"I Know it is Fake News But I Share": Motivations For Deliberate Fake News Sharing Among 20 Young People in Lagos State, Nigeria

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Abstract:

This study explores how young undergraduate students in Nigeria, aged 18-24 years, identify fake news, as well as their motivations for deliberately sharing news they identify as fake. The study employed a qualitative methodology. Data collection involved unstructured interviews with 20 participants who admitted that they engaged with fake news as deliberate sharers. The data were analysed using thematic analysis to identify patterns in fake news detection and dissemination. Findings from the study show that the participants rely on cues such as exaggerated content and distorted images to detect fake news. Contrary to prior research, findings from this study also show that some of the participants deliberately share fake news out of a sense of civic duty, aiming to inform others, while others were mostly motivated by financial gain. This study extends the literature by distinguishing between the behaviours of deliberate fake news sharers and passive consumers. The findings suggest that there is a strategic and deliberate use of exaggeration and social media for misinformation spread among deliberate fake news sharers. In addition, the findings of this study add a fourth construct which is 'financial gratification' to the existing 3 major constructs of the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT).

Keywords: Fake news; digital media engagement; motivations for fake news sharing; Uses and Gratifications Theory.

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of fake news has emerged as a significant challenge in the digital age and one that shapes public discourse and influences societal outcomes. While fake news is often associated with misinformation, propaganda, or fabricated content disseminated for profit or political ends (Wardle, 2017; Gelfert, 2018), its deliberate sharing by individuals remains a somewhat underexplored area of research, especially in the African context. This study addresses this gap by examining the motivations driving deliberate fake news sharing among young Nigerians, adopting the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) as a guiding framework.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) posits that media users are active participants who seek out content to satisfy specific psychological or social needs, such as information-seeking, entertainment, or social interaction (Katz et al., 1973). In the context of fake news, UGT provides a lens for analysing deliberate engagement with and dissemination of false information. Recent studies have highlighted how motivations for media use, including gratification through financial rewards or sociopolitical influence, extend the traditional constructs of UGT (Chen & Hong, 2021; Uzuegbunam & Ononiwu, 2023; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019). This study builds on this foundation by introducing a new construct—financial gratification—specific to the behaviours of deliberate fake news sharers.

Nigeria's unique demographic and sociocultural dynamics amplify the significance of fake news as a research focus. With over 65 million young people aged 10 to 24, comprising approximately 33% of the population (UNICEF, 2022), and rising internet penetration, which increased from 26% in 2018 to 38% in 2022 (Sasu, 2024), social media has become deeply integrated into everyday communication. However, the rapid spread of fake news on these platforms has been shaped by sociocultural factors such as political affiliations, ethnic identities, and religious beliefs, which influence individuals' engagement with misinformation (Oloruntobi, 2023).

Existing studies predominantly focus on accidental fake news sharing (Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2019), leaving the motivations of deliberate sharers inadequately examined. This research seeks to address this gap by focusing on young Nigerians who knowingly share fake news. It situates this behaviour within a theoretical argument, drawing connections between individual motivations, the affordances of social media, and the sociocultural environment in which fake news thrives.

This study pursues the following objectives:

1. To explore how young Nigerians detect fake news on social media.
2. To investigate the motivations behind deliberate fake news sharing among young Nigerians.

By eliciting findings through the adoption of a qualitative research approach which sought interview responses from 20 undergraduate students in Lagos State, Nigeria, this study contributes to an emerging area of fake news research. It advances the theoretical understanding of deliberate fake news sharing and offers practical insights for addressing the spread of misinformation in Nigeria's rapidly evolving digital landscape.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Audience Identification of Fake News

Uzuegbunam and Ononiwu (2023) have highlighted a variety of strategies used by audience to identify fake news. Still, there study may not have adequately addressed the nuances of individuals actively spreading false information. Uzuegbunam and Ononiwu (2023) found that some young, educated individuals in Nigeria perceive fake news as exaggerated and primarily spread through social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp. However, while the findings of the study conducted by Uzuegbunam and Ononiwu (2023) capture the public's perception of fake news, they fail to distinguish between those who are merely consumers and those who may contribute to its dissemination.

