Audience perception on the credibility of online journalism

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Abstract

In the digital era, social media has become a central source of news valued for its speed and accessibility, but it also raises serious concerns about misinformation and declining trust. Anchored on the source credibility theory, which argues that audiences are more persuaded by sources perceived as trustworthy and knowledgeable. the study examined how residents of Ilorin-South perceived the credibility of social media journalism, focusing on their trust levels, evaluation criteria, and coping strategies for identifying reliable information. Using survey data from 384 respondents, the study found that although 65% expressed some level of trust in social media news, almost 20% remained sceptical, highlighting an ongoing tension between accessibility and authenticity. Respondents relied heavily on credibility cues such as source reputation (73%), supporting evidence (68%), consistency across multiple outlets (75%), and professional language (78%), while nearly 80% acknowledged that peer endorsements subtly shaped their perceptions. Despite these indicators, misinformation remained a major concern, with 68% of participants reporting that they frequently cross-check social media news with other platforms to verify accuracy. These patterns affirm the continued relevance of the source credibility theory in digital spaces where audiences must independently evaluate a wide range of content producers, from established media organisations to everyday influencers. Based on these findings, the study recommended strengthening professionalism among online journalists, enhancing the visibility of verified sources, encouraging digital literacy practices such as cross-referencing, and promoting collaboration between traditional and online media to improve the reliability of social media news.

Keywords: credibility, digital literacy, misinformation, social media journalism, trust.

1. Introduction

The medium of communication has long been recognised as being just as important as the message itself. Logan (2016) captures this in the assertion that "the medium is the message," emphasising that the channels through which information is transmitted shape how it is received and understood. In the Nigerian and African context, Chiakwelu (2015) notes that audiences often treat reports from outlets such as *Sahara Reporters* or *The Cable* as unquestionable truths. Yet, the rise of fake news and misinformation on digital platforms has increasingly eroded public trust in journalism, making it necessary to re-examine how audiences perceive credibility in the digital age.

Social media has dramatically transformed the landscape of news production and consumption. What was once used primarily to connect with friends and family has become a major platform for breaking news. Features such as participatory journalism, instantaneous

feedback, online communities, and rapid news delivery have expanded access to information and made news sharing more dynamic than ever before. Supporting this shift, Buchanan (2016) observes that journalists now rely on both professional and personal sources when gathering stories via social media. However, while these platforms offer opportunities for wider news engagement, they also raise pressing questions about the credibility of the content shared.

Credibility, in the context of journalism, refers to the extent to which news stories are adjudged trustworthy and accurate. Adikpo (2019) defines news credibility in more comprehensive terms, viewing it as an assessment of correctness, impartiality, objectivity, trustworthiness, completeness, and freedom from bias. This suggests that credibility is not limited to surface-level judgments but encompasses a deeper evaluation of reliability. Similarly, communication research highlights that the credibility of the communicator strongly influences how messages are processed and how they shape the attitudes and beliefs of audiences (Burgoon & Hale, 2016).

Today's audiences are far from passive. Instead, they actively choose communication channels, particularly when the issues concern them directly (Rubin, 2022). Unlike traditional media such as radio or television, the internet and social media have become "instrumental" in everyday information seeking (Rubin, 2014). Advancements in digital technology have further empowered individuals and organisations to become not only consumers but also creators of communication (McClure, 2017). Within this evolving media environment, cultivating credibility has become central to meaningful engagement and brand-building, as communication devoid of trust is often ineffective (Holtz&Havens, 2019).

Against this backdrop, this study explored how residents of Ilorin-South perceive the credibility of social media news. While global studies on online journalism exist, localised perspectives remain underexplored, especially in communities where reliance on social media for news is high. This study, therefore, investigated how audiences judge the credibility of online journalism and the implications of these perceptions for trust in digital news. In line with this argument, the objectives of this study were to:

i. Examine the level of trust residents of Ilorin-South place in social media as a news source.
ii. Identify the criteria residents of Ilorin-South use to evaluate the credibility of news on social media
iii. Analyse the impact of perceived credibility on residents' trust in social media journalism.
iv. Explore the challenges faced by residents of Ilorin-South in discerning credible news on social media.

