Perception on Social Media Usage and Fake News Dissemination among Students in College of Education Akamkpa, Cross River State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The study examined students' perception of social media usage and fake news dissemination among students of College of Education, Akamkpa, Cross River State. The study adopted the descriptive survey research design, using a sample of 256 College of Education Students. The instrument used for data collection was Social Media Use and Fake News Dissemination Questionnaire (SMUFNDQ). The data collected were analyzed using frequency count and Pearson Product Moment Correlation coefficient. The result of the analysis revealed that over 50% of the respondents have a negative perception of fake news dissemination. Also, there is a significant relationship between social media and fake news dissemination among college students. The study recommended among

others that the federal government and relevant organizations should collate research papers/materials particular to demographic analysis on the dissemination of fake news in Nigeria and use results to identify the specific role of Nigerians in the dissemination of fake news based on the demography.

Keywords: perception, fake news, dissemination, social media usage, students

Introduction

The present era is a world with overwhelming information found from variety of technology resources. With varieties of new information, an individual must be able to properly recognize the right and useful information. And in line with this, Information technology has paved way for the creation of contents and easy sharing of information from one source to another within seconds (Fasanya et al, 2018). Newly invented information technologies increase abilities and open more possibilities for all humans, especially for the purpose of communication through sharing of messages. In the process of engaging in online interactions and discussions, users forward information that they deem relevant and vital to other people on their network. This is usually meant for the purpose of educating, sharing common interest, and creating awareness. Information technology allows for such sharing capability within the internet environment, which include social media, blogs, videos, websites, podcasts, among others.

Social media applications like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Whatsapp among others are the most used internet platforms, mainly for the purpose of instant communication. Hence, they have not only become tools for increased citizens' active online participations but have also become platforms for the spread of hate speeches, misinformation and/or fake news (Duru, 2018). Activities, which are known to be common with educational issues, have distorted the educational system in several countries. Students and also lecturers have consistently used the social media platforms to attack the integrity of their colleagues or the school authority by spreading lies about them thereby gaining the upper hand in the process (Igwebuike & Chimuanya, 2021). The after effect of such actions could distort the school system.

In addition, the spread of fake news is likely to limit the opportunity of good and credible information from being heard. Previous studies by Finkel et al. (2019), Wilson and Umar (2019), and Baum et al. (2017) have discussed the role of selected social media sites and educational status in the spread of fake news. Other research in this area also revolve around phenomenon of fake news, risk to society worldwide, and solutions to the spread of fake news (Roozenbeek & Linden, 2018; Dentith, 2017; Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019).

The impact of fake news on students has become a major concern as it is in its purest form [fake news is] completely made up, manipulated to resemble credible journalism and attract maximum attention and, with it, advertising revenue. Indeed, the ease with which the internet and social media allow information to be exchanged, and the opportunities for popular sites to be 'monetized' through advertising revenue, have removed many of the financial or regulatory barriers that print media may previously have posed to potential creators of fake news.

The use of "fake news" to describe materials reported without basis should be considered distinct from some of the other uses of the term, such as media produced with deliberate satirical and parodic intent, although public confusion between fabricated news, satire and fact has also caused concern. The term has also been appropriated by some US conservatives to describe any reporting they do not like. For example, a tweet from Donald Trump in February 2017 suggested "any negative polls are fake news" (Bosch, 2017) and Trump has even described entire news organizations, such as CNN, as "fake news" (Wemple, 2017). Some commentators have offered categorizations of 'fake news'. They include; intentionally deceptive (as in 'The Pope has endorsed candidate Trump'); jokes taken at face value (misunderstanding parody and satire); large-scale hoaxes (such as the incorrect story that the founder of a beer company had made everyone in his home village a millionaire); slanted reporting of real facts and stories where the truth is contentious.

Distinguishing what is true from what is not true is a critical skill today. Exposing fake news, being aware that there is something like fake news, having the knowledge that there is something that is written that is not necessarily true, that you have to question, think critically; all these are very important. This is something we believe schools can do something about. Many students often lack the experience and understanding to be able to deal with fake sites and fake news they see; and they need the skills to prepare them for the digital world.

The role of social media and other digital organizations cannot be overlooked, as there is "need to see responsible behaviour from the digital industry". To summarize, the proliferation of fake news in recent times has caused considerable concern at a national and international level, with academics, educationalists and policymakers calling for action to improve students' skills and confidence in identifying fake news. Hence, the need to examine students' perception of social media usage and fake news dissemination among students of College of Education, Akamkpa, Cross River State.

Social media is defined as a set of software and web tools that help users interact online, share content and develop a personalized network of friends, colleagues or organizations. Every individual uses their network differently, and there are no set rules about what is 'right' for each site. However, the keyword here is social. Users come to social media sites to talk to friends, share ideas and hear the latest news. Some examples of social media sites are Whatsapp, Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter. The sites described here are among the best known and most popular. In every case, connecting with someone on social media requires mutual consent, and either side can choose to break the connection.

