

FAKE NEWS AND PUBLIC TRUST IN ONLINE MEDIA: A STUDY OF ABUJA, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between the prevalence of fake news and public trust in selected online media platforms in Abuja, Nigeria. Grounded in Gate keeping Theory and Trust Theory, the research aims to understand how frequently users encounter fake news, its impact on their trust in digital media, and the perceived effectiveness of countermeasures such as media literacy and fact-checking. A quantitative research design was employed, using a structured survey administered to a sample of 294 respondents across various demographics in Abuja. Results show that 75% of respondents encounter fake news frequently, and 60% report a significant decline in trust in online platforms due to repeated exposure to misleading content. Respondents also expressed moderate confidence in fact-checking initiatives, while highlighting a need for improved media literacy. The findings suggest that the credibility of online platforms is under threat, which may affect information dissemination and public engagement. The study recommends intensified media literacy campaigns, robust fact-checking systems, and stronger accountability measures for digital platforms to restore and sustain public trust.

Keywords: News, Fake news, Public Trust, Online Media, social media

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Introduction

The digital age has transformed news dissemination, enabling instant global access but also accelerating the spread of fake news—misleading content crafted to deceive (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Online platforms, especially social media, have become primary news sources, yet their structure allows unverified information to go viral, impacting political discourse and public trust (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Spohr, 2017; Brennen, 2017). Advances in mobile and digital networks like 5G and 6G have enhanced connectivity (Landrove, 2024; Shayea, 2024) but also introduced challenges such as misinformation and privacy concerns (Schwab, 2017).

In this evolving digital economy, maintaining media credibility is more important than ever (Li, 2024; Bosire, 2023). Trust—a cornerstone of democracy—is compromised by misinformation, which hampers civic engagement (Putnam, 2000). While global studies on fake news exist, limited research addresses its impact within Abuja's growing digital media space. As

Nigeria's capital with over four million residents (World Population Review, 2024), Abuja presents a critical setting to explore how fake news shapes public trust in online media. This study addresses that gap by examining consumption patterns and trust levels across selected platforms.

News plays a vital role in delivering accurate and verified information, but the rise of fake news—misleading content disguised as legitimate reporting—has weakened public trust in media (Lazer et al., 2018). In Nigeria, particularly through online platforms, misinformation spreads rapidly, threatening democratic stability and public confidence.

In Abuja, the capital city, fake news fuels public skepticism, making it difficult to distinguish fact from fiction. Ugwuanyi (2017) notes that despite widespread misinformation, many still perceive online news as credible. This has contributed to political instability and ethnic tensions (Jibril, 2025). The city's diverse, digitally connected population faces challenges due to

weak regulations and the anonymity of online platforms, which enable unchecked misinformation.

While research on fake news in Nigeria is expanding, few studies focus on Abuja's unique socio-political context. This study fills that gap by investigating how fake news impacts trust in selected online media outlets in Abuja, aiming to inform policy and promote media literacy.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide the research study:

1. To what extent is fake news prevalent in select online media platforms in Abuja?
2. How does the consumption of fake news influence public trust in online media platforms in Abuja?
3. What are the prevailing attitudes and behaviors of Abuja residents towards discerning and verifying news sources online?
4. How do existing media literacy and fact-checking efforts in Abuja contribute to mitigating the effects of fake news?

Review of Related Literature

In today's digital age, the credibility of online media is under intense scrutiny due to the widespread dissemination of fake news—false or misleading information presented as factual reporting. This global challenge is especially pressing in Nigeria, where online media has expanded information access while complicating the public's ability to distinguish truth from falsehood. As Nigeria's capital and a central node of political discourse, Abuja is a critical case for examining the impact of fake news on public trust. The coexistence of traditional and digital media in Abuja's diverse landscape intensifies this dynamic, raising questions about media credibility and influence.