Uzuegbunam and Ononiwu (2023) suggest that fake news can often appear unrealistic or absurd, particularly when linked to familiar scenarios, which is assessed through the "commonsense test" — a process in which people judge the logical coherence of information. Although this approach offers insight

into how some individuals distinguish fake news from credible information, it remains unclear how individuals who intentionally share fake news perceive these cues. Moreover, Uzuegbunam and Ononiwu (2023) reported that participants view nearly all news originating from social media as inherently suspicious, assuming that information on platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook is likely false. This finding aligns with broader concerns about the credibility of social media platforms (Miller et al., 2024; Shahbazi & Bunker, 2024). Uzuegbunam and Ononiwu (2023) also emphasise that audiences usually think that fake news is deliberately created to deceive the public, a view supported by other scholars (Gelfert, 2018; Wardle, 2019). However, Gelfert (2018) and Wardle (2019) also did not look at the views of deliberate fake news sharers. This distinction is critical for understanding whether these intermediaries employ the same strategies for identifying falsehoods as casual news consumers or have developed unique methods for differentiating between different types of fake content.

Further complicating the discourse, Wagner and Boczkowski (2019) found that people often rely on their social capital, drawing on personal knowledge and experience to verify the authenticity of news. This method presumes that all audiences are interested in validating information. Yet, in the context of those who intentionally share falsehoods, personal experience might be used to craft more persuasive fake stories, rather than to identify and avoid them. Thus, existing literature seems to lack specificity when addressing how individuals who spread fake news navigate their detection strategies (Wagner & Boczkowski, 2019)

While current research, including that of Uzuegbunam and Ononiwu (2023), highlight that audiences often identify fake news in varied ways, including contrasting it with information from reputable sources and observing the lack of journalistic standards, this observation is generally framed from the perspective of those seeking to avoid misinformation. It does not address the detection mechanisms used by individuals who may already be familiar with the hallmarks of fake news but choose to propagate it for specific reasons. Therefore, these limitations in the existing body of literature prompt the need to explore a different aspect of fake news identification: how individuals who deliberately share fake news themselves identify fake news. This gap in knowledge leads to the research question: "How do young Nigerians who deliberately share fake news identify fake news?"

Motivations for Fake News Sharing

Hirst (2017) posits that commercial and ideological motivations are the primary drivers behind the production and spread of fake news. For example, some individuals create and spread fake news to attract audiences and generate advertising revenue, as demonstrated by the case of the Macedonian operation during the 2016 US elections

(Subramanian, 2017; Silverman, 2016). While these findings are valuable, they are limited in that they mainly address large-scale operations and professional creators of fake news and tend to neglect the exploration of the motivations of smaller-scale actors, such as students or everyday social media users.

On the other hand, the ideological motivations for spreading fake news have been linked to efforts to manipulate public opinion or discredit political opponents (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). An illustrative case is the false claim that Pope Francis endorsed Donald Trump during the 2016 elections, which was widely shared despite its blatant inaccuracy (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). However, these studies largely focus on Western contexts and politically charged scenarios, which may not be directly applicable to the motivations of youth in other regions, such as Nigeria. Moreover, they do not consider how individuals aware that the news they share is false might rationalise or reframe these ideological motivations. Chadwick and Vaccari (2019) further complicate the discussion by highlighting that individuals with left-leaning ideologies and strong support for labor unions are more likely to share false information. Petersen et al. (2018) add that partisan goals, such as rallying support or inciting dissent, drive misinformation. While these findings suggest that sharing fake news is a form of political participation, the studies fail to address the potential overlap between ideological

and personal motivations—particularly when those spreading the news are conscious of its falsity.

Beyond ideological drivers, psychological motivations play a substantial role in the spread of false information. Duffy et al. (2019) argue that people share news to enhance their self-image, build relationships, and manage uncertainty. Whether true or false, sharing news can thus be seen as a social activity that fosters cohesion and trust. However, such studies often do not distinguish between the intentional and unintentional sharing of fake news. This lack of differentiation is a critical oversight, as the rationale for sharing fake news knowingly might differ significantly from the rationale for sharing it unknowingly.

Contextual factors also shape the spread of fake news. For example, in African contexts, such as Nigeria and Kenya, people often share fake news to appear knowledgeable, enhance social status, or fulfil what they perceive as a civic duty (Chakrabarti et al., 2018). Similarly, Wasserman and Morales (2019) found that declining trust in the media is associated with increased misinformation sharing. These studies provide valuable regional insights but do not delve deeply into the particular motivations of subgroups, such as university students, who might share fake news for a unique set of reasons, including social pressures or financial gain.

