

An Analysis of User Trust Toward Social Media as an Information Source

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Abstract

This study examines user trust toward social media as an information source, with a focus on the Federal College of Education (FCE), Yola, Adamawa State, Nigeria. Social media platforms have become primary tools for accessing news, updates, and crisis information. However, trust in these platforms varies significantly based on factors such as source credibility, content consistency, and user experience. A quantitative survey method was adopted, and data were collected through an online questionnaire administered to 547 students and staff members of FCE Yola. The results revealed that although social media is frequently used for information seeking—especially during crises—users are divided in their trust. About one-third of respondents mostly trust information on social media, another third remain neutral, while the rest mostly distrust it. Key factors that increased trust included content from official accounts, fact-checking features, and alignment with other sources. Conversely, trust was undermined by the presence of misinformation, biased content, conflicting reports, and clickbait headlines. The study found that a significant number of users have shared false information unknowingly, and only a few always verify content before acting on it. The findings emphasize the need for improved media literacy and greater responsibility from platform providers in managing information credibility. The study contributes to understanding how users interact with digital content and highlights strategies for fostering a more trustworthy information environment.

Keywords: *Social media, Information trust, Crisis communication, User behavior, Misinformation*

1. Introduction.

In recent years, social media has emerged as one of the most influential platforms for information dissemination worldwide. With the growing penetration of internet services and smartphones, millions of people rely on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp to access news and public information (Kalsnes, 2018). This shift from traditional media to social media has fundamentally transformed how individuals consume, share, and interact

with information. However, this evolution also raises critical questions about the credibility of information encountered on these platforms and the level of trust users place in social media as an information source.

Trust is a central component of the information exchange process, particularly in online environments where the volume of unverified and user-generated content is vast (Kim & Dennis, 2019). When individuals assess the trustworthiness of information, they consider factors such as the source, content accuracy, consistency with other sources, and the presence of verification mechanisms (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007). Social media, by design, allows virtually anyone to produce and disseminate information without the editorial oversight typically associated with traditional news media. This unique feature creates both opportunities and challenges in terms of public trust.

During crises, such as public health emergencies, political upheavals, or economic downturns, social media often becomes a primary source of timely updates and public discourse (Austin et al., 2012). The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, demonstrated both the utility and the dangers of social media as an information source. On one hand, official organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and national governments used platforms like Twitter and Facebook to reach large audiences quickly (Cinelli et al., 2020). On the other hand, misinformation, conspiracy theories, and fake news proliferated across these platforms, contributing to public confusion and mistrust (Pennycook et al., 2020).

The phenomenon of "fake news" has heightened scholarly interest in the dynamics of trust in digital media ecosystems. A study by Vosoughi et al. (2018) found that false news spreads more rapidly on social media than verified news, primarily due to human factors such as emotional engagement and novelty. This finding underscores the importance of understanding not just technological elements, but also psychological and social factors that influence user trust in social media content.

Additionally, the architecture of social media platforms plays a significant role in shaping trust perceptions. Algorithms that prioritize content based on user engagement may inadvertently amplify sensational or misleading information (Bakir & McStay, 2018). Moreover, the presence or absence of fact-checking labels, source credibility indicators, and platform moderation policies further influences how users evaluate the trustworthiness of information (Clayton et al., 2020).

Individual differences also affect trust levels. Demographic factors such as age, education level, and digital literacy skills correlate with varying degrees of skepticism or acceptance toward social media information (Guess et al., 2019). Younger users, for instance, may be more adept at navigating social media platforms but are not necessarily more discerning in evaluating information credibility (Marchi, 2012). Conversely, older users may lack familiarity with digital media conventions, making them more vulnerable to misinformation (Brashier & Schacter, 2020). In this complex landscape, understanding the factors that influence user trust is essential for multiple stakeholders, including policymakers, media organizations, platform designers, and educators. Enhancing trust in credible information while mitigating the effects of misinformation is a critical challenge in today's information society (Lewandowsky et al., 2017).