This literature review explores theoretical perspectives, empirical studies, and global and Nigerian debates on fake news and media trust. It aims to contextualize how misinformation affects public confidence in online platforms, particularly within Abuja's socio-political environment, and to highlight research gaps that this study addresses.

The review of literature will be discussed under the following sub-headings:

Prevalence of Fake News

The growth of digital media platforms has transformed news dissemination, but it has also fueled

the rise of fake news, false or misleading information presented as legitimate news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Unlike traditional media, which enforces editorial checks, online platforms enable unrestricted content sharing, making them fertile ground for misinformation (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2018).

Fake news spreads faster than factual content, often due to its novelty and emotional appeal (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018). Social media algorithms prioritize engagement, amplifying sensational content over verified facts (Bakir & McStay, 2018). In Nigeria, where social media is a primary news source, especially among youth (Odi et al., 2021), the issue is further compounded by weak regulatory oversight and low digital literacy (Okoro & Ngene, 2021).

Unregulated blogs and news sites also contribute, often prioritizing clicks over accuracy (Mutsvairo & Bebawi, 2019). During periods of political tension, such as elections or public health crises, the spread of misinformation intensifies (Idowu et al., 2020; Olaiya & Olaniran, 2020). While global research has made strides, regional dynamics, especially in African cities like Abuja, remain underexplored. This study addresses that gap by examining the patterns and impacts of fake news in Abuja's digital media environment.

Influence of Fake News on Public Trust in Online Media Platforms

The widespread dissemination of fake news has significantly impacted public trust in online media. Trust in media reflects the public's confidence in the accuracy, impartiality, and reliability of news sources (Fisher et al., 2019). However, the decentralized nature of online platforms has made it increasingly difficult to distinguish credible sources, thereby undermining trust (Luhmann, 2000).

Research indicates that fake news, particularly political misinformation, spreads quickly on social media during critical periods such as elections, leading to a decline in public confidence (Odi et al., 2021; Uwalaka & Watkins, 2018). Ognyanova et al. (2020) describe a "contagion effect," where distrust triggered by exposure to fake news spreads to otherwise reputable sources. Although single exposures may have a limited effect, repeated encounters with misinformation significantly erode trust (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Emotional manipulation inherent in fake news also fosters skepticism (Bakir & McStay, 2018).

In Nigeria, misinformation is prevalent, and urban populations like those in Abuja often exhibit

heightened mistrust due to frequent exposure (Ojebode & Adegbola, 2020). The limited reach of media literacy programs compounds the issue. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) suggests that viral content often leads to shallow cognitive processing, reinforcing misinformation. Similarly, Lewandowsky et al. (2012) emphasize the “illusion of truth” effect, where repeated exposure increases perceived accuracy.

Efforts to rebuild trust include strengthening media literacy and promoting responsible platform algorithms (Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2020; Shu et al., 2017). In Nigeria, these efforts remain limited, highlighting the need for targeted interventions to reduce misinformation and restore trust in digital media.

Attitudes and Behaviours toward Verifying News in the Context of Fake News

In today's digital age, individuals face a constant flow of information, making it harder to distinguish credible news from misinformation. As a result, effective news verification practices have become essential. This review explores how individual attitudes and behaviours influence news verification, viewing them as independent variables and verification practices as the dependent variable. News verification is a vital part of media literacy, which involves critically analyzing media messages (Buckingham, 2003). According to Potter (2004), those with higher media literacy are more likely to verify news, understanding the risks of misinformation. Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behaviour supports this, arguing that attitudes, perceived norms, and self-efficacy influence behavioural intentions.

Attitudes toward fake news play a key role. While skepticism can drive individuals to verify news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), high trust in media may reduce this need. Awareness of fake news prevalence encourages verification (Tandoc et al., 2018), though not always leading to action. In Nigeria, individuals previously deceived by misinformation were more likely to verify news (Idowu et al., 2020). Behaviourally, people who prioritize accuracy tend to cross-check sources (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000). Digital literacy also matters; Uwalaka and Watkins (2018) found that tech-savvy Nigerians verify news more frequently. Repeated exposure to misinformation can foster verification habits over time (Chen & Sin, 2013).

