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## **Social Media Messaging, Fake News and Fact- Checking Behaviours among Residents of Lagos, Nigeria**

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**Nelson OKORIE**

*School of Media and Communication,  
Pan-Atlantic University, Lagos, Nigeria*

*nokorie@pau.edu.ng  
(Lead author)*



**Tolu OLAGUNJU**

*School of Media and Communication  
Pan-Atlantic University, Lagos, Nigeria*

*tolagunju@pau.edu.ng  
(Co-author)*

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### **Abstract**

This study examined the phenomenon of fake news in social media messaging among residents of Lagos, Nigeria, using media ecology theory and survey research method. An analysis of the quantitative data collected purposively from 250 social media users residing in the Lagos metropolis revealed a prevalence of exposure to fake news. Despite confirming a high level of knowledge about fact-checking, there was evidence of a significant relationship between exposure to fake news and the general awareness of fact-checking. The findings suggest that while awareness of fact-checking is important, it may not fully mitigate exposure or stop the spread of fake news in the immediate. A comprehensive approach to

address the menace of fake news was recommended, which includes technical actions by the platforms and continuous awareness campaigns to empower social media users' media literacy skills and responsibilities.

**Keywords:** *Fact-checking, Fake news, Misinformation, Social behaviour, Social media messaging*

## Introduction

Social media has in recent years emerged as a universal tool for social networking, collaborating, content and information sharing worldwide (Drummond *et al.*, 2023). Although social media platforms are numerous and varied, they are mostly distinguished based on functionality and structure. Facebook, for instance, is identified as the largest social media platform with about 3 billion monthly users, while others, such as YouTube, WeChat, WhatsApp, and Instagram, follow with over a billion monthly users each (Statista, 2023). A significant portion of the world's population currently uses one or more social media platforms. This is especially true through social media messaging, that is, interactions on social media platforms in the forms of text, video, audio, infographics, or a combination of more than one element of these formats. The implication is that social media has become an integral part of the modern social communication landscape.

The widespread adoption of social media for messaging and other purposes is undeniable, yet it is accompanied by significant challenges. Social media is indeed a valuable tool for social connectivity, messaging, and interactions. Nonetheless, it also remains a fragile tool with negative possibilities and vices such as terrorism, criminal activity, depression, anxiety, and the proliferation of fake news at an unprecedented level (Koren *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, the widespread dissemination of inaccurate information and other forms of falsehoods regarded as fake news on social media platforms, combined with low levels of awareness, and has become a widespread threat to social order in many parts of the world (Apuke *et al.*, 2023).

Fake news refers to intentionally or unintentionally false, misleading, or manipulated information presented as legitimate news. It can take many forms, including fabricated stories, altered images/videos, misleading headlines, and deceptive social media posts or messages. Although fake news is not a recent phenomenon, its proliferation in recent years is linked to the wide adoption of social media for social connectivity and messaging.

Fake news has been described from several perspectives by scholars. For example, Apuke and Omar (2021) defined fake news as inauthentic information presented in a manner that is expected to be perceived as being true. *Bashiru et al. (2022)* regarded fake news as an innovative approach to propaganda and dangerous misinformation.

*Olan et al. (2024)* affirmed that the recent rise in the propagation of falsehoods, inaccurate information, and other fake news-related phenomena on social media is causing great havoc on social safety and individual and organisational reputations. For instance, Apuke and Omar (2021) confirmed that the proliferation of fake news on social media incited the Nigerian youthful populace against the authorities, while instigating violent social unrest that led to the death of some people during the popular #ENDSARS protests in Nigeria in 2020 (Ilesanmi, 2021).

Fake news is categorisable based on intention and level of accuracy as information disorder, that is, information content that is intentionally or unintentionally used out of context, such as misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. It exists in various forms such as satire, false connection (as headlines), misleading content, false context, imposter content, manipulated content, and fabricated content (Wardle, 2020). The latter forms of fake news, particularly imposter content, manipulated content, fabricated content, and related forms of disinformation, are more harmful than the earlier mentioned, such as satire, false connections (headings), and misleading content that can be categorised as misinformation or malinformation.

