

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SPREADING FAKE NEWS IN UGANDA

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DECLARATION

I ACHAKARA NINA, declare that the information in this research is a result of my effort and hard work. This research is submitted as a partial fulfillment of the award of a degree in Journalism and Mass communication at Uganda Christian University, Mukono.

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.....

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APPROVAL

This is to certify that this dissertation was written under my supervision and is now ready for submission to the school of Journalism, Media and Communication (Uganda Christian University).

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this research to my dear parents Mr. and Mrs. Drajo who have supported my education. I also dedicate this research to my beloved friends Kisitu Owen Steven and Adoch Tracy for always believing and supporting me. I am grateful for the encouragement you gave me when I felt like I could not continue any further.

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ABSTRACT

This research study examines the role of social media in spreading fake news in Uganda with specific attention to the causes, patterns, impacts and responses to misinformation within the country. The study is guided by clearly defined research objectives and research questions that focus on how fake news spreads on social media platforms, the impact of fake news on public opinion and behavior and the roles of key stakeholders in combating misinformation in Uganda.

Chapter One presents the background of the study. It highlights the growth of social media in Uganda and the increasing challenge of fake news. It describes the study's problem statement, goals, questions, scope, importance and rationale. The theoretical framework, which is based on Social Cognitive Theory is also introduced in this chapter. It describes how social reinforcement, imitation and observation affect how people share knowledge on social media. In keeping with the goals of the study,

Chapter Two examines pertinent literature from local, regional and worldwide contexts. It looks at definitions and types of fake news, how false information spreads on social media, how fake news affects public opinion and behavior and what social media companies, government agencies and civil society organizations are doing to fight fake news in Uganda. Additionally, it highlights the gaps in previous research that this study aims to fill.

The research methodology used to address the research questions and accomplish the study's goals is described in Chapter 3. It outlines the study's population and geographic scope, sampling strategies, data gathering procedures and ethical considerations. In addition to content analysis of specific false news situations that have been confirmed by reputable fact-checking groups, the data was gathered via online survey questionnaires given to social media users, journalists, and legislators.

The results of the study are presented and interpreted in Chapter Four in light of the research questions and objectives. It examines the respondents' demographics, social media usage habits, exposure to false information, methods of verification and opinions on the effects of false information in Uganda. The results show that political misinformation is the most prevalent type of fake news on social media platforms, although Ugandan users' verification procedures are still uneven.

A summary of the study's key findings, a pertinent conclusion, and recommendations are presented in Chapter 5. In order to improve the spread of fake news in Uganda, it shows why it is important and necessary to improve media literacy, stronger support for fact-checking initiatives, to increase accountability by social media platforms and to have a coordinated multi-stakeholder approach that involves the government, civil society, media organizations and individual users of social media.

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CHAPTER ONE

1.0 Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technology has fundamentally changed how information is created, shared and consumed globally. In Uganda, millions of people actively engage in social media use for daily communication, news dissemination and public discourse. Platforms such as WhatsApp, X(formally Twitter), Facebook, Tiktok and Instagram have created opportunities for the exchange of information and civic engagement. However, this digital transformation has simultaneously introduced significant challenges, particularly the rapid proliferation of fake news and misleading content. Fake news refers to deliberately fabricated or misleading information presented as legitimate news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

Fake news has serious consequences in that it undermines the trust the public has in the media and the government, it can incite violence, threaten democratic institutions and destabilize communities.

This chapter presents the foundational aspects of the study including the background of the research, problem statement, objectives, research questions, scope and significance of the study. It helps us understand why social media has become such a fertile ground for misinformation in Uganda and more importantly why this issue is worth examining in the first place.

1.1 Background of the study

Uganda's social media landscape has experienced substantial growth over the past decade. The increasing availability of affordable smartphones. The increasing availability of affordable smartphones and improved internet infrastructure have made social media platforms accessible to millions of Ugandans.

In 2024, Uganda had 13.30 million internet users therefore representing 27.0% of the total population (DataReportal). The Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) has licensed numerous television stations and digital broadcasters which has contributed to the expansion of the media ecosystem (Uganda Communications Commission 2015).

Initially, Facebook was the leading social media platform in Uganda. However, this changed following the 2021 general elections where the Government of Uganda indefinitely suspended Facebook after accusing it of refusing to restore the online accounts of the Government of Uganda and NRM. Thereafter, Facebook clarified in a statement that these accounts were shut down due to their involvement in the manipulation of public debate ahead of the elections through 'Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior' which involved the use of fake and duplicated accounts to impersonate users, manage pages and artificially amplify certain posts. This shows the reality of social media, government authorities and the public's access to truthful information are constantly bumping up against each other in Uganda and rarely in harmony.

The absence of robust verification systems, limited media literacy and the viral nature of social media content creates conditions where false information spreads rapidly (Wasswa & Nassanga, 2020). The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) uncovered a network of fake social media accounts on X and Facebook that were linked to the Government Citizen Interaction Centre (GCIC) at the Ministry of information and Communication Technology in Uganda in January 2024.

Fake news in Uganda has been weaponized for political purposes and at the same time used to disseminate misinformation on health issues. In addition it has been used to incite ethnic and religious tensions among people.

