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Influence of Media Literacy on the Dissemination of Fake News among Instagram and Twitter Users

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Abstract

This study aimed to determine how media literacy affects the dissemination of misleading information on Instagram and Twitter. Users create a more informed and dependable social media ecosystem by fostering responsible sharing habits and improving media literacy abilities when a piece of proper information is disseminated. To accomplish the goals of the study, a survey method was utilised to gather data with a questionnaire as the data collection instrument. Undergraduate students at Redeemer's University made up the participants in the study. Using the Taro Yamane formula for sample size, a sample of 373 was selected from the population. Findings point to a mixed state of media literacy, highlighting the need for targeted interventions and educational initiatives to improve users' capacity to distinguish between reliable and misleading news. The study suggests specific programmes to improve users' capacity to assess material, confirm assertions, and recognise promotional content in the light of the findings. The study concluded that social media platforms should incorporate fact-checking tools, source verification capabilities, and plain labelling of promotional content, education initiatives on media literacy and critical thinking into the web page of Instagram and Twitter users. To achieve all the suggested recommendations, media literacy training must be continuous so that social media users can make educated and informed decisions.

Keywords: Fake News, Instagram, Media Literacy, Responsible Sharing, Social Media Users, Twitter.

Introduction

Fake news and misinformation are a trend as a result of the advent of social media. McLuhan prediction of the global village (1) has made everybody a journalist. The spread of fake news has brought back the era of yellow journalism with lots of sensational journalism. The idea of yellow journalism and fake news is not new, however, it is now more pronounced as a result of the Internet. Media houses usually employ qualified professionals for the newsrooms to curb fake news but the advent of social media has revolutionised the media profession. Since the era of democratic participant journalism, there have been advocacies that freedom of expression should be liberalised hence, journalism has become an all-comers' field. As a result of social media, anyone can now publish and circulate content online without the traditional media

gatekeeping channel. Therefore, fake news thrives.

The invention of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Telegram and other social media channels has brought a huge revolution to the production and dissemination of news across the globe. Social media facilitate online sharing of information using videos, photos and other content based on the advancement in technology. The content on social media is interactive and the speed at which the content reaches the audience is very fast. Therefore, social media are dear to the audience. Content creators have understood the powerful nature of social media and they have utilised such to reach and satisfy the public yawning for information on various aspects of human endeavours.

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Fake news is an issue that has various effects on Nigerians daily. Issues on fake news range from government, education, finance, social welfare, technologies, and health to violence among others. However, there is a need for media stakeholders to invest in media literacy and educate the public on the activities of fake news to save the public from the harms inherent in fake news.

Social media platforms provide an affordable option to reach a large audience because they are relatively free to use. Conventional news outlets have been impacted as more individuals use social media to acquire their daily news. However, relying too heavily on social media platforms as a news source makes the spread of false information easier. False information can spread quickly and find momentum on social media channels. Social media has developed into a haven for all types of fake news, including articles that are made up, misleading or clickbait headlines, manipulated facts or events, satire or parody presented as genuine news, sponsored content portrayed as actual news, and the likes. Many social media users share information without verifying it, and as such causes incorrect information to propagate. The sharing of false information has been facilitated by the role social media platforms play as an avenue for user-generated content, including hoaxes, incorrect facts, fabricated storylines, and conspiracy theories. The purpose of the study is to determine social media users' media literacy levels and see if it can help address the sharing of inaccurate information on information sites. The study aims to provide insights and suggestions for encouraging more responsible news-sharing habits on social media by studying how much media literacy can slow down or reduce the transmission of fake news. Media literacy, social media and fake news are here with the society but the level at which the variables influence each other remains unknown. Therefore, the study seeks to find out how media literacy affects the users of Instagram and Twitter concerning fake news dissemination.

The study seeks to know the level of media literacy among Instagram and Twitter users, assess the ability of Instagram and Twitter users to distinguish between fake and real news and investigate the impact of media literacy on

individuals' likelihood of fake news on Twitter and Instagram.

