Ondo and Edo Elections 2020:

A Distribution Analysis of InformationDisorder via Media Channels

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Premium Times Centre for Investigative Journalism (PTCIJ) is a non-governmental organisation, founded in 2014, to promote a truly independent media landscape that advances fundamental human rights, good governance and accountability in West Africa through investigative journalism, open data and civic technology.

Content

1.   Introduction

The impact of media technology on democracy is coming under increased scrutiny all over the world. New media's disruption of an existing order that is characterized by the rise of social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google, made it possible for more people to engage in the political process.[1] However, the disruption has also created an avenue for a different type of engagement; online manipulation of narratives on a massive scale.[2] Nefarious actors have devised strategies to turn these networks into platforms for spreading falsehoods, untruths, misinformation and outright lies, in order to achieve their aims. It has also opened up a new type of international conflict, evident in numerous accusations and counter accusations of cyber interferences between the United States of America and the Republic of Russia.[3] There is therefore a need to interrogate how this emerging phenomenon interacts with the bedrock of democratic process, especially elections.

Polarising and unreliable information by feckless actors and individuals make it difficult, if not impossible for citizens to form a good political judgment on which they can base their decisions about political participation and this has played out across the West African sub region.[4] Budding, but extremely fragile democracies such as Nigeria face significant challenges in responding to the divisiveness and message manipulations of social network platforms, particularly during elections. This study looks into two gubernatorial elections (Edo, Ondo) recently held in Nigeria, where various actors used social networks to feed the electorate misinformation and disinformation, with a view to shaping their voting behaviour.

2.   Methodology

The aim of the study is to identify key characters, trace the connections between claims and claimants, uncover hidden patterns in the transmission of claims during the election process and also investigate audience behaviour (i.e., comments, likes, reactions, etc.) on disinformation, misinformation and/or what we might call 'information disorder'.

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[1]   *https://theconversation.com/can-social-media-loud-and-inclusive-fix-world-politics-74287*

[2]   *https://libguides.valenciacollege.edu/c.php?g=612299&p=5862098*

[3]   *https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/12/world/russia-ghana-troll-farms-2020-ward/index.html*

[4]   *https://ghana.dubawa.org/ghanas-2020-election-can-fake-news-influence-voting-behaviour/*

The study identifies the origins of claims (i.e., where it first emerged) made during both elections and the channels or platforms on which it was first released and which accelerated its rapid distribution.

The data used in this analysis were based on the verified and published claims documented by DUBAWA, a Fact-Checking and Verification Platform, during the 2020 Edo and Ondo Gubernatorial elections. The data was gathered between August and October 2020, which corresponded to the beginning through the end of the election process. 37 claimants (also referred to as characters) were identified as sources for the 37 claims (statements, remarks etc.) shared during both elections. Each claimant was treated as an independent primary subject from whom a claim emanated and posted on a platform of primary posting before it progressed to secondary platforms. Thus, the primary source or owner of the claim is the main character.

Other characters who shared and promoted the virality of a claim were trailed and classified as associates and the platform they used were also identified. Various tools, including CrowdTangle, were used to track down each claim's audience reach while advanced web searches were performed to trace the recurring patterns of claims and to unmask shrouded characters.

These mined data were cleaned, edited, and analysed to draw out the requisite information and conclusions.

3. Platforms for Distribution

Platforms that were identified by this study to have hosted claims during the Edo and Ondo 2020 elections were:

- Twitter
- Blogs/websites
- Television
- WhatsApp
- Facebook
- BBC pidgin

Note: BBC pidgin was extracted from Facebook because of the high numbers it garnered on interaction.

Common terms used in this study are:

Characters: The source of the claim or the claimant to the misinformation or disinformation.

Associations (associates): other characters who shared or forwarded the claim on other platforms.

Verdict: The finding reached by DUBAWA to determine the veracity of the claim:

- **True –** A fact-check is deemed true when all elements of such a claim pertain to factual information. It is also used contextually and verifiably at the time of assertion.

- **False –** A fact-check is deemed false when all elements of such a claim do not pertain to factual information at the time of assertion. In essence, imposter, manipulated and fabricated content will be considered false.

- **Mostly true** – A fact-check is deemed mostly true when some elements of such a claim pertain to factual information; used contextually and verifiably at the time of assertion.

- **Misleading –** A fact-check is deemed misleading when elements of a claim are too complex to be termed true or false.

