

Influence of fake news on social media on the credibility of online newspapers among media audiences in southeast Nigeria

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Abstract

Empirical statistics indicate that legitimate online newspapers are losing readership largely due to association of social media and online platforms with spread of fake news and mis-information. This study investigated influence of fake news on social media on the credibility of online newspapers among mass media audience in southeast Nigeria. This was a descriptive cross-sectional survey conducted among 400 social media users. A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data. Data were analysed with SPSS, version 23. Hypothesis were tested at $P < 0.05$ level of significance. The study found that the extent to which male and female audience in southeast Nigeria relied on social media and online sources for news is to about 90%. Respondents across age perceived online newspapers as credible sources of news to a high extent (about 70%). Strong positive relationship was found between fake news on social media and the credibility perception of online newspapers, with the value of $r = -0.671$ and $p\text{-value} = 0.000 < 0.05$. The study concludes that media audience in southeast Nigeria equate online newspapers' contents with the social media and other online news sources. The study, therefore, recommends that publishers of online newspapers should focus on improving the quality of news by engaging in investigative reporting.

Key words: 1.Social Media, 2.Fake News, 3.credibility, 4.media Audience, 5.Southeast Nigeria.

Introduction

The high wave of social media in the society has made the citizens both consumers as well as producers of news. Social media involve the use of mobile and web-based technologies to design highly interactive platforms by which individuals and communities share, create, converse, and adjust User-Generated Content (Kietzmann, Hermkens & McCarthy, 2011) enabled by Web 2.0. The term Web 2.0 encompasses second generation of internet-based and interactive applications that are developed around user-generated and user-adjusted content, such as wikis, blogs, podcasts and social networking sites.

Thus, with the coming of social media into the global media scene, such concepts as citizen journalism, community journalism, smartphone/mobile journalism, online journalism, blogging and online publication of traditional newspapers etc. have become key aspects of contemporary journalism studies and education. While democratising access to media and information sharing and reception, the social media provides basis for diversified

sources of information. Through the instrumentality of the internet and social media, emerging sites that aggregate views, information, news, comments and diverse opinions have opened a new frontier of possibilities in the way news is produced, distributed and consumed (Dare, 2010). More so, it further brightened the hope for a participatory and interactive news process. Mavridis (2018) concurs that the technological advances associated with the emergence of social media have increased the spread of information and democratized its consumption globally. The social media allows information and ideas to be shared and formerly inaccessible regions to be connected (Burkhardt, 2017).

In consequence, such social media platforms as the Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, Google, internet etc (Penni, 2017, p.5) “have become the 21st century’s hot newsrooms and newsstands, solving the last decades’ problems of media access and reach, cumbersome and unreliable news gathering and production processes, dissemination and consumption, access to sources of information etc.” Paquet (2003, p.21) hints at the powers of social media in information democratisation and the entire news process in his assertion:

Something else, something profound was happening this time around: news was being produced by the regular people, who had something to say and show, and not solely by the ‘official’ news organizations that had traditionally decided how the first draft of history would look. This time, the first draft of history was being written in part by the former audience”

However, “social media are widely criticised for many woes that have become of society. The social media lacks ethical considerations; checks and balances; gatekeeping etc that are characteristics of traditional online media institutions for gatekeeping and filtering news to ensure credibility and authenticity” (Silverman, 2016). This lack of gatekeeping and proper checks of social media news before publication tend to have made the social media fake news career (Banda, 2010) with wide-spread skepticism about the authenticity of the platforms and the veracity of information they churn out. This substantiates the insinuations that social media are known to be the propagators of fake news and as a result tend to lack credibility among news readers. Accordingly, Salaudeen and Onyechi (2020) found that mainstream media are more credible than social media, suggesting that those who often use social media have lower perception about the credibility of social media as a result of proliferation of fake news on the platforms. These, along with the character of social media and other online platforms that have limited quality control standards for determining what constitutes news, make it easy to counterfeit and mimic legitimate news brands to make frauds look like the real thing. It is also possible to engineer audio and video in ways that go beyond legitimate news editing in order to make it appear that a particular individual said or did something in some place, and to pass this off as an authentic record (Solon, 2017), sending it viral in the social communications environments.