In Nigeria, the fact is evident that social media is the most prominent source of misinformation and the spread of fake news (Ilesanmi, 2021). Fake news originating from the various forms of social media messages is responsible for some of the most violent protests and political unrest experienced in Nigeria's recent history, particularly the #ENDSARS protests (Ilesanmi, 2021). Nonetheless, fact-checking is widely accepted as a viable means of addressing the menace of fake news on social media (Aïmeur, Amri & Brassard, 2023). Nevertheless, there remains a dearth of the necessary verification skills among social media users and professionals who deal directly or indirectly with social media content in Nigeria (Ilesanmi, 2021).

The various forms of messaging are fundamental to social media functionality, irrespective of their authenticity. In essence, there is a connection between forms of social media messaging, the spread of fake news, and its numerous social implications. Meanwhile, the menace of fake news on social media has been explored in various fields such as digital media, journalism, mass communication, marketing, and politics (Apuke &

Omar, 2021; Olan *et al.*, 2024; Apuke *et al.*, 2023). However, there is a dearth of research on connecting social media messaging with the level of exposure and patterns of fake news, and awareness of fact-checking in combating the spread of fake news in Nigeria. Therefore, it is imperative to investigate how social media messaging promotes the proliferation of fake news, including its prevalence, impact, and mitigation strategies.

*The following questions and hypothesis guide the study:*

1. What is the level of exposure to fake news among social media users in Lagos, Nigeria?
2. What are the prominent patterns of fake news encounters among social media users in Lagos, Nigeria?
3. What is the level of awareness of fact-checking in addressing fake news among social media users in Lagos, Nigeria?

**Hypothesis:** There is a significant correlation between exposure to fake news on social media and the level of awareness of fact-checking among residents in Lagos, Nigeria.

## **Review of Relevant Literature**

### ***Social Media Messaging and Fake News***

The rise of social media has made messaging easier than ever, becoming the main source of information for a large portion of the global population (Pew, 2021). People can now easily communicate with one another regardless of time or place. Social media plays a crucial role in helping individuals connect and reconnect with friends and family, as well as in finding employment and purchasing products and services (Kim & Dennis, 2019). In recent years, the benefits of social media have garnered more attention, with platforms like Twitter (X), Facebook, and Instagram allowing for widespread sharing of information and news. Apart from providing information, social media also facilitates social interaction, communication, and entertainment (Hwang *et al.*, 2011).

Although the ease of connectivity and interaction through social media platforms is useful for many reasons; nevertheless, it has also created the perfect breeding ground for several challenges. Particularly, the rapid production and dissemination of fake news among other forms of information disorder characterise the social media era (Wardle 2020;

Aïmeur *et al.*, 2023). For example, Pew Research (2021) revealed that most adults in the US who prefer to get their news through social media are more likely to share fake news than those who prefer to get news via traditional media.

Globally, social media serves as the primary source of news for over 2.4 billion internet users, with nearly 64.5 percent receiving breaking news from platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat, and Instagram rather than traditional media (Pew Research, 2021). Unfortunately, researchers such as Yamamoto and Yang (2022) argue that individuals who rely on social media for news are less engaged and informed. Additionally, social media users have played a significant role in propagating the fake news, posing a substantial challenge worldwide (Shu *et al.*, 2017).

However, only a few individuals are cognizant of the growing presence of fake news and its effects globally (Aïmeur *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, there are indications that the term "fake news" is acquiring varied interpretations among different people. Nakov (2020) asserts that, to certain politicians, fake news simply denotes "news that I do not like." Nevertheless, there is yet to be a universally agreeable definition of fake news (Aïmeur *et al.*, 2023). Although issues of fake news have received unprecedented attention in recent years, it is not a recent phenomenon (Bezerra, 2021).