The government has attempted to address this challenge through different interventions such as putting in place social media taxes and occasional internet shutdowns especially during election periods (Kafeero & Mukungu, 2021). In July 2023, a 5% service tax on non resident companies earning income by providing digital services to Ugandans was introduced by the Uganda Revenue Authority (URA) therefore raising fears that companies would increase their prices and further widen the digital divide (Human Rights Watch). However, these measures by the government have faced criticism for potentially violating freedom of expression and the access to information.

In response to the growing challenge of fake news on social media, several fact-checking organizations have emerged such as Debunk Media Initiative which was launched in November 2021 and became Uganda's first fact-checking organization. Other organizations in Uganda like Africa Check and PesaCheck have also been active in combating misinformation. Africa Check was established in 2012 and it is the first independent non-profit fact-checking organization in the continent with offices in different countries such as South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya and Senegal. PesaCheck is Africa's largest indigenous fact-checking organization which debunks misleading claims in 16 different African countries. Despite the efforts that different organizations play, they are still not well equipped to match the speed at which misinformation spreads on social media.

The COVID-19 pandemic greatly exposed the gaps in social media. There were many claims about the virus, vaccines and different government responses circulating across many social media platforms in Uganda (Asiimwe & Grönlund, 2021). In addition, during the November 2022 Ebola outbreak, misleading content was all over different social media platforms.

Therefore, this shows that there is an urgent need to understand how social media leads to the spread of fake news in Uganda and what meaningful solutions can be put in place to stop the spread of fake news.

1.2 Problem statement.

The spread of misinformation on social media has become one of Uganda's most serious threats, starting with how people vote up to how communities relate with each other. Despite the awareness that this is a growing challenge, limited research is done to assess the specific ways through which fake news spreads and yet there are many factors that lead to the spread of fake news and its effects on how people behave and think.

Many social media users in Uganda share content without questioning if it is true or false and this helps to aid the rapid spread of fake news (Wasswa & Nassanga, 2020). The threats that the government makes to sue those responsible for spreading fake news have not done anything to reduce its spread. Misinformation continues to spread across social media platforms (Africa Check).

Low media literacy, a politically charged environment and algorithms built to chase engagement rather than truth have only made things worse (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

Recent fact-checking work has revealed numerous instances of fake news in Uganda with diverse and severe impacts. Debunk Media Initiative has exposed fabricated statements attributed to public officials, misleading claims about political events and false information about health issues. In addition, PesaCheck has debunked AI-generated videos falsely claiming that President Museveni has died, demonstrating how sophisticated fake news has become. Fake TikTok accounts impersonating the Uganda Electoral Commission have been created to share pro-government content which therefore undermines trust in the electoral processes.

Six in 10 Ugandans (60%) say they are aware of social media, though awareness is less widespread among women, rural residents and older and less educated citizens (Africa Check). Among Ugandans who have heard of social media, large majorities say it makes people more aware of current happenings (89%) and helps people impact political processes (74%). However, majority of people also say that social media makes people more likely to believe false news (70%) and more intolerant of others with different political opinions (58%) (Africa Check). This inconsistency demonstrates the double-edged nature of social media in Uganda's information ecosystem.

Current interventions such as government regulations and fact-checking initiatives have shown limited effectiveness. Media experts have emphasized the urgent need for media literacy in sustaining the media landscape with projects aimed at utilizing media literacy and fact-checking to strengthen evidence based reporting. There is a critical knowledge gap regarding what strategies would work best in Uganda. Without comprehensive research into the causes, patterns and impacts of fake news on social media in Uganda, the efforts to combat disinformation will remain segmented and potentially ineffective. This study seeks to address this gap by providing evidence based insights into the role of social media in spreading fake news in Uganda and informing the development of context appropriate solutions.

1.3 General purpose of the study

The main purpose of this study is to examine the impact of social media on spreading fake news in Uganda, particularly focusing on the mechanisms of dissemination, contributing factors, and the difficulties stakeholders encounter during efforts to combat fake news in Uganda.

1.4 Objectives of the study

To identify the factors that contribute to the spread of fake news on social media platforms in Uganda.

To investigate the impact of fake news on public opinion and behavior in Uganda.

To develop effective strategies for combating fake news on social media in Uganda.

1.5 Research questions

How does fake news spread on social media platforms in Uganda?

What impact does fake news have on public opinion and behavior in Uganda?

What role can social media platforms, the government and the civil society organizations play in combating fake news in Uganda?

1.6 Scope of the study

1.6.1 Geographical scope

This study will be conducted in Uganda with the major focus on areas around Kampala district with the highest social media penetration such as Kampala Central Division, Makindye Division and Nakawa Division. The geographical focus reflects the reality that Kampala experiences the most intensive social media activity and it is usually the epicenter where fake news is created and initially disseminated before it spreads to other regions around the country. Statistics show that urban areas have high rates of social media usage and internet connection than rural areas especially Kampala and makes it a perfect place for the study.

1.6.2 Content scope

The study focuses on fake news disseminated through major social media platforms in Uganda, such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), WhatsApp, Tiktok and Instagram. The research will examine various types of fake news for instance political disinformation, health misinformation, false news about security incidents, fabricated stories targeting specific communities and scam related fake news which exploits the vulnerable populations. The study will explore the creation, circulation and impact of fake news as well as current responses from stakeholders including social media companies, government institutions, civil society organizations such as Debunk Media Initiative, Africa Check and PesaCheck, journalists and social media users. The research will not cover fake news in traditional media outlets except where such content originates from or significantly interacts with social media platforms.