Media literacy entails the capacity to comprehend and analyse communications distributed through a variety of media as well as to create mediated messages. The area of education devoted to teaching media literacy abilities is known as media literacy education. To promote critical thinking about media messages, it is crucial to clarify the notion of media literacy (2).

Media literacy as explained by (3) has several essential components. They contend that media constructs reality, has political and economic ramifications, has particular aesthetics and codes for each medium and that viewers influence the meaning of media messages by negotiating their interpretations. The goal of teaching people these principles aims to create informed, self-sufficient citizens who value aesthetics, self-esteem, skill development, and advocacy (4).

There has been a growing emphasis on several media-related literacy ideas in recent years. These concepts have arisen based on diverse sectors and various focuses. Among the literacy ideas that have attracted much attention are news literacy, information literacy, and digital literacy. Information literacy has to do with recognising the need for information, finding and assessing it, and applying it to address issues (5). Numerous academics have offered different definitions of fake news. Researchers (6) assessed 34 scholarly papers on fake news and devised six main definitions: news parody, fabrication, propaganda, news satire, and manipulation. Later, (7) included imbalance as the sixth general description of false news, defining it as highly biased or opinionated and, therefore, inaccurate information.

Fake news is a form of information disease that also encompasses other forms of erroneous or deceptive information, such as disinformation and misinformation, according to (8). Although it mimics how news media content is structured, it lacks journalistic standards and practices that guarantee its accuracy and reliability. According to (9), fake news is purposefully false or primarily false material circulating on social media. However, it can also be found in more established print and broadcast news outlets.

Fake news distorts the truth and is characterised

by two flaws: a lack of truth and truthfulness. In essence, it entails spreading incorrect or misleading information with either a deliberate attempt to mislead or a complete disregard for the truth (10-11). Science, politics, terrorism, natural catastrophes, and urban legends have all been proven to be common subjects for fake news (12-14).

Fake news has had several adverse effects in Nigeria. As was the case during the 2014 Ebola outbreak, fake news resulted in the loss of life (15). Fake news shows the risks of spreading messages without first confirming their accuracy. Fake news reports have also exacerbated ethnic disputes, escalating violence (16).

News dissemination is quickly made possible as a result of social media. Audiences make use of social media platforms to disseminate various kinds of fake news. The sharing or suggesting news material to others via social media platforms is referred to as news sharing (17).

According to studies on the spread of false news (18-19), people post news on social media for a variety of reasons, including the need to express strong emotions, political and ideological convictions, and the desire to inform others. These have been noted as some of the primary drivers of news sharing by academics. Social media users believe disseminating fresh and pertinent "information" enhances their standing and reputation in society. However, spreading false information can also hurt interpersonal interactions, endangering one's reputation in society (19).

The fear of missing out (FoMO) and other sociological and psychological factors influence how people share news (20). Researchers (20) explain that FoMO is characterised by anxiety and a psychological reaction that encourages people to improve their social position in a particular group by seeking acceptance and feeling included, making them more vulnerable to spreading rumours. Furthermore, when false or conspiratorial information supports the user's pre-existing views and beliefs, it is more likely to be spread (21-22).

Additionally, the production and dissemination of fake news are frequently driven by monetary gain through programmatic online advertising based on the number of views and clicks (23). However, some intentionally mislead others by spreading

false information to gain attention, discredit a political candidate, advance a particular ideological viewpoint, or change user behaviour (24, 21:5). It has been noticed that some people might spread false information just for their pleasure or to cause chaos (25-26). Again, because of its inherent media qualities or recommendation algorithms, social media platforms play a significant role in the propagation of false information (27-28).