However, barriers remain. Limited access to fact-checking tools (Ojebode & Adegbola, 2020), time pressure (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017), and cognitive biases

like confirmation bias (Lewandowsky et al., 2012) all hinder verification. Social norms also matter—peer influence can either encourage or discourage checking news accuracy (Tandoc et al., 2020). Improving verification practices requires media literacy education (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) and subtle nudges like prompts before sharing content (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). Nonetheless, more research is needed in African contexts, especially on how socio-cultural and technological factors shape verification habits.

In summary, attitudes and behaviours significantly affect how individuals verify news. In Nigeria, improving digital literacy, promoting fact-checking tools, and fostering critical thinking can enhance verification efforts in a misinformation-prone media space.

Media Literacy and Fact-Checking Efforts in Reducing Fake News

The rise of fake news in the digital era has raised concerns about its influence on public perception and trust in media. In response, media literacy and fact-checking have emerged as essential tools to empower individuals to critically assess information and curb misinformation.

Media literacy, is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media (Hobbs, 2010), equips users to distinguish between credible and false information. Potter (2004) describes it as existing on a continuum, with higher literacy correlating with stronger critical media skills. Livingstone (2004) emphasizes its role in encouraging users to verify content rather than passively consume it. Fact-checking complements media literacy by independently verifying claims found in news and social media. Organizations like Africa Check and Dubawa have been vital in Nigeria's fight against fake news, especially on platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook (Graves, 2016; Ojebode & Adegbola, 2020). However, their effectiveness is often limited by the speed of misinformation spread and low awareness of these tools.

Studies show that media literacy training enhances critical thinking and fact-checking behaviour. Mihailidis and Viotty (2017) found that such training fosters skepticism toward misleading headlines. Yet, Tully et al. (2020) note the need for context-specific programs, especially in high-risk misinformation regions. In Nigeria, Odii and Ajibade (2021) reported positive outcomes from media literacy campaigns among university students, though less-educated populations remain vulnerable. Despite these

benefits, media literacy alone cannot fully solve the fake news problem. Structural issues like social media algorithms that amplify misinformation persist (Bulger & Davison, 2018). While fact-checking helps (Shin & Thorson, 2017), ideological bias can cause individuals to reject corrections (Guess et al., 2020), and false news often spreads faster than truth.

In Nigeria, fake news has influenced politics and health, notably during the 2019 elections and COVID-19 pandemic (Ojebode & Adegbola, 2020). Fact-checking efforts largely reach urban populations, while rural areas remain underserved (Idowu et al., 2020). Government efforts to regulate misinformation have also sparked concerns about press freedom (Ojebode, 2019).

Media literacy and fact-checking are critical tools in combating fake news but must be supported by broader interventions.

Theoretical framework

McQuail (2005,p.5) defines a theory as “a general proposition, itself based on observation and logical argument that states the relationship between observed phenomena and seek to explain or predict the relation, in so far as this is possible”. Theory is the measure where with every scientific findings is built. The theoretical framework consists of theories, principles, generalizations and research finding which are closely related to the present study under investigation. For this research, here are a few theories that are relevant:

The Gate keeping theory

The Gatekeeping Theory, first coined by social psychologist Kurt Lewin in 1943, describes the process through which information is filtered for dissemination to the public. In journalism, this process involves selecting, editing, and approving news items before they are published or broadcast. Gatekeeping ensures that only news deemed accurate, relevant, and ethical reaches the audience. Bruns (2005) identifies three critical stages in this process: input, output, and response. At the input stage, journalists select which events or issues are worth covering. During the output stage, editors decide which stories are most newsworthy and suitable for the platform, taking into account audience interest and space constraints. The response stage involves curating audience feedback, if any, for possible inclusion in subsequent coverage.