Motivations for sharing misinformation also vary according to the specific social media dynamics. For example, a study by Chadwick and Vaccari

(2019) on British audiences revealed that people often share news to express emotions, inform others, and gauge others' opinions. This suggests that emotional expression and social engagement are key drivers. However, the study's focus on British audiences limits its applicability to African youth, who may face different social and cultural dynamics when engaging on platforms like WhatsApp or Facebook.

In the Nigerian context, Uzuegbunam and Ononiwu (2023) observed that social media users often spread false information for financial gain, primarily through blogging. However, their study does not clarify whether these individuals fully know that the content they share is false. This omission is crucial because the distinction between those who knowingly share fake news and those who unknowingly can lead to entirely different implications for intervention strategies.

Thus, while previous research offers broad explanations for why people share misinformation, it does not adequately address the specific motivations of young individuals who knowingly engage in spreading false information in the African context. This gap in the literature leads to the research question: "What underlying motivations drive undergraduate students in Nigeria to share news on social media, even when they recognise it as fake?" Answering this question will help elucidate the complex interplay of social, psychological, and contextual factors that influence deliberate misinformation sharing among this group.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) serves as the theoretical foundation for this study, providing a lens through which to understand how individuals actively engage with media content to satisfy their needs and achieve specific gratifications (Yadav et al., 2024). The theory was initially developed by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1973), and it suggests that audiences are not passive consumers of media; rather, they make conscious choices about what media to use and how to use it, depending on their personal motivations, needs, and desires (Katz et al., 1973).

The Uses and Gratifications Theory is built on the premise that media users seek out content based on individual needs, which can be categorised into three main constructs: information-seeking, personal identity, and social interaction (Katz et al., 1973). The information-seeking aspect suggests that the audience consumes content to stay informed or verify information, while the personal identity construct suggests that the audience consume content to stay informed or verify information, while the personal identity construct suggests that the audience uses media to reinforce values and beliefs (Katz et al., 1973). In addition, the social interaction construct suggests that individuals engage with media to connect, influence, or fulfil social roles (Katz et al., 1973).

In the study context, the UGT is particularly useful for analysing how individuals identify and engage with fake news, whether as consumers or deliberate sharers. It suggests that media users are goal-oriented and utilise specific content based on their expectations of what that content will provide. This perspective shifts the focus from the characteristics of the media itself to the users' motivations and the outcomes they seek (Egede & Chuks-Nwosu, 2013). For instance, individuals may engage with fake news content to fulfill various psychological and social needs, such as entertainment, social interaction, surveillance, or even a sense of empowerment through the manipulation of information (Katz et al., 1973). The application of UGT in this study helps explain the different ways in which individuals interact with fake news; the emphasis is on the active role of users in selecting and evaluating information. For example, the theory can explain why some individuals choose to identify and avoid fake news (gratification from acquiring accurate information). In contrast, others might deliberately share fake news (gratification from influencing others or achieving social capital). Thus, the UGT allows for a nuanced understanding of how motivations shape the identification and sharing of fake news.

The emphasis of UGT on the active role of media users in selecting, evaluating, and disseminating content (Katz et al., 1973) is crucial for understanding the dual roles observed in this study—those of consumers and deliberate sharers of fake news. While many studies treat fake news recipients as passive victims of misinformation, UGT allows for a more complex analysis, recognising that some users might knowingly and strategically engage with fake news content to achieve specific outcomes. Thus, the UGT also helps identify how and why users detect fake news and shed light on why some might choose to propagate it, despite being aware of its inaccuracy.

IV. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the motivations behind disseminating misleading information among young people in Nigeria. Qualitative research allows for an in-depth examination of phenomena through non-numerical data, emphasising interpretive and contextual understanding (Aydogdu, 2023). This approach was selected to comprehensively analyse the underlying factors influencing the spread of fake news among the target population (Potthoff et al., 2023).

Participants

Twenty undergraduate students in Lagos State, Nigeria, aged 18–24 years, were recruited for this study. The selection of students was deliberate, as this demographic represents a significant proportion of Nigeria's digitally active population, with young people being the primary users of social media and more likely to engage with online content, including fake news (UNICEF, 2022). Lagos State was chosen for its reputation as one of Nigeria's most

metropolitan States, known for its diverse demographic drawn from across the country, thereby providing a rich and varied sample reflective of the country's sociocultural landscape (Osho & Ojumu, 2024).

