

PERCEPTION OF FAKE NEWS FACT-CHECKING HABITS AMONG SOCIAL MEDIA USERS IN NORTH-WEST GEOPOLITICAL ZONE, NIGERIA

BY

SALIHU, MURTALA

Department of Mass Communication
Zamfara State University Talata Mafara

msalihu99@gmail.com

Abstract

The general aim of this study was to investigate the perception of social media users regarding fake news fact-checking habits in North West Geopolitical Zone Nigeria. To this end, the study adopted a mixed method research design by sampling 479 online survey respondents and 20 in-depth interviewees respectively. In order to collect quantitative data, an online questionnaire was created on Google Form designed using a Likert 5-point Scale. For the qualitative data component, in-depth interview guide was employed to elicit data from the participants. Findings of this study revealed that majority of respondents (301 Or 64.3%) reported encountering fake news primarily on Facebook, followed by WhatsApp with 115 respondents (24%). However, the result indicated that in North-West Geopolitical Zone Nigeria, the use of contemporary fact-checking methods is not as widespread as it should be even among professional journalists themselves. Thus, the study advised people who regularly access news through Facebook and WhatsApp to exercise greater caution regarding the content they seek and disseminate, given that these platforms have become fertile ground for all kinds of fake news in North West Geopolitical Zone Nigeria. Finally, the study also recommended for intensification of mass media literacy strategies in order to empower social media users in the region to engage in modern fact-checking information on social media before sharing with others.

Key words: Fact-checking, Fake news, Social media, Perception, Proliferation

Introduction

The recurrent discussions over fake news in different countries all over the world point to the major role social media plays in disseminating news to the public via different online platforms. Undoubtedly, the expeditious dissemination of information as facilitated by social media has resulted in the growth, production and public's susceptibility to fake news as more and more people have come to rely on the internet as a source of news and information. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) assert that many people today consume news and are informed about current political and social affairs from social media platforms and networks.

The phenomenon of fake news has been in existence for an extended period of time, dating back to the advent of the printing press (Mirzaei et al., 2019). Nevertheless, in the current era, it is more pervasive and conspicuous than ever because of the speed at which information travels on social media. Certainly, in this era of improved communication through social media, users are now subjected to an excessive volume of news and information much of which are unreliable and the majority of which are unverifiable, therefore separating real news from fake news has become a monumental task (Wilson & Umar, 2019).

In order to properly comprehend or critique what constitutes “fake news” and the way it spreads on social media, there are three kinds of false information to take cognizant of. This comprises misinformation, disinformation and mal-information, even as the actors constantly change their tactics (Ohaja & Okujeni, 2022). However, this present work focused on isolated cases where fake news content attempts to imitate the format and style of journalistic news presentation, irrespective of whether it is misinformation, disinformation or mal-information. Therefore, the study use the term fake news to designate unreliable contents that imitate truthful news stories published intentionally or intentionally in order to mislead the audience.

In North-West Geopolitical Zone Nigeria, which is the focus of this study, fake news circulation is not a new phenomenon. In 2002, there was a rapid dissemination of a false story in Northern Nigeria, alleging that the administration of polio vaccine was linked to infertility and was a component of a larger scheme adopted by the Western world aimed at reducing the population of the Muslims in the area. A significant number of individuals and prominent figures were persuaded by the falsehood, leading them to participate in calls for the boycott of the polio vaccine initiative. Ozohu (2014) affirms that the governments of Zamfara, Kaduna, Bauchi, Kano and Niger states abruptly suspended the polio immunization programmes in their respective states. Consequently, there was a notable increase in the incidence of polio in the region.

Furthermore, the unrest in Kaduna metropolis and Kasuwan Magani as narrated by Ibraheem and Garba (2019) was largely caused by fake news which alleged that the abducted Chief of Agara in Kaduna South had been assassinated. As such, 22 people were killed in reprisals between Muslims and Christians within an hour. The fake news was that the then Governor El-Rufa'i of Kaduna State summoned the chief to a meeting and told him that his chieftdom would be converted to an Emirate (a Muslims chieftaincy title). When the chief objected to this decision, the Governor pledged to deal with him. Afterwards, the ElRufa'i was suspected of arranging the abduction and assassination of the chief while he was returning to Kachia. The death of these 22 people could have been averted through proper fact-checking.

The foregoing discussions provide concrete evidences about proliferation of fake news without fact-checking in North-West Geopolitical Zone Nigeria. Therefore, comprehending perceptions of the social media users in the region about their exposure to fake news and fake news fact-checking habits would be addressed in this study. To this end, the central focus of this investigation was to evaluate respondents' mass media literacy level and fact-checking fake news being circulated on social media. In doing

so, the study aims to contribute meaningful insights into the broader context of mass media literacy, which encourages critical evaluation of online content before sharing it with others.