In a 2017 workshop, Emman Shehu, Director of

the Nigerian Institute of Journalism, underscored the historical importance of gatekeeping in maintaining journalistic integrity. He noted that traditional media organizations were trusted for their role in validating and verifying information before dissemination. According to Shehu, the core of gatekeeping lies in upholding classical journalism ethics—“When in doubt, do not publish.” This principle emphasizes fact-checking, editorial scrutiny, and a commitment to objectivity and balance.

Gatekeeping thus plays a crucial role in ensuring the credibility of news content. It helps filter out inaccuracies, correct misleading headlines, and maintain ethical standards. However, the rise of online media and user-generated content has weakened these traditional mechanisms. Many digital platforms lack structured editorial oversight, allowing unverified and often misleading information to circulate widely. As a result, consumers are frequently exposed to content that bypasses professional editorial checks, contributing to the erosion of trust in media.

This theory supports the argument that credible news requires systematic filtering processes to ensure accuracy and uphold journalistic values. The absence or breakdown of gate keeping in digital spaces has created an environment where fake news thrives, often unnoticed by less media-literate audiences.

Trust Theory

Trust is viewed as a psychological state involving the willingness of one party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party. Mayer & Schoorman (1995). Trust is a complex and multifaceted construct that has been studied extensively by philosophers, psychologists, and social scientists. In the context of communication, trust refers to the belief that a source of information is reliable, unbiased, and competent. Trust is essential for effective communication, as it allows individuals to form relationships, share information, and make decisions. Trust Theory studies the mental, emotional, and interactive factors that influence trust in various contexts, including media. It shows elements such as credibility, perceived expertise, and supposed integrity in establishing trust.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed the **survey method** to gather data. Ada, Abul, Ker, and Okwu (1997, p.37) describe a survey as a useful method for collecting data from a population too large to observe directly. It

involves gathering opinions, attitudes, and behaviours to estimate broader trends. Given that this research focuses on people's perceptions of fake news and public trust, the survey method is appropriate for examining relevant attitudes and demographic factors.

The population for this research work is made up of residents of Abuja. Based on data from the National population commission's census figures, Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja has a population figure of over 4,026,000 people (World Population Review and Population Stat, 2024). A sample size of 294 people was chosen for this research study. The sample size is determined statistically using the formula put forward by Araoye (2004, p.114). According to this author, the formula can be used provided the population size is greater than 10,000. Below is the formula:

$$n = \frac{z^2 p^2}{d^2}$$

Where:

- $Z = 1.96$ (standard normal deviation at 95% confidence level, approximated to 2.0),
- $p = 0.6$ (estimated population proportion),
- $d = 0.07$ (degree of accuracy).

NOTE:

Substituting into the formula:

$$n = \frac{z^2 p^2}{d^2}$$

$$n = \frac{(2)^2 \cdot 0.6(1-0.6)}{(0.07)^2} = \frac{4 \cdot 0.36}{0.0049} = 293.88$$

Thus:

Approximately: 294

The sample size of 294 respondents will be generalized as being the view and opinions of the entire population under study.

This study adopted a multi-stage sampling technique to select respondents. First, the six Area Councils in Abuja were grouped into three clusters using area sampling: Cluster A (Abaji and Abuja Municipal), Cluster B (Bwari and Gwagwalada), and Cluster C (Kuje and Kwali), ensuring representation from across the FCT.

In the second stage, purposive sampling was used to select one Area Council from each cluster based on the likelihood of finding respondents

knowledgeable about fake news and public trust in online media. The selected councils were Abuja Municipal (Cluster A), Gwagwalada (Cluster B), and Kwali (Cluster C).

Next, one council ward was randomly selected from each chosen council using the simple ballot technique: Wuse from Abuja Municipal, Zuba from Gwagwalada, and Kwali from Kwali Area Council. Finally, 98 respondents were purposively selected from each council ward, based on educational background and social media literacy, totaling 294 participants. This ensured informed responses to the questionnaire.