Participants were selected using a snowball sampling technique, starting with a referral from a trusted contact of the researcher. To ensure that respondents were genuinely engaged in disseminating misleading information, a two-step verification process was employed. Firstly, participants were required to self-report their behaviour of deliberately sharing fake news during initial recruitment. Secondly, during pre-interview screening, respondents were asked to provide specific examples of fake news they had shared and to explain their motivations for doing so. This approach ensured the inclusion of individuals whose behaviour aligned with the study's focus.

The sample size of 20 participants was determined to achieve data saturation, the point at which no new themes or information emerged during data collection and analysis (Mwita, 2022). The inclusion of students who actively engaged in spreading misleading information ensured the relevance and depth of insights generated, making the findings directly applicable to understanding the motivations for deliberate fake news sharing within this critical demographic.

Procedure

Data was collected through unstructured in-depth interviews, which lasted between 25 to 50 minutes each. Due to logistical constraints, interviews were conducted online via Zoom, allowing for recording and transcription. An interview guide with open-ended questions was used to explore participants' perceptions, attitudes, and experiences related to sharing fake news. The guide was designed to elicit detailed narratives about the identification and motivations for sharing misinformation. Notes were also taken during the interviews to supplement the recordings.

To ensure thorough data collection, follow-up communications reminded participants of the interviews. Initial reminders were sent via email and followed by direct messages to confirm participation and address technical issues. During the interviews, a structured approach was taken to accommodate participants' schedules and ensure compliance.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using a thematic approach, as Braun et al. (2022) outlined. The analysis involved several stages: familiarisation with the data, identifying and reviewing themes, and defining and naming these themes. The process began with an initial reading of the interview

transcripts to deeper understanding of the data. Themes were identified by grouping similar codes and reviewing them to ensure they accurately represented the data. Each theme was then given a descriptive name that captured its essence. Quotes from participants were used to illustrate and support the identified themes.

Ethics

Participants were fully briefed about the study's purpose, and informed consent was obtained prior to their involvement. To ensure anonymity, participants were assigned unique codes instead of using their names, and any identifying information was excluded from the data. Confidentiality was maintained by securely storing data on encrypted devices, accessible only to the researcher. Additionally, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences, fostering trust and compliance with ethical guidelines.

V. DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION

Identification of Fake News

Participants shared various ways they identify fake news, which reflects their personal needs and gratifications related to information consumption. During data coding, the following sub-themes emerged: exaggerated content, divergence from credible news media, social media content, and distorted images.

Exaggerated Content

Two participants indicated they easily identify fake news because it often contains exaggerated content. For example, Participant 2 stated:

"Fake news often includes content that we all know is exaggerated or does not make sense in any way… Ofcourse…For instance, you hear that over 1000 people died somewhere, and you know that this is not possible… Where I stay in my home town, there are not many people there… So you can't tell me that 2000 people or so died here. How possible? Where are they from? So, when you see such exaggerated things, you feel that it is fake." (Participant 2)

Similarly, another participant mentioned:

"Yes…When a story is sensationalised with exaggerated claims or hyperbolic language, it often indicates an attempt to manipulate or grab attention rather than deliver accurate information… We know all these… Ridiculous things attract people… So we apply them…" (Participant 5)

The findings from the study reveal that participants often identify fake news through the recognition of exaggerated or sensationalised content. The responses of Participants 2 and 5 demonstrate that exaggerated claims are a key indicator that the information is unreliable or fabricated. This aligns with existing literature, such as Uzuegbunam and Ononiwu (2023), who observed that young, educated Nigerians perceive fake news as often containing unrealistic or absurd elements. However, the current study extends this understanding by providing insights directly from individuals who are deliberate contributors to fake

news dissemination rather than just passive consumers.

Exaggeration as a detection strategy suggests a reliance on a "commonsense test" — a cognitive process whereby individuals judge the plausibility of information based on logical coherence and personal knowledge. Participants 2 and 5 refer to the implausibility of specific details, such as an implausible death toll in a sparsely populated area or hyperbolic language. This observation corresponds with the assertions of Uzuegbunam and Ononiwu (2023) that people use personal knowledge and contextual awareness to evaluate information. However, this detection cue might have different implications depending on whether the individual is a deliberate fake news sharer. For those who only consume fake news, exaggerated content is a straightforward signal to dismiss the information. Yet, for deliberate sharers, this recognition might serve a different purpose. Instead of dismissing such content, they may seem to use exaggeration to craft narratives that manipulate their audience, and this is reflected in the comments of Participant 5 that, "Ridiculous things attract people… So we apply them…". This distinction is crucial because it points to the fact that deliberate sharers are not simply misinformed or unable to distinguish real from fake content; rather, they seem to be fully aware of these cues and choose to use them strategically.