- **Insufficient evidence –** When the claim(s) is unverifiable, usually about urban myths or unquantifiable data.

The Verdict categorisation was extracted from Dubawa's methodology, which can be found at: https://dubawa.org/about-us/our-fact-check-process/.

The platform: This refers to the channel or medium that the claimant used to share the claim, i.e., Twitter, Whatsapp, Facebook, etc.

4.   Limitations of the Study

The limitation of the report is the small quantity of data used for the study. As a result, the patterns or correlations between variables are limited. This came about possibly because of poor tracking of claims. It could also be because fewer claims were made during the study period.

5.   Key Findings

Twitter dominated as a distribution platform used for claims:

The Pie chart below shows the distribution of the platforms used by the claimants (characters) to share claims regarding the elections. With 23 claims emerging from Twitter, representing 62.16% of the distribution, the platform stood out as the major medium on which claims appeared during both elections. While TV (13.51%) and blog/websites (8.11%) were also used, platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp were surprisingly under-used by claimants during both elections.
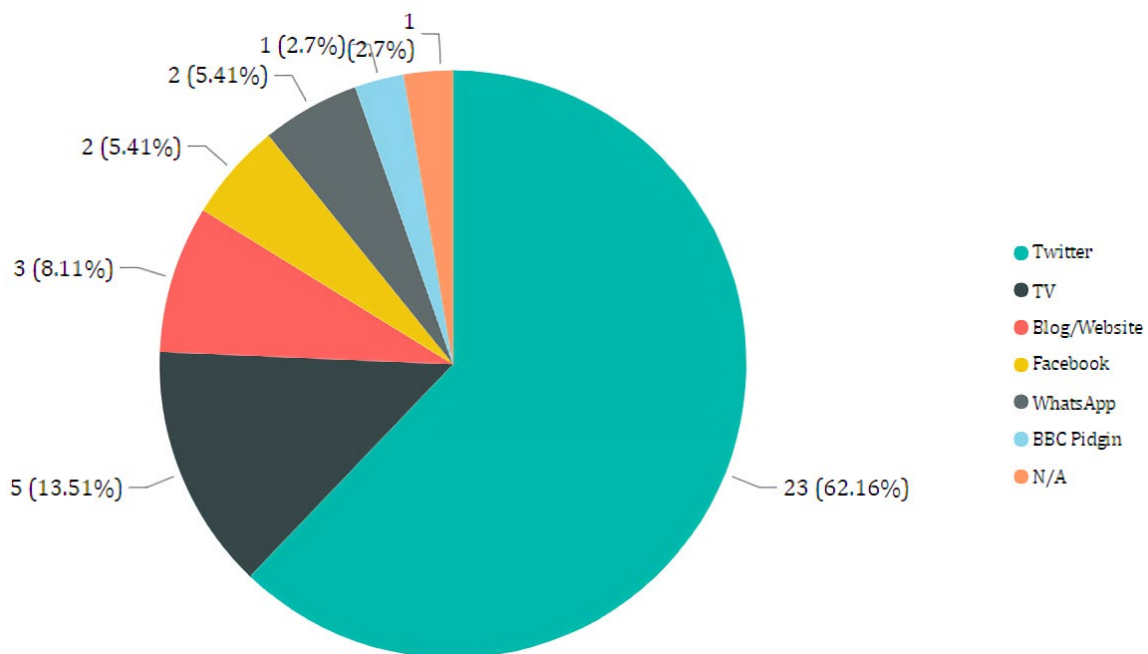

Figure 1: Distribution of platforms used for claims

Distribution of verdicts by platform:

The chart below represents the credibility of claims associated with the different platforms. It was gathered that False claims were noticed on all platforms except BBC pidgin. Twitter had the highest number of false claims (11). Similarly, on Twitter, false claims were found to be two times the number of 'true' claims. The total number of 'True' claims across all platforms was found to be less than the number of 'false' claims on Twitter. Twitter was also found to be the platform used for sharing the most amount (5) of 'Misleading' claims. Further investigation shows that all five (5) on TV were during Gubernatorial debates for the elections, with the only 'False' claim coming during the Edo state debate.
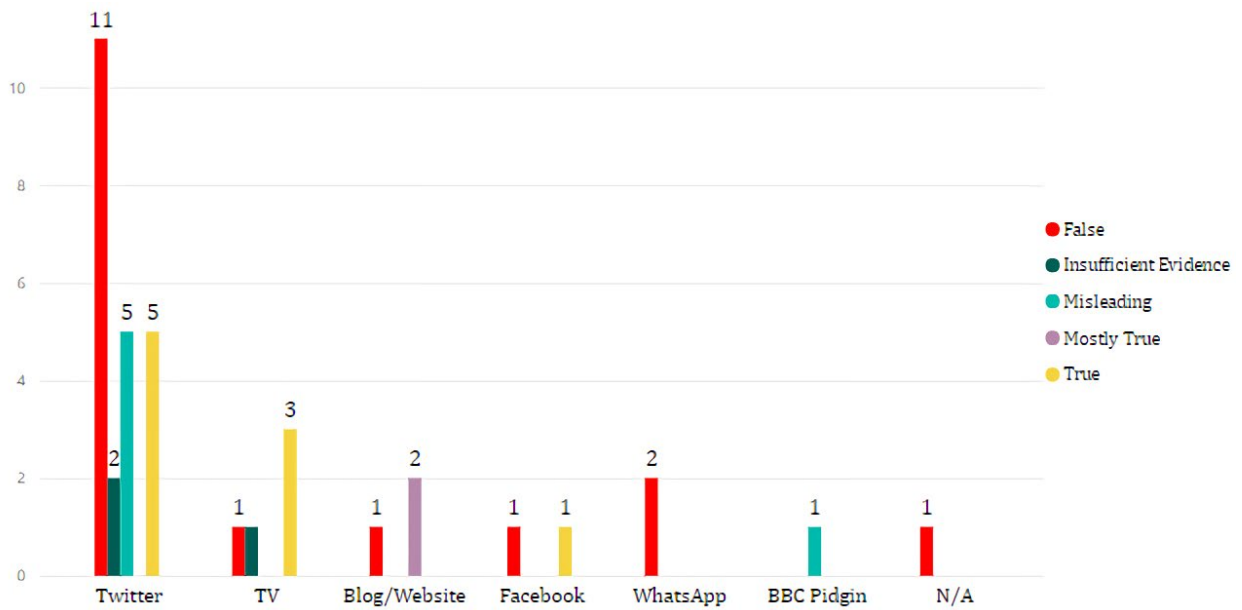
Figure 2: Distribution of verdicts on platforms

False claims performed 2.5 times more than true claims:

Analysis of interactions with claims by verdicts on Twitter, Facebook, and websites/blogs shows claims found to be 'False' had the most interactions on each of the platforms as can be seen in the bar chart below. Total interactions with 'False' claims were found to be more than two and a half times the total interaction with 'True' claims. The only claim on Facebook found to be 'True' was found to have had no interaction. Further analysis shows that total interactions with 'Misleading' claims was greater than total interactions with 'True' claims, despite the fact that there were more 'True' claims than 'Misleading' claims.
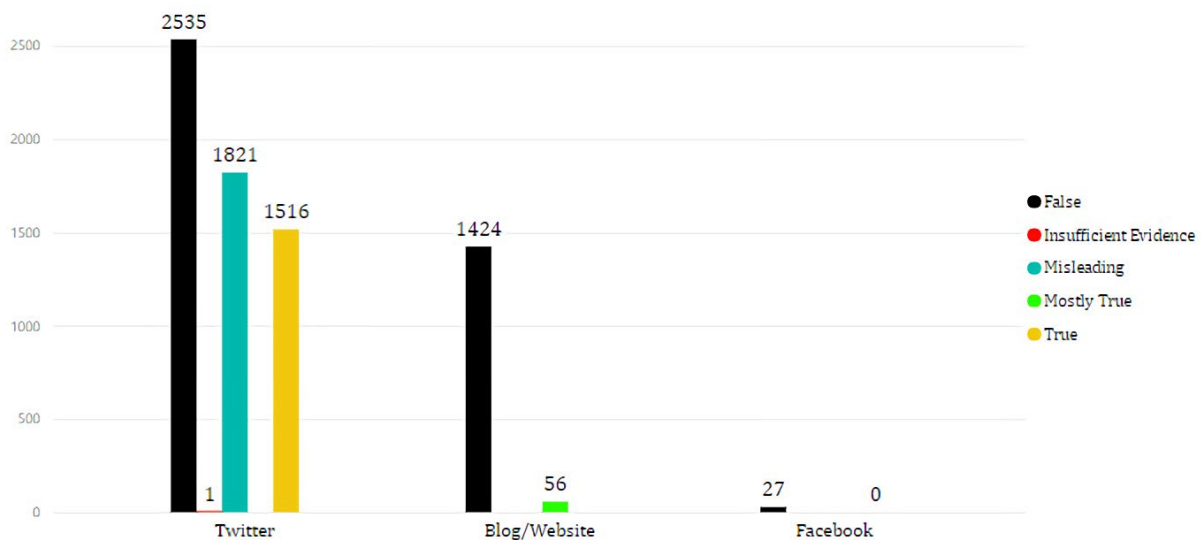