However, the prevalence of fake news in recent years has confirmed that there are minimal acts of fact-checking and verification among social media users across the globe (Shu *et al.*, 2017). This was particularly evident during the 2016 US presidential election (Guess, Nyhan & Reifler, 2018). Concerns about the impact of fake news on social media have been raised from various perspectives, marking this period as the peak of fake news in known history. Likewise, a study conducted by researchers at the University of South Carolina revealed that the biggest influencer in the spread of fake news in this era is the structure of social media platforms that systematically reward users for habitually sharing information (Madrid, 2023).

### ***Fact-checking and Fake News Detection***

Fact-checking involves utilising tools, skills, and procedures to verify the accuracy of information (Bezerra, 2021; Ilesanmi, 2021). This may entail advanced web searching skills, such as effective Google searches, website verification, image verification, video verification, and geolocation (Aïmeur *et al.*, 2023). Fact-checking has become a prevalent method for detecting fake news globally. Aïmeur *et al.* (2023) categorised approaches to detecting fake news into three groups: news content-based approaches, social

context-based approaches (which can be further divided into network-based and user-based approaches), and hybrid approaches that combine content-based and contextual approaches for a comprehensive solution.

Fact-checking is a widely recognised method used to identify fake news. It involves manual or automatic examination of information to verify its accuracy. The latter approach has been embraced by various online social networks, including Facebook, Google, Instagram, and WhatsApp (Bezerra, 2021). However, despite its widespread adoption, fact-checking has been criticized for its limitations in addressing fake news in today's information-overloaded environment (Andersen & Søe, 2020). To overcome these limitations, news organisations have established fact-checking websites such as politifact.com, snopes.com, Reuters, and Fact-checkGhana.com. These websites are often used as data sources to create datasets and train models for effectively identifying and countering the spread of fake news.

Crowdsourcing is another approach for fake news detection. It relies heavily on collective human contributions and signals to detect and reduce the spread of fake news on social media platforms (Micallef et al., 2020; Bezerra, 2021). This method leverages the "wisdom of the crowds" and human expertise, but it has limitations in terms of time and cost (Micallef et al., 2020). To address these limitations, advanced approaches like artificial intelligence-based techniques and blockchain-based methods have also been developed to combat the spread of fake news.

### ***Fake News and Fact-checking on Social Media Platforms in Nigeria***

There is a growing use of social media among the Nigerian populace, with about 36.75 million people engaging on various platforms out of about 103 million internet users in the country as of 2023 (Statista, 2024). Many Nigerian social media users find these platforms cost-effective to communicate and access information, making them a popular alternative to traditional media and costly voice calls (Santas & Inobemhe, 2021). The implication is that Nigeria faces challenges associated with social media, including the scourge of fake news, which affects the nation given its significant population and substantial social media presence (Statista, 2024).

The rise of new media technologies has contributed to the spread of fake news in Nigeria, as well as in other parts of the world (Inobemhe et al., 2020). For instance, the study of Inobemhe et al. (2020) highlighted how new media technologies are being utilised to disseminate fake news

and misinformation in critical areas such as political communication, the fight against insurgency, and the promotion of ethnic tensions among Nigerians. Raji (2020) revealed that social media is the primary source of misinformation in Nigeria in recent years. Likewise, Otulugbu (2020) argued that traditional media in Nigeria are also involved in spreading fake news and have therefore contributed to exacerbating the country's security situation.

Additionally, the Nigerian government has enacted laws to regulate and improve the credibility of information on social media (Egbunike, 2018; Santas & Inobemhe, 2021). While the government planned to train citizens across the country on fact-checking in the past (Baba-Yesufu, 2022), there is no evidence that this was implemented at any time. Nonetheless, there is evidence of training conducted for journalists, especially by civil societies and organisations like the International Press Centre (IPC) and the Oak Centre (News Agency of Nigeria, 2024; Vanguard, 2025).