Divergence from Credible News Media Content

Some participants identified fake news by comparing it with content from news sources they consider credible. For example, Participant 3 noted:

"I know several factual sources… so I can tell which news is fake… Fake news always presents something different from what reputable news organisations such as Channels, Arise, or TVC would say." (Participant 3)

Another participant added:

"Fake news deviates significantly from what I've seen or heard from trusted sources. If a story contradicts established facts or widely reported information, it's a sign for me… For instance, when there was news that President Buhari had died… It was different from what credible media houses were saying. No credible media house carried the news…" (Participant 4).

The findings that participants identify fake news by comparing it with information from credible sources echo key themes in existing literature on fake news detection highlighting a nuanced understanding of how young Nigerians navigate a complex media environment. Participants 3 and 4 emphasised the importance of cross-referencing questionable news with reports from trusted news organisations, suggesting that familiarity with reputable sources is a significant factor in their ability to identify misinformation. This observation aligns with Uzuegbunam and Ononiwu (2023), who note that audiences often rely on their knowledge of credible outlets, such as traditional news media, to validate the authenticity of online content.

Participant 3's reference to "factual sources" and Participant 4's emphasis on "established facts" suggest that young Nigerians actively use verification strategies when encountering potentially false information. This aligns with Wagner and Boczkowski's (2019) findings that audiences often draw upon their own social capital and personal knowledge to determine the reliability of news content. However, unlike the participants in Wagner and Boczkowski's study, who focus on personal networks and social experiences, Participants 3 and 4 appear to prioritise institutional credibility. Their reliance on mainstream media channels like Channels, Arise, and TVC indicates a perception that these outlets adhere to higher journalistic standards compared to social media platforms such as WhatsApp or Facebook, which are often associated with misinformation (Uzuegbunam & Ononiwu, 2023).

The comments of Participant 3 and Participant 4 highlight the importance of contextual awareness and familiarity with local media ecosystems in identifying fake news. For example, the reference of Participant 4 to the news of President Buhari's death being absent from reputable outlets is not just a matter of cross-referencing but also of understanding the news landscape well enough to know what would typically be covered by these outlets. This ability to contextualise information echoes Uzuegbunam and Ononiwu's (2023) concept of the "commonsense test," where people rely on their understanding of what constitutes typical news coverage to judge the

veracity of a story. However, the current study contributes a critical nuance by suggesting that deliberate sharers of fake news might selectively apply this familiarity. If individuals are motivated to spread fake news, their deep familiarity with the local news context could enable them to produce false narratives that seem plausible enough to escape immediate detection by less discerning audiences. In this sense, familiarity with credible sources does not necessarily prevent the spread of fake news; it might instead enhance the ability of deliberate sharers to craft content that bypasses superficial credibility checks.

Social Media as a Source of Fake News

Several participants indicated that most fake news originates from social media. Participant 3, who mentioned the fake news about Nigeria's President Buhari's death, explained:

"Of course… Fake news is mostly found on social media. You know I mentioned the fake news that President Buhari had died… It spread widely on social media and WhatsApp, and none of the well-known media houses carried it… Even when Junior Pope died, a lot of fake news was emanating on Facebook… If it was real, you would have seen the news across many big media establishments…" (Participant 3)

Another participant emphasised:

"Social media such as Facebook and Whatsapp is the main place for fake news due to its viral nature and lack of stringent fact-checking mechanisms…We use it because it helps us to spread our kind of content very quickly" (Participant 8)

The finding that social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp are perceived as primary sources of fake news aligns with, but also complicates, existing literature on the dissemination and detection of misinformation. Participants 3 and 8's statements that fake news "mostly originates from social media" and spreads due to the lack of "stringent fact-checking mechanisms" support the conclusions of Uzuegbunam and Ononiwu (2023) that social media platforms are considered inherently suspicious and unreliable by audiences in Nigeria. However, while existing research emphasises this perception of distrust, it falls short in distinguishing how this view impacts passive consumers versus active disseminators of fake content. This distinction is crucial for understanding the broader implications of social media's role in the propagation of misinformation.