Figure 3: Interaction with claims based on a verdict on platforms

Claims were reposted mostly on Websites/Blogs by Associates:

The chart below shows how claims that were propagated to other platforms by other characters were transmitted. Using a width of at most three reposts per claim, analysis indicates that out of all claims reposted, more than half (55%) of all reposts occurred using websites/blogs. This figure represents just six claims with some of the websites/blogs repost seen on more than one website/blog. The second most used platform, Facebook, was used seven times more than TV and Twitter for reposts which represented just four claims.
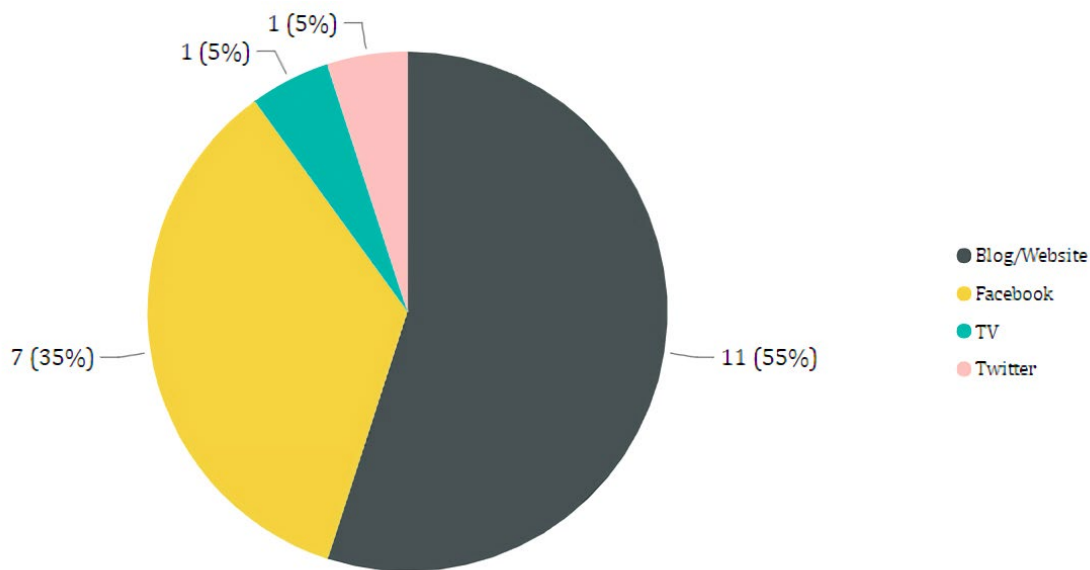

Figure 4: Platforms used by Associates

False claims most propagated by Associates:

Analysis on the credibility of claims against platforms used by associates to propagate the claims shows that claims found to be 'False' were the most reposted by associates, with Blogs/Websites and Facebook having the largest share of four (4) each. For every 'True' claim reposted on a Blogs/Websites, two 'False' claims were found to have also been reposted. Facebook was the platform found to have been used to repost the most (3) 'True' claims. The verdict reposted the most by any platform was 'Mostly True', occurring five (5) times on Blogs/Websites as seen in the bar chart below:
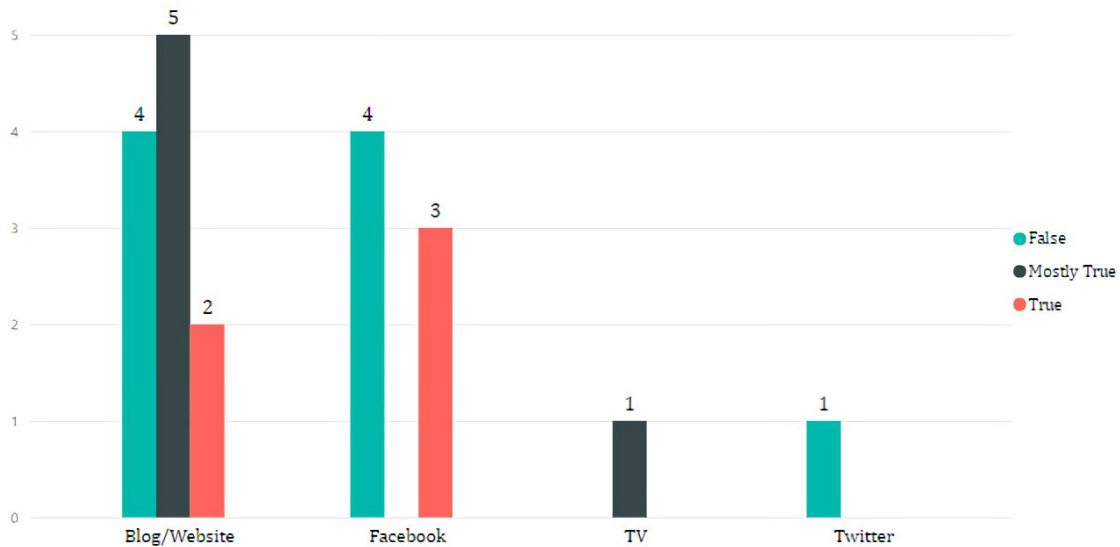
Figure 5: Credtibility of claims propagated by Associates

Distribution of platforms used for reposts:

The following terms are used to interrogate the distribution of claims by the associates:

- **Original -** This represents the number of claims that were originally submitted on a specific platform.

- **Yes -** This represents the number of claims not originally submitted on a specific platform but showed up on it at a later time and date.

- **No -** This represents the number of claims not originally submitted on a specific platform and were not propagated to that platform at a later time and date.

In investigating if original claims were propagated on other platforms, we observed from the table below that only two (2 - Yes) claims not originally presented on Twitter went on to be reposted on Twitter. Four (4 - Yes) posts not originally presented on Facebook were also posted on Facebook by the claimants and also four (4 - Yes) not originally on Website/blog were propagated on Website/blog.

6.   Discussion

This study finds that Twitter was the most widely used platform to propagate false rated information during the 2020 gubernatorial election in Edo and Ondo states. These findings can be attributed to the flexible regulatory nature of Twitter as a platform as well as its wide reach and accessibility.

It was also found that 'information disorder', especially the claims rated false, were not spread by the original main characters (i.e., who first shared the claim) alone but also pushed along by associates who mostly re-shared it on other platforms and sometimes boosted its audience reach with supporting narrative. Although multiple associates were traced to have re-shared claims, 'Nairaland'[5] (a popular interactive website with over a million active users and wide passive users across Nigeria) is the only associate that was uncovered to have re-shared two distinct claims during the elections. This implies a mild absence of deliberate underlying patterns to intentionally propagate claims (especially by the same claimant). It is worth noting that all the identified associates used Twitter only once. This is surprising given the mass popularity and use of the platform by the main claimants. In effect, the identified associates might have used Twitter only to extract the claims posted by the originating principal character, but not for their own reposting of the claim or claims.

Also notable were four (4) false claims that were taken down from Twitter soon after the elections. This implies a deliberate malicious effort by those identified claimants to share false claims during the election and delete them after the elections. It was also discovered that activity on some social media handles that shared claims during the election dwindled drastically soon after the election. These findings can be assumed to signal the intentional efforts by some characters to share fake news during the election with a perceived intention to alter the outcome of the process.

Nonetheless, claims shared on Television were partly used in the analysis. This is because they all emerged from the election debates and were primarily made by the candidates themselves. These claims were also not traced anywhere on the online social space, giving it little or no significant impact to harm. Most of the claims that emerged from blogs and websites during the election were all re-shared on Facebook and Twitter.

The reality uncovered in this analysis suggests the need for a more deliberate, decisive, and logical step in thwarting the menace of fake news during the electoral

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[5]   *https://www.nairaland.com/*

process. It also calls for more careful and attentive oversight of Twitter for emerging claims during elections.

7.   Conclusion

False claims represent about half (45.95%) of the total number of claims analyzed for this report. It suggests that untruths, disinformation and misinformation are still prevalent on the internet. The report shows that while other social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook are commonly used to spread misinformation and disinformation, Twitter was the most used platform for that purpose during these elections. The researchers identified that the intermediacy and increasing rate of Twitter usage amongst Nigerians must have given it an edge during the elections.