1.6.3 Time Scope

The study will be conducted over two months, from October 2025 to November 2025. However, the research will analyze fake news incidents and trends from the past few years till date in order to provide sufficient data for pattern identification and a comprehensive analysis. This period covers some of Uganda's most defining moments in recent years. From contested election seasons and the lingering effects of COVID-19 to the 2022 Ebola outbreak and a string of social and political events where fake news on social media played a noticeable and damaging role.

1.7 Significance of the Study

The purpose of the study is to identify the difficulties that the fact checking organizations and social media users face when they are trying to fight fake news or information in Uganda. The results of the study will provide important information that is based on evidence with different insights to inspire improved regulations, stronger fact checking systems and more successful media literacy programs.

This study shows practical answers for important groups of people like the government institutions, social media companies and communities by guiding them on where their current efforts have failed and what changes they should make.

Finally, the research contributes to the academic discussion about fake news in Africa. It gives new ideas for different countries that have been expanding their online and struggling with misinformation on social media.

1.8 Justification of the Research

The study is significant because it deals with the important need to identify fake news and identify the solutions to stop its spread. Little work has been done to stop the spread of false information even though many stakeholders agree that it's a major problem in Uganda.

This study addresses that gap through research on the ways in which fake news spreads on social media. The study is made more pressing by the upcoming 2026 general elections in Uganda since misinformation usually increases during time for elections and interrupts the democratic process. Carrying out this research ensures that the results inform the interventions that may protect the democracy of the elections.

Fake news has caused a lot of damage in Uganda such as political misinformation, disease outbreaks, financial scams and loss of trust in credible media. The most vulnerable group of people are the ones that are affected by this the most. Therefore addressing this issue helps to protect the ordinary people and promote social justice.

1.9 Theoretical Framework

This study is founded by the Social Cognitive Theory that was developed by Albert Bandura in 1986. This theory explains how people learn different attitudes, behaviors and ideas by

watching those around them. This theory is relevant to the spread of fake news because online users are constantly exposed to the opinions, reactions and the actions of others in their network.

According to Bandura (1986), human behavior develops through the continuous interaction between a person's thoughts, behavior and their environment. This means that the posts people see, the way they interpret information and their online past experience influence what they chose to believe or share.

The theory shows that observational learning is important in the spread of fake news. Social media users usually copy behaviors they observe from friends, influencers or trusted sources without taking time to confirm if the information is correct (Bandura 1977). When users see certain stories or claims being shared, they feel the need to reshare it without verifying and thus the spread of false information.

Another important idea in this theory is self-efficacy. This refers to how people strongly believe in their ability to make judgement or perform certain actions. This idea explains why social media users share information before checking for accuracy. These users are confident that they can tell the difference between true and false information especially when they see others posting similar content without consequences. This in turn makes them to spread fake information without even realizing it.

Reinforcement also increases the spread of fake news in that when someone posts false information and they get many views, likes, comments and shares, they are encouraged and are likely to repeat this action (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Social media platforms encourage this cycle because their algorithms are built to show the content that gets the most views and reactions rather than content that is accurate.

In addition, the theory shows how people interact with information through grabbing attention, remembering and repeating and feeling motivated to share it with others. Fake news is designed to capture attention using emotional stories, alarming headlines and captivating images that cannot be ignored. Social media algorithms put engaging content at the top of user's feeds therefore making it more difficult to bypass such false information. These false stories stay on our minds especially when they confirm something that we already believe is true and it stirs up our emotions. People share these stories with others because they want to feel accepted or motivated by the political views and many other reasons.

Social cognitive theory explains why social media users in Uganda learn how to either spot fake news or keep falling for it. It shows the motive that people have when they are sharing fake news that has not been verified and how online behavior is determined by other factors such as cultural beliefs, peer influence, the design of the platform and politics. This creates interventions that encourage increased and responsible information sharing.

Also, the theory suggests that providing examples for the users to follow can help such as fact checking, promoting reliable sources and teaching the public about media literacy. We can develop strategies that create environments which discourage its spread and support critical thinking if we understand these social cognitive processes. This will help to explain how and why fake news spreads in Uganda and how targeted interventions can make a difference thereby guiding the research design, data collection and analysis. Examples from Africa check, PesaCheck and Debunk media initiative show the types of fake news circulating in

Uganda and verification methods used which will inform how social cognitive theory can be applied to create effective counter measures.

CHAPTER TWO

2.0 Introduction

This chapter looks at the studies of other researchers and scholars about how social media contributes to the spread of fake news in Uganda. It looks at theoretical discussions and experiences from the region to get a clear view of how fake news comes to exist, how it moves, how people consume and what we can do to stop its spread. This chapter introduces social cognitive theory as a theoretical foundation. It explains how people watch those around them and copy behaviors and repeat them. It goes ahead to look at local and international literature and reveals the meaning of fake news, what makes it to be noticed and the social and political environment that allows it to flourish in Uganda. In addition, It talks about how fake news moves and affects peoples behaviors. It looks at what the social media platforms, government institutions and the civil society organisations have done to address misinformation. It concludes by summarizing the lessons from the literature and identifies what this study aims to resolve.