## Theoretical Framework

Theories give clarifications to concepts, placing them in the right perspective for scholarly studies. They elucidate as well as give light to grey areas while placing issues side-by-side with existing theories to test theoretical positions (Fuhse, 2022). Thus, this study draws its theoretical framework from the media ecology theory. Media ecology is a multidisciplinary communication theory that looks beyond media as a stand-alone entity and instead focuses on media as environments and environments as media. This perspective allows for the exploration of media evolution, effects, and forms (Isla & Bernal, 2016). The theory encompasses the complex interaction between humans, media, technology, and the environment to increase awareness of their mutual effects.

Marshall McLuhan, a prominent advocate of media ecology theory, argued that every medium or technology, regardless of its content, has unique effects (McLuhan, 1964). Similarly, Strate (2012) revealed that media ecology includes media logic, mediology, and medium theory, all of which are focused on researching the medium environment. This implies that exploring media involves more than just the medium or the technology; it encompasses the entirety of the media's surroundings.

The perspective of Marshall and Strate on media ecology theory is based on the philosophies of technological determinism and technological evolution. According to Head et al. (2020), it is now more important than ever to pay attention to the nature of media, particularly in an era of social media that is highly volatile, hyperconnected, and saturated with various

forms of fake news. Media ecology theory provides a framework for exploring the messaging and communication activities on a fragile platform like social media, their potential, constraints, and possible means of improving their operations. Particularly, it helps in understanding the nature, environment, fragility, and effects of messaging on social media platforms, especially as related to the menace of fake news.

## **Materials and Methods**

This study employed the survey research method to provide answers to the research questions. The survey research method was used to generate quantitative data on the patterns of fake news and the level of awareness of fact-checking in mitigating the menace among residents of Lagos, Nigeria. Moreover, a survey is an essential method to elicit responses from a heterogeneous audience on a specific subject matter. This study used a cross-sectional survey design, focusing on a specific population and timeline (Wang & Cheng, 2020).

The population of this study was 20 million residents in Lagos, Nigeria (Statista, 2023). This population was chosen because Lagos is the commercial hub of West Africa. Furthermore, Lagos is one of the largest cities in Nigeria with a very high level of social media adoption for various purposes (Statista, 2023). The residents of Lagos are therefore prone to experiencing the endemic spread of fake news on social media (Apuke & Omar, 2021).

The study adopted the purposive sampling technique because the subject matter was restricted to social media users in Lagos, Nigeria. Respondent selection was based on three criteria: (1) Nigerian nationality, (2) residency in Lagos, Nigeria, and (3) active social media usage. Eligibility was determined through initial screening questions confirming these criteria before proceeding with the survey. The sample size of the study was 250, which was regarded as appropriate for validity (Wimmer & Dominick, 2000). The choice of sample size was in line with the position of Wimmer & Dominick (2000), who asserted that a sample size of more than 200 was reasonable for a population of 100,000 and above.

An online questionnaire was used to collect data for this study. It was developed by researchers following existing literature and theories. Google Forms was used to design and customise the questionnaire for data collection. The link to the questionnaire was then circulated through emails and direct messaging across popular social media, especially Facebook and WhatsApp, focusing on residents of Lagos, Nigeria. Data collection took

place between May 18th and August 21st, 2023. The data collected was analysed quantitatively after being summarized. The questionnaire consisted of classification questions, behavioural questions, and attitudinal questions such as the pattern of social media usage. In addition, the questions about the type of fake news were crafted using simple language to ensure easy comprehension by the respondents, i.e., disinformation (as completely false news), misinformation (as inaccurate information), and propaganda (as unbalanced information).

The types of statistical analysis used for this study were a combination of descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. Descriptive statistical analysis was used to develop tables and frequency counts, while inferential statistics was used to test a hypothesis as presented in Tables 4 and 5. Correlation analysis was used to ascertain the relationship between variables, Spearman measurement analysis was used to assess the agreement between ordinal values, while the Somer-D measurement analysis was used to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between ordinal values.

