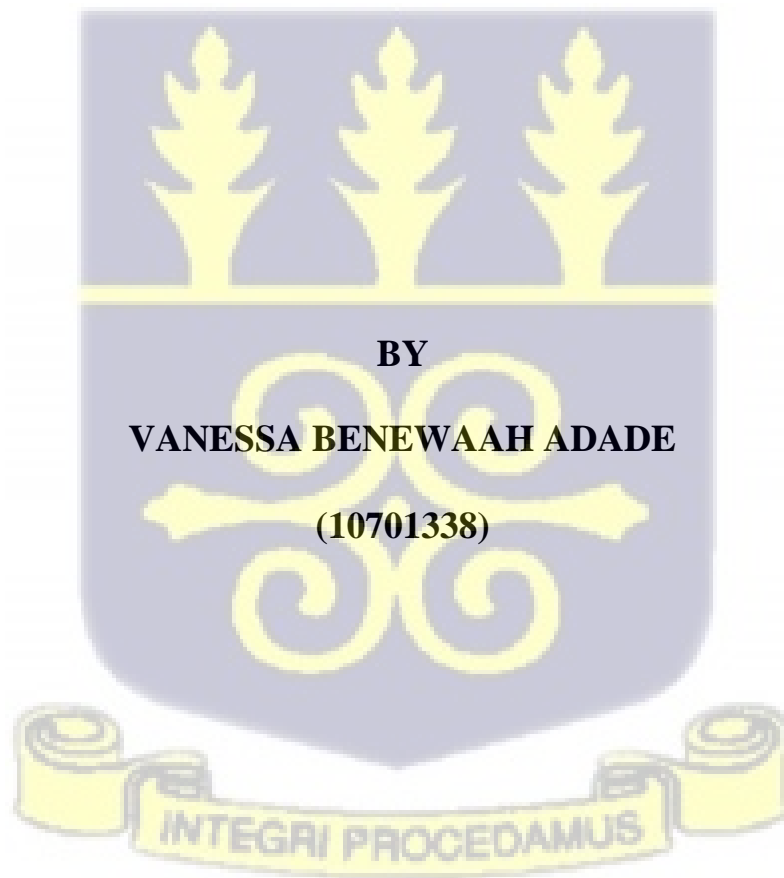


**VERIFICATION HABITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA NEWS CONSUMERS IN
ACCRA**

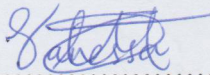


**THIS DISSERTATION IS SUBMITTED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF
GHANA, LEGON IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENT FOR THE AWARD OF MASTER IN
COMMUNICATION STUDIES DEGREE**

OCTOBER 2019

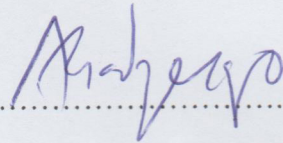
DECLARATION

I, Vanessa Benewaah Adade, declare that except for references to other studies which have been duly cited and acknowledged, this work is entirely mine and was conducted under the supervision of Professor Audrey Gadzekpo of the School of Communication Studies, University of Ghana, Legon.



.....
Vanessa Benewaah Adade

(Student)



.....
Professor Audrey Gadzekpo

(Supervisor)

Date 16/07/20.....

16-07-20.....

ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to determine the verification habits of social media news consumers in Accra. The quantitative method was used for this study under which online questionnaires were distributed on various social media platforms. The study found that majority of social media news consumers in Accra, verified the news they obtained from social media platforms, mainly due to lack of trust in the credibility of social media. Most of the respondents further indicated that in verifying, they used their mental capability to judge the authenticity of the news they obtained from social media. The study therefore recommends further study into authentic verification methods which can inform audiences' choice of a verification method in order not to undermine the process of verification.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my parents who have supported me in every way possible.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I am grateful to God, for without Him I would not have been able to complete this journey.

I also thank my supervisor, Professor Audrey Gadzekpo, whose time and contributions helped me to put this work together.

I am also grateful to my family for their support, encouragement and constant reminder that I had to complete this study.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

This chapter begins with a background to this study, focusing on verification of news. Subsequently, the problem statement of this study is given, followed by the research objectives and questions which guided this study, as well as the significance of this study.

1.0 Background

Kovach & Rosenstiel (2014) state that “the essence of journalism is a discipline of verification” (p. 149). However, it is this very discipline that Buttry (2014), says makes the field of journalism a tough one. It is also this practice of verification that distinguishes journalism from other fields such as entertainment (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014).

Aberbach (2007) highlights reality when he indicates that journalism is not devoid of misrepresentation and biases, therefore, as journalists have increasingly become conscious of this occurrence, the need to establish standards to ensure the accuracy of news has become paramount.

Verification, rather than being an event, is a process (Silverman & Tsubaki, 2014; Wardle, 2014). This process fundamentally requires one to subject the source and content of that information to a test of validity (Brandtzaeg, Luders, Spangenberg, Rath-Wiggins & Folstad, 2015; Silverman & Tsubaki, 2014).

According to Posetti (2014), these two components, the source and content must undergo an autonomous verification and the findings of each element must subsequently be compared to establish whether the two are in harmony.

“Good people share bad things; and good content can come from surprising places” (Posetti, 2014, para. 9). Therefore, regardless of the information source or content, one must not lose guard and subject any information to scrutiny. A lack of verification would render it

impossible to establish the credibility of information (Hermida, 2012) and this credibility, according to Bolalek (2013), is a concern of audiences who seek news.

Despite the differing structures and arrangements that inform the mode of operation in media houses, one thing that cannot be denied, is the centrality of verification to the profession of journalism (Graves & Amazeen, 2019). It is so important that standards, normative practices, and ethics to ensure and uphold quality in journalism have been developed continuously (Koliska, 2015). However, increasing pressure to meet deadlines, outdo others by breaking news first and even a decline in financial resources due to the introduction of new media has endangered this practice (Fink, 2014; Graves & Amazeen, 2019).

As journalists are increasingly falling prey to fake news, some suggest that news audiences ought to assume the burden of verifying information themselves (Fink, 2014). Kovach & Rosenstiel (2014) insist that the burden of verification lies collectively on the shoulders of all who are engaged in it or impacted by it. Therefore, all stakeholders, including audiences, must not only be willing, but must also consistently ask ‘how do you know that’. They must be willing to punch holes into the information they receive, until its authenticity cannot be questioned (Silverman & Tsubaki, 2014).

1.1 Verification in the Era of Digital Media and Fake News

Scholars largely agree that accurate information is important for every society as it helps individuals to make the right decisions that will positively influence the various aspects of their life (Zubiaga & Ji, 2013; Rubin, Conroy & Chen, 2015; Swire & Ecker, 2018). This then reveals the danger that, false information whether deliberately or unintentionally shared, has the potential to unleash. This raises concerns in this current digital era where audiences

are no longer passively waiting to be fed by traditional media but can also exercise their agency on the ‘infinite amount of space’ provided by new media (Zaryan, 2017).

One of these concerns is fake news. Korta (2018) describes fake news as deceptive stories that spread unsubstantiated claims or false information. As novel as it may seem, the matter of fake news and false information can be traced back to history. Records indicate that back in ancient Rome, Octavian gained his position as the first Roman Emperor after spreading false information about his political enemy Antony (Ireton & Posetti, Introduction, 2018). The spread of false information is therefore not new, however, due to the growing volume of information and the introduction of technology, fake news is becoming more complex (Schifferes & Newman, 2013).

According to Wardle & Derakhshan (2018) referring to this information pollution as fake news fails to address the larger issue. They break down this intricate issue into three main categories, namely; disinformation, misinformation and mal-information. Disinformation hints at a deliberate attempt to deceive people, whereas misinformation which also misleads people is not spread with such a conscious intent. Mal-information, however, deals with the spread of genuine information with the intention to cause harm (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018). Therefore, apart from consciously disseminating information known to be false, a simple retweet or like of unverified news can also feed the system of information disorder.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter, have served as a news hub for all kinds of people ranging from journalists to audiences (Schifferes, et al., 2014). The problem that emerges, is that users who are not held to any ethical standards or bound by any code of conduct, flood these platforms with all kinds of content, including false information (Rubin, Conroy, & Chen, 2015). This new platform therefore

provides anyone the time and space to practice the profession of journalism without necessarily possessing the skills or knowledge to do so (Nimwegen, 2018).

This, as well as “real-time information flow, and various forms of sources and content modalities, such as video and images” have invariably complicated the process of verification in social media (Brandtzaeg et al., 2015, p. 2). Brandtzaeg et al. (2015) therefore assert the need to devise new tactics and approaches to verifying content emanating from social media.

Wardle (2014) states that despite the new dynamics introduced by social media, the human eye should not be discarded in the task of verifying social media content. The author outlines four elements to consider in the process of verification; provenance (is this content in its original state), source (who is the originator of this content), date (when was it created) and location (where was it created) (Wardle, 2014).