Statement of the problem

Despite the positive contributions of social media towards information dissemination, this study is concerned about the use of social media platforms in North West Geopolitical Zone Nigeria for the dissemination of fake news without fact-checking. This has resulted in aggravating farmers/herders clashes, religious intolerance, hate speeches, political propaganda, mischief making, character assassination, killings and violence. Certainly, lies and spreading of false information are as old as human existence in the world, but it was never possible to spread them so easily in the past unlike now through social media platforms.

Although, there is an expanding body of research on fake news fact-checking depicting Nigerian context, most of these studies paid less attention to North-West Geopolitical Zone, Nigeria. Consequently, this study endeavoured to fill existing knowledge gaps on the perceptions of social media users regarding this problem by providing an overview of the current situation in the region. Similarly, this study tried to understand how fact-checking is perceived by active social media users and professional journalists in order to find out whether their perception is similar or different.

Specifically, the study aims to identify exact social media platforms that users observe highest frequency of fake news in North-West Geopolitical Zone, Nigeria. In the long run, this study would advise people who regularly access news through these platforms to exercise greater caution regarding the content they seek and disseminate.

Objectives of the Study

1. Identify on which social media the users observe highest frequency of fake news in North-West Geopolitical Zone Nigeria.

2. Understand the perception of social media users in North-West Geopolitical Zone, Nigeria regarding their fake news fact-checking habits.
3. Evaluate the mass media literacy level of social media users and their fact-checking habits of fake news in North-West Geopolitical Zone, Nigeria.

Research Questions

In line with the objectives of this study, the following research questions were proposed:

1. On which social media the users observe highest frequency of fake news in North-West Geopolitical Zone, Nigeria?
2. Do social media users in North-West Geopolitical Zone, Nigeria fact-check fake news on social media?
3. What is the mass media literacy level of social media users and their fact-checking habits of fake news in North-West Geopolitical Zone, Nigeria?

Literature review

Fact-checking entails verifying content that has already been shared especially on social platforms in order to determine its truthfulness. Generally, fact-checking can occur either prior to publication or after the content has been released and shared. Some media outlets conduct internal fact-checking to prevent inaccurate publication of the content. While external fact-checking is done by the third party after the publication of the content. In any case, Fact-checking requires a solid understanding of social media as well as mastery of key open-source intelligence (OSINT) tools to help in verification or image geolocation.

Across the globe, most media practitioners and researchers use fact-checking websites but in Nigeria fact-checking task is commonly manually performed by journalists to verify the truthfulness of a given news content.

Indeed, fact-checking features are being adopted by multiple online social network platforms recently. For instance, Facebook started addressing false information through independent fact-checkers in 2017, followed by Google the same year.

Similarly, Onanuga (2023) discovered that in Nigeria, most people do not always verify the source of information before believing and sharing it. The overwhelming amount of information on the internet contributes to this behaviour (BBC, 2019). The average Nigerian social media user receives a lot of information daily and due to other commitments, he/she has limited time to verify every piece of information. Consistent with this view Folarin (2020) asserts that, many people in Nigeria share information on social media without verifying its accuracy. This tendency is influenced by several factors, including the immediacy of social media, peer pressure, and the gratification derived from being perceived as an information source.

Consequently, users often spread information they deem important without proper confirmation motivated by a sense of protection and care for loved ones and friends. This cycle of sharing continues until the fake news becomes visible to many people. Messages often include slightly motivating benefits of spreading the information and the consequences of not doing so. The urgency presented in some of these messages prompts immediate responses and actions, encouraging users to spread fake news further.

Today, social media users have become active creators and distributors of media content, sharing news from various sources without any form of mediation. This has led to an increase in the spread of inaccurate, false, malicious, and propagandistic content masquerading as news (Ireton & Posetti, 2018). Researchers like Bakir and McStay (2017) found that emotive media content and posts shared by friends or close family members are more likely to be redistributed by users on social media platforms. Traditional media organisations and journalists also use social media to generate and distribute news and engage their audience, recognising the

need to be present in virtual environments with a large audience.

A study conducted by Tully, Vraga and Smithson (2020) revealed that even those with a high level of news literacy might not apply their knowledge to differentiate between high and low quality information. One major reason why social media users may not fact-check information is the speed at which information travels on social media. Platforms like X, Telegram and WhatsApp facilitate the instant sharing of news, making it easier to forward content without taking the time to verify its authenticity. Okoro and Chijioke (2013) found that the fast-paced nature of social media often discourages users from cross-checking information with credible sources before sharing.