Fake news producers are more convenient using social media platforms. Social media is further divided into numerous platforms (29), including blogs, social networking sites (SNS), content communities, virtual gaming worlds, and virtual social worlds. These computer-mediated platforms let users communicate with one another, produce and distribute material, and create communities based on common interests. Researchers (30) claim that social networking sites (SNS) serve as an important avenue for young people to interact, and a source of knowledge. For instance, the main source of news for more than 80% of survey participants in India, almost 60% in Australia and Argentina, and more than 71% in Brazil is social media (31). Additionally, a survey that examined how many individuals used social media for news in 24 of the 40 nations observed reported that more than half did so, with the number topping 70% in Kenya, South Africa, Malaysia, and the Philippines (31). Social media users share the news they read with friends on the same platforms, making it a platform for acquiring and disseminating news (32).

The Bird app is a social network for micro-blogging established by Jack Dorsey, Evan Williams, and Biz Stone in 2006. According to (33) 2022 report on the countries with the most Twitter users, Twitter has 206 million daily active users, making it a well-known social network in the world. The website allows users to communicate instantly using concise messages, known as tweets, limited to 280 characters, which may also contain a variety of media, including links, photos, and videos. Twitter users can communicate with one another using a variety of devices, such as likes, re-post mentions, and responses.

Users of Twitter can follow other users or engage in conversation by utilising hashtags (such as

#Twitter). The hashtag is a special feature on Twitter which allows users to follow updates on topics they are interested in or find more information about a certain subject. Users can participate in the conversation by adding to what others are saying about a certain subject.

Instagram, a social networking platform was launched in 2010 by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger. It is currently owned by Meta Platforms Incorporated which also owns Facebook. The platform's primary focus is on users posting short-form photos and videos, which may be done publicly or privately in their profile's permanent feed or their stories, which are transient and remain for 24 hours. Additionally, live video streaming is an option. With direct messaging, users can communicate secretly with one another. They can get in touch with one another by following accounts and looking for content by hashtag or topic.

Additionally, users of the Instagram app can take photographs or videos within the app and edit them using text, gifs, symbols, and filters. Captions, geotagging, and tags that connect to other users' accounts are all permitted in feed posts, and hashtags are widely used in captions to increase discoverability. Users can like postings with a heart icon and written comments. Users can privately or publicly respond to stories (34). Social media can disseminate misleading information to a large audience, which could harm the society. While earlier researchers mainly give attention to the dissemination of inaccurate news on Twitter and Facebook (35-37), more recent data indicate that Instagram has become more popular as a platform for news-sharing, ranking as the fourth most well-known social media platform for doing so (31). It has been stated that Twitter is well-known for fake news (38). For example, the authors cited a Pew Research Centre in 2018 and 2020 where so much news from Twitter was discovered to be fake. Again, (39) observed that there were fake news sources from Twitter during the 2016 U.S. presidential election and that fake news spread faster (12:5, 38:7).

The responsibility is now on media professionals to use media literacy to combat the effect of fake news. Researchers (40) believe that media literacy will make the public spot reliable information and less inclined to spread fake

news. Other researchers (41) equally observe that information literacy will make the audience identify fake news items. In the same vein, other scholars (42-45) agree that people spread fake news without considering the harmful effects on children.

Fake news is not new to the media industry but the rate at which fake news spreads in the digital age is alarming. The advent of the Internet has revolutionised the content production, dissemination and consumption of news. The use of social media has aided the spread of fake news since everybody now has access to content production. Based on the power of social media to spread information faster, there is a need for social engagement to constantly educate the public on how to interface with media content. Children and youths are more vulnerable in the era of digital disinformation therefore, the need for media literacy is needed more than ever before.

This study is anchored on the Diffusion of Innovation by Everest Rogers and technological determinism by Marshal McLuhan. Information communication technology is considered one of the major technological innovations of the 20th century because it affects news media production and dissemination in the areas of politics, cultural relationships and socio-economic development (46-47). Innovation diffusion theory is a practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption and innovation diffusion is the spread of the capacity to produce or use innovation in practice. The justification for the theories is not far-fetched. The diffusion of innovation is used because Instagram and Twitter have been integrated into the media platforms and the audience shares information through the platforms. The application of the Internet and its associated technologies in news gathering, and dissemination are regarded as designed modern technology used to enhance communication efficiency in the shortest amount of time (48). In the context of this study, the media industry has embraced modern technology in the form of social media to redefine the art and acts of information dissemination. By diffusing and adopting technological innovations into the media space, social change is inevitable.