2. Literature Review
2.1 Concept of News Credibility

News credibility is a central concern in media studies, reflecting how audiences judge the trustworthiness and reliability of information. Abati (2020) defines it as the degree to which audiences perceive news to be accurate, dependable, and unbiased. Scholars note that credibility has several dimensions, including accuracy, balance, transparency, and accountability (Adeyemi, 2021). Accuracy concerns factual correctness; balance relates to presenting multiple viewpoints; transparency involves openness about sources; and accountability refers to the responsibility of journalists and media organisations to provide truthful reporting.

Research highlights that credibility is shaped by a variety of factors. For example, Agbaje (2020) emphasises that

press freedom enhances public trust, while Aghamelu (2021) points to the role of ethical electoral reporting in shaping perceptions. With the rise of online platforms, these factors now interact with new challenges such as ownership structures, political influences, and the varying levels of media literacy among audiences (Apuke & Tunca, 2018; Apuke, 2022).

Journalists play a critical role in defining what audiences consider credible news. Appleman and Sundar (2016) identify constructs such as authenticity, believability, and dependability as key indicators of credibility. Similarly, Metzger and Flanagin (2013) describe source credibility as a function of trustworthiness and expertise, while Visentin, Pizzi and Pichierri (2019) extend this to include qualities like open-mindedness and reputation. Other scholars add traits such as composure, sociability, and dynamism (Pjesivac & Rui, 2014).

Importantly, credibility is tied not only to the journalist or source but also to the medium. For example, Kang (2010) distinguishes between source credibility (trust in the communicator) and medium credibility (trust in the platform itself). In practice, social media credibility combines both; users assess the reliability of the platform as well as the trustworthiness of the individuals posting content. Li and Suh (2015) further show that credibility depends on factors such as audience participation, reliance on the medium, and the strength of arguments in news messages.

This complexity has become more urgent with the rise of fake news and the growth of Nigeria's digital media space, where over 27 million people actively use social media (Kemp, 2020). For journalists, upholding credibility therefore requires careful attention to both the sources they use and the content they publish.

2.2 Source Credibility in News Reporting

The credibility of a news source remains a decisive factor in how audiences interpret information. If a medium lacks reliability, the content is less likely to influence public opinion (Nwabueze, 2016). Kang (2020) reinforces that the credibility of the communication channel strongly shapes audience engagement. Recent studies confirm that credible sources significantly affect not only audience attitudes but also media preferences (Abbasi & Liu, 2023; Edogor, Jonah & Ojo, 2015).

As Amjad, Nik and Rosli (2016) note, audiences now evaluate online information carefully, but perceptions vary depending on the type of source under scrutiny. This highlights the importance of distinguishing between professional news outlets and user-generated content. Audiences may apply different standards of evaluation depending on whether information is produced by established journalists or circulated through informal social networks.

2.3 Use of Social Media in Online Journalism

The advent of social media has transformed journalism, shifting audiences from passive consumers to active participants. Unlike in the 20th century, when news was primarily shaped by circulation and ratings, social media now allows users to comment, share and even co-create content (Özkan, 2018). This interactivity increases audience engagement but also opens the door to challenges such as misinformation.

Initially, many online news sites depended heavily on agencies and copy-paste journalism, leading to uniform and repetitive content. Over time, however, competition for visibility on search engines has encouraged the production of original content (Duman, 2018). Social media's influence in this space is double-

edged: while it fosters participation and immediacy, it also facilitates the spread of unverified stories.

Online news platforms further distinguish themselves from traditional media by their immediacy, multimedia content, accessibility, and interactivity (Maringues, 2021; Apuke, 2022). These platforms provide real-time updates, combine text with visuals, and are accessible across multiple devices. Integration with social media enhances engagement, enabling audiences to share and debate stories within their networks (Apuke & Tunca, 2018; Christopher & Onwuka, 2021).

Despite these advantages, online platforms face serious credibility challenges. The rapid spread of misinformation undermines traditional journalistic gatekeeping (Musa & Mohammed, 2022). Moreover, the pressure to generate advertising revenue often leads to sensationalism and clickbait, threatening editorial independence (Mordi & Ogbu, 2017).