With the large volume of information available making the verification process quite tedious, Posetti (2014) believes that journalists are increasingly going to depend on a form of verification known as ‘open verification’. This practice which is a source of contention due to the risks associated with it, will see journalists outsourcing verification tasks to audiences, possibly in a forum-like discussion (Trewinnard & Bell, 2018). However, Ingram (2014) argues that this practice is actually not new, considering the fact that audiences have always been a part of this process by giving eyewitness accounts and sharing information that they are privy to. The only difference is that now, this can be done on a larger scale with greater speed.

1.1.1 Verification Tools and Services

It behooves journalists and news consumers alike, to sift through vast amounts of content to acquire relevant information, either for consumption or verification purposes;

however, relying solely on human strength will be an exercise in futility. This, according to scholars, has necessitated the invention of verification tools (Wardle, 2014; Rubin et al., 2015; Brandtzaeg et al., 2017). Some of these online tools are Storyful, SocialMention, Trackur and FotoForensics, however, research has not yet captured the degree to which these tools are being used (Brandtzaeg et al., 2015). Trewinnard & Bell (2018) also give an account of some tools that can be used for verification of social media content such as WolframAlpha which can give data on the weather, Forensically, Photo Forensics and IziTru which can be used to analyze images.

Brandtzaeg et al. (2017) also discusses the use of tools in the practice of verifying online content such as videos, text, and images. They assert that these tools are particularly advantageous to journalists. The researchers further examine another element that can be used to authenticate online content; fact-checking services. These services could either be individuals or organizations, which through careful analysis can establish the authenticity of information and data available to the public. Some of these services are FactCheck.org, Snopes, and StopFake (Brandtzaeg et al., 2017).

Realizing the aptitude fake news has for harming society, certain social media platforms have taken steps to help consumers distinguish between fake and authentic content. Celebrities, government officials and certain famous people on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook often have a 'verified tick' accompanying their username (Wardle, 2014), which tells audiences that such pages are the real pages of such personalities and as a result, information on such pages are likely to be authentic. Although verification tools are very helpful in the verification process, Wardle (2014) argues that there is no tool that can verify social media content with hundred percent precision.

1.1.2 Literacy Skills

Since scholars have called on audiences to share in the burden of verification, it is necessary that audiences obtain skills and abilities that will enable them to intelligently engage with media. Receptoğlu (2015) indicates that individuals would be able to sift through the copious amount of information on social media and access facts, if they possessed the skills to evaluate and analyze social media information.

There are a number of literacy skills that can help audiences engage better with media and its content. Abu-Fadil (2018), states that “news literacy is the more specific ability to understand the language and conventions of news as a genre, and to recognize how these features can be exploited with malicious intent” (p. 70). The researcher states that being literate means one should know how to respond to news content and be able to overcome the tendency to credit news as authentic without doing the requisite checks. Media literacy skills also help any individual to effectively engage with social media and its content (Alaphilippe, Gizikis, Hanot, & Bontcheva, 2019).

Riel (2012) asserts that digital literacy should not be confined to possessing knowledge about the control of technology, however individuals should understand the product of this technology- information, as well as the limits of the various media in information presentation. All these literacy skills help the audience to interact better with the various forms of media and its content.

Receptoğlu (2015) states that media ‘fictionalizes what is real’ and vice versa. This indicates a pressing need for individuals to be armed with media literacy skills and a greater understanding of the origin and bias of information.

Finkel et al., (2017) also believe that media literacy comprises various abilities and skills which audiences must have, therefore the public ought to have tailored educational programs which will equip them with these skills and boost their ability to identify fake news. As audiences become media literate, they will be able to consume authentic news with the understanding that news must be consumed in a wider context and not in isolation (Abu-Fadil, 2018).

1.2 Problem Statement

Social media has made it possible for anyone to access a mass audience at any time. As has already been established, scholars such as Kiernan (2017) have argued that along with the development of media technology has come the liberation of communication which has promoted easy access to information. Moreover, considering the unique characteristics of new media, its advent has challenged the monopoly that, what some have termed as legacy media have enjoyed, and has largely undermined the role of journalists as gatekeepers Bruns (2011). Therefore, these platforms lend themselves to looser forms of gatekeeping and are often flooded with volumes of questionable information.

While several studies have emerged from the West on how people verify information, literature fails to adequately address the verification practices by audiences in the African context. Considering the increasing dependence on social media in Ghana and the dearth of information on the verification practices of audiences locally, this exploratory study seeks to fill the gap in knowledge on how African social media news consumers go about the task of verifying information they obtain from social media.

This study will provide insight into whether these particular social media news consumers screen the information they obtain from social media in order to establish its authenticity or just take in all the information that is put out there.

1.3 Research Objectives

The overarching goal of this study is to explore the verification habits of social media news consumers in Accra in order to understand their verification practices concerning the news they consume on social media platforms.

In line with this goal, this study seeks to:

1. Find out if social media news consumers in Accra verify the news they obtain from social media.
2. Find out why these social media news consumers in Accra verify the news they consume on social media.
3. Find out how they verify the news they obtain from social media.

1.4 Research Questions

The following research questions seek to address the objectives of this study.

1. Do social media news consumers in Accra verify the news they obtain from social media?
2. Why do these news consumers verify the news they obtain from social media?
3. How do these news consumers verify the news they obtain from social media?

1.5 Significance of Study

There is an abundance of literature that focuses on new media and its impact in Western countries, as this phenomenon gradually entrenches itself in society. However, in the African

context and specifically in Ghana, there is a dearth of research on social media in the Ghanaian environment. The primary significance of this study is to address this deficiency by contributing to scholarship on new media in the African setting. This study seeks to provide a preliminary understanding of the discipline of verification carried out by Ghanaian news consumers. It could serve as a basis for further research in the area, which can then drive initiatives aimed at promoting quality verification.

Verification of information on social media is a crucial aspect of media literacy, especially in this period where social media is gaining grounds. This study will also provide information on the efforts that social media audiences and news consumers put into verifying the news they consume from social media platforms.

In addition, since this study seeks to find out the circumstances under which social media news consumers verify information, it will produce insight on what elements drive individuals to verify news. This knowledge can then be factored into any initiative aimed at encouraging Ghanaians, especially social media users to engage in verification.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

This chapter begins with the theoretical framework underpinning this study; ‘Audiences’ Acts of Authentication’ which gives insight into the process that audiences go through when verifying. This is followed by a thematic review of literature based on fake news, credibility and verification. Several studies explore the issue of fake news and credibility in other parts of the world, while others deal with verification of news and information either from the point of view of journalists or audiences. These studies generally indicate a growing awareness of fake news and its effects, as well as the importance of verification.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study relied on the model ‘Audiences’ Acts of Authentication’ which was developed by Tandoc, Ling, Westlund & Duffy (2017). Since this study is mainly concerned with whether social media news consumers verify the news they obtain from social media and how they go about this task of verification, this model was seen to be a good fit for this study because it defines the process that audiences go through during verification.

2.1.1 Audiences’ Acts of Authentication Model

According to this model, audiences go through a two-step process when authenticating information. There is first of all, an internal stage and then an external one.

At the internal stage, there is the ‘internal acts of authentication’ which refers to an individual’s initial encounter with news on social media. Audiences must rely on three main authentication framings at this stage, i.e. the self, the source, and the message. The

information that the individual is engaging with, will then be evaluated based on the individual's own experience, knowledge, and intuition (Tandoc et al., 2017). If at this stage, the individual believes that the information is authentic, there is no need to continue to the next stage and as a result, the authentication process ends.

On the other hand, if the individual is not convinced that the information is authentic, he or she will proceed to the next step, which is external acts of authentication. At this stage, audiences use intentional or incidental external authentication strategies in the evaluation of the information. Intentional strategies indicate that the individual actively seeks information to be used in the authentication process; however, incidental strategies mean that the individual is passive towards the search for information to aid the authentication process.

Interpersonal and institutional resources also help the individual with the authentication process. Tandoc et al. (2017) state that audiences can rely on their personal contacts which refer to interpersonal resources. They may also resort to formal sources which are termed as institutional resources. Depending on the availability of resources and the motivation behind verification, the individual can use various combinations of the authentication strategies and the resources in the authentication process; namely the points below.

1. Incidental and interpersonal
2. Incidental and institutional.
3. Intentional and interpersonal.
4. Intentional and institutional.

2.1.2 Justification

The core of this study is to explore the verification practices of social media news consumers in Ghana and the Audiences' Acts of Authentication model proves to be a good fit for this study, as it defines the process that audiences go through during verification.

The model will be beneficial to the study because it outlines a variety of resources that individuals rely on in the verification process. This will aid the study, by bringing to the fore a range of tools that can support the verification process, thereby allowing the researcher to explore whether these tools are used in the Ghanaian context.

2.2 Related Studies

False information, credibility and verification have become important areas of study in this era where social media is facilitating access to information and changing how people engage with information on various media platforms. The following studies provide insight into the discourse.

