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# Uses and Gratifications of Cloned Facebook News Pages among Nigerian Audiences: The Credibility-Misinformation Dilemma.

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**Abstract**

This study set out to ask a practical question: how and why do Nigerian postgraduate students keep visiting cloned Facebook pages that pretend to be Daily Trust and Vanguard newspapers, and what does that behaviour mean for news use, media literacy and the spread of falsehood? Guided by Uses and Gratifications Theory, we surveyed postgraduate students to establish motives, frequency and duration of engagement with these unauthenticated pages. The results are plain and worrying: many respondents follow cloned pages for long periods and return frequently; not because they cannot tell quality journalism from counterfeit, but because brand recognition and convenience persuade them to treat what they find as legitimate. In short, reputation trumps verification. Three vulnerabilities emerge clearly: limited verification skills among users, an outsized trust in familiar media brands (even in digital impostors), and weak regulatory or platform policing that allows clones to multiply. The consequences are not abstract: users become exposed to disinformation, the public's trust in genuine journalism is eroded, and democratic conversation is made more brittle. The paper therefore, argues for modest, focused remedies, namely strengthen basic verification training, partner with reputable newsrooms to signal authenticity and push for enforceable platform accountability, which constitute measures that are feasible in our context and that respect citizens' right to know. The paper concludes by recommending a combined strategy of enhanced media literacy education, stronger regulatory frameworks and proactive newsroom digital security to protect audiences and uphold the integrity of professional journalism in the digital age.

**Keywords:** *Digital news consumption; cloned Facebook pages; fake news vulnerability; audience trust and journalism; regulatory communication policy; media literacy in Nigeria.*

## 1. Introduction

The expansion of social media in Nigeria has profoundly altered how citizens obtain and engage with news. Alongside opportunities for wider participation and faster information flows, however, has come a proliferation of impersonated or cloned pages on platforms such as Facebook. These clones deliberately reproduce the look and labelling of established newspapers in order to mislead users and to serve a variety of often malign ends, such as phishing, fraud, political messaging or deliberate disruption of public discourse (Ibrahim & Ibrahim, 2025; Nieman Foundation, 2023).

For this study, fake news refers to news items that are false, misleading or factually inaccurate, whether disseminated intentionally or by mistake, across online channels including social networks, blogs and independent websites (BBC News, 2023). Both cloned pages and the false content they amplify have demonstrable consequences for public life: they corrode trust in media institutions, distort political behaviour and can deepen social polarisation (Tandoc, Lim & Ling, 2018).

In the Nigerian context, where social media is a primary news source for a substantial portion of the population, cloned media pages have become an increasingly important vector for misinformation. Users frequently struggle to tell legitimate outlets from impostors because many cloned pages adopt nearly identical visual identities and naming conventions to those of the original titles (Ibrahim, Ibrahim & Khalid, 2024). Indeed, multiple clones of mainstream newspapers now operate on social platforms; for example, there are more than ten Facebook pages presented as variations of *Daily Trust* and Vanguard. Some of these use labels such as "Daily Trust Hausa" and "Vanguard Hausa" even though the original newspapers do not publish official pages under those names, and several purported clones claim followings in excess of 200,000 users. These developments have been documented in recent field studies (Jibril, Ibrahim & Ibrahim, 2024; Jibril, Ibrahim & Ibrahim, 2025).

International reporting and research further highlight the incentives that drive operators of cloned pages. A News Media Association report (2017) notes that some individuals and groups exploit cloning to pursue commercial, political or ideological advantage; others, with little or no professional standing, can nonetheless reach audiences comparable in size to mainstream global outlets (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The convergence of high reach and low accountability creates acute challenges for audience assessment of credibility and leaves many social media users uncertain about which sources to trust (Geary, 2017).

Despite the growing alarm about cloned news pages and their corrosive effects, we still do not have a clear, grounded picture of how educated social-media users in Nigeria, notably postgraduate students, actually encounter and engage with these impostors, nor the extent to which such engagement exposes them to falsehood. This study therefore set out to ask a plain question: how do postgraduate students in North-West Nigerian universities use and respond to Facebook pages that pretend to be *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard*, and how much fake news do they pick up in the process? In other words, we are not content with abstract worries; we want empirical evidence about behaviour, not speculation.

The principal objective is straightforward and practical: to establish the level of followership, frequency of visits and duration of engagement with cloned *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard* Facebook pages among postgraduate students in North-West Nigeria, and to gauge the degree of exposure to false content arising from those interactions. Framed succinctly, the central research question reads: What patterns of engagement and exposure to fake news characterise postgraduate students' interactions with cloned *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard* Facebook pages in North-West Nigerian universities?