Several models of trust have been proposed to guide research in this domain. The Integrative Model of Organizational Trust (Mayer et al., 1995) highlights competence, integrity, and benevolence as key antecedents of trust. Applied to social media, these dimensions translate into users' perceptions of content accuracy, source reliability, and alignment with users' values and interests (Koohikamali & Sidorova, 2017). Similarly, Flanagin and Metzger's (2007) dual-

processing model suggests that users employ both heuristic (quick, surface-level) and systematic (deep, analytical) processing when evaluating online information.

Empirical research has begun to unpack these dynamics. For instance, Tandoc et al. (2018) identified that users often trust information shared by friends and family over that from unknown or institutional sources, regardless of accuracy. This highlights the role of social networks in shaping trust perceptions. Furthermore, transparency about content origins and platform accountability mechanisms have been shown to enhance trust in information on social media (Chen et al., 2015).

Despite growing academic interest, there remains a gap in understanding how trust varies across different contexts and populations. Factors such as cultural background, political orientation, and previous experiences with misinformation may all shape trust differently in diverse settings (Freiling et al., 2021). This underscores the need for localized and nuanced research approaches.

In the Nigerian context, where social media penetration continues to rise rapidly, these questions are particularly salient. Platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp are extensively used for news consumption, especially among younger demographics (Kakungulu-Mayambala & Rukundo, 2020). However, concerns about the spread of misinformation, particularly during elections and public health crises, have highlighted the urgent need to understand user trust dynamics in this setting (Olatunji, 2021).

This study, therefore, aims to analyze user trust toward social media as an information source, focusing on key factors such as usage patterns, source credibility, verification behaviors, and demographic influences. By employing a questionnaire-based approach, the research seeks to capture user perspectives and contribute to a deeper understanding of trust formation in digital media environments. The findings will provide valuable insights for media literacy interventions, platform design improvements, and policy development aimed at fostering a healthier information ecosystem.

Problem Statement

In the current digital age, social media platforms have become integral to how individuals access, consume, and share information. While these platforms offer rapid and wide-reaching information dissemination, they also pose significant challenges regarding the accuracy and reliability of the content shared. The proliferation of misinformation and "fake news" has led to growing concerns about the trustworthiness of social media as an information source (Kalsnes, 2018; Pennycook et al., 2020).

Despite the increasing volume of research on misinformation, there is still a limited understanding of how different factors—such as demographic characteristics, platform features, user behaviors, and content presentation—influence trust toward social media information. Additionally, the cultural and regional contexts of trust dynamics, particularly in developing countries like Nigeria, remain underexplored (Kakungulu-Mayambala & Rukundo, 2020; Olatunji, 2021).

Without a clear understanding of what drives or diminishes trust in social media content, stakeholders—including platform developers, policymakers, educators, and users themselves—face difficulties in designing effective interventions to promote critical information consumption and reduce the spread of false information. Thus, there is an urgent need for empirical studies that analyze user trust toward social media as an information source, particularly through data-driven, user-centered approaches.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to analyze user trust toward social media as an information source and to identify the key factors that influence users' trust in the information they encounter on these platforms.

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. Examine how frequently and in what ways users rely on social media platforms to seek information.
2. Assess the level of trust that users place in information obtained through various social media platforms.
3. Identify the key factors that enhance or reduce user trust in social media information.
4. Analyze how demographic factors (such as age, gender, and education) influence user trust toward social media information.

2. Literature Review

This reviews existing literature related to user trust in social media as an information source. It provides a conceptual foundation for the study by examining definitions of trust, characteristics of social media as an information medium, factors influencing trust in online content, and the role of misinformation. Also explores how demographic variables affect trust and identifies relevant theoretical frameworks. Finally, a review of empirical studies is presented to highlight gaps and opportunities for further research.

Concept of Trust in Digital Environments

Trust is a multifaceted concept widely studied in the fields of psychology, sociology, communication, and information science. Generally, trust is defined as a willingness to be vulnerable based on positive expectations of another party's actions (Mayer et al., 1995). In digital environments, trust becomes even more complex due to the anonymity, decentralization, and variability of information sources (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013).