Taken together, these perspectives highlight a paradox at the heart of digital journalism: while online platforms expand opportunities for information access and engagement, they also heighten risks of misinformation and erode trust. Most importantly, much of the existing scholarship has focused on broad national or comparative perspectives, leaving localised contexts underexplored. Yet credibility is often shaped by community-specific factors such as media habits, cultural expectations, and access to technology, which cannot be fully captured in generalised analyses.

It is within this gap that the present study is situated. By focusing on Ilorin-South, the research examined how residents evaluate the credibility of social media news, the criteria they apply in judging reliability, and how these perceptions influence trust in online journalism. This localised perspective not only enriches

ongoing conversations about media credibility but also offers practical insights into how Nigerian communities engage with digital news in their everyday lives.

Review of Empirical Studies
Several studies have investigated how audiences perceive the credibility of online journalism in relation to other news sources. Adeyanju (2015), for instance, conducted a comparative study of the credibility of social media, television, and newspapers. The study was prompted by the increasing role of social media as a daily news source. Findings revealed that respondents' level of education and their expertise in using the internet influenced the news sources they considered credible. Importantly, many respondents cross-checked information from one medium against another to verify its accuracy. Television and newspapers were often rated higher in credibility than social media because their content is produced by trained journalists and filtered through professional editorial processes to ensure accuracy and objectivity.

In another study, Lihong, Jean and Jianjun (2019) investigated the factors that shaped individual perceptions of credibility on social networking sites (SNS). Using an online survey of 213 participants, the study identified six factors influencing perceived credibility: real-world feel, expertise, trustworthiness, ease of use, physical attractiveness, and commercial implications. Their findings demonstrated that all these criteria significantly influenced perceptions of credibility on social media platforms.

In another context, Agboola and Bashir (2019) examined the influence of the internet on media reach and credibility among residents of Minna, Niger State. Using a survey questionnaire administered to 384 respondents, they found that 99.4% of participants acknowledged the internet's considerable influence on the

reach and credibility of media outlets. While 75% of respondents rated programmes from Search FM as credible, a significant portion (45%) also suggested that the station should employ more professionals to enhance content quality. The study concluded that while the internet presents opportunities for expanding media reach, it also poses credibility challenges. Hence, media organisations must exercise caution, ensuring accuracy and professionalism when sourcing or disseminating online information.

Similarly, Wajid and Taimur (2016) investigated social media credibility perceptions in Pakistan across five domains: local news, national politics, international politics, disaster/relief activities, and entertainment. Their study, based on responses from 164 individuals, revealed a growing acceptance of social media as a legitimate and viable news source compared to earlier years when it was often dismissed as unreliable.

Agboola, Essien and Okpanachi (2016) further explored perceptions of social media news credibility among residents of Abuja, Nigeria. From 384 respondents selected through stratified random sampling, results showed that 89.4% were active social media users. While many respondents admitted to using social media for both communication and news purposes, their trust levels varied: a majority (56.3%) considered social media news "slightly reliable," while 15.8% perceived it as not credible at all. The study concluded that the ease of access and convenience associated with social media often overshadow the need to critically evaluate authenticity. Consequently, the authors recommended enhanced media literacy and education to equip users with the skills to verify information and cross-check it with traditional media sources before sharing.

Overall, these studies showed that perceptions of online news credibility are influenced by factors such as education, digital literacy, ease of access, and the role of professional journalistic standards. However, much of the existing research has focused on comparing social media with traditional media or examining credibility at broader, national levels. Few studies have looked at specific local settings where cultural factors, technology use, and media habits may shape perceptions differently.

This study addressed this gap by focusing on Ilorin-South. It investigated how residents judged the credibility of social media news, the criteria they used, and how these perceptions affected their trust in online journalism. By offering a localised perspective, the study adds to ongoing discussions about news credibility and provides practical insights into how communities interact with digital media in their daily lives.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on the source credibility theory, developed by Carl Hovland and his colleagues in the 1950s during their research on communication and attitude change (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1963). The theory explains that the effectiveness of a message largely depends on the trustworthiness and expertise of its source. Trustworthiness refers to how honest and reliable the communicator is perceived to be, while expertise reflects the knowledge or competence attributed to them. Hovland's findings showed that audiences are more likely to accept messages from sources they consider credible, making the theory central to understanding persuasion and communication.