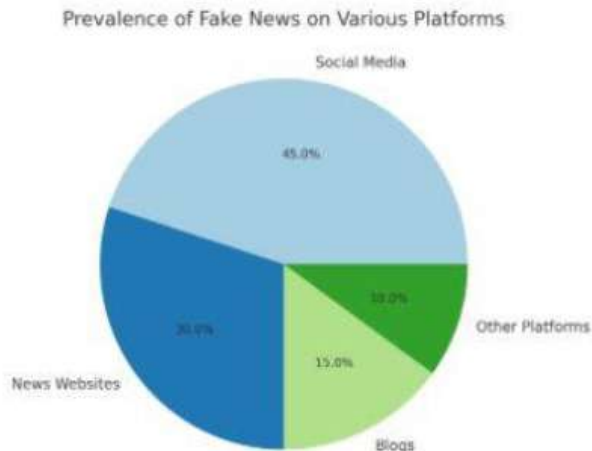
To collect relevant data, a **close-ended questionnaire** was used as the primary instrument. It was administered **face-to-face** with the assistance of two research assistants to ensure clarity and address any potential misunderstandings from respondents regarding the questions. The primary source of data collection for this study is the questionnaire while the secondary source includes: books, journal articles, newspapers, magazines and other research works and internet sources. The primary data for this research work which was collected using the questionnaire and will be presented in tables and analysed in the form of simple percentages.

Findings

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Demographic Variable	Categories	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Gender	Male	158	53.7
	Female	136	46.3
Age Group	18-25 years	94	32
	26-35 years	112	38
	36-45 years	59	20
	46 years and above	29	10
Educational Attainment	Secondary School Education	59	20
	Diploma/OND	73	25
	Bachelor's Degree	118	40
	Postgraduate Degree	44	15
Occupation	Students	82	28
	Employed Professionals	123	42
	Self-employed	59	20
	Unemployed	30	10
Total		294	100

Source: Field survey 2024



Source: Field survey 2024

Frequency of Encountering Fake News:

The data reveals that a significant majority of respondents (75%) encounter fake news either daily or weekly. This high prevalence underscores the pervasiveness of misinformation on online media platforms in Abuja.

Table 2: Impact of Fake News on Trust

Impact of Fake News on Trust	Percentage (%)	Number of Respondents
Strong Negative Impact	60%	176 respondents
Moderate Negative Impact	30%	88 respondents
Minimal Impact	10%	30 respondents
Total	100%	294

Source: Field survey 2024

The data shows that a strong negative impact on trust is reported by the majority, highlighting the critical challenge fake news poses to the credibility of online media.

Table 3: Verification of News Sources:

Verification of News Sources	Percentage (%)	Number of Respondents
Always Verify	20%	59 respondents
Sometimes Verify	35%	103 respondents
Rarely Verify	30%	88 respondents
Never Verify	15%	44 respondents
Total	100%	294

Source: Field survey 2024

The data shows that only 20% of respondents consistently verify news sources, while a combined 45%

either rarely or never verify the information they encounter. This finding suggests a potential gap in media literacy among the population.

Table 4. Effectiveness of Media Literacy and Fact-Checking Efforts

Awareness of Media Literacy Programs	Percentage (%)	Number of Respondents
High Awareness	20%	59 respondents
Moderate Awareness	30%	88 respondents
Low Awareness	40%	118 respondents
No Awareness	10%	29 respondents
Total	100%	294

Source: Field survey 2024

The data reveals that awareness of media literacy programs is relatively low, with 50% of respondents having either low or no awareness. This suggests a need for greater promotion and accessibility of these programs.