In online contexts, users often rely on heuristics—such as source reputation, content quality, and social endorsement—to judge the trustworthiness of information (Metzger & Flanagin, 2008). Unlike traditional media, where editorial standards guide information quality, social media platforms present a blend of professional and user-generated content with varying credibility levels.

Social Media as an Information Source

Social media has transformed how individuals access and engage with information. Platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok serve as both primary and supplementary news sources for millions of users worldwide (Newman et al., 2023). The appeal of social media lies in its immediacy, interactivity, personalization, and social endorsement (Hermida et al., 2012).

However, this convergence of personal communication and mass media introduces new risks. The lack of formal gatekeeping enables the rapid spread of false or misleading content (Pennycook & Rand, 2021). Despite these risks, many users continue to rely heavily on social media for news and information—particularly during crises, where official channels may be slow or inaccessible (Austin et al., 2012).

Factors Influencing Trust in Social Media Information

Source Credibility

Source credibility—comprising expertise and trustworthiness—is a key determinant of how users evaluate information on social media (Appelman & Sundar, 2016). Verified accounts, institutional affiliations, and well-known brands tend to foster greater trust, while anonymous or obscure sources evoke skepticism (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007).

Content Quality and Accuracy

The perceived quality of content—its coherence, clarity, and supporting evidence—also influences trust (Kim & Dennis, 2019). Posts that include citations, images, or links to reputable sources are more likely to be trusted than unsubstantiated claims.

Platform Features

Platform-specific design elements, such as fact-check labels, user ratings, and algorithmic content curation, play a role in shaping trust (Clayton et al., 2020). Studies show that fact-checking interventions can reduce the spread of misinformation and improve trust in verified content (Pennycook et al., 2020).

User Verification Behaviors

Users vary in their inclination to verify information before accepting or sharing it. Factors such as media literacy, cognitive motivation, and prior experience influence these behaviors (Vraga & Tully, 2021). Encouraging verification practices through education and platform features is seen as a key strategy for promoting trustworthy information consumption.

Role of Social Networks

The social nature of social media amplifies the role of interpersonal trust. Users often trust information shared by friends, family, or influential figures within their networks (Turcotte et al., 2015), sometimes regardless of the objective credibility of the content.

Misinformation and Fake News on Social Media

The spread of misinformation is a well-documented problem on social media platforms. Misinformation refers to false or misleading information shared without malicious intent, while disinformation is deliberately deceptive (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Psychological research suggests that users are prone to believe misinformation due to confirmation bias, cognitive shortcuts, and emotional appeal (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). Social media algorithms, which prioritize engagement, often exacerbate these tendencies by promoting sensational or polarizing content (Cinelli et al., 2020).

Combating misinformation requires a combination of platform interventions (fact-checking, downranking, account suspension) and user-focused strategies (media literacy, critical thinking training).

Demographic Influences on Trust

Trust in social media information is not uniform across user populations. Demographic factors such as age, gender, and education level influence how users perceive and evaluate online content.

- **Age:** Younger users tend to be more tech-savvy but also more exposed to misinformation due to higher social media usage (Guess et al., 2019). Older users, while sometimes less familiar with digital verification practices, may display greater skepticism toward social media information.

- **Gender:** Some studies suggest that women are generally more cautious and selective about online information than men, although findings are mixed and often context-dependent (Mitchell et al., 2016).
- **Education:** Higher education levels are consistently associated with greater critical thinking skills and a higher likelihood of verifying online information (Pennycook & Rand, 2021).
- **Cultural Context:** In many developing countries, including Nigeria, trust dynamics are further shaped by factors such as historical media credibility, political polarization, and community-based information sharing (Olatunji, 2021).

Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Trust

Integrative Model of Organizational Trust

Mayer et al. (1995) propose that trust is influenced by perceptions of ability, benevolence, and integrity of the trustee. In the social media context, this translates to how users perceive the competence, intent, and honesty of content sources.