Data collection presented challenges, including difficulty reaching respondents, a relatively low response rate, and an observed gender imbalance. Despite contacting approximately 400 potential respondents, only 250 completed the questionnaire.

## Results

This study generated quantitative data on the patterns of fake news and fact-checking on social media. For this study, 250 data entries of an online questionnaire were collected, coded, and analysed to answer three research questions as previously identified.

Table 1 shows the demographic classification of respondents. Sixty-five percent (65 %) are female, while 35 percent of them are male. Likewise, 8.7 percent of the respondents are under 19 years, while 37.5 percent are between the ages of 20 and 29 years. Similarly, about 38.31 percent are between the ages of 30-39 years, while 12.9 percent of them are between the ages of 40-49 years. Only 2.59 percent are 50 years and above. This is because most social media users are youthful and digital natives.

Table 2 shows the frequency of social media usage and contact with fake news. Ninety-two percent of the respondents are frequent users of social media platforms, while less than 8% are occasional users of social media. Furthermore, Table 2 indicated that a significant majority of respondents, that is, 90.8 percent, were largely exposed to fake news on social media. This aligns with earlier studies in Singapore and the United

States that established that the proliferation of fake news in recent years cannot be separated from the rise of social media around the same time (Tandoc et al., 2019; Olan et al., 2020). Hence, it can be inferred that there was high exposure to fake news on social media among residents of Lagos, Nigeria.

Table 3 illustrates the most prevalent patterns of fake news, which include inaccurate information (55 percent) compared to complete falsehoods (21.9 percent) and unbalanced information (21.9 percent). The table also indicates that Facebook and WhatsApp are the leading social media platforms for fake news, with as many as 60% of respondents identifying these platforms as the most prominent for fake news. Previous studies suggest that misinformation (that is, unintentional sharing of inaccurate information) is the most common form of fake news on social media, while disinformation (that is, complete falsehoods intended to deceive the audience) is the most harmful and impactful (Wardle, 2020). Likewise, Pew Research (2021) found that 64% of Americans encounter misinformation "sometimes" or "often," primarily through social media. Thus, it can be inferred that the predominant type of fake news on social media was misinformation. At the same time, Facebook and WhatsApp were the predominant social media platforms for disseminating fake news among the residents of Lagos, Nigeria.

Table 4 presents respondents' level of awareness of fact-checking in addressing the menace of fake news among social media users in Lagos, Nigeria. The study examined the knowledge of fact-checking to detect fake news among residents in Lagos, Nigeria. The respondents were asked four questions to evaluate their level of awareness of fact-checking either as tools or as practices. Those who answered all four questions were labelled "Very Aware", those who answered three questions correctly were labelled "Moderately Aware", and those who answered two or less than two correctly were labelled "Not Very Aware". The table shows that more than 80% of the respondents were very aware of fact-checking as a means for fake news detection, while less than 16% were not very aware, that is, with insufficient knowledge about fact-checking as a means of detecting and spreading fake news. Therefore, it can be generalised that most of the respondents were sufficiently aware and knowledgeable about fact-checking practices for detecting fake news.

Table 5 shows a correlation test between ordinal variables. The test confirms that there is a linear relationship between the paired values at 0.000. Additionally, the Somer D measurement indicates a positive and strong correlation. Therefore, there is a significant correlation between

exposure to fake news on social media and the level of awareness of fact-checking among residents in Lagos, Nigeria. The test suggests that awareness of fact-checking does not necessarily imply a lack of exposure to fake news. For instance, a 2023 Pew Research study found that 75% of U.S. adults have heard of fact-checking organisations, but only 30% regularly check the accuracy of news before sharing (Pew Research, 2023).