The relevance of this theory grew during World War II when studies on propaganda revealed how credible sources could shape public opinion (Gaziano, 2010). With the rise of new media technologies in the

1950s and 1960s, scholars began to apply it to traditional media such as radio and television. In the digital environment, the theory is even more significant as the spread of social media has enabled virtually anyone to produce and share content.

For online journalism, the source credibility theory provides a useful framework to explain how people judge the reliability of digital news. In the context of Ilorin-South, it helps to understand how residents assess the credibility of social media news, where misinformation and fake news often circulate unchecked. Key factors considered include the integrity and impartiality of the source, the professionalism of journalists, and whether the information aligns with other verified outlets. The theory also sheds light on why audiences may trust certain influencers or platforms over others, and how this trust affects their engagement with online journalism.

Beyond audience perceptions, the source credibility theory underscores the importance of digital and media literacy. By teaching individuals how to evaluate the trustworthiness and expertise of online sources, societies can better equip citizens to navigate misinformation and make informed decisions.

In this study, the theory provides a foundation for analysing how residents of Ilorin-South in Kwara State evaluate the credibility of online journalism, highlighting the central role that credible sources play in sustaining trust in the digital age.

3. Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey design to explore how residents of Ilorin South Local Government Area in Kwara State perceive the credibility of social media news. Ilorin South has a projected population of about 314,100 residents (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). From this figure, a sample size of 384 respondents was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's sampling table. A purposive sampling technique was applied to select respondents who actively use social media, since they were best positioned to provide meaningful insights. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire that included demographic items and Likert-scale questions carefully aligned with the study's objectives. To ensure clarity and relevance, the instrument was reviewed and validated by experts in mass communication, while its structured design helped strengthen reliability. The copies of the questionnaire were personally administered to the study participants, which encouraged better response rates and more accurate feedback. Throughout the process, ethical considerations such as voluntary participation, confidentiality, and respect for respondents' views were strictly upheld. Data collected were analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), where descriptive statistics helped summarise and interpret the findings.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by Demography

SN	ITEM	RESPONSES	FREQ.	(%)	M	SD
1	Age	Under 18	15	4.7	2.92	1.05
		18-25	120	37.3		
		26-35	90	27.9		
		36-45	70	21.7		
		Above 46	27	8.4		
2	Gender	Male	185	57.4	1.45	0.54
		Female	130	40.4		
		Prefer not to say	7	2.2		
3	Highest educational qualification	No formal education	18	5.6	3.57	0.92
		Primary education	25	7.8		
		Secondary education	55	17.1		
		Tertiary education	205	63.7		
		Others	19	5.9		
4	Occupation	Student	200	62.1	1.96	1.41
		Civil servant	35	10.9		
		Business owner	15	4.7		
		Private sector	45	14.0		
		employee	27	8.4		
		Others				
5	Social media usage	Daily	220	68.3	1.48	0.80
		Weekly	60	18.6		
		Occasionally	35	10.9		
		Rarely	5	1.6		
		Never	2	0.6		
	Total		322	100		

The findings showed that most respondents were young adults, with more than a third (37.3%) falling within the 18–25 age range. This highlights the strong involvement of younger people in social media use and news consumption. Gender distribution leaned slightly, with male at 57.4%, but female participation was also significant at just over 40%. Education levels were generally high, as nearly two-thirds (63.7%) of respondents had tertiary education, suggesting that the sample was largely composed of individuals with the capacity to engage critically with media content. Occupation-wise, students dominated the sample at 62.1%, reflecting the influence of an academically active and youthful demographic. Social media use was particularly striking; over two-thirds (68.3%) of respondents reported daily usage, confirming that online platforms have become a central part of everyday life and a vital source of news.