Another reason prompting people to share fake news without fact-checking is the urgency to break news stories. As argued by Warwick and Lewis (2017, p. 1), fake news “may contribute to decrease trust of mainstream media” because, even the so-called professional media who are supposed to be conveyors of truth and factual accuracy as enshrined in professional codes of practice are sometimes found guilty of spreading fake news in their bid to break news stories or further partisan interests..

While the practice of fact-checking before sharing information on social media is not yet widespread among many Nigerians, there is a growing recognition of its importance. The challenge lies in balancing the urgency to break news stories on social media with the responsibility of ascertaining the accuracy of that information before dissemination. By continuing to promote media literacy and critical thinking, educational institutions and media pundits can play a key role in encouraging social media users to adopt more rigorous fact-checking habits. This shift is essential not only for the integrity of the information ecosystem but also for the development of a more informed and discerning Nigerian societies.

Empirical review

Ilesanmi (2021) conducted a study to assess the level of fact-checking competence among journalism lecturers in Nigeria and the extent of knowledge they impart to their students. To achieve this, the author adopted mixed-method research approach by integrating a census survey with in-depth interviews to collect data from all lecturers in the Mass Communication departments of five tertiary institutions in Ondo State. The selected institutions included four universities and one polytechnic all of which teach journalism courses. A total of 36 lecturers together with their Heads of Departments participated in the interviews.

The results of the study indicated a notable absence of dedicated courses on fact-checking within these institutions, leading to a correspondingly low level of fact-checking competence among the lecturers. Furthermore, the findings suggested a positive correlation between the years of service of the lecturers and their fact-checking skills. In conclusion, the study advocated for the training of journalism educators in fact-checking methodologies and called for a comprehensive review of curricula across institutions to align with contemporary information dissemination practices. The author considered this essential in order to equip aspiring journalists with the necessary skills prior to their entry into the workforce.

Dubawa (2021) investigated the level of public awareness regarding misinformation in the media and assessed the potential role of fact-checking organisations in mitigating the dissemination of false information. The research employed an online survey methodology by utilising a questionnaire created via Google Forms, which was distributed to potential participants. A non-probability sampling approach was utilised to recruit respondents from Nigeria, Ghana, and Sierra Leone. Altogether, 508 individuals participated in the survey, and the collected data were subjected to both quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Findings of the research indicated that participants predominantly depended on online news platforms for information, with many encountering various forms of fake news while navigating social media. Facebook and WhatsApp were identified as the primary platforms for the dissemination of false information. Approximately, 95% of respondents reported that they frequently verified information obtained from social media while less than half of the respondents expressed a willingness to verify information from social media platforms that had previously provided misleading content.

In another investigation, Mohammed (2021) explored the awareness of misinformation among journalists engaged in political reporting in Nigeria by focusing on its ramifications for democratic institutions in North-East region. The study adopted purposive sampling by selecting 250 journalists from Adamawa, Bauchi, and Gombe. The findings revealed that a significant number of journalists in the region possessed a limited understanding of the challenges posed by misinformation, as well as inadequate OSINT and fact-checking skills necessary for verifying deceptive content disseminated by political figures.

Furthermore, the study indicated that despite the prevalence of viral and misleading narratives propagated by various political actors and influencers, journalists in the North-East seldom countered misinformation due to their insufficient skills to quickly identify fake news on social media. Therefore, the research advocated for media organisations in Nigeria to take steps to enhance their reporters' verification and fact-checking capabilities, while also urging journalists to prioritise the development of these essential skills to uphold the integrity of their profession. This is what this current study also aimed to recommend after its completion.

Theoretical frame work

This study was anchored on Media Dependency Theory which was propounded in 1976 by Sandra Ball-Rokeach and Melvin Defleur. This

theory builds on the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT), which was developed further through additional researches. While UGT delineates various motivations for media consumption, such as the pursuit of information, entertainment, social interaction, and relationship building, the Media Dependency Theory suggests that as individuals rely more on specific media to satisfy these needs, that media becomes increasingly significant in their lives, leading them to depend on it even more.

Linking the theory with this study, today no one can deny the fact that many people in North-West Geopolitical Zone, Nigeria are dependent and adapted to social media, which they access all the time and in different conditions. Some previous studies revealed that young people and college students are the most active users of social media, actively posting status updates, sending messages, posting pictures and videos, and commenting on posts (Eke, Omekwu&Odoh, 2014). Hence, social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Telegram, YouTube and X appear to be the first places young people look to for information mostly without proper fact-checking.