Social media is the term often used to refer to new forms of media that involve interactive participation. Often the development of media is divided into two different ages, the broadcast age and the interactive age. In the broadcast age, media were almost exclusively centralized where one entity such as a radio or television station, Newspaper Company, or a movie production studio distributed messages to many people. Feedback to media outlets was often indirect, delayed, and impersonal. Mediated communication between individuals typically happened on a much smaller level, usually via personal letters, telephone calls, or sometimes on a slightly larger scale through means such as photocopied family newsletters. With the rise of digital and mobile technologies, interaction on a large scale became easier for individuals than ever before; and as such, a new media age was born where interactivity was placed at the centre of new media functions. One individual could now speak to many, and instant feedback was a possibility.

In the 1990s when the Internet was first made accessible for public use, its main purpose was for accessing of information. Over the years, the Internet has grown with plenty of untruthful and misleading information. As fake news found its way into the Internet, it becomes difficult for people to find truthful information. Fake news is spread online through the social media and the use of fake news websites. Current social media is a fertile ground for the spread of fake news.

Users of Facebook play a major role in feeding into misinformation. Content can be relayed among users with no third-party fact checking or editorial judgment. Misinformation amplified by new technological means in the Internet age poses a threat to open societies worldwide. Fake news is fabricated content deceptively presented as real news. It consists of stories designed to increase readership, online sharing, and Internet click revenue. It is published with the intent to mislead in order to damage an agency, person or rival. It is well known that fake news spreads faster and deeper than truth. There

are websites that deliberately publish fake news purporting to be real news. These are called "fake news websites." Such sites have spread political misinformation in the United States, Russia, Germany, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Currently social media is largely responsible for the spread of fake news.

Social media is a global village involving several participants; this environment allows information to be shared from one person to another at the speed of light. It allows people to contribute and express their opinions on various issues with ease. It is known for minimum restriction on information sharing, low cost, and very easy access. The platform could be regarded as the home of hate speech, malice, and fake news, because people can create their own contents, which in many cases are not entirely true. Fake news may be defined as conscious spread of false information in the form of news articles and stories with the intent of destroying an image (Roozenbeek & Linden, 2018). Also, Gentzkow (2017) sees it as news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers. This expresses the fact that fake news could be news articles published and are set on being false. The spread of false information has become synonymous with the term fake news (Cooke, 2017). In contemporary age, social media platforms have become major sources of information, people almost no longer refer to traditional media to confirm information. Indeed, some information found in the traditional media originates from the social media.

The urge to search for news on social media is almost like an addiction. People are ready to feed this addiction by publishing fake news stories and post on social media, mostly to generate a high flow of online traffic. So many social media users are quick to believe what they watch or hear without much thought. This has become very convenient for people who use this flaw to spread fake news on social media, knowing that social media users are unlikely to confirm the information received. People used this high flow of traffic to create wealth for themselves. Since the audience is very convincing, they go on to share the information from one social media platform to another. Fake news can spread faster than real news (Langin, 2018). It has a wider coverage and wider audience (Vosoughi et al., 2017). Fake news uses a lot of devices and tools to attract audience. In the case of social media, catchy headlines and captions are used to attract audience's attention. Social media articles use many exaggerated titles to sell their fake news.

Research questions

i.   What are students' perceptions of fake news dissemination in College of Education Akamkpa?

ii.   What is the relationship between social media and fake news dissemination among students in college of Education?

Hypothesis

Ho1: There is no significant relationship between social media and fake news dissemination among students in College of Education.

Methodology

The research design adopted for this study was the survey. The design was considered appropriate because it deals with the collection of data for the purpose of describing and interpreting existing conditions from a sample representative of the population. The population for this study comprised of 852 students from the College of Education Akamkpa for the year 2023/2024 academic session. Data available from the Office of the Director, Student's Affairs showed that the registered students were made up of 208 males and 644 female students. 256 students were randomly sampled using accidental sampling approach; this is 30% of the entire population. This technique was utilized because it was not practically possible to get all subjects of the population together to use any probabilistic sampling approach.

The instrument used for data collection was Social Media Use and Fake News Dissemination Questionnaire (SMUFNDQ) designed by the researchers. The instrument was made of two sections, A and B. Section A was constructed to capture information on demographic variables of the respondents while section B is a four-point modified Likert scale used to measure the effect of social media use on fake news dissemination. Section A had six questions while section B had 20 items. Each item on section B required the respondent to indicate the frequency of their various responses under Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (A) and Strongly Disagree (SD). The items in the questionnaire were drawn to reflect the variables under study. The split half method of reliability was used to determine the reliability estimate of the instrument. Thirty (30) undergraduates from the Department of Mass Communication, University of Calabar were used to test the reliability of the instrument. The reliability estimate ranged from 0.79 – 0.92 which was considered good enough for the study. The data was analysed using frequency count and Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Analysis.

Presentation of results

Research question one: What are students' perceptions of fake news dissemination in College of Education, Akamkpa?

This research question focused on students' perception of fake news dissemination in the College of Education, Akamkpa. The statistical analysis used was descriptive statistics. Their responses were collapsed into 2 (Agreed and Disagreed); that is, all responses connoting Strongly Agreed and Agreed were collapsed into Agreed, while all responses connoting Disagreed and Strongly Disagreed were collapsed into Disagreed. Their corresponding frequencies were further converted into percentages as presented on Table 1.