## Discussion

This quantitative study explored the levels of exposure, patterns of fake news, and the level of awareness of fact-checking as a means of addressing the spread of fake news on social media platforms among residents of Lagos, Nigeria. Through the prism of the media ecology theory, particularly, the study explored the phenomena of social media, fake news, and fact-checking. This study raised and answered three research questions as follows:

For research question one, it was deduced that there was high exposure to fake news on social media among residents of Lagos, Nigeria. This result implies that as the growth and usage of social media increase, the cases of fake news on online platforms also increase. This result aligns with media ecology theory because the world has indeed become a '*global village of information overload*' (McLuhan, 1964) that promotes ease of access and exposure to different forms of fake news and inaccurate information. According to McLuhan (1964), every medium has a unique effect, which in the case of social media is the increase in the spread of fake news that is closely linked to its emergence. This result is also in line with the positions of scholars like Egbunike (2018), Raji (2020), Otulugbu (2020), Bashiru *et al.* (2022), and Ilesanmi (2021), whose earlier studies have aligned a high level of exposure to fake news as the key challenge that accompanied the emergence of social media.

For research question two, the respondents identified the predominant pattern of fake news as inaccurate information compared to complete falsehoods and unbalanced information. These findings align with earlier research by Apuke & Omar (2021), Nakov (2020), and Wardle (2020), who had earlier identified, categorised, and described the various forms of fake news as disinformation (i.e., completely false news), misinformation (i.e., inaccurate information), and propaganda (i.e., unbalanced information).

Finally, question three sought to reveal the level of awareness of fact-checking about fake news practices among residents of Lagos, Nigeria. More than 80% of the respondents were revealed to be very much aware

and highly knowledgeable about fact-checking for fake news detection, while less than 16% were not very aware of fact-checking as a means of addressing the menace of fake news proliferation. This implies there is a massive awareness of fact-checking as a means of detecting fake news among residents of Lagos, Nigeria.

To validate the above claim, a Pearson correlation test was conducted to examine the significance of the relationship between exposure to fake news on social media and awareness of fact-checking among Lagos residents. The R-value (correlation value) for the test is 0.991, while the p-value (i.e., the probability value) is 0.000 less than the alpha value at the 0.05 level of significance. The implication is that there is a strong positive and statistically significant relationship between the level of awareness of fact-checking and exposure to fake news on social media. Therefore, the hypothesis that there is a significant relationship between the exposure of fake news on social media and the level of awareness of fact-checking among residents of Lagos, Nigeria, is accepted. This suggests that awareness, knowledge, or understanding of fact-checking might help in detecting fake news, though it may not prevent exposure to fake news on social media.

## **Conclusion**

The study concluded that awareness of fact-checking does not necessarily prevent social media users' exposure to fake news. Instead, as Madrid (2023) noted, social media platforms by design necessitate that users create, share, post, and engage with social media content. The desperation to advance socialness through the various forms of social media messaging is not only responsible for the fragile nature of social media platforms, but by implication, also responsible for the massive spread of fake news on social media platforms.

This study recommends promoting fact-checking awareness among social media users, complemented by media literacy initiatives, regulatory measures, and leveraging emerging technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI) for a more effective long-term solution. Social media platform programmers and organisations should make considerable efforts to make fact-checking and other means of combating the menace of fake news easy from the design phase by creating default settings such as "*reverse-content search*" for ease of fact-checking viral content. Policymakers should pass laws that require platform owners to disclose how content is engaged and amplified on their platforms while imposing penalties on organisations that

fail to verify information before it goes viral. They can also support organisations and initiatives like Fact-Check Africa, the Nigerian Fact-Checkers Coalition (NFC), among other IFCN-certified fact-checking organisations and civil societies that aim to address the menace of fake news in the country. Fact-checking should form a key part of not only journalism and media studies in the country but also a critical aspect of the general media literacy education across the board.

Notwithstanding, combating fake news requires a holistic effort by all stakeholders, beginning with the platform designers to social media users (content creators and audience), gatekeepers, policymakers, and regulators. This study provides additional empirical evidence for a better conceptual understanding of social media messaging, fake news, and fact-checking, while offering a foundation for future studies in this research direction.

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