Fake news is a news article, video, audio, etc that is intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers. Wardle (2017) lists variety of mis- and disinformation types that describe fake to include, news that contains ‘false connection, false context, manipulated content and misleading content. Fake news is completely false information, photos and videos purposefully created and spread to confuse or misinform” others. Bakir and McStay (2018, p. 157) describe fake news as ‘either wholly false or containing deliberately misleading elements incorporated within its content or context’. This means that the presence of facts does not disqualify a message as fake news, and that their content can be completely fabricated, but also only be partly untrue and paired with correct information.

Although, White (2017) cites the Ethical Journalism Network, EJN to admit that the issue of journalistic accuracy and public trust in journalists and news are not new, they have in recent years come under renewed and intense scrutiny, as more and more people reject traditional media in favour of social media for news consumption. Though, fake news is not a new phenomenon, the means by which it is spread has changed in both speed and magnitude: social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are fertile grounds for the rapid spread of fake news (Burkhardt, 2017). In the largely unregulated medium, supported and driven by advertising drive, the

incentive for good is often outweighed by the incentive for revenue, and this has a major impact on how the medium develops over time (Burkhardt, 2017). Discussing the new technological advances associated with social media, Mavridis (2018) describes the proliferation of fake news as one of their outcomes. For instance, the 'Great Moon Hoax' of 1835, in which the *New York Sun* published a series of articles about the discovery of life on the moon is a good example of fake news being around in journalism for a long time.

Burkhardt (2017) explains that rumours and false stories have probably been around as long as humans have lived in groups where power matters. Nonetheless, a significant difference between the 'old' fake news and the fake news in the social media era, lies in the fact that stories can now be distributed with high speed, in real-time, reach a huge audience and therefore, might influence a lot of people. Mehrdad and Anna (2017) concur that fake news about current social or political issues is circulated on social media with tremendous speed. This gives credence to Kim, Tabibian, Oh, Schölkop and Gomez-Rodriguez (2017) assertion that social media and online social networking sites have become major disseminators of false information, urban legends, fake news, or, more generally, misinformation and disinformation.

The scourge of fake news has become more prevalent to the extent that its negative impact on popular online newspapers is very evident. The declining trust in mainstream media could be both a cause and a consequence of fake news gaining more traction (Allcot and Gentzkow, 2017, p.7). If fake news can affect traditional newspapers, then its impact on major online newspapers can only be imagined."

Similarly, the effects of fake news on society and the credibility of other legitimate online news channels are better felt than imagined. Democratic societies are vulnerable to fake news because of the public's limited ability to contain it (Baum, Lazer & Mele, 2017). White (2017) argues that fake news has become an additional factor in the erosion of public trust in journalism. The phenomenon of fake news and online disinformation is a source of deep concern for its potential effects on the reputation of traditional media institutions, public institutions, the outcome of democratic deliberations or the citizens' opinion formation on important public policies such as health, environment, immigration, security, economy or finance (Korta, 2018).

Meanwhile, fake news sharing and consumption in Nigeria are driven mainly by scams and scares, politics and terrorism, reflecting on national anxieties and aspirations. Current affairs (domestic news/politics) earned 41.7% of shared fake news; scares and scams (on health, jobs, money and technology) make up 16.6% of matters shared; while other issues like education, religion, sports and "common man" stories constitute 41.7% of contents shared on social media (BBC, 2019). In Nigeria where about 19% of the people are jobless, employment scams make up 6.2% of fake news stories shared on WhatsApp; 3% of fake news circulated on the same platform concerns terrorism and the army, mirroring Nigeria's anxieties about instability and uncertainty caused by Islamist militants (BBC, 2019).

Fake news issues in Nigeria abound, for instance, the rumoured death of Nigeria's president, Muhammadu Buhari, was widely circulated online among Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube, Instagram and other social media platforms. The president was reported to have died in a London Hospital where he went for medical checks. The rumour which began late in 2017 circulated on the Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Posts promoting it have been viewed more than 500, 000 times (BBC, 2018). This was later found to be outright falsehood, the president eventually returned to Nigeria alive and healthy.