2.2.1 Fake News

Numerous terms such as fake news, misinformation, and disinformation have been used by several scholars to describe information that purports false claims or is partially lacking in truth (Nelson, 2017; Kumar & Shar, 2018; Korta, 2018). Although these terms can be identified as addressing the same phenomenon, the distinction often lies in the motive and intention linked to the dissemination of that particular information. With disinformation and fake news, there is usually a deliberate attempt to spread inaccuracy and deceive audiences by disguising falsehood as truth (Shin, Jian, Driscoll, & Bar, 2018), however, with misinformation, that conscious intent to deceive does not exist (Kumar & Shar, 2018).

Nelson (2017) analyzed US online audiences' exposure to fake news in 2016, by comparing 30 fake news sites to 24 real news sites which comprised various brands within the scope of news media. He discovered that despite the prevalence of fake news in the era of social media, which created the impression that an increasing number of people were engaging with fake news, the percentage of people interacting with fake news was quite minimal compared to the number of people that engaged with authentic content,. Therefore, more people engaged with real news than with fake news. The study also revealed that visitors to fake news sites were likely to end up there from the social networking site Facebook. This revealed that as prevalent as fake news was, only a small section of online audiences was exposed to it. The study also established that fake news audiences were not exclusively attentive to fake news sites but engaged with real news sites as well. From these findings, the author therefore argued that the phenomenon of fake news was exaggerated and not as problematic as some suggested.

However, other scholars presented contrary findings in their study. In Kumar & Shar's (2018) paper, the researchers undertook a comprehensive examination of the various elements that fed into the issue of false information, and in the course recognized that the spread of fake news had a potentially global impact. They argued that false information was only as powerful as it was because audiences were unable to distinguish what was real from what was fake. This difficulty would only deteriorate, since they concluded that technological development would make it increasingly difficult for audiences to accurately identify real news.

Allcott et al. (2018) also conducted a study of user engagement with fake news from a sample of 673 sites on Facebook and Twitter and discovered that within the period of study; 2015 to 2018, engagement with fake news differed on Facebook and Twitter. From 2015 prior to the 2016 election in the US, engagement with fake news increased on both platforms,

however there was a decline in fake news engagement on Facebook even as Twitter engagements continued to rise. They also realized that despite the decline in fake news engagement on Facebook, audiences were still interacting with a significant amount of fake news and misinformation and Facebook was one of the main mediums being harnessed to disseminate misinformation.

Vosoughi et al. (2018) explored the spread of all forms of stories (verified, true or false) on the social media platform Twitter, from the period of 2006 to 2017, with the aid of data consisting of 126,000 news stories that had been tweeted over 4.5 million times by 3 million people. Depending on information from six independent fact checking sites, they were able to catalogue the stories into true and false. They discovered that compared to true stories, false ones spread more quickly and reached a larger number of people than true ones. They also found that audiences were more likely to retweet false news than they would retweet true ones, which essentially was inconsistent with Nelson's (2017) claim that audiences' engagement with fake news was minimal.

Wasserman & Madrid-Morales (2019) also conducted a study on fake news and media trust in Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa. Their quantitative study sampled 1847 adults which were aged 18 years and above. The study revealed that Africa like many other parts of the world has been afflicted by the issue of fake news aided by the presence of mobile phones. It was also discovered that out of the respondents, the educated ones professed they were exposed to fake news on a regular basis. The study further disclosed that South Africans who indicated that they were constantly exposed to fake news had a low level of trust in social media while in Kenya, it was the educated men who reported low levels of trust in the media.

Research therefore reveals that fake news is indeed an issue in today's society and with its dissemination being facilitated by the internet and social media, many are exposed to information that is untrue.

2.2.2 Credibility

In this period where new media appears to be dominating the media landscape and serves as a channel for the spread of misinformation and fake news, there is a growing need to understand audiences' perceptions of credibility of not only traditional media, but more importantly new media.

Sabigan (2007) studied credibility perceptions of students in the US of both television and online news. Using the convenience sampling method to obtain 538 respondents, the researcher distributed paper and online questionnaires. The study revealed that when students were presented with conflicting news, they would most likely believe the version offered by newspapers, then television before online news. Most of the students, when asked, preferred online news sites that were linked to newspapers. This study revealed that students perceived online news to be more credible than television news because they believed that television was not likely to present a comprehensive story as online news would. However, television news was considered to be better presented than online news. The data also revealed that the credibility of online news was primarily judged based on the credibility of the reporter and not on the news itself.

Kang (2010) sought to establish that the perceived credibility of social media dictates audience's engagement with the medium. The data was obtained from a focus group of 41 blog users and an online questionnaire administered to a sample of 278 social media users. The study did reveal that audiences were highly concerned about credibility and that this

perception informed their choice of what blogs to attend to. According to Kang (2010) credibility was one of the main factors that caused a lot of individuals to visit the social media pages of organizations.

Kovačič et al. (2010) also conducted a study to find out the perceptions of Slovenian journalists of media credibility. Surveying a random sample of 130 journalists in Slovenia, the researchers limited the scope of media, to what they termed as ‘serious media’ (i.e. all media excluding tabloids). They discovered that majority of the journalists regarded traditional news media as highly credible however, when it came to the websites linked to these traditional media, the number declined with many either disagreeing or taking a neutral stance. Regarding, internet media, respondents who used the internet often, either for work or other reasons, were of the view that it was credible while those working in traditional media perceived the internet media to be less credible than the traditional one. One of the reasons given, for rating traditional media as more credible was the kind of news they offered- more serious, public affairs topics (economy, social affairs and ecology) while online media was more prone to provide sensational news (entertainment, lifestyle and sexual advice). Contrary to Sabigan (2007), respondents deemed traditional media to be more credible than online media because it offered more ‘in-depth, exhaustive’ information while online news media provided ‘surface, quick and unverified’ information. It is therefore evident that the work of online journalists was rated lower than that of traditional journalists and was seen to be less credible compared to traditional media.

McCracken (2011) obtained data from 107 respondents from the Rochester Institute of Technology in the US in an online survey in order to understand consumers’ perceptions of credibility of mainstream and new media. The findings of this study were consistent with the general discourse on media credibility as the researcher found that most news consumers

were more reliant on media that they found credible. An interesting finding was that despite the fact that online media was not considered to be as credible as traditional media, there was a daily consumption of online media by audiences. However, it is noteworthy that even then, online audiences did not totally discard credibility since they had a tendency to engage with more established and accredited sites for news rather than platforms being used by citizen journalists.

Thom (2016) explored in her study how Canadian youth decide the kind of news they believe, in this era where social media and online platforms have come to disrupt the profession and operation of journalism. Thirty-four participants were conveniently sampled for a focus group discussion while 25 other participants were interviewed. The study found that on the issue of credibility or the believability of news, young people were likely to make a subjective analysis and judge the credibility of that piece of information based on factors such as their experience with news and other information or make sense of the information guided by information evaluation tools such as CRAAP (Currency, Relevance, Authority, Attendance and Purpose) method or the 5Ws (Who, What, When, Where, and Why).

Generally, scholarship agrees that credibility is an important factor and most online media platforms are regarded as less credible than traditional media. It is therefore necessary for online audiences to be able to establish the credibility of the online platforms they engage with in order to be comfortable about consuming its content.

2.2.3 Verification

Although the propagation of false information and fake news is not novel, its increasing prevalence has warranted that verification of news and information be important area of study. Metzger, Flanagin & Zwarun (2003) conducted a study which sought to investigate student's effort in verifying web-based information. Data for this study came from

356 undergraduate students who filled anonymous questionnaires. The researchers discovered that most students regarded online information with low credibility however, their efforts in verifying such information was quite minimal. The researchers however, found out that for students who went to extra extents to verify information, they analyzed the completeness and comprehensiveness of the information they were dealing with or sought out other sources to validate the online information they had obtained.

Juffinger et al. (2009) devoted their study to the evaluation of a blog analysis system which was designed to assess the credibility of information presented on a blog. This system allowed the search of blog entries and news articles and provided additional information meant to inform the user of the credibility level of that particular piece of information. In comparing the contents and quantity structure of a blog to a news corpus, the authors concluded that the system helped in ranking blogs at three levels of credibility (highly, average/unspecified and little). This system would be especially useful for audiences who have poor information literacy skills and needed a third party to authenticate or debunk news.

Diakopoulos et al. (2012) developed the SRSR (Seriously Rapid Source Review) system, which is based on journalistic practices, to aid in evaluating the authenticity of sources that journalists find through social media. Seven journalists who used social media were recruited using the snowball sampling method. The researcher discovered that this system presented journalists with a list of Twitter users who could serve as potential sources for certain issues and is fitted with visual and informational cues which afford the journalist a preliminary investigation of the sources' authenticity. An exploratory study of how helpful the system was to journalists revealed some of the cues that journalists often considered in their routine checks. They would check the age of the account, related website, historical tweets, and interaction with others. Some journalists noted that in the event of breaking news

online, sources who had friends(followers), located in the area of focus were seen as more credible and that was important to a number of journalists. Another cue that some journalists found particularly useful was a network sketch of people following the source who were also tweeting about the same issue. This was designed to show how connected the potential source was to others involved in the discussion of the issue. Furthermore, if the followers were established organizations, this in a sense, vouched for the credibility of that source.

