

**SOCIAL MEDIA: DETERMINANTS OF FAKE NEWS ON COVID-19 AND
UNDERGRADUATES PERCEPTION OF HEALTH REALITIES OF THE
VIRUS IN SOUTH-EAST NIGERIA**

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Abstract

The advent of social media as a result of the proliferation of the internet witnessed a new transformation of news production, dissemination, and consumption especially on the outbreak of COVID-19 Pandemic. The purpose of this study is to examine “social media, determinants of fake news on COVID-19 and undergraduates perception of health realities of the virus”. The study was anchored on Technological Determinism theory of Mass communication. The study used the descriptive survey research method to sample the opinion of 399 respondents that were exposed to social media fake news on COVID-19 pandemic. It was discovered through the data generated that there are factors that often lead undergraduate students into social media shared fake news on COVID-19 which are altruism, socialization, status seeking, and entertainment. The study equally found out that there is a significant difference in the level of perception of undergraduate students on the health realities of COVID-19 virus in South East Nigeria. As it was discovered that undergraduate students through social media fake news believed that the virus does not exist at all and cannot affect their health and COVID-19 has no adverse effect on African blood due to genetic and climatic peculiarities. Social media fake news on COVID-19 made also made undergraduate students to accept that 5G network is actually perilous to human lives. Based on the findings, this paper recommends that that social media users should be aware of factors that often lead to fake news on social media and try not to spread fake news in form of helping people to get informed or for the sake of status seeking and entertainment. More so, it recommends that students should know that not all information on social media is true and should not accept social media messages hook, line and sinker especially on a health issues such as COVID-19.

Key Words: Social media, determinants, fake news, perception, COVID-19

Introduction

Mass media audience relied on the traditional form of media, such as radio, television, newspaper and magazine which involved relatively more established sources of news. Nowadays, the audience are exposed to online sources of information (Internet) which emerged primarily for information dissemination, thereby

determining what information is made available as well as the impression people have on issues ([Savrum & Leon, 2015](#)).

In the Nigerian context, social media is a means of keeping up with occurrences all over the globe and is used to shed light as regards the Nigerian situation. The ability to sieve authentic information from an avalanche of half-truths and fake news available on social media networks is a challenge in Nigeria. However, [Aondover \(2020\)](#) adds that the outbreak of COVID-19 in Nigeria spurred a digitalized reaction with citizens especially youths surfing about COVID-19 content to gather information about the virus.

Considering the belief system attached to social media fake news on COVID-19 in minds of its users, the influence of such fake news on the user's perception of realities became very important. Drawing from the views among earlier media scholars on the powers of the mass media to control the people and shape realities, it becomes paramount that these social media shared fake news directly or indirectly influence the perception of the people who are exposed to them at all times. The ways people think according to the proponents of the agenda setting theory have been ascribed to the media power to manipulate the audience (Asemah, 2011).

Statement of the Problem

Suffice it to say that fake news is not a new phenomenon in the history of media communication. The exponential growth of the social media and Internet based communication has led to the increase in quantity and varieties of unverified messages that flood into public consumption most especially because messages are not filtered (World Economic Forum, 2018).

There is lots of information on COVID-19 as regards to its origin, symptoms, curative measures etc such that chloroquine is a potent cure for Coronavirus, that salt and warm water or vinegar is a remedy, BCG vaccine as a preventive measure against COVID-19 pandemic etc. More so, that spraying alcohol or chlorine kills the virus; children do not get affected by coronavirus, more than 25 degree centigrade temperature kills the virus, COVID-19 is just like the flu, drinking alcohol reduces the risk of infection, Garlic protects against coronavirus and so on (Hossain, 2020). All this information arose from various social media platforms and later has been proven as fake news.

It is therefore pertinent for this work to investigate the determinants social media fake news on COVID-19 through WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Intagram, YouTube etc as well as the publics' perception of the virus in case of future epidemic or pandemic. Social media fake news has become a recurring decimal on health issues which is apparently a phenomenon that has is now a source of worry to health enthusiasts, communication experts and government whose resources and efforts are at stake to stop the spread and prevents the potential hazards. Thus, the statement of the problem in this study is guided by these issues with the determination to investigate the determinants of social media fake news on COVID-19 and undergraduates perception of messages from social media regarding the realities of the outbreak in case of future pandemic or epidemic.