Drawing from the tenets of Media Dependency Theory, this study believes that many people in North-West Geopolitical Zone, Nigeria depend on social media for information seeking and dissemination. Today nobody can gainsay the fact that social media plays a significant role in transmitting, organising, and amplifying information generated by others. The joy of obtaining information faster, cheaper, and more frequently through social media platforms has undoubtedly made it the most popular information channel in modern times. However, the concern of this study is that social media has become a two-edged sword. This is because on the one hand, social media is cheap, simple to use, and allows for the rapid distribution of information. On the other hand, it promotes the rapid dissemination and consumption of fake news without fact-checking.

Methodology

This research adopted a mixed methods design which aims to leverage on the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative designs while addressing their individual shortcomings. Supporting this view, Keth (2014) notes that we can sometimes learn more about our research topic if we can combine the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative research while compensating at the same time for the weaknesses of each method. Specifically, the methods adopted in this study were online survey and in-depth interview.

The population of this study comprised residents of Sokoto, Kebbi, Katsina and Zamfara states who were active users of social media like Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter/X, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok and so on. Data from the Nigeria Bureau of Statistics (NBS) as at July Q1 2024 revealed that the active internet subscribers in Sokoto State stood at 2,557,742; Kebbi State, 2,528,194; Katsina State, 4,491,134 and Zamfara State, 1,990,855 (NBS, 2024). This gives a total of 11, 567, 925 internet users. This study relied on this data as proxy because it is very difficult to get accurate data on the active social media users in Nigeria according to state-by-state level because such detailed data may not be readily available or regularly updated.

Consistent with this view, Chen (2011) notes that a challenge often faced when sampling social media users is the difficulty in accurately capturing the entire population, especially with the continuous growth of users on a daily basis. However, this should not be a source of concern because recent data from OnlyAccounts.io claim that as of October 2023, nearly 95% of all internet users also used social media platforms (Adejumoh, 2023). Consistent with this view, Osuagwu (2018) states that Nigeria has 83% of its internet users being active social media users.

In order to determine the accurate sample size of respondents for the online survey, the Australian Online National Statistical Service Sample Size Calculator was used. While the population of social media users in the 4

selected North-West Geopolitical Zone, Nigerian states was put at **11, 567, 925**, a confidence level of 95 percent was applied at a proportion of 0.4 and confidence interval of 0.04. The upper level was 0.44 while the lower level was 0.35 with a standard error of 0.022 and relative standard error of 5.6.

Table2: Calculation of Sample Size

Confidence Level	95%
Population	11, 567, 925
Proportion	0.4
Confidence Interval	0.04390
Upper	0.44390
Lower	0.35610
Standard error	0.02240
Relative standard error	5.6
Sample Size	479

National Statistical Service Size Calculator

<http://www.nss.gov.au/nss/home.nsf/pages/Sample+size+calculator>

The outcome of this calculation gave a sample size of 479 social media users to be administered with the online questionnaire. By applying the basic formula to determine the sample size of each state on the strength of its population, the following sub-sample sizes were obtained.

$$n_s = \frac{N_s}{N} \times n$$

n_s = Sample size of state

N_s = Population size of state

N = Total Population Size

n = Total sample size

Sokoto State

$$\text{Sample Size for Sokoto State} = \frac{2,557,742}{11,567,925} \times 479 = 106$$

Kebbi State

$$\text{Sample Size for Kebbi State} = \frac{2,528,194}{11,567,925} \times 479 = 105$$

Katsina State

$$\text{Sample Size for Katsina State} = \frac{4,491,134}{11,567,925} \times 479 = 186$$

Zamfara State

$$\text{Sample Size for Zamfara State} = \frac{1,990,855}{11,567,925} \times 479 = 82$$

For the qualitative component of this study, 20 professional journalists were purposively selected for the in-depth interview in a manner that reflects their diversity in media representation comprising newspaper, magazine, radio, television and online. Therefore, 5 respondents were selected from each capital city, namely, Sokoto (Sokoto State), Birnin Kebbi (Kebbi State), Katsina (Katsina State) and Gusau (Zamfara State).

The data collected in the survey were coded in numerical values and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS Statistics v30). On the other hand, the analysis of qualitative data was done at two distinct levels. The first stage involved providing a transcribed account of the data. The second stage involved examination of the conceived meaning, interpretations and implications of the responses to the study.