However, when the president returned, it was again rumoured and widely shared and circulated on the social media and the Internet that he had been replaced with "a double body called "Jubril" from Sudan" (BBC, 2018). A scene from 1997 film "Face/Off" was used by the social media promoters of the fake news to show how a dead Buhari's face could have been transplanted to a 'double body'. To disclaim this rumour, Buhari was reported still on the social media saying "some people thought I have been 'cloned' but it's the real me, I assure you". The lookalike rumour was traced to pro-Biafran supporters (BBC, 2019), who want a sovereign state for the ethnic Igbo people who dominate the southeast Nigeria.

Yet in 2018, another online news reported the Nigerian president to have become a “left hander” at old age. Two images of Mr Buhari was circulated online, one upturned to allege that the Nigerian leader who is a right hander, was using his left hand to write, “proving” that he was a ‘body double’. The source of this information (@MAZINNAMDIKANU) demanded for clarification from the presidency. This information which went viral on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp etc. was later found to be fake.

Furthermore, drawing inference from Salaudeen and Onyechi, 2020; Solon, 2017 and Banda, 2010, fake news tend to affect the credibility of social media as information channel, thereby putting a question mark on and sparking renewed interest in credibility research of other online media environments. Incidentally, social media and online newspapers exist and operate in the same online platform. Ascertaining the influence of such fake news shared on social media and other online platforms on the credibility of online newspapers is the task before this study.

Online newspapers are legitimate media platforms which follow ethical journalism and media practice to gather, process and provide news and information to their readers and audience. Similarly, offline/hardcopy newspapers have their online editions published in the web pages to make news and information available to the online readers. However, over the past two decades, media organizations have invested in building their online presence, with the later use of social media platforms playing a significant role. They use social media like Facebook or Twitter, to distribute their contents and build a network of audiences and engage with them online(Mavridis, 2018).

However, the growing spate of fake news, fabricated news reports, misinformation, disinformation and omnipresent media environment tend to have blurred the credibility of online newspapers, prompting a handful of empirical investigations into audience assessment of the credibility of Nigerian mainstream and online media. A study examining the objectivity of news reporting among online news media in Nigeria, Akpan, *et al.* (2012) revealed that majority of online news stories are not objectively reported. Edogor, *et al.* (2015) show that users rather rate social media platforms as credible sources of information, with Facebook adjudged as the most credible. Yet, a cross-national study by Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2019) on fake news and media trust in Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa, provide evidence of a significant relationship between high exposure to fake news on social media and lower levels of trust in news media across all three African countries. On the other hand, pressures – economic, technological, political, and social – combined with the need to be constantly present, to report with equal speed and alacrity, and to gain followers in the process, has led to a landscape where fake news is almost everywhere, even in prominent media outlets (Kellner, 2003).

Meanwhile, media credibility has to do with the trust, believability and reliability of news, information and other communication messages of the mass media. Credibility of news and information in the mass media is based on factors such as: accuracy, factual, comprehensiveness, fairness, objectivity, believability, timeliness, trustworthiness, currency and balance(Salaudeen&Onyechi, 2020).

Therefore, this study focuses on influence of fake news on social media on the credibility of online newspapers among media audience in Southeast Nigeria. Southeast Nigeria is one of the six (6) geopolitical zones in Nigeria. It has five states: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states. It is dominated by the Igbo speaking people in Nigeria. The zone also has high rate of social media consumption as shown in studies and reports.

Research Questions

1. To what extent do mass media audience in Southeast Nigeria rely on the social media and online sources for news?
2. What is the level of credibility attached to online newspapers as sources of news?
3. To what extent does the association of social media and online sources with fake news affect the perceived credibility of online newspapers?

Research Hypothesis

The three objectives were coalesced into one hypothesis. It is tested at 0.05 level of significance

H0₁: There is no significant relationship between fake news on social media and online sources and the credibility perception of online newspapers among mass media audience in Southeast Nigeria.

Materials and Methods

Data and Method of Analysis

The study adopted “descriptive cross-sectional survey design, which is a type of design where the researcher does not alter the exposure status but measures the outcome and the exposure(s) in the population under observation” (Umokeet *al*, 2021). The study was conducted in 10 communities in Southeast Nigeria, made up of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states.