2.1 Theoretical Review

This study is built on the Social Cognitive theory of Albert bandura. This theory explains how people adopt behaviors through back and forth interaction with their thought, actions and the environment around them. Bandura (1986) argues that people learn from just watching what others do and seeing the consequences they face for their actions. Social media platforms are designed to makes content interesting and engage users with each other therefore creating space for learning through observation.

People in Uganda learn by watching what others do and this affects how fake news spreads. When someone who has many followers shares a post that is dramatic or divisive, their followers are most likely going to post it as well without knowing if it's true or not. A study by Namusoga (2023) found that many people share information quickly without proof of accuracy because it comes from someone they admire and trust. This supports Bandura's idea that we are influenced by the people we see as credible and popular.

Another reason why fake news spreads quickly is reinforcement. When someone receives likes, shares and comments after sharing a post it is like a reward that encourages them to keep repeating it. Fake news brings out strong emotions such as shock, fear, anger etc and this gets more reactions than the truth (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018) thus creating a repeated cycle where misleading content keeps getting shared to more and more people which encourages others to share it further. This is visible on Ugandan platforms like Tiktok and Facebook where fake political narratives and emotionally loaded rumors have be spreading rapidly during time for elections and national emergencies (African Centre for Media Excellence, 2022)

Also, self-efficacy which talks about the confidence someone has in their ability to differentiate the good information from the bad one. Many social media users in Uganda use their gut feelings and this overconfidence makes them to share information without checking

wether it is true or not, they think that they are much better at this than they are (Ayesiza, 2019). This showed during the COVID 19 pandemic and the Ebola outbreak when different misleading advice was being spread on social media. People shared information freely just because it felt right to them. This is because it either matched what they already believed or because it echoed familiar traditional remedies (Asiimwe & Grönlund, 2021).

Where people live also determines how they behave online. Uganda's digital environment has many different factors that ease the spread of fake news. Most people are smart phone users without skills to assess online content. Also, misinformation thrives because of political tensions, trusting information according to people that are known personally and influence of online groups and communities.

Social cognitive theory therefore makes sense of how fake news spreads in Uganda. It explains why people copy what they see other people doing online and amplify false information, and how sharing information without verifying it has become a norm online.

2.2 Literature Review

False news has become well known worldwide because of its effects on democracy, public health, economic stability and social unity. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) define fake news as material that is created and distributed with the intention of misleading people while imitating the structure and presentation style of authentic news.

This definition is consistent with the current thinking that makes a distinction between disinformation and misinformation. Disinformation is false information disseminated on purpose to deceive people, whereas misinformation is false information disseminated without malicious intent. Additionally, when accurate material is misrepresented or taken out of context in order to do harm, researchers detect malinformation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

Fake news spreads throughout the world in settings marked by political polarisation, economic disparity and quick technical advancement. False news travels more quickly and broadly than real news due to its novelty and emotional appeal, according to studies by Vosoughi et al. (2018). Fake news usually contains shocking, excessive or provocative statements that captures people's attention. In Africa, structural challenges such as limited media literacy, weak regulatory systems and linguistic diversity exacerbate vulnerability to misinformation (Ayesiza, 2019).

Misinformation is a serious problem in East Africa that is driven by policy makers who want to use social media to influence how people think and vote. The use of smartphones has increased due to affordability and this has encouraged the use of whatsapp as an everyday tool for communication thus making it easy for false content to travel quickly to a very large group of people. This was clear when fabricated videos, doctored images and created stories were deliberately used to manipulate political conversations during the 2020 general elections in Tanzania and the 2017 and 2022 elections in Kenya (Arshad, Klashanov & Malik, 2024). The shutdown of facebook in Uganda in 2021 was due to worries of fake accounts and organized networks that were spreading political propaganda. These concerns increased in 2024 when the BBC indicated similar patterns. Local newspapers such as the Nile Post wrote about many

cases where statements of politicians had been fabricated and images were altered to mislead the public.

Aside from politics, when the COVID 19 pandemic came, many false assumptions were all over social media about possible herbal remedies, vaccine conspiracy theories and fake government announcements. This false information led to confusion among people with many in shock and reluctant to follow the official health guidelines (Asiimwe and Grönlund (2021) The same problem happened during the Ebola outbreak in 2022 where rumours about the number of people that were infected as well as false treatment spread through Whatsapp and Twitter making the situation difficult to manage.

Misinformation about the economy is making a lot of people to lose money because of fake job adverts and scammers pretending to be government offices or NGOs. Many jobless Ugandans between the age of 18 and 35 are likely to fall for these scams since they have never been taught how to spot a financial scammer, ResearchGate (2025). Many people outside cities get their news from people that are close to them such as pastors, relatives and clan heads instead of televisions and newspapers. In case they share false information no one will ask questions. The message is important and true because of the person that has shared it (Namusoga, 2023). Thus cultural trust makes it hard to fight fake news in Uganda.

2.3 How fake news spreads on social media platforms in Uganda

Fake news in Uganda spreads because of technical, social, political and cultural factors. Social media platforms are built to push content that gets strong reactions and keeps people scrolling through their phones and this supports the spread of fake news. This news is usually shocking and emotional which enables it to get many likes, shares and comments thus enabling it to be shown in the algorithm more often (Vosoughi et al., 2018). For example when misleading political content goes viral on X, Tiktok and Facebook during elections.