Data presentation

Social media respondents mostly encounter fake news? (Tick only one)

S/N	Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
	WhatsApp	115	24
	Facebook	301	62.8
	Twitter/X	9	1.9
	Instagram	4	.8
	YouTube	6	1.3
	TikTok	27	5.6
	Telegram	9	1.9
	Others	2	.4
	Can't remember	6	1.3
	Total	479	100

Respondents' mass media literacy level and fake news fact-checking habits

S/No	Items	N	SA	A	U	D	SD	Mean	Std dev
1)	I have enough knowledge of mass media literacy	479	6	13	36	378	46	2.07	.623
2)	I have innocently circulated false information, which I thought was true, but later on discovered it to be unreliable.	479	100	192	21	129	37	3.39	1.29
3)	I always read the content of the story not just the headlines before sharing.	479	131	243	15	83	7	3.85	1.05
4)	I check locations in stories with tools like Google Map.	479	50	62	66	278	23	2.66	1.10
5)	When in doubt, I check the source of the news content before sharing it with others.	479	162	238	30	39	10	4.05	.956
6)	I usually check the date of the news story and the accompanying pictures, audio and video clips to ascertain when the content was created.	479	38	55	39	339	8	2.53	.910
7)	I crosscheck news stories in other media institutions before sharing it with others.	479	133	235	33	66	12	3.86	1.05
8)	I check the authenticity of images with tools like Google Reverse Image Search.	479	52	71	57	279	20	2.70	1.12
9)	I use other fact-checking tools in the internet to verify the authenticity of news story before sharing it with others.	479	37	57	48	316	21	2.53	1.02
10)	I do not have any idea on how to fact-check news stories on social media.	479	48	68	30	288	45	2.55	1.15

The scales of measurement include SA (5) = Strongly Agree, A (4) = Agree, U (3) = Undecided, D (2) = Disagree, SD (1) = Strongly Disagree. Therefore, responses that had a mean score rating of 3.5 or higher were considered accepted, but responses that received a mean score rating lower than 3.5 were considered rejected during data analysis and interpretation.

Out of a total of 10 responses in the result in Table above, 4 responses had mean scores that fall within the limit of real numbers leading to “Agree” decision. They are:

- I have innocently circulated false information, which I thought was true, but later on discovered it to be unreliable. (mean = 3.39)
- I always read the content of the story not just the headlines before sharing. (mean = 3.85)
- When in doubt, I check the source of the news content before sharing it with others. (mean = 4.05)
- I crosscheck news stories in other media institutions before sharing it with others. (mean = 3.86)

In contrast, the other 6 responses tilted towards “Disagree” with the following statements.

- I have enough mass media literacy. (mean = 2.07)
- I check locations in stories with tools like Google Map. (mean = 2.66)
- I usually check the date of the news story and the accompanying pictures, audio and video clips to ascertain when the content was created. (mean = 2.53)
- I check the authenticity of images with tools like Google Reverse Image Search. (mean = 2.70)
- I use other fact-checking tools in the internet to verify the authenticity of news story before sharing it with others. (mean = 2.53)

- I do not have any idea on how to fact-check news stories on social media. (mean = 2.55).

In contrast, the data gathered during the in-depth interview with the participants indicated that they possessed mass media literacy. Because they are journalism professionals, they use modern fact-checking tools unlike the online survey respondents. This may not be surprising because journalism profession advocates for proper fact-checking before disseminating news and information. The excerpts of the interview presented below buttressed this point.

We have our own tools of operation as conventional or traditional media practitioners. We have what we call the Google News or Google websites. This is a very reliable source of news generation. I think they call them trusted news aggregators or something like that. They are some of the tools we use to fact-check false information on social media (Participant 17).

Consistent with the aforementioned view, another participant highlighted the importance of fact checking news through official government websites or dedicated social media handles like Facebook, WhatsApp and X of government agencies, ministries and parastatals.

Our reporters are committed to ensuring the accuracy of any news story before it reaches the public. Whenever they submit a news item that raises doubts, we quickly double check from other reliable sources to verify the news in question. This diligence helps us present information responsibly to the public, minimising the risk of disseminating fake news to the general public. (Participant 2).

Restating the foregoing viewpoint, another participant was more specific about the fact-checking of news stories through websites of government agencies.

When I come across news on social media that raises my suspicions, I prefer to verify it by going straight to the original source, especially if it concerns a job opportunity from a government agency. Instead of clicking on the provided links, I often type phrases like "NNPC is recruiting" into a search engine. The top results typically clarify whether the agency is recruiting or debunk the false claims (Participant 14).

Interestingly, one participant said he utilises Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools to fact-check suspicious news stories on social media. According to him, AI has simplified everything nowadays. One need not to stress himself or herself before he can know the veracity of what was reported.