The target population of this study is the entire social media users resident in southeast Nigeria, estimated at 21,955,414 as of 2021 (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021). The researchers used the Australian National Statistical Service, online sample size calculator. Using the calculator, the sample size was determined to be 400 at 95% confidence level and 0.02567 confidence interval. The researchers adopted multi-stage sampling technique to select and reach the respondents for the study. To ensure fairness in the distribution/allocation of the questionnaire to the states, the researchers followed Kothari (2014, p. 63) advices that “researchers should adopt the method of proportional allocation under which the sizes of the samples from the different strata are kept proportional to the sizes of the strata”. The population of each state was obtained for this purpose. The proportionate formula is expressed as: $Nh = \frac{nNh}{N}$

Where: nh = number of units allocated to each sub-group

Nh = number of respondents in each sub-group

n = total sample size

N = total population

Therefore:

$$\text{Abia} = \frac{400 \times 3727347}{21955414} = \frac{1490938800}{21955414} = 68$$

$$\text{Anambra} = \frac{400 \times 5527809}{21955414} = \frac{2211123600}{21955414} = 101$$

$$\text{Ebonyi} = \frac{400 \times 2880383}{21955414} = \frac{1152153200}{21955414} = 52$$

$$\text{Enugu} = \frac{400 \times 4411119}{21955414} = \frac{1764447600}{21955414} = 80$$

$$\text{Imo} = \frac{400 \times 5408756}{21955414} = \frac{2163502400}{21955414} = 99$$

The purposive sampling technique was used to distribute the questionnaire to the selected communities. The rationale for the adoption of purposive technique was to enable the researchers to select only the respondents who have social media accounts or are active users of one or more social media platforms as a criterion to participate in the study. Out of 400 questionnaire distributed, 377 copies were completed and returned representing 94.3% return rate.

The data collected for the study was coded into the IBM’s Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23 and analysed using descriptive statistics- mean and standard deviation. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis was used to test the hypothesis. The level of statistical significance was determined at *p* value <.05, while the rating scale for the items was set as:

- 4 < Mean value ≤ 5 = Very High Extent = (80-100) % = about 90%
- 3 < Mean value ≤ 4 = High Extent = (60-89) % = about 70%
- 2 < Mean value ≤ 3 = Low Extent = (40-59) % = about 50
- 1 < Mean value ≤ 2 = Very Low Extent = (20-39) % = about 30%
- 0 < Mean value ≤ 1 = Neutral = (0-19) % = about 10%

Results

Table 1: Demographic Data of Respondents

SN	Variable	Item	F	%
1	Gender	Female	209	55.4
		Male	168	44.6
		Total	377	100%
2	Age	46 years and above	20	5.3
		39 – 45 years	32	8.5
		32 – 28 years	62	16.4
		25 – 31 years	59	15.6
		18 – 24 years	204	54.1
		Total	377	100%
3	Qualification	Ph.D.	17	4.5
		M Sc./MA	29	7.7
		First Degree or its Equivalent	158	41.9
		SSCE	160	42.4
		FSLC	13	3.4
		Total	377	100%

Source: Authors’ Field Survey, 2021

The result of the analysis carried out as shown in table 1 above, first shows the distribution of respondents by gender. According to the result, 209(55.4%) of the respondents are female and 168(44.6%) of the total respondents are male.

The distribution of respondents by age on the table shows that 20(5.3%) of the respondents were 46 years and above, 32(8.5%) of the respondents were within 39 – 45 years, 62(16.4%) of the respondents have their ages to be 32 – 28 years, 59(15.6%) respondents are in the age bracket between 25 – 31 years and 204(54.1%) respondents have their ages between 18 – 24 years.

Furthermore, the table reveals the distribution of respondents by educational qualification. 17(4.5%) of the respondents have Ph. D, 29(7.7%) of the respondents have M Sc./MA, 158(41.9%) respondents have First Degree or its equivalent, 160(42.4%) respondents have SSCE and 13(3.4%) respondents have FSLC.

Research Question 1: To what extent do mass media audience in Southeast Nigeria rely on the social media and online sources for news?

Table 2: Extent mass media audience in southeast Nigeria rely on the social media and online sources for news.

