

## **Fake News in Public Emergencies and Individuals' Fact Checking Reality**

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### ***Abstract:***

The paper examined the phenomena of fake news during public emergencies and evaluated how news consumers discern reality in an increasing environment of misleading information during emerging situations. To adequately probe how individuals respond to fake news, the study conducted an online survey using the chat group BSU ACADEMICS on Telegram. The chat group is open to academic staff of the Benue State University, Makurdi, Nigeria. Findings from the study showed that the public is increasingly relying on online media as their first point of call for news, including social media, blogs, and web pages of traditional media. News consumers encounter fake news online, and are not oblivious of its presence, especially during emergencies such as the Covid-19 pandemic; news consumers resort to crosschecking unverified information from more credible outlets; doing online background check on suspected content and discouraging the re-sharing of fake news as it can create panic and distort genuine information. It is increasingly becoming a reality that emergencies present themselves with the spread of fake news that requires verifications by information consumers. Media literacy is therefore required to ensure the crosschecking of readily available online information with other credible sources and then discourage the spread of fake news as it can create panic and distort genuine information.

***Keywords:* Fake news, Emergencies, Response, Online, Fact-checking.**

### **1. Introduction**

Public emergencies, of whatever form, usually come with the need for accurate and timely information for individuals, groups and communities to quickly make informed decisions. This was evident with the outbreak of the corona virus as noted by Moscadelli, Albora, Biamonte, Giorgetti, Innocenzio, Paoli, Lorini, Bonanni and Bonaccorsi (2020, p.1) that “decision makers (governments and institutions) were left in a difficult and dangerous situation in terms of risk management and risk communication regarding infection rates and restrictive measures of containment that were imposed to slow down the spread of the virus”. Information needs in public emergency situations are fundamental in handling delicate situations. Torpan, Hansson, Rhinard, Kazemekaityte, Jukarainen, Meyer, Schieffeler,

Lovasz and Orru (2021) aver that people need information that is truthful especially in an emergency situation. Messages sent and received must contain quality information to enable rational and enduring decision making.

Traditionally, public need for information in emergency situations has always been filled by the news media, underlining the information function of the media. The fidelity of information emanating from the mainstream media gives guidance to the public in an emergency situation such as flooding, fire disaster, disease outbreak, earth quake, volcanic eruption and conflict, among others. Public confidence in information emanating from the is predicated on the media's principle of objectivity, which encompasses accuracy of facts. To ensure that media content is trusted, Agbese (2008) calls

on media editors to ensure that materials for publications conform to established standards of accuracy of information and respect for public taste. This serves the public good and the medium's interest as well. Safori, Rahman & Mohammed (2016) corroborate that mass media audience is less likely to patronise news they do not deem credible, just like products with low brand equity. Thus, the public, in an emergency situation, is more likely to turn to an information source that is perceived to be credible.

The increased availability of multiple sources of information, especially internet enabled instant media, has given room for fake news especially in emergency situations. For example, the Pan American Health Organisation (2020) refers to fake news in a time of crisis as infodemic. It stresses that social networks have the tendency to increase the volume of information within a short period of time. Such increase of information can come with misinformation, rumour, and sometime outright manipulation of information with doubtful intent.

Mainstream media have devised several ways of checking the spread of fake news. Okoro, Abara, Umagba, Ajonye and Isa (2018) note that news the media process information to ensure authenticity through interpretation and evaluation. This involves careful consideration of the message content, ideas behind the message, and the source of the information. Apart from the traditional means of cross checking facts, Coddington, Molyneux and Lawrence (2014) aver that journalists use the popular social media Twitter to verify claims by political actors which reflects the "scientific" approach to objectivity that underlies the emergent fact-checking genre, by referencing *evidence* for or against the claim by politicians and, in a few cases, rendering an explicit judgment about the validity of the claim.