Technological determinism is used for the study because, through technology, the world has

become a global village. Through the Internet, members of society now produce, process and disseminate information through the available technology and use it to their advantage as is the case of Instagram and Twitter users since technology enhances media performance and efficiency. Again, as technology advances such as the Internet, media continue to have access to the technology and use such technology for media activities. (1:1) as cited in (49) explains that audiences feel and think the way they do as a result of the technology they are exposed to. Therefore, exposure to technology has a long-lasting effect on the media audience and of course, technology affects civilisation. Due to technological determinism, new media transcend the boundaries of experience reached by the old media and contribute to further change. The use of social media such as Twitter and Instagram will continue to reposition media space in terms of news production, dissemination and reception.

Methodology

The study used a quantitative research design to execute the study. The survey research method was used to collect data from the respondents and analyse numerical data. A survey is subject to biases but the researchers were meticulous in administering the copies of the questionnaire to avoid biases. To find trends, test causal linkages, make predictions, and extrapolate findings to broader populations, quantitative research is essential (50).

Students from Redeemer's University in Ede, Osun State were chosen as the population for this study with a total population of 5,590 students. The university was chosen because it has the highest number of students' population among private universities in Osun State, Nigeria. Private universities in Nigeria are more expensive therefore, they are viewed as elitist institutions in which their students have access to social media tools.

To determine the sample size for the questionnaire, Taro Yamane's Sample size formula was utilised to arrive at 373 sample size thus:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

$$n = \frac{5590}{1 + 5590(0.05)^2}$$

$$n = 373$$

A non-probability sampling technique called snowball sampling was used for the study. This method involved identifying the initial volunteers and asking them to find additional study participants. The researchers chose a small group of students who met the requirements of the study and were willing to participate and collected data from them using the snowball sampling technique. Few students were identified and those identified were asked to suggest other students who are Twitter and Instagram users and who participated in the study till the required sample number was complete.

A self-structured questionnaire was designed and used to collect information from the participants. Each subscale was constructed using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). The instrument was administered to Redeemer's University students in Osun State who are Instagram and Twitter users. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyse the quantitative data collected using descriptive statistics such as frequency distribution and percentages. Simple percentages and frequency tables were used to display the data.

Results

Tables and simple percentages were used to present the data collected from respondents. A total of 373 copies of the questionnaire were administered to the respondent and only 348 copies of the questionnaire were completed and returned and were used for the study.

Table 1 shows that the majority of the respondents are adept at keeping up with media changes and they can equally use various media environments to access information. The majority of the participants can discern between different roles of media (entertainment, information etc.) and they can tell whether or not media content contains commercial messages. When asked if they could decide quickly and whether media statements are accurate, a combined 61% of the participants responded affirmatively but the 39% that responded in the negative is a serious concern for information and media literacy. Misinformation is bound to occur where there is no media literacy. Most of the participants can evaluate media in terms of trustworthiness, dependability, objectivity, and relevance, easily create user accounts and

profiles in media, and use the hardware and software required to make content in the media (text, video, image, etc.) and are adept at sharing digital media contents and messages on social media.

The majority of the participants can add to or

remark on the media that other people share, can assess or review media content based on their personal preferences and interests and can also produce media content that adheres to moral and legal standards.