Many Ugandans know that fake news exists online but they do not know the difference between the fake news and factual news hence showing media literacy. In 2021, Afrobarometer found this to be a concern that is widely spread. People share information as fast as they can on social media platforms without questioning where it is from and if it is true. The Debunk Media Initiative(2023) notes that fake news has some true information that has been twisted out of context, misrepresented images or genuine stories that have been intentionally distorted because of political motives. Most people in Uganda use WhatsApp which makes it hard to contain misinformation since messages are forwarded to groups in seconds and its encrypted content moves invisibly out of reach of fact checkers. In addition, many people believe information they receive from personal networks like church groups, family or friends and they believe it without question (Ayesiza, 2019).

Political propaganda is usually organized and deliberate and thus enabling the spread of fake news. Investigations done by Meta in 2021, the BBC in 2024 and reports from ACME all show that fake accounts are used to push political messages to ruin opponents and influence public

debate. These accounts are coordinated operations that use bots and paid social media influencers to generate AI content that people can believe or direct them on what to think about.

Cultural factors shape the spread of misinformation in Uganda. Communities in Uganda depend more on word of mouth communication. In this environment, misinformation does not need to be convincing on its own. It just needs to come from the right person. When local leaders or influential personalities share unverified information, it is easily accepted. Additionally, strong emotional, religious and ethnic identities can make users more susceptible to content that resonates with their beliefs or fears (Namusoga, 2023).

The rise of artificial intelligence tools such as deepfakes and voice cloning technology represents a new phase of misinformation. In 2024, PesaCheck verified multiple cases of AI-generated videos falsely claiming the death of the president hence showing the growing sophistication of fake news in Uganda.

2.4 The impact of fake news on public opinion and behavior in Uganda.

Fake news has far reaching consequences on public opinion, behavior and societal stability in Uganda. In the political field, misinformation distorts democratic processes by influencing voter's attitudes, shaping political narratives and dividing communities. Elections are the most vulnerable periods during which manipulated images, fabricated speeches and rumor based narratives circulate widely. Semujju et al. (2024) note that political misinformation undermines trust in electoral institutions, contributes to political intolerance and affects voters decision making. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) similarly observed that misinformation can reduce the quality of the democratic choice by misleading voters.

In public health, fake news can cost lives. Uganda saw this firsthand during both the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2022 Ebola outbreak. Social media filled up fast with false information whereby people were being told about home remedies that did not work, statistics that had been manipulated, wild theories about vaccines, and announcements that no government office had ever made.

Asiimwe and Grönlund (2021) found that all of this left people confused, scared, and unwilling to follow official health guidelines or get vaccinated. It resulted in a slower and disorganized public health response. Fake news not only misleads but also frightens people and turns communities against each other. ACME (2022) documented cases where rumours about kidnappings, ritual murders and ethnic attacks sent communities into panic and triggered some people to take matters into their own hands before anyone had verified whether the story was even true. When false information is wrapped around religion, ethnicity or cultural beliefs, the consequences are beyond confusion, they can spark real conflict and discrimination between groups that would have coexisted peacefully.

Across Uganda, It is common to find scams that disguise themselves as job opportunities, schemes to acquire wealth and fake organisations that pretend to be legit companies or NGOs.

This however makes people to lose trust in companies and institutions. For example many people lose trust in government offices, the electoral commission, the media and health authorities because of such scams. In 2023, the Uganda Communications Commission warned that people are most likely not going to participate in national programmes and public services when they lose trust in them. Such mistrust can slowly weaken the capacity of institutions and limits the delivery of public services.

2.5 The role of social media platforms, the government and civil society organizations in combating fake news in Uganda.

Fighting fake news in Uganda requires participation from platforms, government, organisations and ordinary people. Social media companies such as whatsapp, Meta, X etc have put in place some measures to stop the spread of fake news. Whatsapp labels forwarded messages and limits the number of times a message can be forwarded in order for viral misinformation to spread slowly. Meta is working together with Africa Check to review suspicious information which is flagged. Other platforms like YouTube, X and Tiktok have their own policies that they put in place. However, these measures work better in other countries than in Africa. Africa Check (2023) highlights that enforcement of these policies is hindered by the shortage of fact checkers, limited understanding of conditions that are in some areas and the multitude of languages that people communicate with.

The government of Uganda has put in place legal systems to fight the spread of fake news. It is a criminal offence to knowingly spread misinformation or share someone else's personal information without being granted permission according to the Computer Misuse Act which was updated in 2022. The Data Protection and Privacy Act of 2019 stipulates how people and organisations should communicate responsibly online. In addition, the Uganda Communications Commission monitors digital platforms and online content although most people are not convinced that such measures are intended for protecting Ugandan citizens. (Kafeero & Mukungu, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2023) suggest that scholars and human rights organizations raise concerns during elections that tools such as social media tax, the digital service tax and the internet shutdowns cut people off from accurate information and silence legitimate public debate. Critics claim that sometimes content suppresses dissent or limits freedom of expression among people.

In addition, civil society organizations fact check, carry out media literacy education and public advocacy to combat misinformation. Organisations like Debunk Media Initiative, Africa Check, PesaCheck and the African Centre for Media Excellence (ACME) are actively checking viral claims, publishing investigative findings and teaching journalists and students how to verify information before sharing it. These organizations have exposed many false claims and verified others. Besides this, they go to schools, universities and communities to build critical thinking skills that can help people to question information they see online before sharing it. They also work with media houses to ensure accurate and responsible reporting.