Public emergencies of whatever kind, like flooding, conflict, disease outbreak, earthquake, among others, bring with them the need for verifiable information. This provides news consumers with the opportunity to increasingly become alert to media messages in order to manage the situation. During periods of emergencies, the creation and sharing of information is usually no longer an exclusive preserve of mainstream media. The tendency to encounter fake news, especially as shared on social media, becomes more palpable and

evident. This paper therefore seeks to understand how the audience deciphers fake news regarding issues during public emergencies. It also examined online presence and individuals' preferred source of online news focusing on platforms that are prone to the spread of fake news during the outbreak of Covid-19. The study also analysed the presence of fake news and individuals' news consumption pattern and how they react to Covid-19 fake news

## I. THE CONCEPT OF FAKE NEWS

The idea of what is currently known as fake news according to Paskin (2018) refers to particular news articles that originate either on mainstream media (online or offline) or social media and have no factual basis, but are presented as facts and not satire. The understanding here is that fake news may be presented as routine coverage of happenings which is not a true representative or reflection of reality. Goyanes & Lavin (2018) further describe the phenomena of fake news as information that is sensationally disseminated under the guise of news reporting. Although fake news is not a new invention in media practice, it has found more footing with the rapid adoption and use of social media for news sharing and consumption.

Social media has accelerated the spread of fake news as noted by Mavridis (2018) that fake news about social or political issues find presence on the social media with tremendous speed. These fake stories or hoaxes are deliberately not to misinform or deceive audiences, though they are sometimes meant to achieve this. Usually, however, these stories are created to influence people's views, push a political agenda or cause confusion and can often be a profitable business for online publishers.

Fake news finds expression in many forms as explained by Muigai (2019) that it may be presented as satire or parody which has no intention to cause harm but has the potential to fool the public. Fake news may also come in the form of false connection where headlines, visuals or captions do not support the content. Muigai (2019) further explains that fake news may manifest in the form of misleading content which may be targeted at framing an issue or an individual in a wrong context. This is closely related to outright false context when genuine content is shared with false contextual information. Genuine sources can also be manipulated by

impostors with false and made-up sources. The doctoring of content such as imageries can deceive the reading public as well.

The circulation of fake news according to Mavridis (2018) can deceive people since their sources are mainly using names and web addresses similar to reputable news organisations. Here, the deliberate act with intent of mischief creation is paramount. In other instances, fake news is produced by mistake, but it might also confuse and mislead audiences. The proliferation of social media as online news sources for the public on current social and political affairs has made it difficult to tell whether stories are credible or not. Information overload and a general lack of understanding of how the internet works, have also contributed to an increase in the number of fake news or hoax stories.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This review is situated around the Audience Reception Theory which is a form of textual analysis that focuses on the scope of negotiation and opposition by the audience. This means that media content in whatever form (book, movie, other creative works) is not simply passively accepted by the audience, but that the reader interprets the meanings of the text based on her or his individual cultural background and life experiences. In essence, the meaning of a text is not inherent within the text itself, but is created within the relationship between the text and the reader. According to Livingstone and Das (2013) is a fundamental approach which assumes that the meaning of a message, including all forms of media message, is not fixed or pre-given but must be interpreted by its recipient. The theory of interpretation and reception is regarded as processes of meaning construction centred on the interaction between texts. Texts are understood to encode a particular "ideal" or "implied" reader, and empirical readers are understood to decode texts in accordance with particular knowledge and interests as shaped by the social context.

Reception theory also emphasises that interpretation should be understood as a collective process, situated in an interpretative community or communities, and divergent among audiences from different communities. In terms of culture, the theory looks at the dynamic interrelations between production and consumption in the production and reproduction of meanings. Situating reception

within broader socio-cultural contexts thus gives insight to broader questions of identity, participation, politics, and power through the exploration of how people make sense of media texts in their daily lives.

Media reception theory looks at patterns of audience interaction with media content. Media audience in this regard is seen as active and capable of interpreting content based on existing knowledge. Aminudin (2018) note that reception analysis theory has the understanding that contextual factors influence the way audiences view or read media. Media reception theory analyse public participation in media with a focus on the depth the actual process in which media discourse is assumed through discourse practices and audience culture.

Understanding the meanings readers' ascribe to fake news on Covid-19 can be situated in the context and perspective of reality. Textual meaning therefore measures media audiences through reception analysis, where it provides a meaning for understanding media texts (in this case fake news on Covid-19) by understanding how media text characters are read by audiences

Many studies, as outlined below, have enumerated the incidents of the prevalence of fake news in different situations. Swire-Thompson and Lazer (2020) outline misinformation on public health as found in online content. Disinformation in this instance thrive because public health is a field in which there are obvious winners and losers, and the losers have significant financial loss at stake, hence disinformation is a coordinated or deliberate effort to knowingly circulate misinformation in order to gain money, power, or reputation. The circulation of such misinformation is chiefly found on different platforms on the internet.