Table 1: Level of media literacy and knowledge between fake and real news

S/N	Statements	SA% (n)	A% (n)	N% (n)	D% (n)	SD% (n)	Total % (n)
1	I am skilled at keeping up with changes in the media	33.3% (116)	41.4% (144)	17.8% (62)	5.7% (20)	1.7% (6)	100% (348)
2	I can easily use a variety of media environments to access information	35.3% (123)	54.6% (190)	6.9% (25)	1.7% (6)	1.4% (5)	100% (348)
3	I can tell how different media serve different purposes (entertainment, information etc.)	32.2% (112)	52.3% (182)	13.2% (46)	2.3% (8)	0%	100% (348)
4	I can tell whether or not the media content contains a commercial message	23.6% (82)	54.9% (191)	17.5% (61)	3.2% (11)	0.9% (3)	100% (348)
5	I can decide quickly whether the media statements are accurate	19.50% (68)	41.4% (144)	28.7% (100)	9.2% (32)	1.1% (4)	100% (348)
6	I am able to evaluate media in terms of trustworthiness, dependability, objectivity and relevance	21.8% (76)	45.1% (157)	23.9% (83)	6.9% (24)	2.3% (8)	100% (348)
7	I can use the hardware and software required to make media content (text, video, image, etc.)	22.4% (78)	49.7% (173)	19.3% (67)	7.2% (25)	1.4% (5)	100% (348)
8	I am adept at sharing digital media content and messages on social media	44% (153)	27% (94)	6.3% (22)	0.3% (1)	22.4% (78)	100% (348)
9	I can add to or remark on the media that other people share	21.3% (74)	44% (153)	25.6% (89)	5.2% (18)	4% (14)	100% (348)
10	I have the ability to assess or review media content based on my personal preferences and interests	25.9% (90)	58.6% (204)	23% (42)	3.4% (12)	0% (0)	100% (348)
11	It is also crucial for me to produce media content that adheres to moral and legal standards	26.4% (92)	42% (146)	289 (83)	7.8% (27)	0% (0)	100% (348)

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Table 2: Likelihood of sharing fake news on Instagram and Twitter

S/N	Statements	SA% (n)	A% (n)	N% (n)	D% (n)	SD% (n)	Total % (n)
1	Prior to sharing any social media post, I frequently verify the validity of the claim being made	29.3% (102)	35.9% (125)	25.6% (89)	6.6% (23)	2.6% (9)	100% (348)
2	I verify the accuracy of the information on social media before sharing it with a friend	24.4% (85)	34.5% (120)	25.9% (90)	13.2% (46)	2% (7)	100% (348)
3	I am inclined to forward information that my friend shared with me without confirming its validity	15.2% (53)	38.5% (134)	24.1% (84)	17.8% (62)	4.3% (15)	100% (348)
4	I prefer to confirm the source of social media posts by checking the account	28.7% (100)	50% (174)	11.5% (40)	7.5% (26)	2.3% (8)	100% (348)
5	I think about the motivations behind the individuals' posts that I come across before I share	20.1% (70)	33.6% (117)	33.6% (117)	9.5% (33)	3.2% (11)	100% (348)
6	Before sharing information on social media, I make sure I verify the reliability of the source and where it originated from	22.7% (79)	37.9% (132)	21.8% (76)	13.2% (46)	4.3% (15)	100% (348)

Source: Field Survey, 2023

Most of the respondents strongly agree that before sharing any social media post, they frequently verify the validity of the claim being made but the 34% who do not verify before sharing is a call for worry because fake news thrives in such an environment. In fact, 40% of the participants do not verify the accuracy of information on social media before sharing it with their friends. Furthermore, the majority of the respondents forward information that their friends share without confirming its validity. Since the majority of respondents do not verify the validity of information sources before forwarding such information, fake news is bound to spread.

It is good to note that most of the participants prefer to confirm the source of social media posts by checking the account. It should be noted that verifying social media accounts does not amount to confirming the validity of information. Again, thinking about motivation is not an absolute priority among the participants, therefore, a large

chunk of them are not media literate. Even though more than half of the participants verify the reliability of the source and the originality of information, the one-third that do not verify the originality of the information sources are pruned to embrace fake news.