Participant 3's reference to the false news of President Buhari's death circulating widely on social media platforms aligns with the findings of Uzuegbunam and Ononiwu (2023) that audiences often view information originating from platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp as suspect. This view is echoed in broader studies (such as Miller et al., 2024; Shahbazi & Bunker, 2024) that highlight the perception of social media as a breeding ground for false information due to its low entry barriers and the speed at which content spreads.

While existing research such as Uzuegbunam and Ononiwu (2023) emphasises the distrust of social media platforms among Nigerian audiences, it does not differentiate between those who view social media as a source of unreliable information and those who use it strategically to disseminate fake news. This omission is critical, as the motivations and behaviours of deliberate fake news sharers are likely to differ from those of passive consumers. For instance, Participant 8's assertion that Facebook and WhatsApp are the "main places for fake news" due to the absence of stringent fact-checking mechanisms could be interpreted differently by individuals seeking to spread misinformation deliberately. Instead of viewing this absence as a flaw, they tend to see it as an opportunity, as reflected in the views of Participant 8, "We use it because it helps us to spread our kind of content very quickly". From this perspective, deliberate sharers might actively choose social media platforms precisely because these sites lack oversight and provide an ideal environment for spreading false content rapidly.

Distorted Images

Participants also identified fake news through distorted images, which they believe are used to manipulate narratives and deceive audiences. One participant whose views captured the views of other participants in this regard noted:

"One way I identify fake news is by scrutinising the images accompanying the story. Distorted or digitally altered images often serve as red flags for potential misinformation. I pay close attention to inconsistencies in lighting, shadows, and proportions, which can indicate manipulation." (Participant 3)

While the literature generally agrees on the role of visuals in spreading fake news, there is a notable divergence regarding the public's ability to identify such manipulation. Studies like Wardle (2019) and Gelfert (2018) seem to suggest that the public is largely unaware or unequipped to recognise sophisticated fake news, especially given the increasing sophistication of deepfakes and other digital tools. Yet, Participant 3's detailed account suggests a higher level of visual literacy than typically reported, indicating that some segments of the population are actively honing skills to detect visual inconsistencies. This discrepancy between the literature and the findings could be attributed to differences in sample populations; the participants in this study may have higher digital literacy than the average user, or they may have had specific experiences that sensitised them to visual manipulation.

Participant 3's approach to identifying fake news through image scrutiny also touches on a significant, yet seemingly underexplored, aspect of misinformation research: the cognitive load involved in visual fact-checking. While literature suggests that identifying fake news can be cognitively demanding and that the audience can easily be deceived by fake news (Gelfert, 2018), Participant 3's detailed examination suggests a willingness and ability to engage with fake news in a sophisticated way. This participant can "pay close attention to inconsistencies in lighting, shadows, and proportions, which can indicate manipulation" and this indicates a high tolerance for cognitive effort when evaluating visual content in fake news. The deliberate fake news sharers seem to be sophisticated.

Motivations for Sharing Fake News

The researcher explored why participants who distinguish between factual and fake news still share fake news. The study identified two primary motivations: a sense of civic duty and financial motivation.

Sense of Civic Duty

Two participants mentioned sharing fake news to keep others informed and using their platforms to highlight false information. Participant 4 explained:

"I know it is fake news but I share. I share the news I identify as fake… It's strange, right? I share because people need to know the facts. So my page is sometimes like a fact-check page… I place the false news side-by-side with the factual information… I tell people this is fake, but this is the factual news… If you check Africa Check, for instance, they include the fake news marked 'fake news' and then attach the verified information beside it…" (Participant 4)

Another participant noted:

"Fake news is a menace that needs to be stopped in Nigeria, and one way to do this is to highlight it… For instance, last year, when there was fake news that Peter Obi had won the election with a particular amount of votes, I had to screenshot some of this fake news and write the factual information under it… I told people, look, this is fake news… Peter Obi is not winning. Look at the information from TVC and INEC; Peter Obi has won 11 states so far, not 18 as stated in this false news…

Look, the news has no source. Look at the figures… How many registered voters do we have? Does it mean the other participants are not getting any votes even in their stronghold states?" (Participant 3)

The findings of this study, revealed that participants share fake news out of a sense of civic duty, present a nuanced departure from traditional conceptualisations of misinformation dissemination. Existing literature largely categorises motivations for spreading fake news into commercial, ideological, and psychological drivers (Hirst, 2017; Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Duffy et al., 2019). This study's emphasis on civic duty as a rationale for spreading fake news introduces a unique dimension to the discussion, as it suggests that individuals may engage in this behaviour not out of malevolent intentions or for personal gain but rather to serve a perceived societal purpose.