On a different level, Yariv, Boomgaarden, Strömbäck, Vliegenthart, Damstra and Lindgren (2020) aver that fake news may also find space in the mainstream media and it is more than likely that the result of news coverage of fake news in mainstream media is that significant parts of the audience, who did not see the original publication, may internalise the wrong information or at least become less certain regarding the truth. Baron and Crootof (2018) attribute the presence of fake news to the widespread disagreement over what comprises fake news. Merely labelling something as

fake news can itself be considered mere propaganda, thus making it more important that journalists cite sources and show their work. Cross checking to ensure that a piece of news is factual is an age long professional journalism practice. Graves, Nyihan and Reifler (2016) explain that scrutinising information to guard against fake news conforms with journalistic standard practice which constantly brings in innovations that seem to invite professional recognition by visibly performing journalism's democratic role. This is consistent with the rhetoric of media practice which avidly promotes fact checking as a more demanding and valuable form of reporting meant to restore the truth-seeking role of journalism.

News media detection of fake news takes several forms. Parikh and Atrey (2018) highlight some methods to include using linguistic approach and visual presentation which play a huge role in people believing in fake news content. Thus, the news media ensure the authentication of not just language, but images, audio and embedded content. The news media also check the source of news in order to perform source verification and consider the source in evaluating fake news stories. Editors and news managers also use the detection of the tone of a news story to detect fake news. Author credibility check also allows the system to detect a chain of news written by the same author or same group of authors to detect fake news (Parikh & Atrey, 2018).

The sharing of fake news and how individuals react to it varies and depends on the situation. Baptista and Gradim (2020) opine that the belief in fake news is closely related to motivational factors that imply party, political and ideological affiliations. The subtly fake news distorts, manipulates and falsifies facts to make the subject more surreal, bizarre, surprising and controversial, and these aspects motivate the sharing by individual users. Thus, a false story is much more likely to go viral than a real one.

Individuals' dealing with fake news especially in emergency situations like the outbreak of the corona virus epidemic, according to Ferreira and Borges (2020), increases media consumers' susceptibility to false news, especially those who attribute greater credibility to the information they find on social media. Since such consumers do satisfy their information needs through social networks, they

tend to judge themselves well informed and thus without the need to consume news on/from other media. This points to the importance (and the need) of media literacy actions that would provide individuals with the mechanisms of assessing the credibility of information sources. Studies such as López-García, Costa-Sánchez, and Vizoso, (2021) focussed on journalistic fact checking during the pandemic. On the other hand, Baptista and Gradim (2020) looked at individuals' alternative media choice in an emergency situation while the United States Department of Homeland Security (2018) provided a guide on how to counter fake information in time of disasters and emergencies. Not much has been done, to the best of the present research' knowledge, on how individual news consumers fact check fake news especially in times of emergency in order to arrive at news that is considered reliable.

### III METHODOLOGY

In order to adequately probe how individuals respond to fake news, this study conducted online survey. This study's methodology replicated the design by Mavridis (2018) who adopted an online survey of a Facebook group where 100 members were randomly selected. Our design however focuses particular attention to how individuals' fact checks reality in fake news in emergency situations. The online survey for this study was conducted on a group chatting platform of Benue State University, Makurdi known as *BSU ACADEMICS* on Telegram. The platform is open to academic staff of the Benue State University, Makurdi, Nigeria. As at 3<sup>rd</sup> May, 2023, the group had 325 members. Discussions on the platform by members often take cognisance of issues of common national and international interests. News and information pieces are also regularly shared in the group chat.

The sample was drawn from the pool of academic staff on *BSU ACADEMICS* using a confidence level of 95% and confidence interval of 5. Thus with a population of 325 academics on the group chat, the study arrived at a sample of 176 respondents.

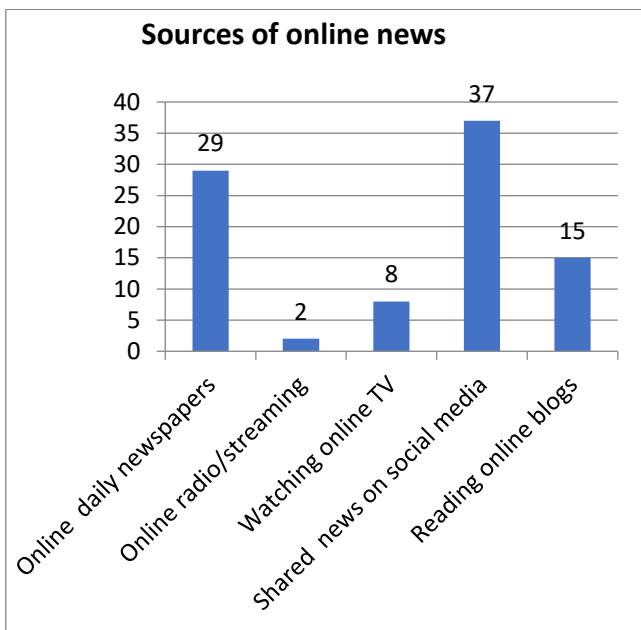
### IV. DATA PRESENTATION

The link to the online survey was posted to academic staff forum of Benue State University,