Table 2: Extent to which Residents of Ilorin-South Perceive Online Journalism as Credible

SN	ITEM	RESPONSES	FREQ.	(%)	M	SD
1	Online journalism provides accurate and trustworthy news.	SA	94	29.2	3.82	1.06
		A	137	42.5		
		N	48	14.9		
		D	27	8.4		
		SD	16	5		
2	I do not rely on online journalism platforms for up-to-date news.	SA	92	28.6	3.84	1.06
		A	146	45.3		
		N	44	13.7		
		D	20	6.2		
		SD	20	6.2		
3	Online journalism platforms are not as credible as traditional media	SA	150	46.6	3.89	1.25
		A	76	23.6		
		N	35	10.9		
		D	33	10.2		
		SD	28	8.7		
4	The reputation of an online journalism platform influences my perception of its credibility	SA	140	43.5	3.92	1.15
		A	93	28.9		
		N	38	11.8		
		D	29	9		
		SD	22	6.8		
5	The speed of news delivery on online journalism platforms makes them more trustworthy.	SA	115	35.7	3.67	1.20
		A	80	24.8		
		N	58	18		
		D	45	14		
		SD	24	7.5		
	Total		322	100		

The findings showed that while many respondents expressed confidence in online journalism, perceptions of credibility remain mixed. A majority (71.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that online journalism provides accurate and trustworthy news (M = 3.82, SD = 1.06), yet about 20% expressed doubts. Similarly, 73.9% of respondents disagreed with the idea that they do not rely on online journalism for up-to-date news, suggesting that timeliness is a major strength of digital platforms (M = 3.84, SD = 1.06). However, credibility comparisons with traditional media revealed scepticism: over 70% agreed that online journalism is less credible than television or newspapers (M = 3.89, SD = 1.25). Reputation emerged as a strong determinant of trust, with 72.4% noting that the credibility of a platform depends largely on its reputation (M = 3.92, SD = 1.15). Speed of news delivery was also valued, with 60.5% linking it to trust, though nearly 40% remained neutral or disagreed, indicating that audiences expect more than quick updates (M = 3.67, SD = 1.20).

TABLE 3: Perceptions of Residents of Ilorin-South Regarding the Credibility of News Shared on Social Media Platforms

SN	ITEM	RESPONSES	FREQ.	(%)	M	SD
1	I find news content shared on social media platforms credible.	SA	84	26.1	3.71	1.09
		A	141	43.8		
		N	38	11.8		
		D	38	11.8		
		SD	21	6.5		
2	Social media platforms frequently share accurate and factual news	SA	27	8.4	2.85	1.09
		A	65	20.2		
		N	84	26.1		
		D	123	38.2		
		SD	23	7.1		
3	The credibility of news on social media depends on the source of the information.	SA	82	25.4	3.94	0.94
		A	180	55.9		
		N	27	8.4		
		D	27	8.4		
		SD	6	1.9		
4	Verified accounts on social media platforms share more credible news.	SA	119	36.6	3.67	1.23
		A	83	25.8		
		N	51	15.9		
		D	35	10.9		
		SD	34	10.8		
5	Social media news often contains misinformation or fake news.	SA	103	32	3.55	1.22
		A	75	23.3		
		N	63	19.5		
		D	57	17.7		
		SD	24	7.5		

The survey results revealed mixed perceptions of social media as a news source. Most respondents (26.1% strongly agreed, 43.8% agreed) acknowledged social media news as credible, yet nearly one in five expressed doubts, highlighting divided trust levels (M = 3.71, SD = 1.09). Confidence dropped when accuracy was considered: only 28.6% believed social media frequently shares factual news, while over 45% disagreed, underscoring persistent scepticism (M = 2.85, SD = 1.09). Notably, credibility was strongly linked to the source of information, with more than 80% (25.4% strongly agreed, 55.9% agreed) affirming that reputable sources shape their trust in social media content (M = 3.94, SD = 0.94). Verified accounts also mattered, as 62.4% agreed that verification badges enhance credibility, though about a quarter remained unconvinced (M = 3.67, SD = 1.23). At the same time, misinformation emerged as a major concern: 55.3% agreed that fake news is common on social platforms, while roughly a quarter either disagreed or stayed neutral, reflecting ongoing caution in how users engage with online information (M = 3.55, SD = 1.22).