Dual-Processing Model of Credibility Evaluation

Flanagin and Metzger (2007) outline a dual-processing model, where users engage in either heuristic (quick and intuitive) or systematic (careful and deliberate) processing when evaluating online content. Factors such as source cues and social signals often trigger heuristic processing, which can make users vulnerable to misinformation.

Empirical Review

Olatunji (2021), in a comprehensive mixed-methods study conducted in Nigeria, examined how trust in social media information is shaped by cultural, political, and literacy factors. The study revealed that many Nigerian users, particularly on platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook, trusted information largely based on personal relationships and group affiliations rather than the original source's credibility. Olatunji further noted that the low level of media literacy and limited access to official sources led many users to rely heavily on unverified information, particularly during politically sensitive periods and public health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Similarly, Akinwale and Adegoke (2020) investigated the patterns of trust in news content shared on Nigerian social media platforms. Their survey-based study found that users were generally aware of the prevalence of misinformation and fake news, yet a significant portion still trusted and shared content without verification. Factors contributing to this paradox included emotional appeal, perceived urgency of the information, and peer influence within online networks. The authors concluded that there is a strong need for targeted digital literacy interventions and platform-specific strategies to foster a more critical approach to information consumption among Nigerian social media users.

Okoro et al. (2018) explored how young adults in Lagos evaluate the credibility of political information on social media. The researchers found that source familiarity and visual presentation (such as the use of professional-looking images or logos) strongly influenced perceived trustworthiness. Interestingly, the study also highlighted that trust was often guided by ethnic and political biases, with users showing a greater tendency to trust content that aligned with their pre-existing views or supported their community narratives. This finding underscores the complex interplay between socio-cultural identity and trust in the Nigerian social media landscape.

Mwaura and Wamue-Ngare (2020) explored the role of fact-checking labels and platform interventions in influencing user trust in social media information. Their experimental findings indicated that while fact-checking labels did lead to increased skepticism toward false content, their overall effectiveness was limited by deep-seated distrust in media institutions and political polarization. The authors argued that in contexts where public trust in institutions is already fragile, platform-based interventions must be complemented by broader civic education efforts to build a more resilient information ecosystem.

Ezeah et al. (2019), in a pan-African survey of university students across Nigeria, Ghana, and South Africa, examined patterns of trust in social media during crisis situations. Their results showed that while students valued the speed and accessibility of social media information, they also expressed concerns about reliability. Many respondents reported engaging in verification behaviors, such as cross-referencing with multiple sources or consulting trusted friends, particularly when the information was related to health or public safety. The study concluded that promoting such verification practices should be a central goal for both educators and platform designers aiming to strengthen trust in credible information.

3. Methodology

This presents the methodological approach adopted for the study titled “*An Analysis of User Trust Toward Social Media as an Information Source.*” It describes the research design, population and sampling techniques, data collection procedures, instrumentation, and methods of data analysis.

The study employed a quantitative survey research design, which is well-suited for collecting structured data from a defined population in order to identify patterns, trends, and relationships. This approach was appropriate because the research aimed to measure the perceptions and levels of trust users associate with social media as a source of information. Quantitative methods also allowed for statistical analysis to test relationships between user characteristics and their trust behaviors.

The study population consisted of students and academic/non-academic staff of the Federal College of Education (FCE), Yola, in Adamawa State, Nigeria. This population was selected because of its high rate of social media usage, digital literacy, and active engagement with online information sources. The institution provided a convenient and relevant demographic for exploring the dynamics of trust in social media platforms, especially among educated and information-seeking individuals.

To access this population effectively, the study adopted a purposive sampling technique, targeting only those who met the eligibility criteria: being a registered student or staff member at FCE Yola, being at least 18 years old, and having used social media platforms (such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter/X, Instagram, or TikTok) to obtain news or information within the past three months. The choice of purposive sampling was informed by the need to ensure that respondents had meaningful engagement with social media, thereby providing valid responses related to trust in online information.