Overall, the high level of false claims during both the 2020 gubernatorial elections in Edo and Ondo states respectively shows that 'information disorder' poses a significant threat to Nigeria's fragile democracy. This calls for informed fact-checking during such times, as an antidote to possible corruption of future elections. The analysis did not identify any deliberate large-scale disinformation campaign targeted at the elections, but the study was both constrained and limited to be able to explore that dimension. Hopefully, a future engagement will be broader.
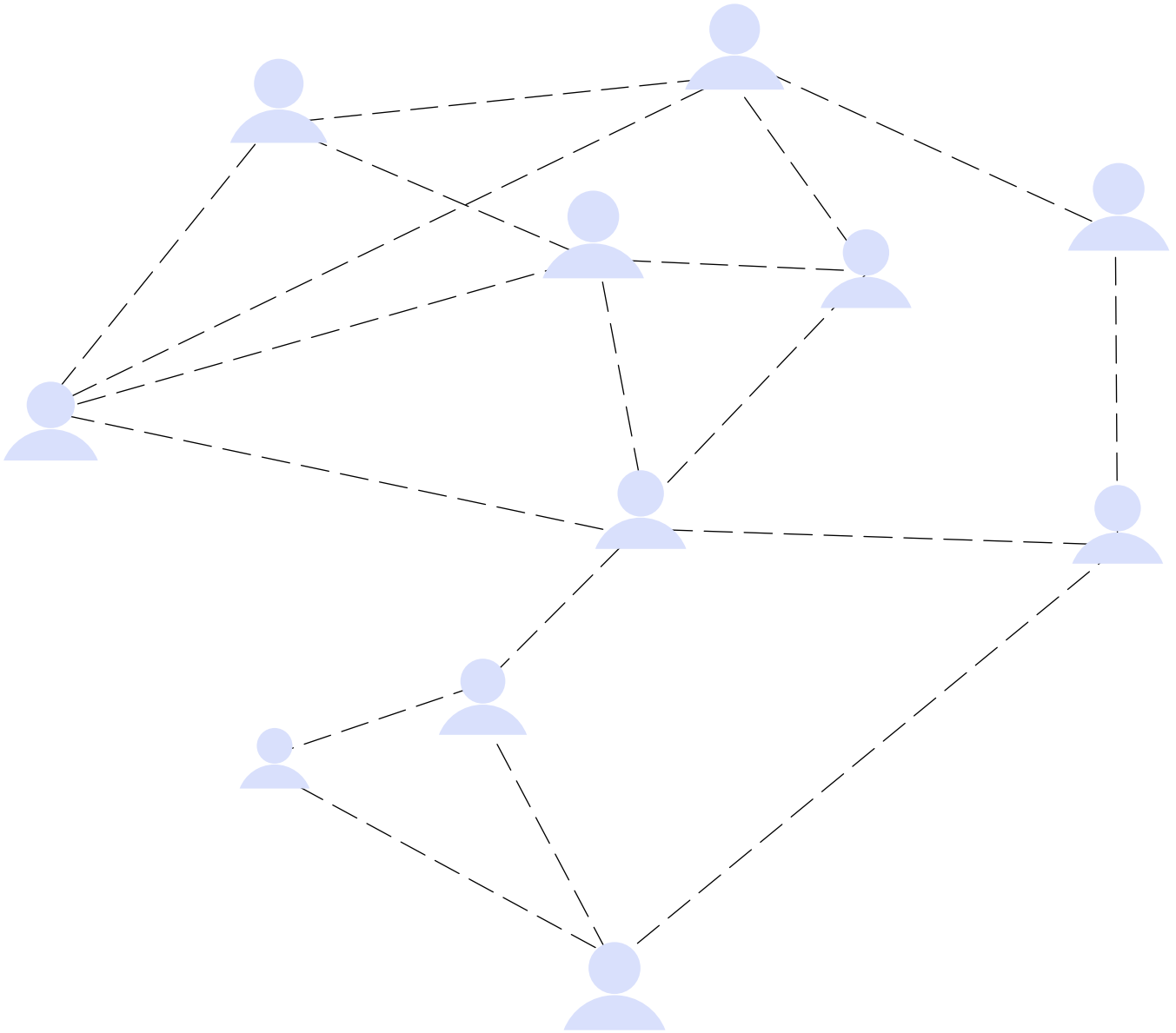
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