TABLE 4: Criteria Residents of Ilorin-South Use to Evaluate the Credibility of News on Social Media

SN	ITEM	RESPONSES	FREQ.	(%)	M	SD
1	The reputation of the source is important when evaluating the credibility of social media news.	SA	140	43.5	4.02	1.11
		A	98	30.4		
		N	45	14.0		
		D	28	8.7		
		SD	11	3.4		
2	The presence of evidence enhances credibility	SA	160	49.7	4.14	1.08
		A	90	28		
		N	38	11.8		
		D	24	7.5		
		SD	10	3.1		
3	Consistency of the news content with other sources affects my perception of its reliability.	SA	130	40.4	4.00	1.08
		A	110	34.2		
		N	45	14		
		D	27	8.4		
		SD	10	3.1		
4	The use of professional language in social media news affects its credibility.	SA	145	45	4.11	1.03
		A	105	32.6		
		N	40	12.4		
		D	25	7.8		
		SD	7	2.2		
5	Peer endorsement or sharing of social media news increases my trust in its accuracy	SA	180	55.9	4.22	1.08
		A	75	23.3		
		N	35	10.9		
		D	22	6.8		
		SD	10	3.1		

The findings highlight several key factors shaping perceptions of credibility in social media news. Reputation of the source emerged as highly influential, with nearly three-quarters of respondents (43.5% strongly agreed, 30.4% agreed; M = 4.02, SD = 1.11) affirming its importance, while only a small minority dismissed it. Evidence was also central to credibility judgments: almost 78% (49.7% strongly agreed, 28% agreed; M = 4.14, SD = 1.08) emphasised that factual support boosts trust. Similarly, consistency with other sources strengthened confidence, with 74.6% (M = 4.00, SD = 1.08) affirming that alignment with multiple outlets enhances reliability. Presentation also mattered, as the use of professional language was endorsed by 77.6% (M = 4.11, SD = 1.03), suggesting that tone and clarity significantly affect how audiences judge news quality. Finally, peer endorsement proved the most powerful factor, with nearly 80% (55.9% strongly agreed, 23.3% agreed; M = 4.22, SD = 1.08) acknowledging that shares or recommendations from friends and peers increase trust in social media news. Collectively, these findings show that credibility on social platforms is not determined by content alone but is reinforced by the source's reputation, evidential backing, cross-platform consistency, professional delivery, and social validation.

Table 5: How Perceptions of Social Media News Credibility Influence Residents' Trust in Online Journalism

SN	ITEM	RESPONSES	FREQ.	(%)	M	SD
1	Misinformation on social media reduces my trust in online journalism platforms	SA	129	40.1	4.05	0.97
		A	113	35.1		
		N	48	14.9		
		D	32	9.9		
		SD	0	0		
2	I often cross-check news from social media with other sources before trusting it.	SA	145	45.0	4.10	0.99
		A	97	30.1		
		N	48	14.9		
		D	32	9.9		
		SD	0	0		
3	Negative experiences with fake news on social media affect my trust in online journalism.	SA	161	50	4.20	0.98
		A	97	30.1		
		N	32	9.9		
		D	32	9.9		
		SD	0	0		
4	Trust in social media news influences my reliance on online journalism platforms.	SA	177	55	4.47	0.68
		A	97	30.1		
		N	32	9.9		
		D	0	0		
		SD	0	0		
5	My overall perception of social media news credibility does not impact my trust in the journalism profession.	SA	0	0	1.45	0.67
		A	0	0		
		N	32	9.96		
		D	80	24.94		
		SD	209	65.1		