SN	Variable	Frequency					Descriptive Statistics		Remark
		VHE	HE	LE	VLE	N	\bar{x}	SD	
1	I use social media notifications to get news.	202 (53.6%)	147 (39%)	10 (2.7%)	8 (2.1%)	10 (2.7%)	4.38	0.859	VHE
2	I spend more time reading news on social media than I spend reading news on offline media	171 (45.4%)	135 (35.8%)	38 (10.1%)	14 (3.7%)	17 (5%)	4.13	1.070	VHE
3	I prefer social media and online news to offline news sources	155 (41.1%)	128 (34%)	61 (16.2%)	16 (4.2%)	17 (4.5%)	4.03	1.073	VHE
4	I enjoy various media coming together on social media and online platforms such as visual pictures, voice audios, texts to make up one information	160 (42.4%)	166 (44%)	24 (6.4%)	8 (2.1%)	19 (5%)	4.17	1.001	VHE
5	I have used social media for news and information for between 1-10 years and above	110 (29.2%)	153 (40.6%)	68 (18%)	19 (5%)	27 (7.2%)	3.80	1.131	HE
6	I cannot resist social media notifications on breaking news	115 (30.5%)	155 (41.1%)	71 (18.8%)	18 (4.8%)	18 (4.8%)	3.88	1.050	HE
7	I access social media and online sources regularly	148 (39.3%)	164 (43.5%)	32 (8.5%)	12 (3.2%)	21 (5.6%)	4.08	1.050	VHE
8	I depend more on social media and online sources than mainstream media sources.	107 (28.4%)	134 (35.5%)	91 (24.1%)	21 (5.6%)	24 (6.4%)	3.74	1.121	HE
Cluster Mean							4.02	1.044	

Source: SPSS Output, 2021

VHE = Very High Extent

the result of the analysis carried out as shown in table 2 above, shows the extent to which mass media audience in southeast Nigeria rely on social media and online sources for news. From the result, the cluster mean value is 4.02 and this mean value lie within the acceptance region of $4 < \text{Mean value} \leq 5$ = about 90%, indicating that the extent to which respondents relied on social media and online sources for news is to about 90%.

Research Question 2: What is the level of credibility attached to online newspapers as sources of news?

Table 3: The extent to which Southeast mass media audience consider online newspapers as sources of factual news.

S N	Variable	Frequency					Descriptive Statistics		Remark
		VHE	HE	LE	VLE	N	\bar{x}	SD	
1	I read online newspapers	119(31.6%)	140(37.1%)	78(20.7%)	20(5.3%)	20(5.3%)	3.84	1.09	HE
2	I depend on online newspapers for information and news	68(18%)	135(35.8%)	114(30.2%)	33(8.8%)	27(7.2%)	3.49	1.10	HE
3	I spend more time reading online newspapers than offline newspapers	137(36.3%)	134(35.5%)	52(13.8%)	33(8.8%)	21(5.6%)	3.88	1.16	HE
4	I prefer online newspapers to hard copies/offline newspapers	142(37.7%)	106(28.1%)	56(14.9%)	38(10.1%)	35(9.3%)	3.75	1.31	HE
5	If presented with online newspapers and offline/hard copies newspapers, I will first read the online newspapers	165(43.8%)	118(31.3%)	49(13%)	33(8.8%)	12(7.2%)	4.04	1.20	VHE
6	News and information in online newspapers are free from external control	89(23.6%)	114(30.2%)	96(25.5%)	55(14.6%)	23(6.1%)	3.51	1.18	HE
7	News and information in online newspapers are trustworthy	89(23.6%)	114(30.2%)	96(25.5%)	55(14.6%)	23(6.1%)	3.32	1.12	HE
8	News and information in online newspapers are factual	69(18.3%)	123(32.6%)	105(27.9%)	46(12.2%)	34(9%)	3.39	1.18	HE
9	News and information in online newspapers are accurate	64(17%)	113(30%)	112(29.7%)	60(15.9%)	28(7.4%)	3.33	1.15	HE
10	News and information in online newspapers are balanced	62(16.4%)	115(30.5%)	107(28.4%)	56(14.9%)	37(9.8%)	3.29	1.19	HE
11	News and information in online newspapers are objective	82(21.8%)	132(35%)	82(21.8%)	44(11.7%)	37(9.8%)	3.55	1.95	HE
12	News and information in online newspapers are detailed/comprehensive	91(24.1%)	148(39.3%)	76(20.2%)	35(9.3%)	27(7.2%)	3.63	1.15	HE
13	I do not trust online newspapers because they seem to be published in a hurry	81(21.5%)	84(22.3%)	104(27.6%)	62(16.4%)	46(12.2%)	3.32	1.97	HE
14	I find a lot of grammatical errors in online newspapers.	79(21%)	90(23.9%)	98(26%)	73(19.4%)	37(9.8%)	3.27	1.26	HE
15	Online newspapers are really not different from social media and other online sources.	100(26.5%)	126(33.4%)	68(18%)	49(13%)	34(9%)	3.55	1.26	HE
16	Online newspapers report gossip news like the social media.	98(26%)	116(30.8%)	87(23.1%)	48(12.7%)	28(7.4%)	3.55	1.21	HE
17	Online newspapers they have identified sources.	99(26.3%)	112(29.7%)	79(21%)	55(14.6%)	32(8.5%)	3.51	1.26	HE
Cluster Mean							3.54	1.28	