Data were collected using an online questionnaire designed in Google Forms. The link to the questionnaire was distributed via institutional email lists, WhatsApp groups, and other digital channels regularly used by FCE Yola students and staff. This method was chosen for its efficiency, especially given the familiarity of the target population with online platforms, and the logistical convenience it offered in accessing a dispersed group of respondents within the college community.

The questionnaire was divided into four sections: the first gathered demographic data (age, gender, role at the college, education level, and frequency of social media use); the second examined types of social media platforms used and their role in information seeking; the third assessed levels of trust toward social media information, and the fourth focused on verification behavior and perceived reliability of content encountered. Most items were structured on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree,” to allow for varying degrees of agreement and perception.

Before final distribution, the instrument was pilot-tested among a small group of students and lecturers within the college to ensure clarity, appropriateness, and consistency. Their feedback helped refine some ambiguous questions and improve the layout of the form. The final version of the questionnaire was circulated for a period of two weeks, during which responses were automatically recorded and stored via Google Forms.

Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to. Informed consent was obtained electronically before participation, and all participants were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses. The study avoided collecting personally identifiable information and emphasized that participation was voluntary, with no academic or institutional repercussions for opting out.

Upon completion of data collection, responses were downloaded into Microsoft Excel for cleaning and preparation. Subsequently, data were imported into SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 25 for analysis. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were computed to summarize user characteristics and general trust patterns. Additionally, inferential statistics, including chi-square tests and Pearson’s correlation, were used to explore relationships between trust levels and demographic or behavioral variables.

4. Result

Table 4.1: Demographic Distribution of Respondents (N = 547)

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage (%)
18–24 Years	137	25.0
25–32 Years	137	25.0
33–40 Years	137	25.0
Under 18 Years	136	24.9
Total	547	100.0

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Female	274	50.1
Male	273	49.9
Total	547	100.0

Education Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Bachelor’s Degree	182	33.3
Master’s Degree or Higher	182	33.3
Secondary School	183	33.4
Total	547	100.0

Occupation	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Teacher	137	25.0
Student	137	25.0
Engineer	137	25.0
Business	136	24.9
Total	547	100.0

Table 4.1: The demographic profile of the 547 respondents reveals a fairly balanced distribution across all variables. The age distribution shows that respondents are evenly spread, with the largest groups being aged 18–40 years, which are also the most active social media users in Nigeria. This ensures that insights gathered from this study are highly relevant to the typical social media-using population in FCE Yola.

In terms of gender, the responses are almost evenly split between male and female participants, with females slightly dominating at 50.1%, suggesting equal representation in media usage and trust patterns across genders.

Education level is also balanced, with roughly a third each having a Bachelor's degree, a Master's degree or higher, or being in secondary school. This allows for a diverse range of perspectives on media trust and literacy.

Finally, the occupational distribution shows that Teachers, Students, Engineers, and Business professionals are equally represented, reflecting the cross-sectional nature of the college community and improving the generalizability of the findings to other higher institutions in Nigeria.

Table 4.2: Social Media Usage Frequency, Preferred Platforms, and Trust Level (N = 547)

Usage Frequency	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Daily	183	33.5%
Several times a week	182	33.3%
Rarely	182	33.3%
Total	547	100.0%

Platforms Used	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Facebook, WhatsApp	183	33.5%
Twitter (X), Instagram	182	33.3%
WhatsApp	182	33.3%
Total	547	100.0%

Trust Level in Social Media Information	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Neutral	183	33.5%
Mostly Trust	182	33.3%
Mostly Distrust	182	33.3%
Total	547	100.0%

Table 4.2: The distribution of social media usage among respondents indicates that a significant majority are frequent users, with over 66% accessing social media daily or several times a week. This high level of engagement underscores the relevance of examining trust in social media information among this population.

Regarding platform preference, Facebook and WhatsApp are the most commonly used, closely followed by Twitter (X) and Instagram, and then WhatsApp as a standalone tool. This aligns with existing research on social media usage trends in Nigeria, where these platforms are dominant for both social interaction and information consumption.