The results underscore how misinformation and trust dynamics on social media shape perceptions of journalism more broadly. A large majority (75.2%) agreed that misinformation on social media reduces their trust in online journalism platforms (M = 4.05, SD = 0.97), highlighting how false content erodes confidence. This scepticism has fostered cautious behaviour, as 75.1% reported cross-checking news with other sources before believing it (M = 4.10, SD = 0.99). Negative experiences with fake news further deepened mistrust, with 80.1% admitting that such encounters weakened their confidence in online journalism (M = 4.20, SD = 0.98). Trust was also shown to directly influence reliance, as 85.1% agreed that their dependence on online journalism platforms hinges on whether they find social media news credible (M = 4.47, SD = 0.68). Interestingly, however, this scepticism did not spill over into the journalism profession as a whole: 90% disagreed that perceptions of social media credibility affect their trust in journalism generally (M = 1.45, SD = 0.67). Collectively, these findings suggest that while misinformation is a significant threat to online journalism, audiences are developing coping strategies such as cross-checking, and they continue to separate distrust of social media from their broader faith in professional journalism.

Discussion of Findings

Objective 1: To examine the level of trust residents of Ilorin-South place in social media as a news source
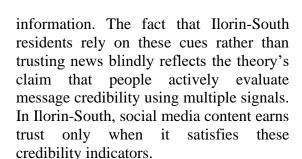
The findings revealed that trust in social media as a news source among residents of Ilorin-South is present, but far from absolute. A little over two-thirds of respondents (26.1% strongly agreed, 43.8% agreed; M = 3.71, SD = 1.09) said they find news on social platforms credible. Yet nearly one in five respondents expressed doubts, either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. This shows that while social media is widely used and accepted, scepticism about accuracy remains. These results echo Omenugha et al. (2015), who observed that Nigerians are generally cautious about fully trusting social media news. In other words, even with its popularity, social media has not yet displaced traditional concerns about misinformation, making credibility a fragile and conditional attribute.

The source credibility theory argues that audiences judge messages based on the trustworthiness and expertise of the source. Social media, unlike traditional media, hosts a mix of credible journalists, influencers, anonymous users, and unregulated content creators. Because many sources lack established reputations, residents of Ilorin-South tend to withhold complete trust. Their partial confidence reflects the theory's core idea: credibility is conditional, and people accept messages only when they perceive the source as reliable. Thus, the mixed trust levels show residents intuitively apply the theory, assessing whether the communicator on social media seemed honest and knowledgeable before believing the news.

Objective 2: To identify the criteria residents of Ilorin-South use to evaluate the credibility of news on social media

From the findings, Ilorin-South residents were not passive consumers; they had clear criteria for judging what news they considered trustworthy. The source's reputation stood out most strongly, with almost three-quarters (43.5% strongly agreed, 30.4% agreed; M = 4.02, SD = 1.11) saying it shaped their perception of credibility. Evidence also mattered deeply, with 49.7% strongly agreeing and 28% agreeing that factual support strengthened their trust (M = 4.14, SD = 1.08). Consistency with other outlets followed a similar trend, with 74.6% affirming that alignment across sources boosted reliability (M = 4.00, SD = 1.08). Respondents also paid attention to presentation, noting that the use of professional language affected credibility (77.6% agreed; M = 4.11, SD = 1.03). Finally, peer endorsement carried surprising weight: nearly 80% reported that shares or recommendations from friends increased their confidence in the news (M = 4.22, SD = 1.08). These results align with Oyero and Oyesomi's (2014) findings, who reported that Nigerians often relied on cues such as source reputation and peer influence to judge digital news. Collectively, these criteria suggest that people in Ilorin-South treat news with cautious scrutiny, layering their trust on multiple signals rather than accepting stories at face value.

These criteria align directly with the source credibility theory's pillars: trustworthiness and expertise. Reputable sources and evidence represent expertise; consistency across platforms and professional language represent perceived professionalism, while peer recommendations influence trustworthiness, especially in digital communities where people rely on familiar voices to interpret unfamiliar

information. The fact that Ilorin-South residents rely on these cues rather than trusting news blindly reflects the theory's claim that people actively evaluate message credibility using multiple signals. In Ilorin-South, social media content earns trust only when it satisfies these credibility indicators.