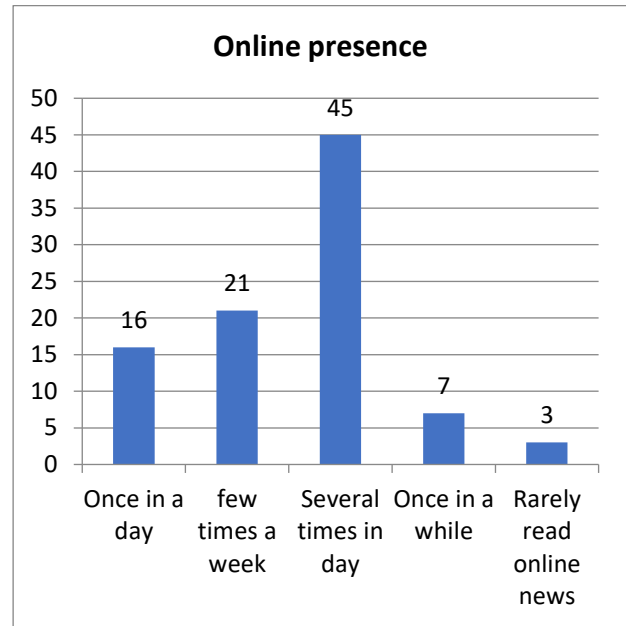
Makurdi, Nigeria between the month of June and July, 2022. The forum is a platform of academic staff of the university, cutting across all faculties. The instrument had a ten item variable and sought among other things to determine sources of online news, and how often they engaged with such sources. It also enumerated individuals' encounters with fake news during the peak period of the Covid-19 pandemic and how such encounter shaped their understanding and reactions to the disease.

**Figure 1:** *Online presence and individuals' preferred source of online news.*

**A) Individual's source of online news**



**B) Online presence**

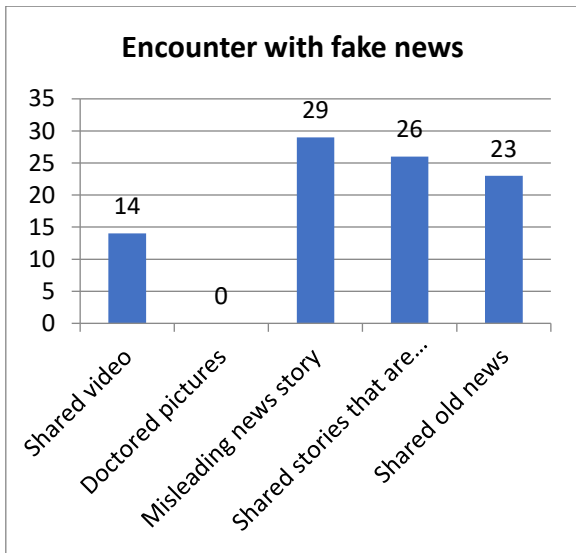


Data from Figure 1A indicates that nearly a half of respondents engaged themselves several times in a day in online activities. This is followed by 22.83% of individuals who go online few times in a week while 17.39% go online once in a day. However, there were individuals who rarely go online standing at 3.26%.