Objectives of the Study

The major objective of this study is to investigate social media and determinants of fake news on covid-19 and undergraduates perception of the health realities of the virus.

Specifically, the objectives are;

1. To find out factors that often leads to the social media fake news undergraduate students in South East Nigeria.
2. To identify the perception of undergraduate students on the health realities of COVID-19 virus in South East Nigeria

Research Questions

The following research questions guide the study;

1. What are the factors that often lead to the social media fake news on COVID-19 among undergraduate students in South East Nigeria?
2. What are the undergraduates' perceptions on health realities of COVID-19 virus in South East Nigeria?

Review of Related Literature

Concept of Social Media

Asemah and Edogoh (2012) posit that social media as a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of web 2.0 which allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Thus, social media guarantee greater interactive conversation between and among users. Social media makes it possible for people to generate and publish content as well as engage in online interaction. Social media are Internet sites, which allow people to interact freely, exchange information, ideas, views, pictures and lots more with friends. These sites are user friendly, they allow users to generate their own content and consume these contents as well as others from friends.

However, what differentiates the social networking sites from the traditional media is the flexibility of these sites. Users create, edit, distribute, and remove their own customized contents. They are also free to share information with friends/other users privately or publicly. The flexible nature of the new media can be referred to as the democratization of the new media.

Social media is a phrase being tossed around a lot. It is a website that does not just give you information but interact with you while giving you information. It is a group of internet based application that allows the creation and exchange of users generated content.

The mobile nature of the social media permits its ubiquity and scalable communication technique. Kist (2010) in Amana & Attah (2014) conceives of social networking sites as distinct from other forms of communication by virtue of the online character and employment of web based platforms. The employment of the SNS is basically dual, to foster already existing lines of networking relationship or to create newer ones. It is informative to note that the social networking sites are highly interactive.

COVID-19: An Overview

COVID-19 stands for Corona virus Disease 2019. It is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus strain - Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome-Coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2) (WHO, 2020). The coronavirus is an infectious Chinese cause of respiratory infections ranging from the common cold to more severe respiratory difficulties. It originated from the human seafood market at Wuhan, China where bats, alligators, snakes, racoon dogs, wild animals among others were sold in December, 2019. The first news reports about the outbreak came from Wuhan Municipal Health Commission on December 31st, 2020 ([Gralinski & Menachery, 2020](#)).

As a result of COVID-19's highly infectious nature, in January 2020, different parts of China and different countries in Asia gradually started to report their first cases of COVID-19. Among the many countries in Asia, Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, Singapore, South Korea, India, and the Islamic Republic of Iran (Iran) were on the initial list of countries reporting their first cases of the outbreak. Between January and April 2020, almost every country in the world was fighting against COVID-19. As of April 30th, 2020, more than 3,193,886 cases of COVID-19 have been reported in 225 countries and territories, resulting in 227,638 deaths (WHO, 2020).

The disease primarily affects the respiratory system with symptoms ranging from fever, cough, and mild shortness of breath, to severe desaturation, causing respiratory failure. Despite the lung damage in the form of Adult Respiratory Distress Syndrome (ARDS), the novel virus creates a thromboembolic condition in the body and hence causing myocardial infarction and pulmonary embolism. It can also result in kidney failure in several patients. Modes of spread range from droplets, airborne, or feco-oral to contact spread. The viruses can stay viable on surfaces from a few hours to many days. This heterogeneous spectrum of disease was concerning and one of the reasons for the increased fatality of the disease.

The ground strategy followed by most countries around the world including Nigeria was to reduce the transmissibility of the disease, often by non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs), including enforcing masks policy, hands washing and sanitization, social distancing, travel restrictions, schools' closures, and partial or complete lockdowns.

COVID-19 is a global infectious disease that has spread to 210 countries throughout the world. World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a pandemic on 11th March, 2020 and raised international public health concerns for it.