Discussion of Findings

Prevalence and Sources of Fake News

The study reveals that fake news is a widespread issue in Abuja's online media space. A striking **75% of respondents** reported encountering fake news frequently, **45% daily** and **30% weekly**. Social media platforms were identified as the leading source of misinformation (**60%**), followed by online news websites (**25%**) and messaging apps like WhatsApp and Telegram (**5%**). The ease of sharing digital content, coupled with the lack of strong regulatory mechanisms, has contributed to the rapid spread of misinformation in online spaces.

Public Trust in Online Media

Trust in digital news platforms has been significantly eroded due to frequent exposure to fake news. **50% of respondents expressed low trust**, while **15% stated they had no trust at all** in online media sources. This declining confidence reflects a broader global trend where misinformation has weakened public faith in journalism, particularly in online spaces where news is often unverified.

News Verification Habits

Despite the prevalence of fake news, only **20% of respondents** consistently verify the authenticity of the news they consume. A concerning **45% admitted they rarely or never verify news**, increasing the risk of misinformation spread. Among those who fact-check:

- **50% cross-check with multiple credible sources** before accepting news as true.

- **15% rely on social media comments**, assuming that collective opinions determine accuracy.
- **15% trust individuals they consider reliable**, such as family, friends, or influential personalities.

These findings highlight the need for stronger fact-checking habits among media consumers in Abuja.

Effectiveness of Fact-Checking and Media Literacy

The study found that awareness of media literacy programs and fact-checking initiatives is **relatively low**. About **50% of respondents had little or no awareness** of such programs, while **60% rated current fact-checking efforts as either minimally effective or completely ineffective**. This suggests that existing interventions may not be reaching or engaging audiences effectively.

The study draws on two key theoretical perspectives:

Gate keeping Theory - Traditional media institutions once acted as filters for news content, but with the rise of digital platforms, that control has weakened, allowing misinformation to spread unchecked.

Trust Theory - The growing prevalence of fake news erodes public confidence in online media, making it harder for audiences to distinguish between credible and false information.

The research underscores that fake news is **rampant** in Abuja's online media space, leading to declining trust and weak verification practices. Many people either fail to cross-check information or rely on informal methods that can reinforce misinformation. Additionally, the **low awareness of media literacy programs** and scepticism about fact-checking efforts hinder effective intervention.

Conclusion

The findings highlight the urgent need for stronger gate keeping, especially on social media where misinformation thrives. Public trust in online media remains fragile, and restoring it requires sustained efforts centered on transparency and accuracy. Weak verification behaviours among Abuja residents emphasize the importance of media literacy to help individuals assess information credibility.

This study reveals the widespread presence of fake news in Abuja's online media and its damaging effects on trust. Through the lens of Gate keeping and Trust Theories, it offers insight into how misinformation spreads and suggests strategies to

counter its impact on public perception and democratic discourse.

Recommendations

To reduce the impact of fake news and rebuild trust in online media, the study offers the following key recommendations:

1. Promote Media Literacy:

- Government and media stakeholders should run widespread media literacy campaigns.
- Schools should incorporate media literacy into their curricula at all levels.
- Community outreach programs should target diverse groups to improve misinformation detection skills.

2. Enhance Fact-Checking Initiatives:

- Social media platforms should integrate visible fact-checking tools and automated content flags.
- Fact-checking bodies should collaborate with media outlets and engage the public via campaigns and interactive tools like gamification.

3. Rebuild Public Trust in Online Media:

- Platforms should hold webinars, Q&As, and content discussions to increase transparency.
- Independent monitors should be empowered to track and report on media credibility.

4. Integrate Media Literacy into Civic Education:

- Governments, NGOs, and civic groups should lead awareness drives, particularly during elections, to counter politically driven misinformation.

5. Encourage Responsible Online Behaviour:

- Public campaigns should emphasize the dangers of misinformation and promote verification habits.
- Tech companies should fund digital literacy programs as part of their CSR.
- A multi-stakeholder approach involving government, civil society, and private sector should oversee content moderation and fake news regulation.

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