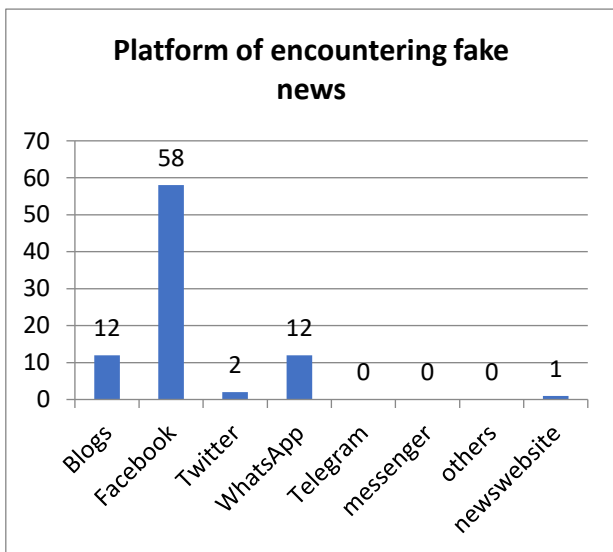
Data in Figure 1B shows that shared news on social media platforms visibly attracts more individuals. This is evident as four in every ten individuals indicated their reliance on this digital medium as their first point of sourcing news. Closely followed were persons who read news directly in online newspapers' website pages. This category accounted for a third of all individuals' online news sources. It is worth noting here that media consumers are paying less direct attention to online streaming of audio or video content. Overall, using media live streaming as source of information account for just about 11% among individuals' preferred source of news. Streaming also fall behind online blogs which attracted 16.48% as a news source.

**Figure 2:** Platform for encountering fake news

**A) Encounter with fake news**



**B) Platform of encountering fake news**



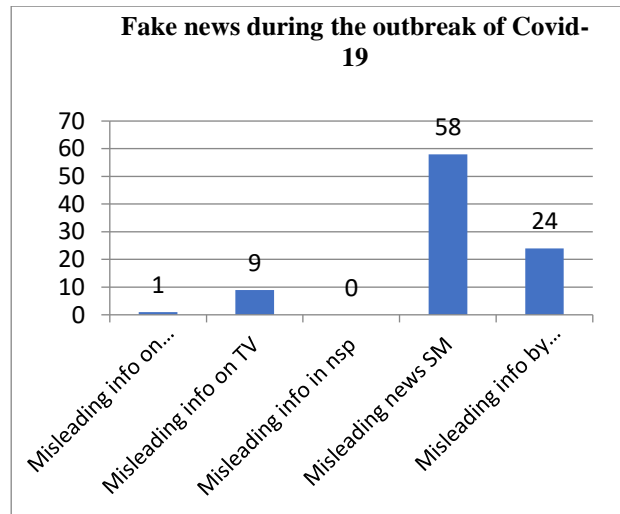
Reliance in online sources for news comes with attendant drawbacks. Data in Figure 2A provide evidence on how individuals encounter fake news. Analysis reveals that at the top of the pyramid are stories that are outright misleading. This accounted for 31.52% while stories that are regarded as false were 28.26%. A quarter of stories encountered by readers online were items that were

reposted to make them look new with a semblance of having a connection to recent issues. Data here also provides an insight into the individuals' perception of what may be considered items of fake news. One such key point of interest is that no respondent made an entry for doctored pictures as fake news but 15.22% considered shared unrelated videos as fake news.

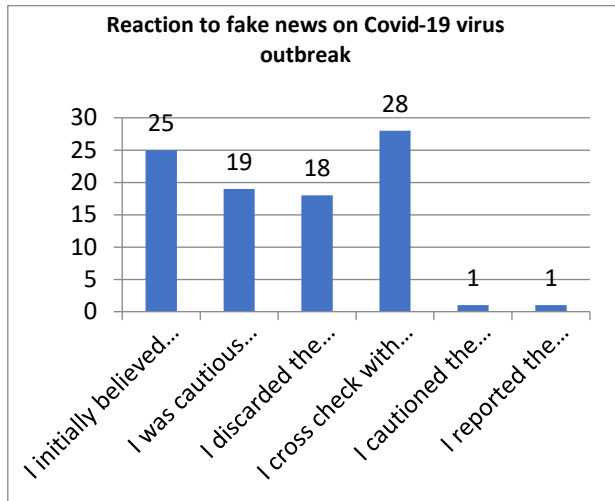
In Figure 2B, data show that online platforms susceptible to holding fake news differ from one person to the other. Facebook was found to have the highest incidences of shared fake news with about seven in every ten persons having encountered fake news on Facebook. This is closely followed by WhatsApp and personal blogs with 13% each. Websites of traditional news media such as radio, television and newspapers were found more reliable as they spread just about 1% of fake news and seen by individuals.