Exposure to Social Media

It has been observed in recent times that students have unlimited access to the internet as well as the social media. Students connect with computer to send and receive information anywhere on the globe. The manufacturing and distribution of equally sophisticated cellular phones has complicated the situation, as students no longer need to visit a cybercafé before they send and receive messages. Some schools are so equipped that there is internet connection made available within the school premises as well as in the library. Online Wikipedia and blogs are the main resource centers for students as attention have been shifted from making research in the library to overall dependence on these social platforms. It is a common thing to see a student reading in the library and putting the books aside on hearing the sound of a ping on the phone. According to a joint study by Campus2Careers and Study Breaks on the use of mobile devices among students discovered that, an average undergraduate spend 3-6 hours a day with their cell phones and smart phones, while spending less time with computers, TV's, handheld gaming devices and e-readers.

Factors that Lead to the Social Media Spread of Fake News on COVID-19

Many factors affect the spread of fake information in general and fake information about COVID-19 in particular. Based on the research of Apuke and Omar (2020), these are the factors that influence the spread of fake news about COVID-19 on social networks.

Altruism: Altruism entails giving someone something without expecting any favour in return. Altruistic behaviour occurs when individuals share with others without thinking of any reward. Relating this to news sharing, altruism could be described as the act of disseminating news and information without expecting a reward for such an act (Plume & Slade, 2018). An altruistic person constantly has the mind to serve others. This indicates that when people seek information and news, an altruistic person is always eager to share such news to help without expecting any recompense in the future. The altruistic behaviour has been well tested and documented in knowledge, information and news sharing studies (Plume et al., 2018). For instance, Ma and Chan (2014) revealed that altruism is positively associated with the voluntary gathering and dissemination of information, suggesting that users of social media would assist without expecting remuneration. It is argued that those with higher altruistic attitude may have more tendencies to share misinformation on COVID-19 while trying to share information that could help others.

Entertainment: The entertainment gratification is attained when individuals use social media to pass time, engage in the act that is entertaining to them, as well as escape from their everyday lives. It is the utilisation of social media to amuse oneself as well as ease emotional tension and anxiety (Lee and Ma, 2012). Relating this view to sharing, previous study revealed that individuals share on Facebook for entertainment, relaxation and enjoyment. Though there are no studies that have shown entertainment gratifications to be related to fake news sharing on pandemic or epidemic, it is argued that in the light of the mandatory self-isolation worldwide, it is anticipated that the tendency for using social media for entertainment will increase, many people will be online to monitor the situation of the virus as well as try to be the first to disseminate this information, and this could lead individuals to post unverified information.

Socialisation: This is merely the desire to establish associations and relate with others (Lee et al., 2012). It has been established that social media which supports participatory communication, is used for expressing oneself as well as building a relationship (Sihombing, 2017). Therefore, sharing information on social media is done to develop and maintain a relationship, especially among individuals with a similar view and interest in the shared content. Past research found that a sense of belonging and trust is gained when people relate with each other (Lee et al., 2012). A positive link has been found between news sharing and socialisation

gratification (Lee et al., 2011). This indicates that people see sharing of news as a suitable way of preserving and extending their relationship and networks as it permits them to discuss and relate with friends through posting, commenting, chatting, and liking news stories which in turn enhance the sense of belonging (Lee et al., 2011). Moreover, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, many individuals would highly want to share and contribute to the news, and this may lead to fake news sharing.

Information Seeking: In this study, information seeking is designated as the level to which news circulated in social media can offer individuals essential and up-to-date information. Lampos, Moura, Yom-Tov, Cox, McKendry and Edelstein, (2020), accentuated that as the cases of the COVID-19 increase around the world, there has been a flurry of misleading or false news stories emerging, as well. This indicates that a great deal of individual search for information regarding how to cope with the virus, which could turn out to be untrue. Information seeking has been linked with using social media for news dissemination (Ma et al., 2013). It has been established that individuals wish “to be in the know” result to the reception and propagation of fake news on social media (Duffy, Tandoc & Ling, 2019). Supporting this view, it has been shown that news content on social media is circulated among users that demonstrate similar interest (Anspach & Carlson, 2018). Once such content is shared, people could retrieve them quickly at a subsequent time and when the need arises.