The findings on civic duty align partially with research by Chakrabarti et al. (2018), who highlight that, in African contexts, individuals may share misinformation to appear knowledgeable and fulfill a sense of duty to inform others. Similarly, the emphasis on using social media platforms to highlight inaccuracies mirrors Duffy et al.'s (2019) assertion that people share news—whether true or false—to manage uncertainty and enhance their self-image. By positioning themselves as fact-checkers or truth-tellers, some of the participants in this study seek to establish a role for themselves within the information ecosystem as people who can help in the identification of fake news.

The sense of civic duty motivation contrasts with the ideological and commercial drivers emphasised in prior research (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Hirst, 2017). While ideological motivations, such as influencing public opinion or discrediting political opponents, are key drivers in Western contexts, the participants here highlight a commitment to countering misinformation rather than promoting a particular agenda. For instance, the efforts of Participant 3 to debunk false information about Peter Obi's electoral performance demonstrate a desire to correct public misconceptions rather than manipulate political outcomes. This contrasts with studies that emphasise using fake news to serve partisan goals, such as rallying support or inciting dissent (Petersen et al., 2018). Furthermore, while commercial motivations—such as generating advertising revenue—are significant in large-scale fake news dissemination efforts, such as the Macedonian operation during the 2016 US elections (Subramanian, 2017; Silverman, 2016), some participants in this study are not driven by financial incentives in the context of civic duty. The absence of commercial gain as a motivation differentiates these participants from professional disseminators of fake news. It suggests that smaller-scale actors, such as students, may operate based on different incentives not captured in traditional analyses of misinformation spread.

The sense of civic duty identified among these participants reflects unique contextual factors in Nigeria, where declining trust in mainstream media (Wasserman & Morales, 2019) and the prevalence of misinformation create an environment where individuals feel compelled to step in as informal fact-checkers. This contrasts with findings in other regions, such as the UK or the US, where the focus is often on the role of ideological alignment or partisan divides in misinformation spread (Chadwick & Vaccari, 2019). Some of the participants' motivations are consistent with a specific type of civic engagement, one that prioritises the perceived social responsibility to combat misinformation rather than ideological warfare or personal gain.

Financial Motivation

Most participants admitted that financial incentives motivated them to share fake news deliberately. Participant 10 mentioned:

> "I aggressively share such stories to get readership for my blog. People will find it interesting, so I share. I would share to get traffic for my blog and social media account. That's one of the things I do for a living, so I have to sustain my blogs." (Participant 10)

Another participant added:

> "Well… You know that this is what Nigerians like, and money has to be made… You wouldn't call it fake news entirely… It's just the kind of entertaining news that Nigerians like to talk about… It's just fun… I don't think there's really anything wrong with it   because, at the end of the day, these stories drive traffic and it is necessary for monetising my account…" (Participant 8)

Participant 7 also remarked:

> "I share fake news because, after all, money has to be made… I need traffic. I need adverts and money. How do you think I will get these things when my blog isn't attracting people?" (Participant 7)

The participants' comments reflect broader patterns identified in the literature, particularly the work of Hirst (2017) and findings on the Macedonian operation during the 2016 US elections (Subramanian, 2017; Silverman, 2016), where commercial incentives were major factors for engagement with fake news. The monetisation of misinformation to attract audiences and generate revenue mirrors the motivations described by Participant 10, who shared fake stories to ensure their blogs' sustainability. Similarly, Participant 7's rationale that "money has to be made" illustrates how misinformation is often a calculated business strategy, as the literature describes, where false stories are engineered to generate viral content and drive profits.

Furthermore, the findings align with the observations of Uzuegbunam and Ononiwu (2023) in the Nigerian context, which highlight the financial gains associated with the deliberate spread of misinformation, particularly among bloggers. Participants in this study explicitly framed their actions regarding economic necessity, providing direct support for the idea that financial motives are not limited to large-scale operations but also significantly influence smaller-scale actors, such as students and social media users. This similarity

highlight the critical role of economic incentives, even among individuals who are small-scale players looking to capitalise on social media dynamics.