Millennial college students from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga were conveniently sampled for Lee's (2016) study which sought to reconcile the skepticism of millennials and their vulnerability to media persuasion. The study discovered that in verifying news, majority of millennials were likely to resort to Google. However, in most cases, this only happened if they were unsure of the veracity of that piece of information. This study also brought to light the fact that when a news item was repeated by more and more people, the tendency to believe that, that news item was credible was highly likely, suggesting that in such cases, a lower number of millennials would find it necessary to verify information.

Kumar et al. (2016) in this study, conducted an experiment where 10 participants were presented with 64 hoax articles from Wikipedia. Each hoax article was matched with an authentic article which was slightly identical in appearance and the raters were tasked to determine which article was a hoax only by engaging with the article and not any external material. The researchers discovered that a human being's accuracy in differentiating between what was false and real, was quite weak. Unable to analyze any other element (mentions from other articles, article editor's edit history) apart from the text of the article, the researchers concluded that in distinguishing between false and true information, audiences need to go beyond analyzing text and need cues such as 'the article creator's edit history, the mentions received from other articles, and the density of the article's ego

network'. They further concluded that if humans do not have any special tools, their skills in distinguishing between hoax and non-hoax are quite lacking. One of the ways that people judged if an article was authentic or not, was to look at the length. Shorter articles were often judged as hoax meanwhile from the study, most hoaxes were actually longer than their counterpart non-hoax articles.

Kiernan (2017) in this quantitative study conducted in Ireland, sought to discover how information literacy could help third level students to assess information on their social media platforms since they appeared to be avid users of social media platforms. The survey revealed that majority of students were equipped in that area, however, despite the large number of information literate students, when it came to verifying information, students opted for convenient and 'easy-to-use' sources, which would invariably reduce the effectiveness of this verification process. Despite this, Kiernan (2017) still concluded that the level of information literacy skills that students have, ought to be enhanced in order to help students become more skilled in identifying fake news. He noted that librarians could play a role in adapting these skills to the non-traditional information sources like social media.

Aside from the use of convenient and easy sources in the process of verification, Zaryan (2017) discovered that people often used their subjectivities to determine whether news fell in the category of fake news. Her qualitative study conducted in Europe, which was hinged on an interview with 14 participants, revealed that most of the participants' attempts at verifying the authenticity of such information depended on their personal judgements or 'gut' feeling. In consensus with other scholars, the research did reveal that in verifying information, some people engaged with multiple sources in order to compare the presentation of the same story. This helped them to get a broader picture of the issue and also determine the veracity of the information being presented.

Some scholars, believing that the task of identifying and tackling fake news is one that technology can solve, focused their studies on tools and technology. Safieddine (2017) in studying the spread of misinformation online, set out to explore whether a verification tool could fight misinformation after it had been shared. Using a simulation intended to replicate the real-world propagation of information online, the study revealed that authentication or verification tools such as a ‘real-time rumor tracker’ were useful in tackling misinformation. However, these tools were rendered quite ineffective, when newsgroups (usually a number of people with a common interest in a subject) continued to propagate misinformation and did nothing to correct it. This indicates that regardless of technological effort, human effort is quite necessary in reducing misinformation and the spread of fake news.

Mavridis (2018) in this quantitative study conducted a random sampling of 100 members of a Facebook group in Greece, with the aim of investigating the tools and methods that Greek users opt for in tackling fake news. His findings are consistent with other scholars who highlighted personal judgement as a verification tool. His study recorded that majority of the participants, verified online information. Most of these Greek users visited a number of online platforms to authenticate news. Some went to the extent of analyzing the types of comments that followed online posts and from that, were able to create their personal judgements about the authenticity of the information. Another way that these users established the credibility of online information, was to look into the source of that information. An interesting finding was that Greek users appeared to have a well-organized authentication process which was based not only on sources but on cues in the message or information and their own personal experience, individual knowledge and intuition. Their personal knowledge might also be influenced by their network, i.e. their family and friends. In tackling fake news, he noted that Greek users go the extra mile by reporting posts they

deem to be fake, warning others in the comment section of online information of their suspicion and sending warnings on their personal accounts.

In this quantitative study, Wada (2018) sampled 350 Nigerians to ascertain the extent to which people were dependent on unprofessionally processed information and how well people were able to distinguish information from social media from information from professional sources. The study discovered that majority of the youth in Nigeria were solely dependent on social media whereas the older generation complemented information from social media with that from other sources. The study also ascertained that despite their willingness to share the information found on social media platforms, Nigerians generally did not authenticate the information before doing so.

2.2.4 Journalists and Verification

From the point of view of journalists, Vergeer (2018) investigated how a journalist's perception of the credibility of an online source drives his or her need to verify information from that source. This quantitative study conducted in Netherlands with a sample of 666 members of the Dutch Association for Journalists revealed that majority of journalists did engage in some form of verification before publication however, a few journalists admitted to not doing any form of verification. Furthermore, contrary to the belief that an educational background in journalism would encourage a journalist to be more critical of online information and therefore, subject it to higher scrutiny and checks, the study revealed that a journalist's training did not indicate a higher compulsion to verify online information. However, a journalists' level of education was discovered to influence his or her perception of the credibility of an online source. Therefore, the more highly educated a journalist was, the more likely he or she was to question the authenticity of information coming from an online source. An interesting finding was that the position a journalist held in his or her

organization influenced his or her propensity to verify news from online sources. Therefore, managers in the newsrooms were more likely to verify such information.

In the Ghanaian context, Ofosu-Peasah & Ahiabenu (2018) conducted their quantitative study based on a sample of 154 newsrooms in order to ascertain media perspectives on fake news in Ghana. The study, which is a fairly new research area, discovered that as most newsrooms in Ghana were becoming digitally oriented, they were becoming more susceptible to the phenomena of fake news, however, most journalists lacked the requisite skills and training in order to combat fake news, thereby leaving them handicapped. This invariably will take a toll on the audience, since ignorant media will be unable to equip audiences with authentic information.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This chapter describes the research method of this study. Defined in this section of the study, are the research design, population and sample, data collection method and plans for data analysis.

3.1 Research Design

This exploratory study adopted a quantitative approach. According to Babbie (2010), the quantitative method is suitable for collecting data from a population that is too large to observe directly. A survey was conducted under this approach in order to allow the researcher gather data from a lot of sources. The researcher who uses the survey is afforded the opportunity to gather a large amount of data with relative ease (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). This method therefore appeared to be appropriate for this study which targeted all social media consumers in Accra.

3.2 Research Population and Sample

Wimmer & Dominick (2011) refers to population as a group, class of subjects. The population or group that informed the sample of this study was all social media news consumers in Accra. As at 2018, the number of social media users in Ghana had reached 3.196 billion (Zurek, 2018). This population would have been too huge for a study of this sort to consider, therefore the researcher decided to limit the population to Accra. Out of this population, the convenient sampling method was used to select a sample of 300 respondents.

With this sampling method, the researcher was able to obtain a sample that was easily accessible. Considering the fact that there is no formal database of social media users in Ghana, that could have helped the researcher determine the precise sample that would be representative of this study's population, the researcher found it prudent to gather responses from a readily accessible group. Moreover, looking at the time allotted to the completion of this study and the nature of the research, the researcher could not afford to use any other sampling method.

However, the researcher is not oblivious to the fact that the convenience sampling method is riddled with issues, such as the possibility of a biased sample and its limited ability to derive a sample representative of the population (Etikan, Musa, Alkassim, 2016). Despite these flaws, the convenience sampling method was considered the best option for this study due to the immense problem posed by the nonexistence of a comprehensive and accessible record of the study's population.

The unit of analysis for this research was the various individuals who partook in the survey.

3.3 Data Collection and Instrument

A structured questionnaire was designed using Google Forms to gather the necessary data for the study. This questionnaire was divided into two sections with section A addressing the demographics of the respondent and section B delving into the main issue of social media news and verification. The questionnaire began with a screener question which was included to sift out the respondents who were located in Accra. The questions were to a large extent close-ended with a few portions, making room for the respondent to provide responses that may not have been captured by the researcher. There were 12 questions in all, with 3

fashioned as statements followed by a Likert scale for the purpose of measuring the degree to which respondents agreed or disagreed with the statements provided.

In Ghana, 76.3 percent of social media users can be found on Facebook, one of the most popular social media platforms in the country (Statcounter, 2019). Another social media platform that appears to be dominant in Ghana is WhatsApp which has several users all over the nation (Ahiabenu, 2018). This therefore influenced the researcher's choice to administer the questionnaire on the three most popular social media platforms in Ghana; Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter. These platforms provided the researcher the opportunity to reach a diverse group of people which although did not solve the problem posed by the chosen sampling method, mitigated it to some extent.