A study has associated information seeking on social media with fake news sharing (Chen, 2014). This could be due to the million unsupervised messages found on social media that individuals continuously seek to consume. We, therefore, contend that as people’s movement is restricted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and as the cases of the pandemic keep increasing individuals would seek for information on social networking sites without much consideration if the content is accurate or not as far as it contains some suitable way to combat the virus. They may as well share such information among their networks, which could increase the wave of fake news and hoaxes that has already been reported in recent months (Hou, Du, Jiang, Zhou, Lin, Assessment and Commission (2020).

Information Sharing: Evidence has shown that the usage of social media platforms is accelerating the circulation of false content online (McGonagle, 2017). One possible reason for this could be because sharing news on social media has become easier as people can take part in the creation and dissemination of information (Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2018). Information sharing stems from the need to offer information to others (Thompson, Wang & Daya, 2019). Information-sharing behaviour has been well documented in prior studies (Anspach and Carlson, 2018, Chen et al., 2015). Chen et al. (2015) revealed that misinformation circulation is positively associated with the information dissemination gratification. The same research revealed that people circulate false stories for informational reasons than for entertainment. Drawing from this perspective, contend that due to the already millions of information on COVID-19 on social media, sharing misinformation is likely to take place if individuals do not verify accordingly.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Marshall McLuhan’s Technological Determinism Theory of 1962. The core of McLuhan’s theory of technological determinism is that inventions in technology invariably cause cultural changes. McLuhan argued that it is specifically changes in modes of communication that shape human existence. Technological Determinism states that media technology shapes how we, as individuals in a society think, feel, act, and how society operates as we move from one technological age to another.

The theory regards the wider dimension of information craze in the society as a direct result of the information explosion fostered by information and communication technologies. It believes that the social, historical, economic, and cultural changes could be linked to the invention and development of new technologies. These technologies emphasize-new media, and social media in particular are turning the world into an interactive forum, allowing users to express themselves, interact with friends, share personal information and with freedom as well as publish their own views on issues on the internet (Odoemelam and Adibe, 2011).

McLuhan viewed every new form of media innovation to be an extension of human faculty. This explains the power inherent in the social media and level of influence, which they have on general behavioural patterns as witnessed today in our society. Indeed, technology has altered the life and activities of man in society. It is an obvious fact that closed human systems no longer exist.

The relevance of Technological Determinism theory to this study is that ICTs have greatly enhanced the area of human communication, making everyone information creator instead of mere receivers (Overholser, 2010). More so, it is believed that new media technologies that have been made possible through the internet have certain distinguishing features from older media and such features have brought social, cultural and economic changes, which in turn have culminated in a new kind of society. In other words, the interactive nature of communication in this age has brought a lot of changes to traditional mass communication, and fake news is one of the features embedded in the use of technology in propagating fake news in Nigeria especially during COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population of the study comprises of 128,953 of Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, and University of Nigeria, Nsukka which are situated in South-East Nigeria. The instrument used to collect data for this study was questionnaire. The sample size of 399 undergraduate students was determined using Taro Yamane’s formular. Purposive and multi-stage sampling techniques were employed. This was to enable the researcher to study only the students who are exposed to different social media fake news on COVID-19. Out of 399 copies of questionnaire distributed, 341 copies were fully completed and returned.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion

Research Question 1: What are the factors that often lead to the social media shared fake news on COVID-19 among students in South East Nigeria?

The questionnaire items for this section’s analysis are question 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5.