I usually use Chat GPT, an Artificial intelligence (AI) tool, to check the veracity of any fake news in circulation on social media. AI has the ability to detect the authenticity of the news story or otherwise. Although AI is a model that some journalists criticise, but I gain satisfaction from using it to detect the veracity of news stories. (Participant 10).

Among all the 20 participants, only 7 interviewees have gone far in utilising fact-checking tools. What this means is that, even among professional journalists, some are using advanced level of fact-checking ahead of others. One of the participants who work with the online newspaper enunciated his views thus:

To fact-check suspicious news on social media, I verify the source and cross-check the information with credible news outlets. I then look for expert opinions, and use trusted fact-checking tools or websites to confirm its accuracy. I normally utilise platforms like Snopes, Africa Check, or PolitiFact to validate claims. These platforms make my work easier and I like using them all the time. (Participant 11).

On his own part, a participant confessed that he is not using any modern fact-checking tools because he lacks the required skills to do that.

Sincerely speaking for now, I don't use any application for fact-checking. I wanted to attend fact-check trainings so that I will equip myself with those applications that would help me to detect fake news. There was a non-governmental organisation, Centre for Investigative Journalism, that I applied to for different trainings on fact-checking but, unfortunately, I was not shortlisted. (Participant 9).

The foregoing data presentation indicates that the practice of modern fact-checking among many people North-West Geopolitical Zone Nigeria is not as prevalent as it should be even among professional journalists themselves. The results revealed that fact-checking task is commonly manually performed by both online survey respondents and interviewees to verify the truthfulness of a given news content from other media outlets.

Discussion of findings

Research question 1: On which social media the users observe highest frequency of fake news in North-West Geopolitical Zone, Nigeria?

Findings from this study revealed that the majority of the respondents (301 or 64.3%) encounter fake news through Facebook, followed by WhatsApp (115 or 24%). This result concurred with some previous studies that have established the spread of fake news on social media platforms like Facebook (Hossain et al., 2023), WhatsApp (Herrero-Diz, Conde-Jiménez & Reyes de Cózar, 2020), Twitter (Grinberg et al., 2019; Li & Su, 2020) and recently TikTok (Hoai & Minh, 2024). This suggests that users of social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp and TikTok should be wary of the

contents they encounter before sharing with the others. In the long run, this would reduce the likelihood of circulating fake news on social media.

Consistent with the outcome of this study, a prior research conducted by Mutsvairo and Bebawi (2019) confirmed that people in Nigeria who utilise Facebook and WhatsApp play a significant role in the dissemination of false information. This is due to the ease with which these platforms allow for the creation, sharing, modification, and redistribution of content across various social networking sites, reaching audiences at a rapid pace regardless of their location. This implies that increased reliance on and utilisation of Facebook and WhatsApp by the users could be linked to the dissemination of fake news.

Research question 2: Do social media users in North-West

Geopolitical Zone, Nigeria fact-check fake news on social media?

Findings from this study revealed that most respondents of the online survey (192 or 40.1%) admitted to unintentionally sharing fake news, after believing it to be true at first, only to realise later that it was false. To this end, Bondielli and Marcelloni (2019) blamed insufficient use of proper fact-checking from social media users which lead to the dissemination of suspicious information they encounter while navigating different social media platforms. This indicates that certain information may be shared without being thoroughly examined beforehand. Undoubtedly, this attitude has contributed to the rapid spread of fake news among the public.

This study also found that the majority of the in-depth interview participants were not trained on fact-checking competence. According to Silas (2020), fact-checking competence entails skills on advanced web search i.e. Google search, Website verification, Image verification, Video verification and geo location, among others. This might be understandable because fact-checking is just gaining popularity due to the proliferation of fake news as enhanced by social media. Therefore, the very low level of fact-checking skills among social media users and the journalists in North-West Geopolitical Zone, could explain the proliferation of fake news in the region without fact-checking.

Research question 3: What is the mass media literacy level of social media users and their fact-checking habits of fake news in North-West Geopolitical Zone, Nigeria?

The major finding here was that the majority of the respondents of the online survey (378 or 78.9) agreed with the statement that they do not have enough mass media literacy to fact-check fake news on social media. By extension, the result depicts how average Nigerian social media users do not always verify the source of information before believing and sharing it. Consequently, users often spread false information they deem important without proper fact-checking.

Furthermore, the result revealed overwhelming stand of the respondents of not using modern fact-checking tools to ascertain the veracity

of the information before sharing with others. Therefore, it could be deduced from the outcome of this result that in North-West Geopolitical Zone Nigeria, the modern means of fact-checking using several internet tools is not as prevalent as it should be. As such, the users may end up sharing information on social media without verifying its accuracy.