Also, Makerere University, Uganda Christian University and other institutions regularly produce research on digital misinformation, how people consume media and the relationship between social media and political communication therefore creating media literacy and a responsible digital citizenship into what is taught to the young people.

Despite this, Technology moves faster than how any regulation or awareness campaign can keep up. Ai generated content is becoming difficult to detect and encrypted platforms are still beyond the reach of fact checkers and monitors. Fact checkers have limited funds although they are doing important work and there is no unified national strategy that coordinates efforts across different sectors.

2.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this analysis shows that fake news has a major problem in Uganda's digital environment. It highlights the need for research that aims at building a comprehensive, context specific and sustained strategies to reduce the spread of fake news and to strengthen digital resilience. This study aims to contribute to these efforts by examining the mechanisms through which fake news spreads and identifying interventions that are practical to combat its impact on the society.

CHAPTER THREE

3.0 Introduction

This chapter provides an overall methodological approach on the role of social media in spreading fake news in Uganda. This chapter shows the research design, area and population of study, data collection methods, the methodological constraints and ethical considerations.

3.1 Research design

According to research by Anene (2008), she described a research design as a method that the researcher wants to use in accomplishing his or her study. Therefore, the research study investigation is a method whereby the researcher's main objective is to collect enough information to help in solving a given issue in the area of study. This research design is appropriate because it allows collection of qualitative data from a sample population in order to determine the current status, opinions and behaviors on social media platforms. Also, a research design was developed during this study because it is believed that it would help collect more empirical data in relation to the role of social media in spreading fake news in Uganda.

3.2 Area and population of the study

3.2.1 Area of study

The study was conducted in Uganda with a major focus on Kampala District, specifically areas around Kampala central division, Nakawa division and Makindye division where there's high internet connectivity and a large number of active social media users.

3.2.2 Population of study

The population of the study consisted of social media users aged 18 years and above, journalists and policymakers based in Kampala District. This population was selected because they are the main users and distributors of information on social media platforms in Uganda.

The study targeted people with different education backgrounds and age groups that use different social media platforms with different experiences.

3.2.3 Sample size and sampling technique

A sample of 15 respondents was selected for this study using a convenience sampling technique. The relatively small sampling size limits the generalizing of findings although it provides preliminary insights into the phenomena under this investigation. A convenience sampling technique was employed due to the time and resource constraints therefore allowing the researcher to collect data from readily available and accessible respondents.

3.3 Methods of data collection

3.3.1 Survey questionnaires

Primary data was collected using structured questionnaires administered online to social media users, journalists and policymakers through Google forms. The questionnaire included closed-ended questions that helped to collect numerical data on social media usage, exposure to fake news and sharing habits. The questionnaire consisted of four sections.

Section A consisted of the demographic Information and social media use whereby data was collected on respondents' gender, age group, highest level of education, social media platforms used regularly and average daily time spent on social media.

Section B consisted of the encounters with fakes news and response. It examined how often respondents encounter information that might be fake on social media, types of fake news encountered, their immediate responses to suspicious content, indicators that make them believe information might be fake, confidence in identifying fake news and verification methods employed.

Section C consisted of the verification behaviors of social media users. It examined the users ability in identifying fake news, verification methods and fake information shared.

Section D consisted of the perceptions of the impact of fake news. It examined the seriousness of the fake news problem, its impacts and who should be responsible for combating fake news.

3.3.2 Data collection procedures

The questionnaire was distributed electronically to potential respondents through various social media platforms. Respondents were provided with clear instructions and assured of confidentiality. The online survey approach facilitated both rapid data collection and automatic compilation of responses.

3.3.3 Content analysis

Content was analysed to examine selected social media posts and online news articles that were identified as fake or misleading by fact-checking organizations such as Africa Check, Debunk Media Initiative and so on. Researchers looked at the words that were used, where the content came from and how to bring out emotion from people. Certain patterns started showing with attention-grabbing headlines designed to provoke rather than inform, charged language that pushed readers toward a particular feeling, clear political slanting and images that had been manipulated or taken out of context. According to (Krippendorff, 2018), This approach is useful when making sense of how misinformation is built and why it moves easily on different platforms.

3.3.3 Secondary Data

Existing literature and documented evidence were drawn from different credible sources such as published reports from organizations that are working on combating misinformation in Africa for example Africa Check, PesaCheck and the Debunk Media Initiative as well as survey findings from Afrobarometer and academic work showing the dynamics of social media and fake news from within Uganda and broader global contexts. This secondary data was used alongside the content analysis and survey findings to test, compare and strengthen the emerging conclusions. This methodological approach is supported by research that is established by Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018).

3.4 Methodological constraints

The small sample size of 15 respondents limits how the sample reflects the broader population. In addition, self assessment may be affected by bias among respondents who overstate their skills in detecting fake news. No mechanism has been showed that verifies if the practices match the actual behaviors of the users. The structure of the questionnaire format limits the extent of research compared to qualitative methods such as using interviews. In addition the coverage of platforms like Whatsapp, X, YouTube and Facebook was not equal and this may have affected the insights into specific misinformation mechanisms.