Source: SPSS Output, 2021

HE = High Extent

The analysis on table 3 shows the extent to which mass media audience in Southeast consider online newspapers as sources of factual news. From the result, the cluster mean value is 3.54 and this mean value lies within the acceptance region of $3 < \text{Mean value} \leq 4 =$ about 70%, indicating that the extent to which mass media audience in Southeast consider online newspapers as sources of factual news is to about 70%.

Research Question 3: To what extent does the association of social media and online sources with fake news affect the perceived credibility of online newspapers?

Table 4: Effect of the association of social media and online platforms with fake news on the perceived credibility of online newspapers among mass media audience in Southeast Nigeria

S N	Variable	Frequency					Descriptive Statistics		Remark
		SA	A	D	SD	N	\bar{x}	SD	
1	I read online newspapers less because of prevalence of fake news, misinformation and disinformation in online platforms	97(25.7%)	142(37.7%)	94(24.9%)	28(7.4%)	16(4.2%)	3.73	1.06	Accepted
2	I don't have much trust on online newspapers content	81(21.5%)	142(37.7%)	99(26.3%)	32(8.5%)	23(6.1%)	3.60	1.10	Accepted
3	I fact-check any issue found in online newspapers in other news sources before I take it to be factual	112(29.7%)	173(45.9%)	48(12.7%)	21(5.6%)	23(6.1%)	3.88	1.09	Accepted
4	Fake news in social media and online platforms tend to make me weary of the entire content of online news	113(30%)	167(44.3%)	51(13.5%)	21(5.6%)	25(6.6%)	3.85	1.11	Accepted
5	I equate online newspapers with the social media and other online sources.	81(21.5%)	186(49.3%)	66(17.5%)	20(5.3%)	24(6.4%)	3.74	1.05	Accepted
6	There is no difference between the quality of online newspapers and hardcopy newspapers.	69(18.3%)	108(28.6%)	127(33.7%)	54(14.3%)	19(5%)	3.41	1.10	Accepted
7	Online newspapers are not to be trusted as the authors of the news stories are well known professionals while the sources of social media news are hardly ever known.	99(26.3%)	149(39%)	75(19.9%)	25(6.6%)	31(8.2%)	3.68	1.17	Accepted
Cluster Mean						3.70	1.09		

Source: SPSS Output, 2021

Data on the table 4 show that, the mean value of the variables “I read online newspapers less because of prevalence of fake news, misinformation and disinformation in online platforms” is 3.73 and this mean value lies within the mean acceptance region of $3 \leq \text{Mean value} \leq 5$, indicating that the variable “prevalence of fake news, misinformation and disinformation in online platforms” is one of the effects the association of social media and online platforms with fake news has on the perceived credibility of online newspapers among respondents. All other variables in the

table earned mean values which lie within the acceptance region of $3 \leq \text{Mean value} \leq 5$, indicating the effect of fake news on social media on the perceived credibility of online newspapers among mass media audience in Southeast Nigeria.

Test of Research Hypothesis

Table 6: Relationship between fake news on social media and online sources and the credibility perception of online newspapers among mass media audience in Southeast Nigeria.