However, the in-depth interview conducted with the professional journalists indicated that all the participants possessed mass media literacy which helped them a lot during manual fact-checking. Corroborating the link between media literacy and fact-checking, Guess et al. (2018) associated higher levels of media literacy with greater fake news awareness leading to fact-checking before disseminating news and information. What this means is that, individuals can effectively counteract fake news by enhancing their media literacy through the application of critical thinking and scepticism in order to fact-check the reliability of news on social media.

An additional noteworthy observation from the finding is that even among the professional journalists interviewed during this study, only 7 out of the 20 participants fully practised fact-checking through the utilisation of contemporary internet tools such as Google Reverse Image Search, Google Maps, TinEye, Bing, and Metadata, among others. Consequently, this highlights the need for more proactive modern strategies in fact-checking in order to reduce the spread of fake news on social media platforms.

Summary of findings

One of the key findings of this study was that a significant number of people in North-West Nigeria depend on social media for both seeking and sharing information. It is an undeniable fact that social media plays a crucial role in the transmission and amplification of information created by others. The convenience of accessing information quickly, affordably, and frequently through these platforms has made social media the leading source of information in contemporary society.

This study also revealed that a significant portion of the participants reported encountering fake news primarily on Facebook, followed by WhatsApp. This suggests that a growing number of people in North-West Geopolitical Zone, Nigeria are turning to social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp for their news, rather than traditional news outlets. This implies that an increased reliance on and utilisation of social media platforms could be linked to the dissemination or encountering of fake news without fact-checking.

With regards to fact-checking fake news on social media, the major finding was that most of the respondents of the online survey (378 or 78.9%) agreed with the statement that they do not have enough mass media literacy to fact-check fake news on social media. However, the in-depth interview conducted with the professional journalists indicated that all the 20 participants possessed mass media literacy which helped them a lot during

fact-checking. Yet, their fact-checking habits was usually manually done without the modern technologies of fact-checking.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study revealed how social media plays a crucial role in the transmission and amplification of information created by others. The study also portrayed how an average Nigerian social media user receives a lot of information daily and due to other commitments, he/she has limited time to verify every piece of information. As such, most people do not always verify the source of information before believing and sharing it. Consequently, users often spread false information they deem important without proper fact-checking, especially if the story has potential concomitant benefit for their loved ones and friends. In view of the findings of the study, the following recommendations are hereby made:

1. There should be widespread awareness campaigns through workshops and conferences that promote responsible social media usage in North-West Geopolitical Zone, Nigeria. These campaigns should emphasise the importance of verifying information before sharing and the potential consequences of spreading fake news.
2. Since this study identified Facebook and WhatsApp as social media platforms that exhibit the highest proliferation of fake news in North-West Geopolitical Zone, Nigeria. People who regularly access news through these platforms ought to exercise greater caution regarding the content they seek and disseminate, given that Facebook and

WhatsApp have become fertile ground for all kinds of fake news. Therefore, the state governments in the region through their ministries of information and media houses should prioritise sensitisation efforts to mitigate fake news proliferation by targeting Facebook and WhatsApp users.

3. There is need for enhancing mass media literacy in order to empower social media users in North-West Geopolitical Zone, Nigeria to engage in fact-checking information before sharing with others. Findings of this study brought to fore the need for training on fact-checking using modern internet tools in order to mitigate the circulation of fake news on social media. Such trainings on modern fact-checking competencies must not be limited to journalists alone but also extended to other social media users in the region.

Reference

- Adejumoh, J. (2023, November 24). 95% of internet users use social media. *Independent*. Retrieved from <https://independent.ng/95-of-internet-users-use-social-media/>
- Alcott, H., Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 5 (31), 211-236. Retrieved from <https://www.nber.org/papers/>.
- Bakir, V., & McStay, A. (2018). Fake news and the economy of emotions: problems, causes, solutions. *Digital Journalism*, 6(2), 154–175. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2017.1345645>
- Dubawa (2021). Fact-checking in an infodermic: Examining the information ecosystem in West Africa. Premium Times Centre for Investigative Journalism. Retrieved from www.ptcij.org