3.5 Ethical considerations

Before participating in this research, participants were told that joining the study was their choice therefore no one was forced or put on pressure to respond to the questions. They were also assured that the information they shared was for academic purposes only. The identity of the participants including names and personal details was left confidential to protect the people that participated in this research.

CHAPTER FOUR

4.0 Introduction

This chapter shows the findings obtained from a survey of fifteen social media users. It examines how social media contributes to the spread of false information. The discussion is organized around five key areas which include who the respondents are, how they use social media, how often and in what ways they encounter fake news, how they verify information, and what they think about the fake news problem in Uganda.

4.1 Demographic and social media use of respondents

4.1.1 Gender distribution

Among the respondents, 9 were male (60%) and 6 were female (40%) which is a reasonable representation of both genders although male participants were slightly more in number.

4.1.2 Age distribution

People between the age of 26 and 35 age were the most represented which accounts for 40%. This was followed by ages between 18 and 25 years accounting 27%. Respondents between 36 and 45 were 27% while 7% was aged 46 and above. This shows that young people are the most social media users compared to older people.

4.1.3 Educational background

The respondents were well educated. 47% were Bachelor's degree holders followed by 33% with Diplomas or certificates. 20% had Postgraduate qualifications. Only one respondent had secondary education as their highest level of education and no one reported only primary education. The relatively high education levels shaped how respondents evaluate and engage with information on social media.

4.1.4 Social media platforms used

Respondents used a different of social media platforms such as Whatsapp and X which were equally the most popular since each was used by 5 respondents accounting for 33%. This was followed by 3 Tiktok users making up 20% while YouTube and Facebook were the least used with each attracting only 1 respondent thus 7%.

4.1.5 Daily time Spent on social media

The largest group of 6 respondents (40%) spends 3 to 4 hours on social media daily, while 5 respondents (33%) exceeded 4 hours. A smaller proportion spent more moderate amounts of time online, with 3 respondents (20%) spend 1 to 2 hours and just 1 respondent (7%) spending

less than an hour daily on social media. This shows that nearly three quarters of the total respondents (73%) spend 3 or more hours on social media every day and this pattern increases the possibility of encountering accurate and misleading information.

4.2 Exposure to fake news on social media

4.2.1 Frequency of encountering potentially fake information

Many respondents were exposed to fake news with more than half, 8 respondents (53%), saying that they encounter such content every day thus making daily exposure the most common response. 5 respondents (33%) reported encountering it several times a week while the remaining 2 respondents (13%) came across it occasionally. It is very clear that no single respondent said that they rarely or never encounter potentially fake information. This shows that misinformation has embedded itself in the daily social media experience in Uganda.

4.2.2 Types of fake news encountered

A 7 respondents (47%) say that they encounter political misinformation frequently. 4 respondents (27%) say that financial scams are the most with 3 respondents (20%) encountering fake celebrity gossip. Fake news on religion and health misinformation remain less common with only 1 respondent (7%). Uganda's political environment shows that social media is used to deliberately push false political narratives which has serious consequences for democratic participation and the ability of communities to live together peacefully.

4.3 Responses to suspicious information

4.3.1 Initial actions when encountering suspicious content

Seven respondents (47%) indicated that they would verify information first before sharing thus demonstrating responsible information consumption behavior. Five respondents (33%) chose to ignore suspicious content which prevents further spread but does not actively counter misinformation. Also, 3 respondents (20%) admitted that they would share suspicious information immediately without verification. This represents a high risk factor in the spread of fake news as they facilitate rapid dissemination of unverified content or information.

Therefore, the findings that show that nearly half of respondents practice verification before sharing is encouraging hence suggesting that there is some level of media literacy. However, the fact that one fifth would share immediately without verification highlights the need for continued education on responsible social media use. Those who ignore suspicious content may miss opportunities to report or flag misinformation but at least they do not contribute to its spread.

4.4 Fake news identification and verification

4.4.1 Indicators of potentially fake information

Respondents identified many indicators that raise suspicion about the authenticity of information which included:

- Contradicts known facts (5 respondents, 33%)
- Sensational headlines (4 respondents, 27%)
- Emotional manipulation (3 respondents, 20%)
- No credible source cited (2 respondents, 13%)
- Comes from unfamiliar sources (2 respondents, 13%)

These findings show that respondents use different cognitive strategies to assess the credibility of information with logical consistency and presentation as key factors.

4.4.2 Confidence in identifying fake news

Six respondents, 40%, reported that they were somehow confident in identifying fake news hence indicating moderate self-assessment of their abilities. Three respondents, 20% were very confident while 4 respondents, 27% were not very confident. One respondent 7% admitted to not being confident at all. The findings show that moderate confidence dominates which in turn suggest that most respondents recognize the complexity of identifying fake news and maintain a healthy degree of skepticism about their own judgment. The relatively small number of very confident respondents may actually be positive

4.4.3 Verification methods employed

Respondents put in place different verification strategies some of which include:

- Checking source credibility (3 respondents, 20%)
- Ask knowledgeable people (3 respondents, 20%)
- Use of fact-checking websites (2 respondents, 13%)
- Cross-check with mainstream media (2 respondents, 13%)
- Don't verify (3 respondents, 20%)
- Other methods including Google reverse search (2 respondents, 13%)

The fact that 20% of respondents do not verify information is concerning and aligns with the earlier finding that some share information immediately. The variety of verification methods used shows that people are aware of the approaches to combat fake news although they may vary. Underutilization of formal fact checking websites reflects limited awareness of such resource for more accessible verification methods.