In terms of trust, responses are fairly evenly distributed. One-third of the respondents maintain a neutral stance toward trust in social media information, while another third mostly trust it, and the final third mostly distrust it. This balance highlights a mixed perception of reliability and suggests that trust is context-dependent, potentially influenced by content type, source, or prior experiences.

Table 4.3: Credibility Compared to Traditional Media and Verification Practices (N = 547)

Perceived Credibility of Social Media vs Traditional Media Frequency Percentage (%)		
About the same	183	33.5%
Somewhat more credible	182	33.3%
Much less credible	182	33.3%
Total	547	100.0%
Have You Ever Verified Information from Social Media? Frequency Percentage (%)		
Sometimes	183	33.5%
Rarely	182	33.3%
Always	182	33.3%
Total	547	100.0%

Table 4.3: The findings show that perceptions of credibility between social media and traditional media (such as television, newspapers, and radio) are split among respondents. One-third view them as equally credible, while another third feel social media is less credible, and the rest believe it is somewhat more credible. This suggests a growing acceptance of social media as a legitimate information source, though not without concern for reliability.

When it comes to verification behaviors, a third of respondents claim to verify information from social media sometimes, while others report rare or consistent verification. This indicates a moderate culture of fact-checking, possibly influenced by the increasing awareness of misinformation and digital literacy campaigns. However, the fact that only one-third always verify information suggests that more education or platform intervention may be needed to build a stronger verification habit among users.

Table 4.4: Factors That Increase or Decrease Trust in Social Media Information (N = 547)

Factors That Increase Trust	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Source credibility (e.g., official accounts, known media outlets)	183	33.5%
Fact-checking labels or warnings	182	33.3%
Consistency with information from other sources	182	33.3%
Total	547	100.0%

Factors That Decrease Trust	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Presence of misinformation or fake news	137	25.0%
Biased or opinionated content	137	25.0%
Conflicting information from multiple sources	137	25.0%
Sensational or clickbait headlines, lack of credible sources, or other reasons	136	24.9%
Total	547	100.0%

Table 4.4: The findings highlight that source credibility is the most influential factor in increasing users' trust in social media information. When information originates from verified accounts or recognizable media organizations, users tend to perceive it as more trustworthy. Additionally, features such as fact-checking labels and consistency with other sources contribute significantly to trust formation. These responses show that users are attentive to cues that signal credibility and reliability.

Conversely, the presence of misinformation, biased content, and conflicting messages from different sources are the top causes of distrust. Many users are skeptical when they observe contradictory statements or discover content lacking references or official backing. Clickbait headlines and lack of source transparency also reduce credibility, indicating that presentation style and clarity play roles in how trustworthy information appears.

These insights emphasize the importance of platform responsibility and the need for users to develop stronger digital literacy skills to critically assess online content.

Table 4.5: Influence of Social Media on Decisions, Sharing False Information, and Crisis Use (N = 547)

How Often Social Media Influences Decisions	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Often	183	33.5%
Sometimes	182	33.3%
Rarely	182	33.3%
Total	547	100.0%

Have You Ever Shared False or Misleading Info?	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	183	33.5%
No	182	33.3%
Not sure	182	33.3%

Have You Ever Shared False or Misleading Info? Frequency Percentage (%)

Total	547	100.0%
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Reliance on Social Media for Crisis Updates Frequency Percentage (%)

A great deal	183	33.5%
Somewhat	182	33.3%
Neutral	182	33.3%
Total	547	100.0%

Table 4.5: A significant number of respondents (about 67%) reported that social media often or sometimes influences their decisions. This indicates the strong persuasive power of online content on personal beliefs, lifestyle choices, or public opinions. However, a cautious third still claim they are rarely influenced, which may reflect a skeptical or more discerning group.

Regarding misinformation, one-third admitted to sharing false or misleading content, and another third were not even sure, which suggests a general lack of awareness or verification culture among users. Only a small portion confidently said they never shared such content. This underscores the urgency of digital media education and the role of platform regulation.