Objective 3: To analyse the impact of perceived credibility on residents' trust in social media journalism
The data also showed a strong link between credibility and trust. Majority of the respondents (75.2%) agreed that misinformation reduces their trust in online journalism (M = 4.05, SD = 0.97). Many respondents reported coping strategies: three-quarters (75.1%) said they often cross-check stories from social media before believing them (M = 4.10, SD = 0.99). This finding is consistent with Okoro and Adibe (2013), who argued that exposure to fake news encourages people to become more cautious in how they engage with digital platforms. For most of the respondents (50% strongly agreed, 30% agreed), negative experiences with fake news had already eroded their trust in online journalism (M = 4.20, SD = 0.98). At the same time, reliance on social media platforms was clearly tied to trust: 85.1% agreed that their dependence on online journalism depends on whether they find social media news credible (M = 4.47, SD = 0.68). This shows that audiences are not passive consumers but instead make careful judgments, shaping how much they depend on online journalism in daily life.

When a message source loses credibility, whether through misinformation or inconsistent reporting, audiences withdraw trust. The tendency of respondents to cross-check stories mirrors the theory's claim that individuals evaluate and re-evaluate sources based on perceived expertise and trustworthiness. The more they perceive a source as unreliable, the less they depend on it. Conversely, when social media posts appear credible, respondents show stronger reliance and engagement.

Objective 4: To explore the challenges faced by residents of Ilorin-South in discerning credible news on social media.
The most pressing challenge highlighted was misinformation. Over half of the respondents (32% strongly agreed, 23.3% agreed; M = 3.55, SD = 1.22) pointed out that fake news is a common problem on social media platforms. This finding is consistent with Shaibu and Shittu (2020), were majority of the respondents in Offa Local Government in Kwara State, Nigeria had encountered fake news on social media. This reflects a wider concern about the speed at which false content spreads online. Peer endorsements, while seen as helpful cues, sometimes complicated the picture, since news shared by trusted friends could still be inaccurate. Younger users, especially students, seemed more likely to rely on peer validation, which could both reinforce trust and, in some cases, amplify misinformation. Importantly, the findings showed that while respondents remained cautious, they have developed coping habits such as verification, cross-checking, and reliance on credible sources. Interestingly, however, scepticism about social media did not automatically translate into distrust of journalism more broadly: 90% disagreed that their perception of social media credibility affected their overall trust in the profession (M = 1.45, SD = 0.67). This suggests that respondents draw a line between the sometimes-chaotic world of digital platforms and the more structured, professional world of journalism.

Misinformation thrives when sources lack clear reputations or when audiences mistakenly attribute trustworthiness to familiar but unqualified peers. The fact

that respondents rely on peer endorsements shows how social credibility can override professional expertise - one of the weaknesses Hovland's theory acknowledges in environments where source evaluation becomes complex. The respondents' coping strategies (cross-checking, verifying, and depending on reputable sources) illustrate their attempt to reclaim credibility by focusing on trusted communicators.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

Conclusion

This study shows that although social media has become an important news source for residents of Ilorin-South, trust in its content remains selective and closely tied to credibility issues. Respondents relied on source reputation, factual evidence, consistency with other outlets, and social validation when assessing news reliability, reflecting a deliberate and cautious consumption pattern. Framed within the source credibility theory, these findings illustrate that perceptions of trustworthiness and expertise continue to shape audience engagement in digital environments. The prevalence of misinformation further reinforces the need for verification behaviours, which respondents demonstrated through frequent cross-checking of online claims. Strengthening media literacy, promoting transparent verification processes, and enhancing platform accountability remain essential for improving trust in social media journalism and ensuring a more reliable information ecosystem.

Recommendations

From the findings, the study proffered several recommendations:

Promotion of professionalism in online journalism: Journalists and content creators should maintain professionalism by using clear, factual, and ethical reporting. This helps counter sensationalism and builds audience trust.

Encouraging use of verified sources: Stronger verification systems are needed so that credible accounts and reputable media outlets are easily identifiable, reducing the influence of unverified sources.

Promotion of Cross-Referencing and Verification: Audiences should be encouraged to fact-check and compare news across multiple platforms, using tools like fact-checking websites and official sources.

Strengthening Collaboration with Traditional Media: Partnerships between social media platforms and traditional media can deliver reliable, well-researched news online, restoring trust and reducing misinformation.

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