Despite these similarities, the motivations outlined by the participants diverge in some important ways from the broader literature. The commercial motivations observed in large-scale fake news operations (e.g., the Macedonian operation) often involve sophisticated networks and professional creators who engineer false narratives systematically to achieve maximum impact (Silverman, 2016; Subramanian, 2017). In contrast, the participants in the current study appear to be more opportunistic, using fake news as a pragmatic tool to meet short-term financial needs rather than engaging in organised disinformation campaigns. This distinction is critical, highlighting the difference in scale and intent between smaller, individual actors and large-scale professional misinformation networks.

The findings from the study advance the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) by illustrating how individuals actively engage with media to satisfy specific needs, particularly in the context of identifying and sharing fake news. Participants actively engage with media by critically analysing news content to identify fake news. This aligns with UGT's premise that audiences are not passive consumers but actively seek content that meets their specific needs (Yadav et al., 2024).

The UGT is particularly insightful for understanding the dynamics of fake news identification and sharing because it considers the various gratifications that users might be seeking. The theory suggests that users evaluate media content for its informational value and how well it aligns with their specific needs (Yadav et al., 2024). For example, the participants in the study often rely on a "commonsense test" or plausibility check to evaluate news. This behaviour aligns with the information-seeking construct of UGT, where users engage cognitively to determine if the content meets their expectations for truthful reporting. The finding that exaggerated or sensationalised content often triggers skepticism highlights how users apply cognitive resources to achieve the gratification of understanding.

The findings show that while participants recognise social media as a frequent source of fake news, they still use these platforms due to their accessibility and immediacy. This suggest that despite the risk of false information, the gratifications of immediacy, social interaction, and entertainment often outweigh the desire for accuracy. The insights enhance UGT by showing that different gratifications can be prioritised differently depending on the context, especially in environments with high exposure to misinformation.

Furthermore, this research shows complex motivations for sharing fake news. The participants share fake news for various reasons, including a sense of civic duty and financial gain. This finding

broadens UGT by highlighting that individuals may seek to gratify different needs simultaneously. For example, those motivated by civic duty may share fake news to fulfill their altruistic need to protect others from misinformation, which aligns with the theory's notion of personal and social gratifications. Conversely, those driven by financial motivations illustrate how economic incentives can override ethical considerations, leading to the gratification of financial needs at the expense of accuracy. By exploring how individuals identify and share fake news, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how UGT applies in the context of misinformation. It shows that UGT can be expanded to include not only the gratifications sought from consuming media but also the motivations behind the distribution of media content, even when that content is known to be false. Also, the findings of this study add a fourth construct, which is 'financial gratification', to the existing 3 major constructs of the UGT, which are information-seeking, personal identity, and social interaction.

Practically, understanding the motivations for sharing fake news—whether for raising awareness or financial gain—can inform the development of counter-narratives and interventions to promote responsible sharing behaviour. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of transparency and accountability in journalism, considering the participants pointed to traditional media as credible news sources. This suggests that avenues should be created for enhancing trust in media sources. Avenues to enhance trust in media can include adopting strict fact-checking protocols, promoting transparency in news sourcing, increasing community engagement through public forums, implementing ethical journalism standards, fostering diverse perspectives, providing clear corrections, as well as encouraging independent oversight to hold media accountable for accurate reporting (Iruke, 2024).

VI. CONCLUSION

This study, rooted in the Uses and Gratifications Theory, explores how participants identify and share fake news. The participants identified fake news through exaggerated content, divergence from credible sources, and distorted images. Social media was recognised as a primary source of fake news, yet participants still shared such content due to immediate gratifications tied to civic duty and financial gain. The desire to raise awareness and combat misinformation reflects a form of civic responsibility, while the pursuit of financial incentives highlight the challenges of ethical media engagement in the digital age. This study advances the Uses and Gratifications Theory by highlighting how individuals' motivations for sharing fake news are influenced by altruistic and self-serving gratifications, thus offering new insights into the dynamics of misinformation in the Nigerian context.

The findings emphasise the need for a multifaceted approach to media literacy that

considers the ethical and economic factors driving fake news dissemination, ultimately contributing to the broader understanding of how individuals interact with media in complex social environments. The clear emphasis on financial motivations has significant implications for intervention strategies. Traditional media literacy programs focusing on identifying and debunking false information may be ineffective if the root motivation is economic rather than informational or ideological. Instead, interventions could focus on providing alternative income-generating opportunities or building sustainable business models for bloggers and social media users who do not rely on misinformation. This approach would address the core motivation—economic gain—rather than attempting to counteract misinformation through fact-checking or ideological persuasion.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

FUNDING

The researcher did not receive any funding for this study.

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