Within the month of July, the questionnaire was consistently shared on these three platforms in order to obtain as many responses as possible. The researcher was able to obtain 300 completed questionnaires, however, 48 of them had to be eliminated since some of the questionnaires were incorrectly filled or respondents who filled these questionnaires indicated (in the screener question) that they were not located within Accra. Since the population of this study was restricted to social media news consumers in Accra, the 48 respondents were not included in this study thereby bringing the sample to a total of 252 respondents.

3.4 Data Analysis

The responses from the completed questionnaires were then coded with SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). A descriptive analysis of the data followed, which led to the generation of frequencies, percentages and cross tabulations. The software was also used to generate charts and tables to support the findings of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

4.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of this study. The data, which was collected from social media news consumers in Accra, helped to understand the verification habits of the 252 social media news consumers sampled for this study. The findings are introduced by a demographic description of the sample and the information in this chapter is supported by tables and charts.

4.1 Sample Description

The total population of this study was all social media news consumers in Accra and out of these, 252 respondents were conveniently sampled.

Majority of the respondents (238) were within the ages of 18-36 years, while seven of the respondents were aged 37 and above. Seven respondents were also below 18 years.

With regard to level of education, majority of the respondents (122) had a graduate degree while 85 respondents had a bachelor's degree. The diploma holders were 30 and 14 possessed a high school certificate. One respondent did not specify his or her level of education.

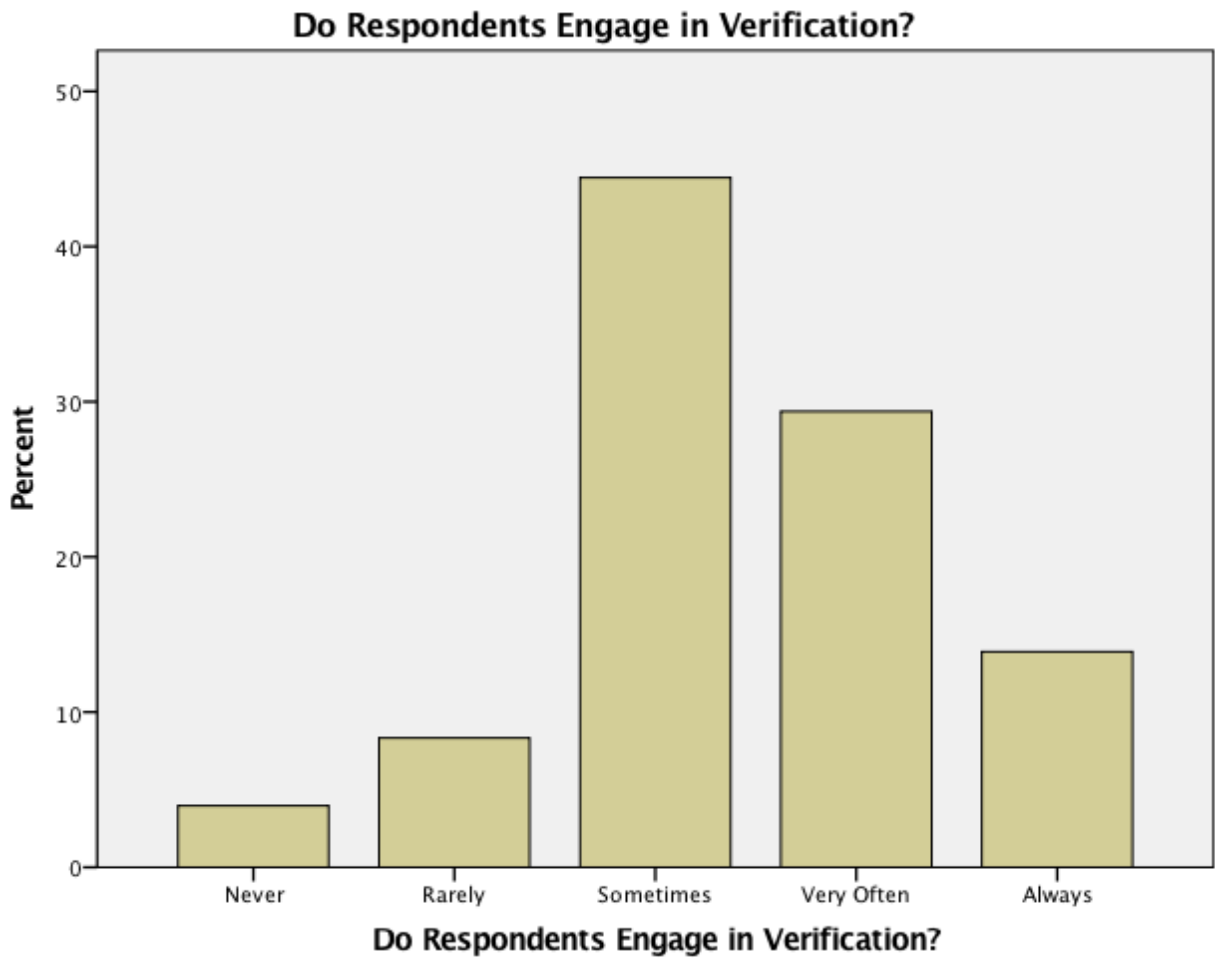
The data revealed that a large percentage of the respondents, that is 72.6 percent, were WhatsApp users, closely followed by Facebook users with a percentage of 59.1. With a percentage of 47.2, Twitter users were not lagging behind. Instagram users accounted for 14.7 percent of the respondents, while LinkedIn, Telegram, YouTube and Reddit appeared to be in the minority with 6 respondents using LinkedIn, 5 respondents using Reddit, 4 respondents using Telegram and 3 respondents being YouTube users.

Finally, according to the data, most of the respondents, that is 87.3 percent, consumed social news on the social media platforms they used. Consumers of entertainment, arts and culture news accounted for 85.7 percent while 73.8 percent consumed political news. Seventy-point two percent said they consumed international news on the social media platforms they used while 64.7 percent said they consumed news pertaining to education. 63.1 percent chose health news while 60.7 percent chose sports news. Business and finance news had the lowest share of respondents with a percentage of 53.2 percent.

4.2 Engagement in News Verification

The study revealed that majority of the respondents, that is 96 percent, engaged in verification to some extent while 4 percent did not do any verification at all. Respondents were asked to indicate the frequency with which they verified the news that they obtained from social media. The analysis revealed that majority of the respondents, 44.4 percent, verify the news that they receive sometimes whereas 29.4 percent of the respondents verify very often. Respondents who always verify the news they obtain from social media accounted for 13.9 percent while 8.3 percent of the respondents indicated that they rarely verify. The respondents who claimed that they never verify were in the minority with 4 percent. Figure 1 below shows the degree to which the various respondents engage in verification of news that they obtain from social media.