Table 1: Description of the general pattern of students' perception to fake news dissemination

S/N	My perception about fake news (I feel)	Agreed	%	Disagreed	%
1.	fake news is a type of hoax or deliberate spread of misinformation	245	95.70	11	4.29
2	Fake news is easy to create	178	69.53	78	30.46
3	Fake news is a new phenomenon	78	30.46	178	69.53
4	A new story is not fake simply because it is impolite	113	44.14	143	55.85
5	Fake news are stories that have some truth but aren't 100% accurate	228	89.06	28	10.93
6	Fake news stories are found online	208	81.25	48	18.75
7	Fake news can spread rapidly and is easily consumed in a 24/7 news cycle	216	84.37	40	15.62
8	Clikbait stories and headlines earn advertising revenue on creating fake news	211	82.42	45	17.57
9	Fake news comes from fake sites	97	37.89	159	62.10
10	Fake news arouses anxiety	241	94.14	15	5.85
11	Fake news employs rumour exaggeration	213	83.20	43	16.79

12	Fake information was created to make entertainment	142	55.46	114	44.53
13	Fake information was created to make money	189	73.82	67	26.17
14	Fake news is widely spread through the social media	246	96.09	10	3.90
15	Fake news headlines are vague	188	73.43	132	51.56
16	Fake news headlines have too many details	186	72.65	70	27.34
17	Not all of the misinformation being passed online are complete fiction	214	83.59	42	16.40
18	There are still many laws that can be applied to protect individuals from harmful content	223	87.10	33	12.89
19	Fake news is punishable by law	242	94.53	14	5.46
20	Fake news is misleading	248	96.87	8	3.12

The result on Table 1 shows that a greater proportion of the respondents (above 50 percent) indicated that they are aware of fake news dissemination. This was determined in their response to the following questions in Table 1 which shows that they feel: fake news is a type of hoax or deliberate spread of misinformation, fake news is easy to create, fake news are stories that have some truth but are not 100% accurate, fake news stories are found online, fake news can spread rapidly and is easily consumed in our 24/7 news cycle, clikbait stories and headlines earn advertising revenue on creating fake news, fake news arouses anxiety, fake news employs rumour exaggeration, fake information was created to make entertainment, fake information was created to make money, fake news are widely spread through the social media, fake news headlines are vague, fake news headlines have too many details, not all of the misinformation being passed online are complete fiction, there are still many laws that can be applied to protect individuals from harmful content, fake news is punishable by law and fake news is misleading.

On the other hand, the result shows that most students of the college of education are not so aware of fake news dissemination. This was determined by their response to the questions in Table 1, "I feel": Fake news is a new phenomenon, A new story is not fake simply because it is impolite, and fake news comes from fake sites.

Ho1: There is no significant relationship between social media and fake news dissemination among students of the College of Education, Akamkpa.

Table 2: Relationship between social media and fake news dissemination

Variable	N	R	Sig-2-tailed	Remark
Social media	256	0.29	.000	Rejected
Fake news dissemination	256			

The results of the Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC) analysis as presented in Table 2 show that the Pearson r value of 0.29 is significant at p-value = .000 (p< .05) thus there is a significant relationship between social media and fake news dissemination. Based on this, the null hypothesis is rejected. The implication of this is that social media have contributed to the dissemination of fake news among students of College of Education, Akamkpa.

Discussions of the findings
The discussion of the findings was organized based on the research question and hypothesis that guided the study. The findings in Table 1 revealed that over 50 percent have a negative perception of fake news dissemination. This finding is in line with Gentzkow (2017) who sees fake news as news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers. This expresses the fact that fake news could be news articles published and are set on being false. The spread of false information has become synonymous with the term fake news (Cooke, 2017).

The findings in Table 2 showed that there is a significant relationship between social media and fake news dissemination among students in College of Education, Akamkpa. The finding of this study is in line with that of Gentzkow (2017) that asserted significant relationship between social media usage and fake dissemination of information. The result also upholds Cooke (2017), who reported that there was a significant relationship between fake news dissemination using social media.

Conclusion
It was concluded that the shared value on the perception of fake news dissemination was highly negative even though there is a significant relationship between social media and fake news dissemination among college students. Thus, the management of the college should put up some check mechanism to reduce the dissemination of fake news among students generally.

Recommendations

From the findings, the following recommendations were made:

1.   Parents should instill proper home training on their children to aid the reduction of fake news dissemination.

2.   The federal government and relevant organizations should collate research papers/materials particular to demographic analysis on the dissemination of fake news in Nigeria and use results to identify the specific role of Nigerians in the dissemination of fake news based on the demography. Since students are beginning to be involved in the creation and spread of fake news, it is necessary for researchers to begin to engage in proper investigations to expose this act among students. They should investigate to understand how and why people create blogs and other platforms for the sole aim of spreading false information. Such exposure will not only restrain students from carrying out such dirty act but it would also inform other university students on the importance of verifying online information.

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