**Figure 3:** Fake news during the outbreak of Covide-19

**A) Fake news during the outbreak of Covid-19**



**B) Reaction to fake news Covid 19 outbreak**



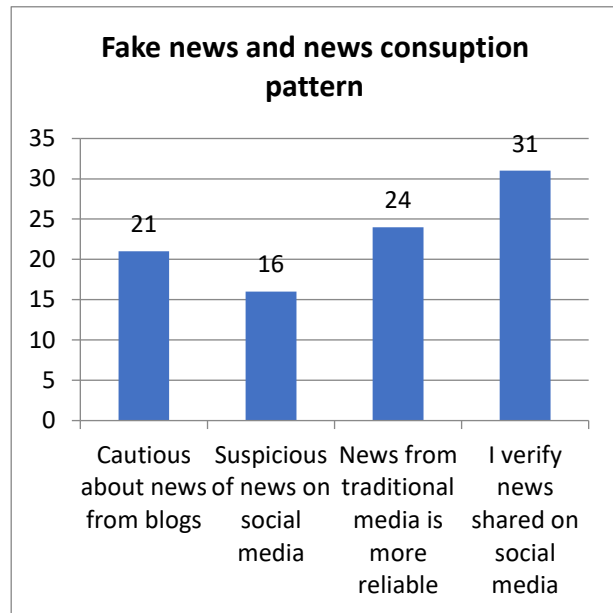
Data in Figure 3A was to ascertain the specific ways in which individuals encountered fake news during the outbreak of Covid-19. The study drew variables such as misleading, unverified and unproven information about the disease. Attention was paid to the medium of sharing fake news about the virus. Result indicates that social media make themselves more amenable to the sharing of misleading, unverified and unproven information about the outbreak of Covid-19. Seven in every 10 fake news items encountered were on social media. Such pieces of information were passed on by more than a quarter of individuals as authentic news. Radio and newspapers accounted for the least of shared fake news with a combine percentage of less than two.

Figure 3B shows individuals' reactions to fake news. A third of respondents surveyed said they deliberately made efforts to authenticate news they got on Corona virus. This was done by crosschecking with other sources to ensure that the information received on the disease was factual and reliable. More than a quarter of persons (27.17%) who encountered fake news on the disease initially believed and shared same with other persons. Other reactions were those who acted cautiously towards emerging information with 20.65% in this category while those who discarded suspected fake news were 19.57%. Although there appeared to be more chances of getting fake news online, news

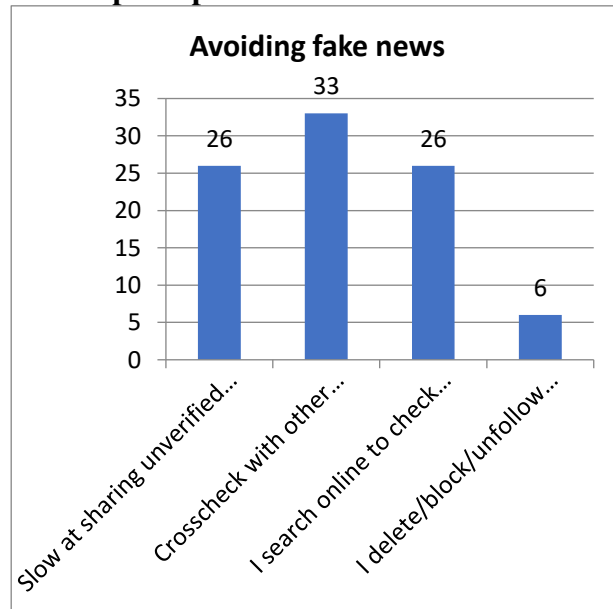
consumers are increasing becoming more cautious of what information they internalise.

**Figure 4:** Fake news and individuals' news consumption pattern

**A) How encounter with fake news shaped**



**B) How individuals avoided fake news consumption pattern**



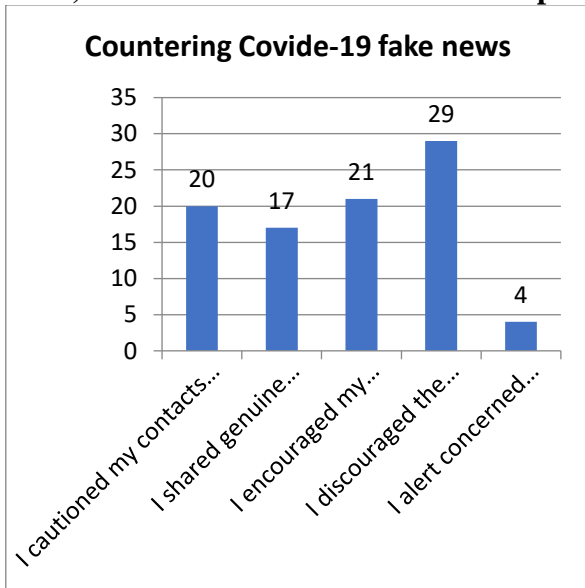
Data in Figure 4A provides insight into how people shaped their news consumption patterns with the chance of encountering fake news. Analysis