Figure 1: Social media news consumers and their engagement in news verification

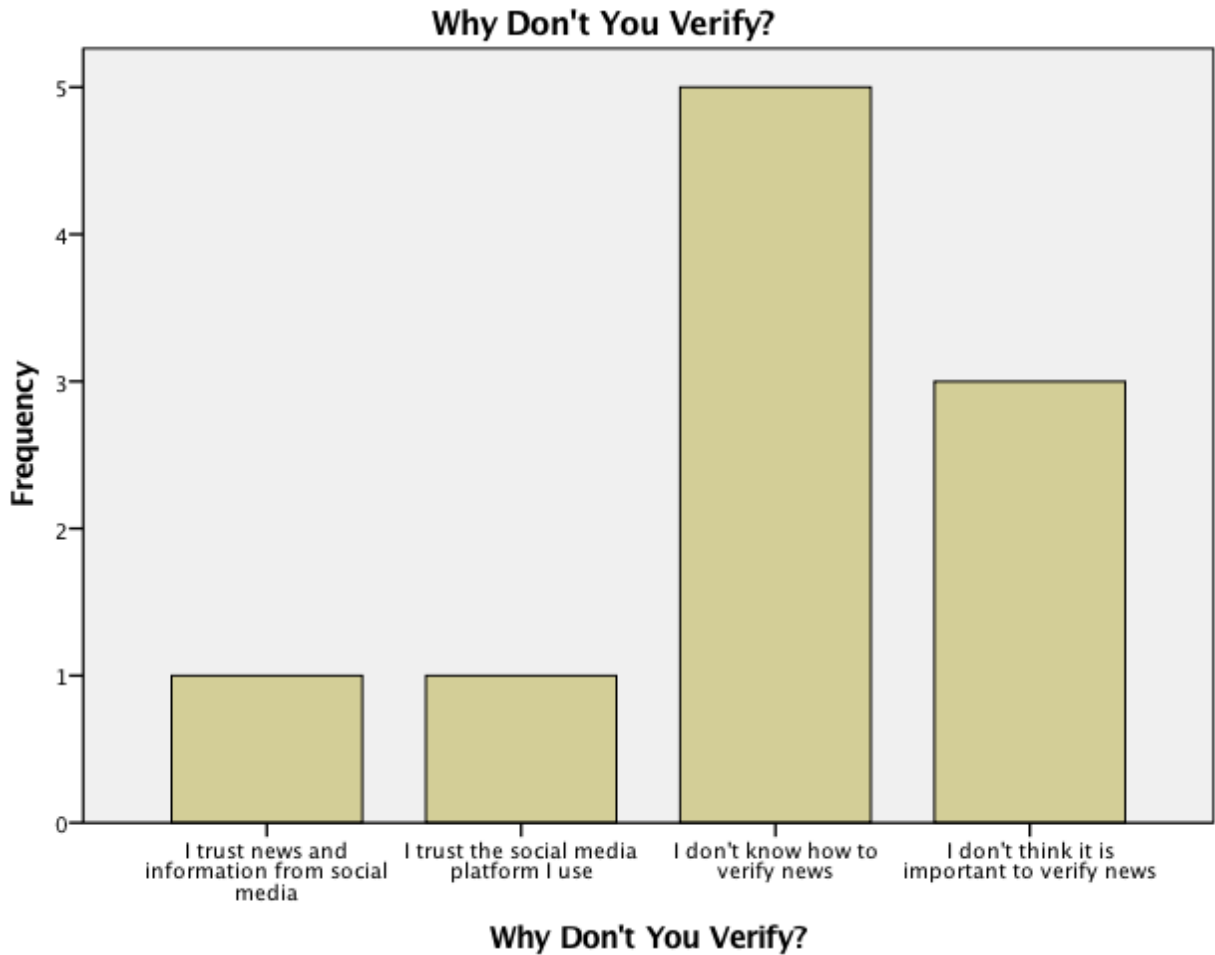


4.3 Reasons for No Verification

According to the data, the respondents who indicated that they did not verify the news they obtained from social media, which accounts for 4 percent of the sample, had varied reasons. The prevailing reason for not verifying was lack of knowledge as to how to verify and 50 percent of the respondents gave this as their reason while 30 percent of the respondents indicated that they did not think verification of news was important. 10 percent of respondents said they trust news from social media whereas another 10 percent of the

respondents did not verify because they trust the social media platform that they use. Figure 2 indicates reasons why respondents do not verify the news they obtain from social media.

Figure 2: Reasons for not verifying news obtained from social media

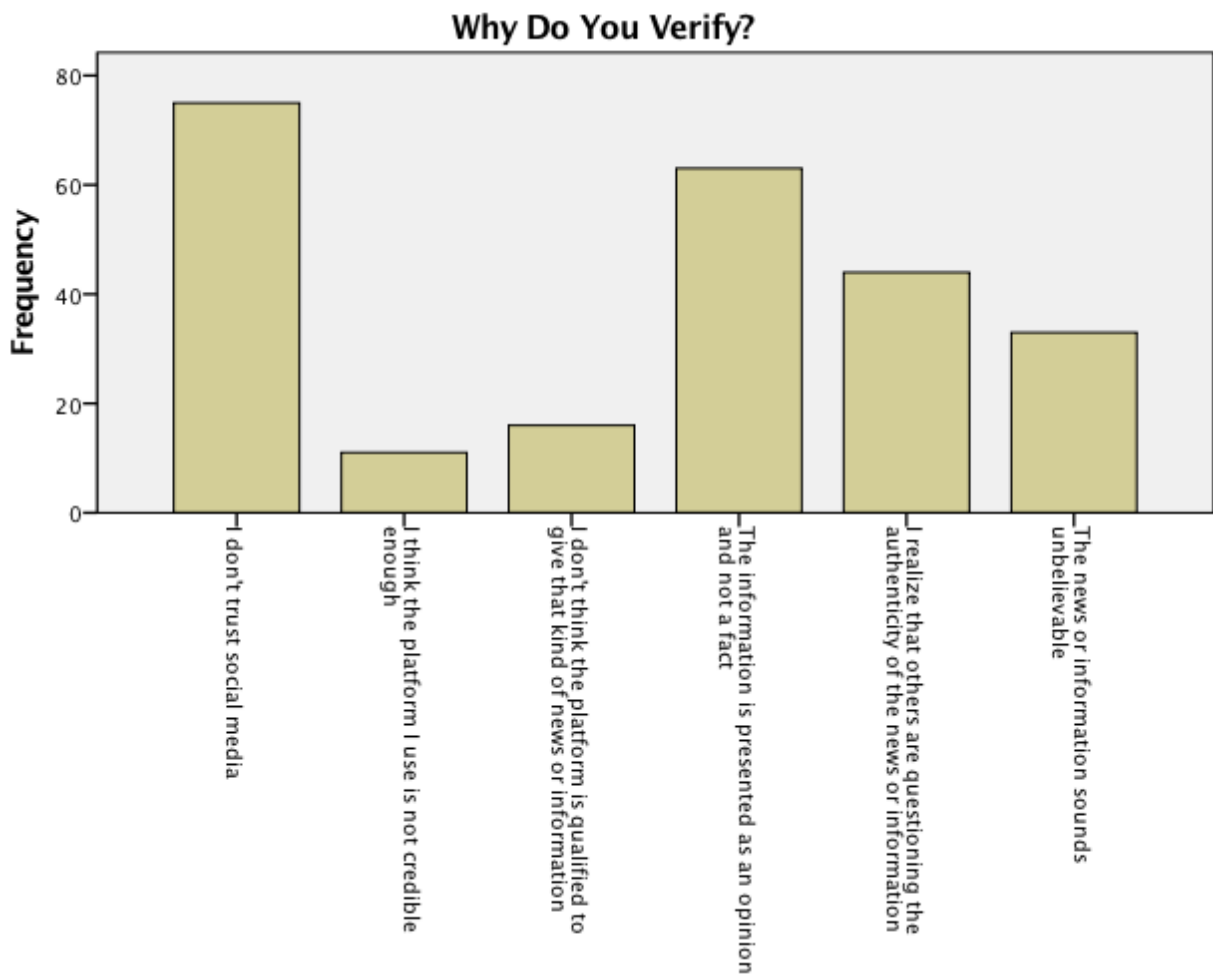


4.4 Reasons for Verification

The data analysis revealed that the 242 respondents who indicated that they verified the news they obtained from social media gave 6 main reasons. The dominant reason given by almost 30 percent of the respondents (29.8%), was the lack of trust in social media. However, 25 percent of the respondents indicated that they verified news from social media when it was presented as an opinion and not a fact. The data also showed that 17.5 percent of

the respondents verified because other people were questioning the authenticity of the news they had obtained from social media, while 13.1 percent of the respondent said that they verified because the news they had obtained sounded unbelievable. For 6.3 percent of the respondents, their reason for verifying was that they did not think the social media platform they were using was qualified to give the kind of news that was being provided. A few of the respondents, 4.4 percent stated that they did not think the platform they were using was a credible one and as a result, they had to verify the news they were receiving. Figure 3 below, indicates the reasons why respondents verify the news they obtain from social media.

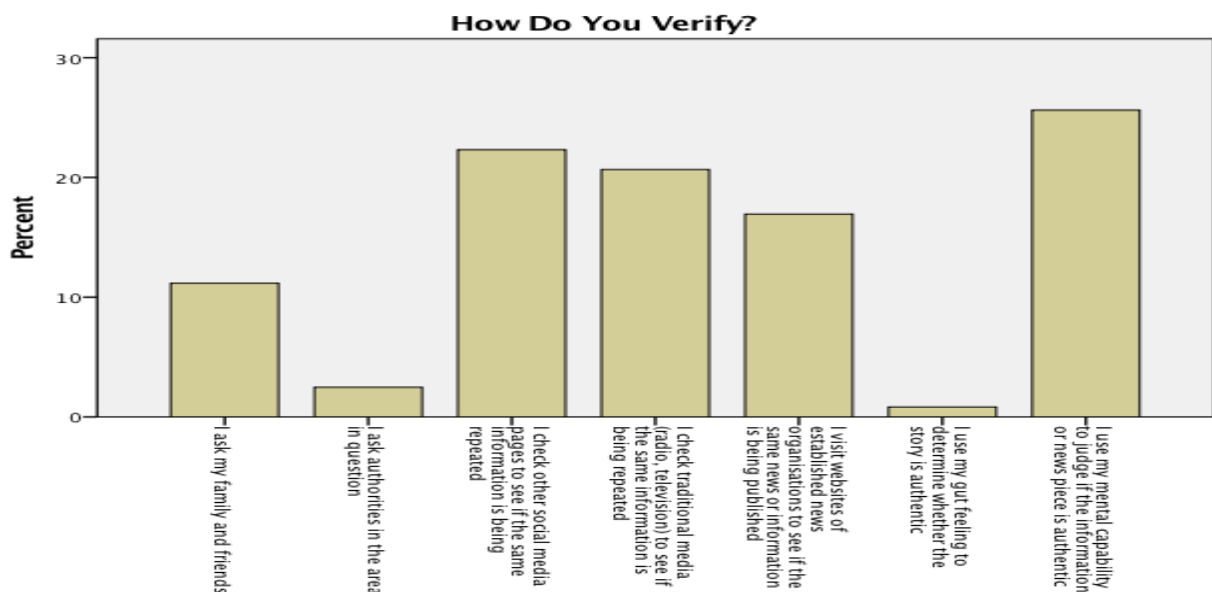
Figure 3: Reasons for verification of news obtained from social media



4.5 Method of Verification

According to the data, the respondents indicated 7 ways of verifying the news they obtained from social media. The most popular method of verification was using one’s mental capability to judge the authenticity of news and 24.6 percent of the respondents indicated that they used this method of verification. 21.4 percent of the respondents however said they visited other social media platforms to see if the same news was being repeated while 19.8 percent indicated that they check traditional media such as radio, television and newspapers to find out whether the same news had been broadcast or published. 16.3 percent of the respondents stated that they visited the websites of established news organizations to see if the same news had been published, and 10.7 percent of the respondents said that they asked family and friends. A few respondents, accounting for 2.4 percent of the sample, said they asked authorities in the area in question while 0.8 percent of the respondents claimed to use their gut feeling or intuition to determine the authenticity of news they obtained from social media. Figure 4 indicates the method of verification that respondents use.