4.4.4 Personal experience with sharing fake information

9 respondents (60%) admitted that they had previously shared information that turned out to be fake news. On the other hand, 3 respondents (20%) indicated that they had not shared fake news and 3 people were not sure. This high rate of unintentional misinformation sharing shows

the difficulty of identifying fake news consistently even among educated users. It also suggests that confidence levels and verification practices don't always translate into accurate judgment.

4.5 Perceptions of the fake news problem in Uganda

4.5.1 Severity of the fake news problem

The respondents demonstrated strong consensus on the seriousness of fake news in Uganda. Ten respondents (67%) rated it as very serious while 4 respondents (27%) considered it as somewhat serious. Only 1 respondent did not provide a clear assessment. No respondents dismissed the problem as minor or non-existent. This shows that social media users are acutely aware of the problem and its potential consequences.

4.5.2 Perceived impacts of fake news

The respondents identified multiple impacts of fake news in Uganda.

Political polarization: This was the most frequently cited impact mentioned by 13 respondents (87%). This reflects concerns about how fake news exacerbates divisions along political lines and undermines national unity.

Social unrest: Cited by 10 respondents (67%), this impact highlights fears that fake news can incite violence, protests or other forms of social disruption.

Erosion of trust in media: 9 respondents (60%) identified this impact, indicating awareness that fake news undermines confidence in legitimate journalism and media institutions.

Public health risks: 8 respondents (53%) recognized the danger that health misinformation poses particularly relevant in contexts like disease outbreaks or vaccination campaigns.

Damage to democracy: 5 respondents (33%) cited this impact hence recognizing how fake news can undermine electoral processes and democratic governance.

Economic losses: 4 respondents (27%) noted economic impacts thus potentially including financial scams, market manipulation or business reputation damage.

This therefore shows that respondents view fake news as a diverse threat that affects society. The emphasis on political polarization and social unrest shows concern about the role of fake news in making the existing tensions in the country worse.

4.5.3 Responsibility for combating fake news

Respondents' views on who should be responsible for combating fake news were distributed across multiple actors.

Individual users: 7 respondents (47%)

Government agencies: 3 respondents (20%)

Social media platforms: 2 respondents (13%)

Fact-checking organizations: 2 respondents (13%)

Media houses: 2 respondents (13%)

The findings show the belief in personal accountability and the importance of media literacy because individual users bear primary responsibility. However, the distribution of responses across various actors indicates that combating fake news requires a multi-stakeholder approach. The lower attribution of responsibility to social media platforms (13%) may show either limited expectations of these companies or limited awareness of the role of platform policies and algorithms in dissemination of information.

CHAPTER FIVE

5.0 Introduction

Chapter five shows the major finding of the study and the recommendations with a conclusion to the study.

5.1 Summary of the major findings

This study shows that the social media users in Uganda are highly exposed to misinformation. Many people continue to spread misinformation even though they know that fake news exists and it can be verified.

Education and media literacy do not automatically mean that people spot fake news easily even though a stronger education background helps, distinguishing credible information from fake news remains a struggle. Sharper critical thinking habits and more practice are required alongside knowledge. In addition, accessible tools that can help people navigate the misinformation are also important.

The way people in Uganda perceive misinformation echoes anxieties that are felt across the world about what unverified misinformation does to societies. Fake narratives should not shape how people think, vote or respond to public issues. Frequent political misinformation shows that deliberate or casual deception is finding a ground where it can do the most damage. This shows the need for responses that target the political information space directly and intentionally.

This research shows that Individual users carry real responsibility for what they choose to share and amplify although the responsibility does not exist in isolation. Government agencies, social media platforms and media organisations all have a role to play in building an environment where accurate, trustworthy information is a norm.

5.2 Recommendations

It is important to evaluate what young social media users see online. Schools, community groups and digital platforms should join hands in making media literacy education widely available. This will give people tools to question and verify information that they come across.

More effort should be put in backing fact checking organisations by making their work more visible to the public. Social media platforms should step up by weaving fact checking features directly into their systems to make it easy for users to spot verified content.

Social media companies should rethink how their algorithms work such that credible sources of information are given more visibility at the same time build systems that identify and remove misleading content before it spreads.

Teamwork between government bodies, social media platforms, media houses and fact-checking organisations is required to tackle fake news. It becomes possible to build a well-

rounded and effective strategy for addressing misinformation when these teams come together.

Finally, People need to be encouraged to think before sharing content. They should verify it before sharing it. Public awareness focused on the responsible and ethical use of social media can shift attitudes and reduce the space for sharing fake news.

5.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, social media plays a large role in spreading fake news in Uganda. Limited media literacy, algorithmic amplification and social trust dynamics enable the rapid spread of fake news despite the awareness that people have. This leads to polarization, unrest and erosion of trust in institutions. Combating fake news effectively requires everyone to work together on a combined plan to teach people, fund fact checkers to support their initiatives, encourage accountability and promote the responsible sharing of information. This can help Uganda to have a more informed digital space and combat the spread of fake news and its effects on democracy and social unity.

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