- Eke, H. N., Omekwu, C. O. & Odoh, J. N. (2014). The use of social networking sites among the undergraduate students of university of Nigeria, Nsukka. *Library Philosophy and Practice* (e-journal). Retrieved from
- Grinberg, N., Joseph, K., Friedland, L., Swire-Thompson, B., & Lazer, D. (2019). Fake news on Twitter during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. *Science (New York, N.Y.)*, 363(6425), 374–378. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aau2706>
- Herrero-Diz, P., Conde-Jiménez, J., & Reyes de Cózar, S. (2020). Teens' motivations to spread fake news on WhatsApp. *Social Media + Society*, 6(3), 205630512094287. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120942879>
- Hoai, D. L. & Minh, T. T. (2024). Exploring fake news awareness and trust in the age of social media among university student TikTok users, *Cogent Social Sciences*, 10:1, 2302216. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2302216>
- Hossain, M. A., Chowdhury, M. M. H., Pappas, I. O., Metri, B., Hughes, L., & Dwivedi, Y. K. (2023). Fake news on Facebook and their impact on supply chain disruption during COVID-19. *Annals of Operations Research*, 327(2), 1–29. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10479-022-05124-1>
- Ibraheem I. A. & Garba K. A. (2019). Undermining the freedom of expression: The case of fake news in Nigeria in fake news and hate speech; narratives of political instability, *ACSPN Book Series 2*, pp. 92 — 106. Retrieved from <http://www.acspn.com.ng>
- Ilesanmi, S. (2021). Assessing fact-checking competence of journalism lecturers in Ondo state tertiary institutions. Dubawa. Retrieved from <https://idac.dubawa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Assessing-Fact-checking-Competence-of-Journalism-Lecturers-in-Ondo-State-Tertiary-Institutions.pdf>
- Ireton, C., Posetti, J. (2018). (ed.). *Journalism, 'fake news' and disinformation: a handbook for journalism education and training*. Paris: UNESCO. Retrieved from <https://en.unesco.org/fightfakenews>

- Keth, P.F. (2014). Introduction to social research: Quantitative and qualitative approaches. 3rded. London: Ashford
- Li, J., & Su, M.-H. (2020). Real talk about fake news: Identity language and disconnected networks of the US public's "fake news" discourse on Twitter. *Social Media + Society*, 6(2), 205630512091684. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120916841>
- Mirzaei, M. S., Zhang, Q., Nishida, T., Granskogen, T., Gulla, J. A., Talwar, S., Dhir, A., Kaur, P., Zafar, N., & Alrasheedy, M. (2019). Social computing and social media. design, human behavior and analytics. *CEUR Workshop Proceedings, 2041*(February), 72–82. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-21902-4>
- Mohammed, H. (2021). Misinformation awareness among journalists covering politics in Nigeria: Implications for democratic institutions in North-east Nigeria. The Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development [CJID]. Retrieved from <https://idac.dubawa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Misinformation-Awareness-among-Journalists-Covering-Politics-in-Nigeria.pdf>
- Mutsvairo, B. &Bebawi, S. (2019). Journalism educators, regulatory realities, and pedagogical predicaments of the 'fake news' era: A comparative perspective of the Middle East and Africa. *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator*, 74 (2), 143-157
- Ohaja, E. U., &Okujeni, R. (2022). Disinformation, ethics and reality: Appraisal of the duties and functions of press secretaries in Nigeria. *Journal of Communication and Media Research*. 14(1), 80-90. Retrieved from <https://www.jcmrjournal.org/article?id=470>
- Okoro, N. &Chijioke, D. I. (2013). Citizen journalism in Nigeria: Possibilities and challenges. *Journal of Media and Mass Communication*, 11(1). Retrieved from www.iiste.org.
- Onanuga, B. (2023). Harnessing African solutions to combat fake news, malinformation, misinformation and disinformation. Being a paper presented at *1st international symposium*. Abuja: National Open University of Nigeria.

- Osuagwu, T.R. (2018). Trumped up support for Trump: What did the Nigerian women say? In S.S. Chen, N. Allaire & Z.J. Chen (eds), *Constructing narratives in response to Trump's election: How various population make sense of unexpected victory* (165-174). London: Lexington Books.
- Ozohu-Suleiman, Y. (2014). *Communication determinants in the 2008 polio campaign resistance in Northern Nigeria*. Zaria: Ahmadu Bello University Press.
- Salihu M. (2025). Comprehending Audience Motivations and Gratifications for Sharing Disinformation on Social Media in North West Nigeria. *Zamfara International Journal of Humanities*, 3 (3), 80-96. Retrieved from www.doi.org/10.36349/zamijoh.2025.v03i03.010
- Tully, M.; Vraga, E.K. & Smithson, A.B. (2020). News media literacy, perceptions of bias, and interpretation of news. *Journalism* 21, 209–226.
- Warwick, A., & Lewis, R. (2017). *Media manipulation and disinformation online*. New York: Data & Society.
- Wilson, F. & Umar, M. A. (2019). The Effect of fake news on Nigeria's democracy within the premise of freedom of expression. *Global media journal* 17(32).