shows that 33.70% of news consumers did verify news shared on social media on the Corona virus before they believed same to be true. Result also indicates more than a quarter of the respondents found news from the traditional media more reliable. The Figure also shows online news consumers becoming weary of news content from blogs (22.83) and social media (17.39%).

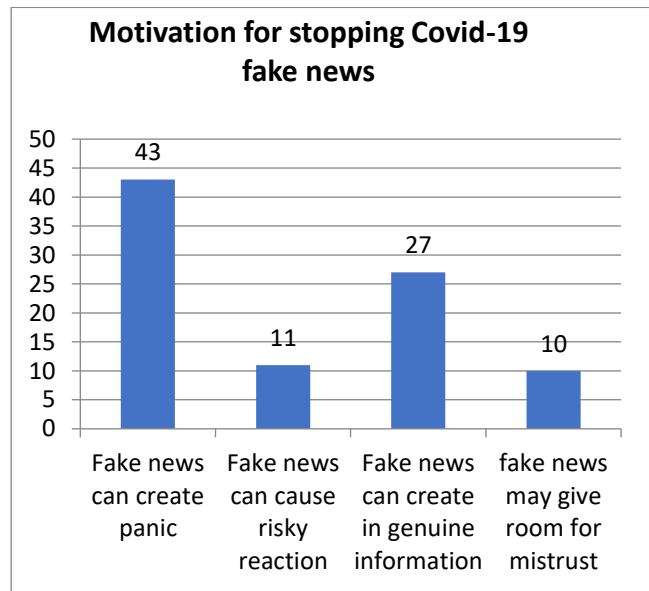
Figure 4B conveys the various strategies used by online news consumers in tracking fake news on the outbreak of Covid-19. They (36.26%) thus avoided believing such fake news in most instances by crosschecking with more reputable media outlets. Other news consumers (28.57%), searched for extra information online in order to get the facts behind suspected fake news items. However, others avoided fake news on Corona virus by being slow at sharing such unverified news items.

**Figure 5: Reactions to Covid-19 fake news**

**A) How individuals countered the spread**



**B) Motivation for halting Covid-19 fake news of fake news about Covid-19**



Insights into how news consumers helped counter the spread of fake news about Covid-19 are drawn from Figure 5A. Data show that more than a third of respondents discouraged the re-sharing of fake news about the disease. Other actions taken include, alerting other readers that this and that piece of information is fake information while 23% of the respondents alerted persons in their contacts/phonebook to watch out for potential fake news item(s) on Covid-19. It was noticeable from the data that not many persons sought redress on fake news as only 4 % of respondents found it convenient to alert authorities concerned about the existence of fake news on the pandemic. On the whole, however, results show that news consumers were actively becoming aware of the prevalence of fake news on the pandemic and indirectly devised ways of dispelling same.

Figure 5B rationalises the direct/indirect actions taken by readers to dispel fake news on the outbreak of Covid-19. Majority of the news consumers (47.25%) justified their actions against fake news as being predicated on fake news' potentiality of creating panic in the general population. Other news consumers (29.67) were prompted to take action against fake news because they believed that fake news was capable of creating doubt in people over genuine information.



## V. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This study was designed to provide insights into how individuals handled fake news during the outbreak of Covid 19. From the analysed data it is evident that online spaces are increasingly becoming a primary means of sourcing information by individuals for their daily information needs. Although the frequency of online engagement differs, only an insignificant fraction of the public hardly goes online. More people go online looking for news. Such news may be derived from shared information on social media news feeds by individuals, groups and organisations. This study also shows that four in every ten individuals rely on the social media as their first point of sourcing news.

The dependence on online sources for news has proven to be a major catalyst for fake news. As this study shows, misleading information was most prevalent during the peak period of Covid-19. Apart from misleading information, coupled with stories with false information, the reposting of old stories that had little or no bearing on new happenings were actively encountered by news consumers.