SN	Variable	N	Mean	STD	R	P. Value
1	Fake News on Social Media and Online Sources	93	25.897	4.588		
2	Credibility Perception of Online Newspapers Among Mass Media Audience in Southeast Nigeria	93	28.172	5.917	-0.671(*)	0.000

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

Source: SPSS Output, 2021

Statistically, since $p\text{-value} = 0.000 < 0.05$ and it is significant at 95% confidence interval and the value of R is -0.671 , we accept the alternative hypothesis and conclude that there is significant relationship between fake news on social media and online sources and the credibility perception of online newspapers among mass media audience in Southeast Nigeria.

Discussions of Findings

The findings showed that the extent to which mass media audience in southeast Nigeria rely on social media and online sources for news is to about 90%. Validated with males’ mean scores $32.048 \leq 32.325$ female mean scores and $p\text{-value} 0.617 > 0.05$, the result indicated that male and female relied on social media and online sources for news and information at the same rate. This finding supports the suggestions that although there is an increasing awareness of the prevalence of fake news, the extent of its impact in Europe is still very limited (Reuters Institute, 2017), the key motivations are pecuniary (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2016) but also (and increasingly) ideological (Marwick and Lewis, 2017), while the theoretical and potentially negative consequences of their spread point to a myriad of agents and social circumstances, such as political leaders and democratic societies (Gu, *et al.*, 2017) stock markets (Ferrara *et al.*, 2016), health policies (Fernández-Luque and Bau, 2015) citizens in crisis situations (Gupta, *et al.*, 2013), and, fundamentally, readers’ interpretation of reality (Cook, *et al.*, 2012; Silverman, 2016). However, this result is in opposition to the findings of Asogwa (2018) which showed that females read online news more than the males.

In line with research question two, the result of the analysis showed that the level of credibility attached to online newspapers by the respondents is to about 70%. Respondents irrespective of their ages, considered online newspapers as credible sources of news to a high extent.

Findings of the study equally revealed that mass media audience in southeast Nigeria perceived online newspapers as credible sources of news, with strong indications that online newspapers tend to be published in a hurry; report gossip news like the social media, have grammatical errors and are really not different from social media and other online sources to a ‘High Extent’ (HE), yet respondents agreed to read online newspapers; depend on online newspapers for information and news; spend more time reading online newspapers than offline newspapers and have “high” preference to online newspapers than hard copy/offline newspapers. Respondents equally perceived online newspapers to be trustworthy, accurate, balanced, objective, detailed/comprehensive, free from external control and factual sources of information to a High Extent (HE). These findings support empirical studies of Kang, 2010; Edogor, Aladi & Ojo, 2015; which claimed that “credibility of online media is one of the key factors initiating and further increasing public engagement and communication effectiveness in the...social media”

However, result of the study strongly indicated that mass media audience associated fake news on social media with online newspapers. The influence of this is that fake news in social media and online platforms tend to make respondents weary of the entire content of online news; they read online newspapers less because of prevalence of fake news, misinformation and disinformation in online platforms; do not have much trust on online newspapers' contents; fact-check any news matter found in online newspapers in other news sources before they take it to be factual, and generally equate online newspapers with the social media and other online sources to a "high extent". This was validated with cluster mean value of 3.70 fitting into acceptance region of $3 \leq \text{Mean value} \leq 5$. This suggests that respondents generally like what is on the social media and online platforms but believe and trust more in the mainstream media for news, information and clarification of issues. This is in consonance with Ivan and Yide's (2020) which revealed that content likeability is an antecedent of social media engagement and content credibility.....social media engagement both directly affect user acceptance of product placement in mobile social networks not necessarily because of the product itself. This result equally gives credence to McLuhan's 'medium is the message' framework. Also, this corroborates the findings of Salaudeen and Onyechi (2020) which provides evidence that the mainstream media are still adjudged more credible despite heavier dependence on social media for information.

Accordingly, the statistical analysis of the hypothesis showed a significant relationship between fake news on social media and online sources and the credibility perception of online newspapers among mass media audience. This was validated using Pearson Products Moment Correlation Coefficient Statistics with the value of $r = -0.671$ and the $p\text{-value} = 0.000$.

Conclusion

Conclusion is drawn from the findings of this study that there is strong positive correlation between fake news on social media and online sources and the credibility perception of online newspapers among mass media audience in Southeast Nigeria. This means that media audience in southeast Nigeria generally equate online newspapers contents with the social media and other online news sources.

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