and not because of their plans and records. Therefore, online visibility and audience reactions such as likes and shares should not be treated as enough proof of meaningful political participation.

In Nigeria, where social media has become an important platform for political mobilization and election discussion, the circulation of edited visual content raises extra concerns. Hassan (2023) and Ibrahim and Ekdale (2026) give a wider background for understanding information disorder in Nigerian political communication. Although their studies do not look at AI-enhanced selfies, they stress the importance of credible information for informed political participation. Democracy works best when citizens base their choices on facts. Therefore, the democratic contribution of AI-enhanced selfies depends on whether they encourage genuine political expression without misleading audiences or distorting public understanding.

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AI-enhanced selfies in the Nigerian political context

The growing use of social media in Nigeria has changed how politicians, political parties and citizens communicate during elections and other political activities. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and X give political actors chances to present their identities, share campaign messages and interact with the people. In this environment, AI-enhanced selfies may become another means of political self-presentation, allowing politicians to create attractive images that show accessibility, confidence and closeness to the electorate. Nigeria has a large and young population that uses mobile phones and social media often, and so images posted online can quickly reach many voters, supporters and critics.

However, the Nigerian political environment also has challenges that may affect the responsible use of these technologies. The spread of misleading political content, limited digital literacy and difficulty in checking online information may make citizens open to edited images. Hassan (2023) identifies disinformation as a concern in Nigeria's political and electoral processes. Such concerns become more serious when AI tools make it easier to change photographs in ways that audiences may not notice. Nigeria has many languages, and the level of education and internet access differs from place to place. This means that warnings and corrections may not reach everyone in the same way.

The National Artificial Intelligence Strategy (Federal Ministry of Communications, Innovation and Digital Economy, 2025) provides useful guidance for the responsible use of AI in Nigeria. Even so, dealing with the political effects of AI-enhanced selfies requires more than technical regulation. Political parties, candidates, media organizations, technology platforms and citizens must all promote openness and responsible visual communication. In this regard, AI-enhanced selfies should be judged not only by their power to attract online attention but also by their contribution to credible political communication and democratic responsibility.

Ethical considerations and responsible use of AI-enhanced selfies

The use of AI-enhanced selfies in political communication raises ethical questions about honesty, consent, openness and accountability. Changing a personal photograph may be acceptable as creative expression. However, ethical problems arise when the changes are made on purpose to create false impressions about a politician's appearance, activities, relationships or public appearances. Political actors therefore have a duty to make sure that AI-assisted visual content does not mislead audiences. Consent is also important. A politician or supporter should not use another person's face or likeness in an edited image without that person's permission.

Openness is particularly important. Where AI has greatly changed a political photograph, proper disclosure can help audiences to tell the difference between an ordinary photograph and an AI-edited one. This is important for keeping public trust and for helping citizens to make informed judgments about political messages. Political parties and campaign organizations should also set rules for the responsible use of AI-generated and AI-enhanced visual materials. A simple label such as "edited with AI" can go a long way.

In addition, media organizations and social media platforms have a duty to promote media literacy, provide easy information about edited content and respond to unreliable political images. Citizens should also learn to question and check suspicious images before sharing them. These steps can help to ensure that AI-enhanced selfies serve the lawful purpose of political expression and do not become tools of deception and manipulation.

Discussion

The review shows that AI-enhanced selfies are becoming important in political communication because they combine visual self-presentation with the growing power of artificial

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intelligence. Using Impression Management Theory, the paper explains how political actors may use these images to create favourable identities, show desired impressions and strengthen their presence on social media. This builds on the established role of visual communication in political personalization (Farkas & Bene, 2021; Šimunjak, 2023).

The paper also identifies opportunities and challenges linked with this practice. AI-enhanced selfies can make political communication more creative, accessible and engaging. However, when images are greatly changed without disclosure, they may create false impressions and weaken the credibility of political messages. The concerns about political deepfakes raised by Barari et al. (2025) support the wider need to take synthetic and edited political images seriously, although deepfakes should not be treated as the same as AI-enhanced selfies. The findings of Harff (2026) add that labels may help people to detect AI images, but they may also reduce trust in the message. This means that disclosure rules must be designed with care.

In the Nigerian context, these concerns are especially relevant because social media plays an important role in political mobilization and election communication. Existing research on disinformation in Nigeria (Hassan, 2023) provides a base for understanding the information environment in which AI-enhanced images may circulate. The central argument, therefore, is that the democratic value of AI-enhanced selfies depends not simply on their ability to attract attention but on their responsible use, openness and contribution to informed political engagement. This also shows that no single group can solve the problem alone. Politicians, parties, platforms, the media and citizens all have a part to play.

Limitations of the study

This paper is based on a conceptual review of existing literature and does not use new data from interviews, surveys or content analysis. Most of the studies reviewed deal with political images, deepfakes and disinformation in general, and only a few deal with Nigeria. No study found by the authors looks directly at AI-enhanced selfies in Nigerian politics. For this reason, the arguments in this paper should be seen as a starting point for discussion and not as final proof. Future studies that collect real data from Nigerian voters, politicians and social media posts will help to test and improve these arguments.

Conclusion

AI-enhanced selfies are a growing part of visual political communication in the social media age. By combining personal photography with artificial intelligence, they give political actors and citizens new opportunities for visual self-presentation, political expression and audience engagement. However, their use also raises concerns about authenticity, manipulation, openness and public trust.

This paper concludes that AI-enhanced selfies are neither good nor harmful to democratic communication by nature. Their effects depend largely on how they are created, presented and shared. In Nigeria, where social media has become an important space for political communication, responsible use of these technologies is necessary to protect the credibility of political information and to promote informed citizen participation. Thus, openness, ethical standards and better AI literacy are essential to make sure that AI-enhanced selfies contribute positively to democratic processes.

Recommendations

Based on the discussion, the paper makes the following recommendations:

1. Political actors and campaign organizations should state clearly when photographs have been greatly changed with artificial intelligence, so as to avoid misleading audiences. A short label on the post is enough.

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2. Government agencies, schools and civil society organizations should promote public awareness of AI-enhanced images and strengthen citizens' ability to identify edited visual content. Such programmes should reach rural areas and people with low education, using local languages where possible.
3. Political parties and campaign organizations should set clear rules for the making and sharing of AI-enhanced photographs, especially during election campaigns. These rules should also cover consent when another person's image is used.
4. Social media platforms should strengthen their policies for identifying and tagging deceptive AI-edited political images while protecting lawful creative expression.
5. Nigerian scholars should carry out empirical studies on how AI-enhanced political selfies influence audience perceptions, political trust, election participation and democratic engagement.

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