We also measured specific ways by which individuals encountered fake news during the outbreak of Covid-19. Findings show that misleading, unverified and unproven information about the disease were the major ways fake news found expression in news content. Attention was paid to the medium of sharing fake news about the virus. Result indicate that the social media make themselves more for the sharing of misleading, unverified and unproven information about the outbreak of Covid-19. Such pieces of information were passed on by more than a quarter of individuals to other persons as authentic news. Radio and newspapers accounted for the least shared fake news.

Finding for this study provides understanding on how individuals navigate through the quagmire of fake news which agrees with Safori, Rahman and Mohammed (2016) aver that mass media audience is less likely to patronise news they do not deem credible, just like products with low brand equity. This study further shows that not only do news consumer discard fake news in an emergency

situation such as the Covid-19 pandemic, they deliberately made effort to authenticate news on Corona virus. This was done by checking with other sources to ensure that information received on the disease was factual and reliable. Although some news audience had initially taken in unverified news and shared same, subsequent reactions were to act cautiously towards emerging information and discard same when elements of fake news were discovered in such information. It is evident that a complete elimination of fake news may be unrealistic, however, news consumers are increasingly becoming aware of the consequences of online fake news and are becoming more cautious of what information they internalise.

This study has also provided exposure to how readers contend with the availability of unsolicited fake news. Evidence here revealed that online news consumers are more likely to verify news shared on social media before believing same to be true. Audience members are actively becoming aware of the need to have factual information. That need is filled in with news sources from core traditional news media sources such as radio, television and newspapers.

It has been established in this study that online news consumers are becoming weary of content from blogs and social media during emergencies. This tallies with the Pan American Health Organisation (2020) in its description of fake news in a time of crisis as infodemic which stresses that social networks have the tendency to increase the volume of information within a short period of time. Such increase of information can come with misinformation, rumour, and sometimes outright manipulation of information with doubtful intent. Thus, our study reveals that online news consumers try to avoid fake news in most instances by crosschecking with more reputable media outlets. Others news consumers use the array of online sources to search for extra information online in order to get facts behind suspected fake news and information. Apart from getting additional factual information, news consumers are slow at sharing unverified news items.

Reality checks by news consumers of fake news especially about Covid-19 come in the form of conscious efforts from the audience members to discourage the re-sharing of fake news about the disease. This is in cognisance with the Media

Reception Theory which looks at patterns of audience interaction with media content. Media audience in this regard is seen as active and capable of interpreting content based on existing knowledge. Aminudin (2018) note that reception analysis theory has the understanding that contextual factors influence the way audiences view or read media. Media reception theory analyse public participation in media with a focus on the depth the actual process in which media discourse is assumed through discourse practices and audience culture.

Understanding the meanings readers' ascribe to fake news on Covid-19 can be situated in the context and perspective of reality. Textual meaning therefore measures media audiences through reception analysis, where it provides a meaning for understanding media texts (in this case fake news on Covid-19) by understanding how media text characters are read by audiences. Other actions taken include the alerting of other readers to fake content. Active news consumers alerted persons within their contact group(s) to watch out for potential fake news. This study however revealed that not too many persons seek redress on fake news by reporting offending accounts to concerned authorities. On the whole, this study establishes that news consumers are actively aware of the prevalence of fake news and are indirectly devising means to dispel same.

This study also established that news consumers were prompted to caution people about fake news regarding Covid-19 owing to the fact that fake news has the potential of creating panic in the general population. This corroborates Torpan, Hansson, Rhinard, Kazemekaityte, Jukarainen, Meyer, Schieffellers, Lovasz and Orru (2021) that during emergency situations, people need information that is truthful. The ground norm is that messages must be of unquestionable standard to enable the general public to make informed decisions and avoid risky reaction.

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has the potential of creating panic in the general population. This corroborates Torpan, Hansson, Rhinard, Kazemekaityte, Jukarainen, Meyer, Schiefflers, Lovasz and Orru (2021) that during emergency situations, people need information that is truthful. The ground norm is that messages must be of unquestionable standard to enable the general public to make informed decisions and avoid risky reaction.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Instant online sharing of news and information especially during public emergency may serve as harbinger of online fake news and distorted information. This becomes potent because a significant number of the public are turning to online sources for their daily news needs. Although fake news hardly finds its presence in traditional core news media, they readily find perching ground on blogs and social media. Individuals are not oblivious of the presence of fake news especially during emergencies such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Checking to ensure they do not internalise unwholesome information are done by way of crosschecking with other credible sources and then discourage the spread of fake news as it can create panic and distort genuine information.

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