Table 1: Analysis on the Factors that often Lead to Social Media Shared Fake News on COVID-19

S/N	Variable	SA	A	U	D	SD	Remarks
1	I usually share fake information on social media just for entertainment	210 (61.6%)	120 (35.2%)	-	11 (3.2%)	-	Agreement
2	I usually share fake information on social media just to pass time because am bored	55 (16.1%)	75 (22.0%)	-	158 (46.3%)	53 (15.5%)	Disagreement
3	I usually share fake information on social media just for socialization and status seeking	304 (89.1%)	26 (7.6%)	-	9 (2.6%)	2 (0.6%)	Agreement
4	I usually share fake information on social media just for information sharing	39 (11.4%)	27 (7.9%)	-	149 (43.7%)	126 (37.0%)	Disagreement
5	I usually share fake information on social media just for altruism	312 (91.5%)	24 (7.0%)	-	-	5 (1.5%)	Agreement

Source: Field Report, 2023

The results from the table above revealed the factors that often lead to social media shared fake news on Covid-19. From the findings, majority of the students (91.5%) strongly agreed that they share information for the purpose of altruism. The study also revealed that most of the students (89.1%) strongly agreed that they usually share fake information on social media not just to pass time because they are bored, but just for socialization and status seeking purposes. (61.6%) of students strongly agreed that they usually share fake information on social media just for entertainment purposes. The study also revealed from the responses (43.7%) of the students strongly disagreed that they usually share fake information on social media just for information sharing.

From the data gathered above, it implies that undergraduate students as a result of social media shared fake news believed that; altruism, socialization and status seeking and entertainment are the factors that usually lead to social media fake news on COVID-19.

Research Question 2: What are the undergraduates’ perceptions of health realities of COVID-19 virus in South East Nigeria?

The questionnaire items that are used for this section’s analysis is question 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10.

Table 2: Analysis on Perception on the Health Realities of the Virus

S/N	Variable	SA	A	U	D	SD	Remarks
6	Social media shared fake news on COVID-19 made me to believe that the virus does not exist at all and cannot affect my health	316 (92.7%)	20 (5.9%)	-	5 (1.5%)	-	Agreement
7	Social media shared fake news on COVID-19 made me to believe that it has no adverse effect on African blood due to genetic and climatic peculiarities	308 (90.3%)	31 (9.1%)	-	2 (0.6%)	-	Agreement
8	Social media shared fake news on COVID-19 made me to accept that 5G network is actually perilous to human lives	231 (67.7%)	108 (31.7%)	-	2 (0.6%)	-	Agreement
9	I see it as a strategy that the Western world want to use to reduce African population	24 (7.0%)	83 (24.3%)	-	168 (49.3%)	66 (19.4%)	Disagreement
15	Social media shared fake news on COVID-19 made me to believe that the virus exist and it can affect my health	78 (22.9%)	45 (13.2%)	-	170 (49.9%)	48 (14.1%)	Disagreement

Source: Field Report, 2023

The students had convincing opinion on the perception of the health realities of COVID-19 virus in South-East Nigeria. The table above revealed that all the examined students (92.7%) strongly agreed that fake news sharing on social media on COVID-19 made them to believe that the virus does not exist at all and cannot affect their health. Again, (90.3%) of students strongly agreed that social media fake news on COVID-19 made them to believe that the virus has no adverse effect on African blood due to genetic and climatic peculiarities. (67.7%) of the students strongly agreed that social media shared fake news on COVID-19 made them to accept that 5G network is actually perilous to human lives. However, over (68%) of the students disagreed that Covid-19 is a strategy that the Western world want to use to reduce African population. More so, (49.9%) of the students further disagreed that social media shared fake news on COVID-19 made them to believe that the virus exist, and it can affect their health.

From the data gathered above, the implication is that the students based on social media shared fake news on COVID-19 have the perception that the virus does not exist at all and cannot affect their health, that COVID-19 has no adverse effect on African blood due to genetic and climatic peculiarities and that 5 G network is actually perilous to human lives.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study indicate that the level of perception of undergraduate students on the health realities of COVID-19 virus in South East Nigeria is highly related to social media messages. From this study it is confirmed that there are lots of fake information on social media which shows that the peoples’ knowledge, collective perception and attitude towards COVID-19 was mainly driven by social media and this made people to share information in form of helping people to get informed (altruism), information seeking and entertainment. In line with the findings, this paper recommends that social media users should be aware of factors that often lead to fake news on Internet and try not to spread fake news in form of helping people to get informed or for the sake of status seeking and entertainment. More so, it recommends that students should know that not all information on social media is true and should not accept social media messages hook, line and sinker especially on a health issues such as COVID-19.

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