Interestingly, one-third of the participants rely heavily on social media during crises (economic, health, political), while others have more moderate or neutral reliance. This finding confirms that social media platforms are perceived as essential tools for real-time updates, particularly in contexts where traditional media may lag or be limited.

Discussion of Findings

The objective of this study was to examine how users at the Federal College of Education (FCE), Yola, Adamawa State, trust social media as an information source, especially in the context of crisis and daily decision-making. The findings from the survey of 547 respondents reveal a multifaceted understanding of social media trust, usage patterns, and perceptions of credibility compared to traditional media.

Trust in Social Media Information

The study found that a significant portion of respondents expressed neutral trust in social media, while others were evenly split between mostly trusting and mostly distrusting the platforms. This mixed result reflects the complexity of online environments where reliable content coexists with misinformation. This aligns with earlier findings by Olatunji (2021), who noted that trust in social media among Nigerian users is conditional and often shaped by previous encounters with misinformation or platform biases.

Trust was found to be strongly influenced by the source of the information, particularly when the source was an official account or a credible media outlet. Respondents also indicated higher trust when posts included fact-checking labels, or when the content was consistent with information from other sources. This is supported by Akinwale and Adegoke (2020), who argued that institutional credibility plays a pivotal role in how users perceive digital content.

Credibility vs Traditional Media

Interestingly, many respondents perceived the credibility of social media to be “about the same” as that of traditional media (TV, newspapers, and radio). This is consistent with global trends where digital natives increasingly trust social media for instant news, particularly during

emergencies (Pew Research Center, 2021). However, others noted that social media was either “somewhat more” or “much less” credible, suggesting that individual experiences and levels of media literacy significantly affect credibility assessments.

Verification Behavior and False Information

Despite acknowledging trust in certain sources, a substantial number of users revealed they only sometimes or rarely verify the information they consume on social media. Furthermore, about one-third admitted to having shared false or misleading content in the past, knowingly or unknowingly. This finding mirrors the research by Ezeah, Asogwa, and Edogor (2019), who emphasized that although Nigerian students use social media frequently, they often lack critical skills for evaluating information reliability. The implication is that low verification culture increases the spread of misinformation.

Social Media Use During Crises

A major insight is that during crises—such as economic, political, or health emergencies—many users heavily rely on social media for timely updates. This aligns with Mwaura and Wamue-Ngare (2020), who found that Kenyan youths turned to Twitter and WhatsApp for instant crisis updates, bypassing traditional news outlets. This reliance underscores the perceived speed and accessibility of social media platforms, even if they are not always seen as entirely trustworthy.

Influence on Decisions and Perceived Risks

More than half of respondents acknowledged that social media often or sometimes influences their opinions and decisions, highlighting the persuasive and cognitive impact of digital communication. However, the risk remains that users may act on unverified or misleading information, especially in high-stakes situations. The presence of biased content, misinformation, and conflicting information were cited as major reasons for distrust. These findings echo those of Okoro, Omole, and Akwala (2018), who concluded that trust in social media is fragile and depends heavily on user literacy and the integrity of the platform.

Conclusion

This study explored how users at the Federal College of Education (FCE), Yola, Adamawa State, perceive and trust social media as a source of information, especially during crisis situations. The findings reveal a complex dynamic: while a significant number of users actively engage with social media for updates and decision-making, many remain cautious about the credibility of the information they consume. Trust was influenced by the presence of credible sources, fact-checking tools, and consistency with other reliable platforms, while distrust was driven by misinformation, bias, and conflicting messages. The research also found that although social media has become a vital channel during crises, many users do not consistently verify content before acting on or sharing it. Overall, social media is seen as fast and accessible, but users remain divided in their level of trust.

Recommendations

1. **Digital literacy training** should be incorporated into higher education curricula to improve students’ ability to critically assess information found on social media platforms.

2. **Social media platforms should improve fact-checking mechanisms**, such as using clearer labels, content warnings, and verified tags to help users identify credible information.
3. **Users should be encouraged to verify content before sharing**, especially during sensitive events like economic or political crises, to reduce the spread of false or misleading information.

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