Figure 4: Method of verification



4.6 Degree of Verification in relation to Social Media Platform Used

A cross tabulation of the social media platforms that respondents used and the degree to which they verified, showed that more respondents on the various platforms verified the news they obtained than those who did not verify. According to the data, WhatsApp was the most used social media platform with 183 respondents claiming to use the platform. Majority of the respondents (84 respondents) indicated that they verified sometimes, while 57 respondents claimed to verify very often. Nineteen respondents stated that they verified always while 16 respondents said they rarely verify. Minority of the respondents (7 respondents) said they never verified.

Out of the 149 respondents who claimed to be Facebook users, about half of them, 74 respondents said they verified the news they obtained sometimes while 37 respondents said they verified very often. Twenty respondents claimed to verify always whereas 12 respondents indicated that they rarely verify the news they obtain from social media. A few, 6 respondents stated that they never verified the news they obtained from social media.

On Twitter where 119 respondents claimed to use this platform, there was a decline in the numbers, compared to WhatsApp and Facebook. Forty-four respondents indicated they verified very often. This was closely followed by 39 respondents who claimed to verify sometimes. Twenty-three respondents stated that they always verified while 12 of them indicated that they rarely do. Only 1 respondent stated that he or she never verified the news he or she obtained from social media.

Despite the low number of respondents who stated that they used Instagram (37 respondents), most of them indicated that they engaged in some form of verification. Almost half of the respondents (17 respondents) said they verified sometimes while 12 respondents said they verified very often. Four respondents said they verified always, and

another 4 respondents indicated that they never verified. None of the respondents indicated that they verified rarely.

Six respondents indicated they used LinkedIn and out of these 6 respondents, most of them (4 respondents) verified sometimes. One respondent said he or she verified very often while another respondent indicated that he or she always verified the news he or she obtained from social media.

Out of the 5 respondents who said they use Reddit, 3 claimed to verify very often and 2 indicated that they verified always.

Telegram was chosen by 4 respondents. Two respondents claimed to verify very often. One respondent claimed to verify sometimes while and another respondent claimed to verify always.

For the three respondents who said they used YouTube, 2 indicated that they verified very often, while one respondent claimed to verify always. Figure 5 below shows the relationship between the social media platform used and the degree of verification.

Table 1: Degree of Verification in relation to Social Media Platform Used

		Degree of Verification				
		Always	Very Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Social Media Platform Used	WhatsApp	19	54	84	16	7
	Facebook	20	37	74	12	6
	Twitter	23	44	39	12	1
	Instagram	4	12	17	0	4
	LinkedIn	1	1	4	0	0
	Reddit	2	3	0	0	0
	Telegram	1	2	1	0	0
	YouTube	1	2	0	0	0

4.7 Degree of Verification in relation to News Type

A cross tabulation of the types of news the respondents consumed and the degree to which they verified also revealed that most of the respondents engaged in verification, regardless of the type of news.

The data revealed that for social news which had the largest share of respondents; 220 respondents, majority of these respondents, (100 respondents) verified sometimes while 68 respondents verified very often. While 27 respondents claimed to always verify, 16 of them indicated that they rarely verified. Nine respondents who were in the minority stated that they never verified.

Out of the 216 respondents who identified themselves as consumers of news on entertainment, arts and culture, 93 of them indicated that they verified sometimes while

64 said they verified very often. Thirty-one indicated that they verified always while 18 said they rarely verified. A few respondents (10 respondents) said they never verified.

One hundred and eighty-six respondents were political news consumers. Seventy-nine of them said they verified sometimes. Fifty-nine respondents said they verified very often, and 29 respondents stated they verified always. Thirteen said they rarely verified while only six said they never verified.

In the case of international news consumers (177), 81 respondents indicated that they verified sometimes while 52 respondents claimed to verify very often, and 29 respondents said they always verified. Ten respondents indicated that they rarely verified while 5 respondents said they never engaged in verification.

Out of the 163 respondents who identified as consumers of news on education, 76 of them said they verified sometimes; 50 of them said they verified very often and 23 of the respondents said they always verified. Eight respondents said they rarely engaged in verification while 6 respondents indicated that they never verified.

One hundred and fifty-nine said they were consumers of health news and out of these respondents, 73 of them said they verified sometimes while 48 respondents indicated that they verified very often. Twenty-three respondents said they always verified while 10 respondents said they rarely verified. A few of the respondents (5) said they never verified.

With sports news consumers (153), more than half (75) of the respondents said they verified sometimes. Forty-six respondents said they verified very often while only 18 said they always verified. Nine of the respondents said they rarely verified, and 5 respondents said they never do.

One hundred and thirty-four respondents said they consumed news on business and finance. Sixty-four of these respondents said they verified sometimes, while 40 respondents claimed to verify very often. Twenty claimed to always verify but 7 respondents indicated that they rarely did. Minority (3 respondents) said they never verified. Figure 6 below shows the relationship between the type of news consumed and the degree of verification.

Table 2: Degree of Verification in relation of Type of News Consumed

		Degree of Verification				
		Always	Very Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Type of News Consumed	Social News	27	68	100	16	9
	Entertainment, Arts & Culture	31	64	93	18	10
	Political News	29	59	79	13	6
	International News	29	52	81	10	5
	Education News	23	50	76	8	6
	Health News	23	48	73	10	5
	Sports News	18	46	75	9	5
	Business & Finance	20	40	64	7	3

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.0 Introduction

The main aim of this study was to explore the verification habits of social media news consumers in Accra. This chapter discusses the findings of the study in relation to the three objectives of this research, as well as provides answers to the research questions posed. It also notes the limitations that emerged during this study, as well as some recommendations for future studies.

5.1 Discussion of Key Findings

The proliferation of information available, especially due to the introduction of social media, makes it expedient that verification of news and information in general, be a top priority.

The first research question of this study was ‘do social media news consumers in Accra verify the news they obtain from social media’. According to the results, majority of the respondents did verify the news they obtained from social media. This therefore suggests a consciousness on the part of social media news consumers that information from social media cannot be received without some degree of interrogation. This finding is consistent with Mavridis (2018) whose study relied on a sample of Greek social media users. He discovered that majority of Greek social media users went to great extents to verify the information they obtained from social media.

The study further revealed differing consistencies in the frequency of verification among the respondents, ranging from verifying always to verifying rarely. Those who

claimed to verify always (13.9%), were in the minority compared to those who were not as religious in their verification attempts (that is, verifying sometimes or very often - 73.8%).

Finally, just a few respondents (4%) said that they never verified, indicating that they run no form of checks on the news that they got from the social media platforms they used. The fact that few individuals do not verify the news they obtain from social media is promising, considering it shows a high level of consciousness of the need to verify and authenticate news that is obtained from social media. However, those who consistently verify are in the minority compared to those who are not as consistent. This indicates that a number of social media news consumers are vulnerable to fake news and misinformation in relation to the news they fail to verify.

It is noteworthy that across the various social media platforms that the respondents indicated that they used, the trend was still visible, with most respondents claiming to verify sometimes, followed by those who verified very often and so on and so forth.

The second research question was ‘why do social media news consumers in Accra, verify the news that they obtain from the platforms they use’.

This study found that the dominant reason for verification of news obtained from social media was the lack of trust in social media. This is not surprising since existing scholarship largely highlights social media’s susceptibility to fake news and audiences’ increasing exposure to false content (Allcott et al., 2018; Kumar & Shar, 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018). Therefore, it is evident that majority of the social media news consumers in Ghana who verify the news they get from the various platforms are aware of social media’s susceptibility to false information. Lee (2016) however, provides a different reason why most millennials verify. According to Lee (2016), who studied why millennials verified information, most of them were likely to verify a piece of information if only they were unsure of its accuracy.