Discussion

On the level of media literacy among Instagram and Twitter users, the data displayed in Table 1 concludes that Instagram and Twitter users have a moderately high level of media literacy with varying degrees in many areas. Most of the respondents expressed confidence in their ability to keep up with media changes and believed they could effectively use various media platforms to access information as seen in Table 1. The participants equally demonstrated competence in understanding different functions of media. Looking at the extent of Instagram and Twitter users' ability to distinguish between real and fake news, the results shown in Table 1 analysis indicate a varied media literacy level. There were

lower levels of media literacy; only 78.5% of respondents felt confident identifying commercial messages in media, indicating that a size-able portion of users need help identifying promotional content while some of the respondents stayed indifferent or disagreed when evaluating the accuracy of media messages. There were additional signs that upholding the law and ethical standards would take more work. The findings highlight the necessity for targeted interventions and educational initiatives to help users distinguish between reliable and false news.

The impact of media literacy on individuals' likelihood of sharing fake news on Instagram and Twitter according to the data analysed in Table 2 shows that a size-able portion of respondents engage in media literacy practices that support responsible information sharing. From the data presented, most respondents routinely authenticate the accuracy and truthfulness of social media post claims before sharing. The survey also demonstrates that people carefully consider essential factors before disseminating information, including the origin of the social media post and the reasons for the poster's posting as seen in Table 2. According to these findings, people who are more media literate are more inclined to verify content's accuracy before sharing it. The outcomes of the study suggest that knowing media literacy will lessen the tendency to spread fake news thereby curbing the spread of misinformation among the users of Twitter and Instagram. Verifying the source of information, fact-checking and being curious about critical thinking will go a long way toward curbing fake news on social media platforms.

The outcome of this study further buttresses (42:8, 44:8) studies that observe that media literacy education will afford students the necessary mechanism needed to protect themselves against fake news. The studies reveal that media literacy reduces students' ignorance while it gives them the ability to detect fake news. Therefore, focusing on intervention educational programmes will enhance Twitter and Instagram users' ability to differentiate between false and authentic news. This is equally in line with the (41:8) submission that when media literacy education is taught in schools young media audiences will be equipped and protected against misinformation. Hence, the higher the media literacy the lower the tendency

for misinformation and vice versa. The new generation of students are active participants online therefore, the same social media platforms can be used to educate them on media literacy.

Conclusion

The conclusion from the study emphasises the importance of media literacy in reducing the spread of false information among Instagram and Twitter users. The results show that those with better media literacy abilities behave responsibly when sharing information. They are more likely to do critical analysis before sharing and to authenticate information's veracity, source, and intentions. If media literacy is put in place the risk of spreading incorrect information will be reduced. The study showed that Instagram and Twitter users have moderate to high media literacy. Hence, interventions are required to improve abilities in detecting commercial messages, assessing accuracy, and complying with legal and ethical guidelines. The outcome of the study also demonstrates the need to develop media literacy to stop fake news on social media by demonstrating how skills like checking claims and considering sources and motivations actively minimise the risk of disseminating incorrect information.

Based on the outcome of this study, it is recommended that Instagram and Twitter users should be educated on media literacy to reduce the spread of fake news. Media literacy should be incorporated into the tertiary institutions' curriculum to foster skill development and protect against false information. Twitter and Instagram users should be encouraged to always confirm, check and recheck promotional content on social media platforms before spreading information. Social media users and consumers should be trained on how to use and share information on Twitter and Instagram by installing fact-checking tools on their devices so that they can make informed decisions before reproducing content online. Social media users should keep media literacy training current to address new issues and include new data, empowering users to make wise decisions in a shifting media environment.

Abbreviation

NAMLE: National Association for Media Literacy Education

FoMO: fear of missing out

SNS: social networking sites

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All authors whose works were cited are duly listed in the references.

Author Contributions

All the authors contributed to the study in terms of conception, writing, reviewing, methodology, data curation, analysis, editing and funding.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest among the authors.

Ethics Approval

The study received ethical approval from the University Ethical Approval Committee.

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