This study also discovered that another reason that compelled respondents to verify news from social media was that the information was presented as an opinion and not a fact. This finding also suggests that these news consumers who verify are able to distinguish between factual information and that which is an opinion. This skill is crucial when engaging with content on social media platforms since there is relatively little gatekeeping on these platforms and as a result anyone is able to play an editorial role without adhering to journalistic standards. This also ties into the issue of fake news on social media. One might not have a conscious intention to mislead audiences but can still misinform them anyway (Kumar & Shar, 2018) especially when information shared is based on one's opinions.

On the other hand, those who chose not to verify the news they obtained from social media, although few, had their reasons for not doing so. Most respondents admitted that they did not know how to verify news. This highlights the increasing need for information and media literacy education. As social media becomes embedded in our daily lives, there ought to be easily accessible systems in place that can help news consumers go about the task of verification. Beyond that, there needs to be thorough education on these systems and methods and how to use them effectively.

The final research question of this study was 'how do social media news consumers in Accra verify the news they obtain from social media'. Seven main ways that the respondents verified news from social media emerged in this study. Majority of the respondents indicated that they used their mental capability to judge the authenticity of the news they obtained from social media. This is in consonance with other studies conducted in other jurisdictions. For example, Thom (2016), Zaryan (2017) and Mavridis (2018) discovered that many people used their personal judgement or undertook a subjective analysis, when verifying information. Tandoc, Ling, Westlund & Duffy (2017) also agree with this finding as their study which centered on how audiences verify revealed that audiences go through an internal

stage of verification where they assess information based on their experience, knowledge and intuition. This is not surprising considering that when one comes into contact with any piece of information, it is almost automatic that you engage with that information mentally before you proceed to use or apply it, but this raises concerns in the area of the quality of verification done. Does the person using his or her mental capability have the right knowledge, experiences or background to accurately decipher the credibility of the information they have received from social media? Is there not a possibility of their biases influencing their thought process and eventually the conclusion they arrive at?

This study also found that more people visited other social media platforms as a method of verifying than those who checked traditional media such as radio, television and newspapers. This is similar to findings by Sabigan (2007) who found that students in the US perceive online news to be more credible than television news because they believe that television does not present a panoramic view of stories whereas online media has the time and space to accommodate a lot of information, thereby leading them to turn to other online media to authenticate a story rather than resorting to traditional media. McCracken's (2011) finding also agrees with this discovery to a large extent. The researcher's online survey which conveniently sampled staff and students of Rochester Institute of Technology discovered that respondents perceived online media to be less credible than traditional media. However, this did not deter the respondents from relying on online media.

Beyond the issue of credibility that audiences attach to the various forms of media, the issue of quality verification comes up again. For those who verify using other social media platforms, there is the possibility that the false information they have received on one platform will be shared on other platforms as well. Therefore, they might err in thinking that proliferation of information is equal to authenticity, which is definitely not the case.

The sample of this study, which to a large extent comprised the youth, may account for the shift from traditional media to online media. Despite the lack of trust that many seem to have in social media, they still use these platforms and invariably accept the information they obtain from there. It is however noteworthy that the difference between those who verified news from social media by checking other social media platforms and those who check traditional media was not large (1.6%).

Despite the fact that audiences are highly concerned about credibility (Kang, 2010), it is interesting to discover that most of the methods used by a majority of the respondents in authenticating social media news pose some credibility risk. Kiernan (2017) also concludes that students often opt for ‘convenient and easy to use’ sources in their verification attempt and this appears to apply in this study as well since it was found that more respondents either verify using their mental capability or by checking other social media pages.

Also as already established, a number of scholars agree that most people use their subjectivities in determining the authenticity of news and information (Zaryan, 2017; Thom, 2016; Mavridis, 2018). Considering that these subjectivities depend on what one has been exposed to or experienced, these judgments can be defective, thereby raising questions about the reliability and validity of verification that most of these respondents do.

5.2 Limitations

One of the limitations of this study was that due to time constraints, only a small sample of 252 respondents made up the survey. Although the sample did provide a lot of information on the phenomenon being studied, a larger sample size would have permitted a wider generalization of the results and findings of this study.

Furthermore, this sample was confined to Accra and comprised to a large extent millennial between the ages of 18-35. Therefore, this study did not factor in how variations in

demographics and socio-economic factors could have had an impact on how the respondents verified news from social media.

5.3 Recommendations

It is recommended that a larger sample size, more reflective of the population be used for a similar study for the purpose of comparison and also generalization of the findings.

This study also raised questions about the validity of the verification methods being used by the respondents. The researcher therefore recommends that further study be done on the available methods of verification and the ones that are currently being used.

Subsequently, audiences should be educated on valid methods of verification and equipped with media literacy skills in order not to undermine the verification process.

5.4 Conclusion

There is a vast amount of information available in this digital age, produced not only by the traditional gatekeepers but by audiences who have turned into news producers. It has therefore become increasingly important in recent times to be sure of the authenticity of information that one has, especially when such information originates from social media. This study which was prompted by the need for literature on verification in Ghana, basically established the fact that majority of social media news consumers in Accra indeed verify social media news for a number of reasons with the most dominant reason being a lack of trust in social media.

Subsequently, the study showed that these news consumers also had a variety of methods which they used in order to assure themselves of the authenticity and verity of news obtained from the social media platforms they used, with the most popular method being the

use of one's mental capacity to determine whether a piece of information obtained is accurate or not.

As the model in this study posits, one of the primary methods of assessing information authenticity is to depend on the self, in other words, using one's knowledge and experiences to determine the credibility of a piece of information. This study indeed established that generally, respondents rely on the self in the process of concluding whether information they have received from social media is authentic or not. This is closely followed by interrogating the information by juxtaposing it with similar or related information from other social media platforms, traditional media and websites of established news organizations.

APPENDIX

QUESTIONNAIRE

A SURVEY ON NEWS VERIFICATION HABITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA NEWS

CONSUMERS IN ACCRA

Dear Respondent,

I am Vanessa Benewaah Adade, a graduate student at the University of Ghana. I am conducting this study to explore how social media news consumers in Accra verify news and information that they obtain from social media platforms.

Given the prevalence of fake news currently, it is necessary to understand if social media users are capable of recognizing fake news and authenticating the information they obtain from social media.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Please note that the responses you provide will be treated with confidentiality. The outcome and report of this research will not include references to any respondent.

Screening Question: Do you live in Accra?

- a. Yes. b. No

If you do, please proceed to fill out the rest of the questionnaire.

Section A: Demographic Profile

1. Gender

- a. Male b. Female

2. What is your age group?
 - a. Below 18
 - b. 18 – 36
 - c. 37 and above
3. What is your level of education?
 - a. High School Certificate
 - b. Diploma
 - c. Bachelor's Degree
 - d. Graduate Degree
 - e. Other, please specify.....

Section B: News Habits

4. Which social media platforms do you obtain news or information from?
 - a. Facebook
 - b. WhatsApp
 - c. Twitter
 - d. Others, please specify
5. What kind of news and information do you obtain from the platform you selected above?
 - a. Political
 - b. Social
 - c. Health
 - d. Sports
 - e. Entertainment, Arts & Culture
 - f. International
 - g. Business & Finance
 - h. Education
 - i. Others, please specify
6. News and information on social media are credible.
 - a. Strongly Agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Disagree
 - e. Strongly Disagree
7. I can accurately distinguish between fake news and authentic news or information on social media.
 - a. Extremely
 - b. Very
 - c. Moderately
 - d. Slightly
 - e. Not at all
8. I verify news or information that I obtain from social media.
 - a. Never
 - b. Rarely
 - c. Sometimes
 - d. Very Often
 - e. Always

9. If no, why not?

- a. I trust news and information from social media.
- b. I trust the social media platform I use.
- c. I don't know what verification of news is.
- d. I don't know how to verify news.
- e. I don't think it is important to verify news.
- f. The news or information sounds believable, so I don't need to verify it.
- g. Others, please specify

10. If yes, why do you verify the news and information you obtain from social media?

- a. I don't trust social media.
- b. I think the platform I use is not credible enough.
- c. I don't think the platform is qualified to give that kind of news.
- d. The information is presented as an opinion and not as a fact.
- e. I realize that others are questioning the authenticity of the news or information.
- f. The news or information sounds unbelievable.
- g. Others, please specify

11. How do you verify?

- a. I use my mental capability to judge if the information or news piece is authentic.
- b. I ask my family and friends.
- c. I ask authorities in the area in question.
- d. I check other social media pages to see if the same information is being repeated.

- e. I check traditional media (radio, television, radio) to see if the same information is being repeated.
- f. I visit websites of established news organizations to see if the same information or news is being published.
- g. I use my gut feeling to determine whether the story is authentic.
- h. Others, please specify

12. If you use your mental capability to judge the authenticity of news or information from social media, what factors do you consider?

- a. I check if the one posting the information or news is a popular individual, organization or news source.
- b. I check if the one posting the information is knowledgeable in the issue presented in the news or information.
- c. I analyze the content of the news piece or information.
- d. I analyze the comments following the news or information posted.
- e. I check if the news or information posted has a link that leads to an authentic news website.
- f. Others, please specify.....

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