To answer this question we adopted a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. First, a quantitative survey maps the broad patterns: who follows the clones, how often they visit and how frequently they report encountering suspect items. Second, a qualitative phase of in-depth interviews (six postgraduate students and four senior editorial staff) explains the how and why behind the numbers, offering nuance, motive-centred accounts and editorial perspectives. This combination gives us both the breadth to describe the problem and the depth to understand it in our local context.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Conceptual Review: Cloned Pages, Fake News and User Engagement

This section clarifies the principal concepts that frame the study: cloned social-media pages, fake news and user engagement. These constructs are interdependent in practice: cloning amplifies the reach and perceived credibility of false material, while patterns of user engagement determine how rapidly and widely such material circulates.

Cloned social-media pages. Cloned pages are social-media accounts that imitate the visual identity, naming and editorial style of recognised news organisations to deceive audiences (Ibrahim & Ibrahim,

2025; Nieman Foundation, 2023). Operators of cloned pages may be motivated by commercial gain, political or ideological ends, or criminal intent (e.g., phishing or fraud), and they exploit users' tendency to trust familiar news brands. In the Nigerian setting, cloned versions of mainstream titles such as *Daily Trust* and Vanguard have proliferated on Facebook; some present themselves under labels such as "Daily Trust Hausa" or "Vanguard Hausa" despite no official affiliation, and a number claim very large followings (Jibril, Ibrahim & Ibrahim, 2024; Jibril, Ibrahim & Ibrahim, 2025). Such close imitation of logos, typographic style and headline framing can make visual verification difficult for many users.

Fake news. For this study, fake news denotes news items that are false, misleading or inaccurate and that are circulated through online channels, whether deliberately disseminated or by mistake (BBC News, 2023). Wardle's taxonomy remains helpful in distinguishing three operational categories of problematic content: (a) misinformation, which refers to false information spread without intent to harm (e.g., errors or satire taken literally); (b) disinformation, which refers to false information produced and shared with deliberate malicious intent (e.g., fabrications or fictitious conspiracy narratives); and (c) malinformation, which refers to genuine information used to inflict harm by changing context or timing (e.g., the strategic release of private material). These categories overlap in practice but are analytically useful when assessing origin, intent and likely effects (Wardle, 2017).

User engagement and exposure. User engagement denotes the spectrum of interactions that audiences perform online, such as following pages, viewing posts, liking, commenting, sharing and the time spent on particular pages. High levels of engagement with cloned pages both increase the visibility of those pages in platform algorithms and signal to other users that the content is socially endorsed; both mechanisms raise the probability that false items will be accepted and redistributed. Repeated exposure to sources that appear credible (for instance, a page that closely resembles a trusted newspaper) elevates the risk of misperception and subsequent sharing. In short, engagement is not merely passive consumption: it is an active mechanism that can legitimise and amplify misinformation, with consequences for public trust and civic behaviour.

### 2.2 Empirical Review: Evidence on Page-Cloning and Online Misinformation

Empirical literature on cloning and misinformation shows a mixture of local case studies and broader comparative research that sketch the scope and mechanisms of the problem.

Early work on online credibility among young adults made a simple, uncomfortable point: people struggle to tell authentic sources from impostors. Marchi (2012) showed this clearly: the flood of dubious online material does not merely confuse users, it corrodes public confidence in established news outlets and signals an urgent need for targeted media-literacy work. In other words, this is not a problem of curiosity or naivety alone; it is a structural problem in information environments where brand recognition, rapid circulation and weak verification incentives combine to advantage counterfeit content. Subsequent scholars have built on Marchi's insight by emphasising the role of platform affordances, repeated exposure and the socio-psychological pull of familiar news brands in sustaining engagement with inauthentic pages. Concisely, the literature suggests that any intervention must address both the technical mechanics of verification and the everyday habits and incentives that lead otherwise educated users to treat impostor pages as credible sources. More recent analyses of newsroom practice (Salaverría et al., 2021) document how some online newspapers have responded by instituting cross-platform verification, partnering with third-party fact-checkers and running audience education campaigns; yet these authors also note that many outlets struggle to communicate clearly which social-media accounts are official.

Regional studies that include West and East Africa report uneven levels of public familiarity with cloning tactics. For example, Gharawi et al. (2021) surveyed users across Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and South Africa and reported detection rates that varied substantially by country and by exposure to digital-media curricula. Their findings suggest that formal education in digital verification is associated with higher recognition of impersonation techniques. Closer to the present, Ibrahim and Ibrahim (2025) specifically document how cloned Facebook pages in Nigeria sow confusion and reduce trust in online

journalism; their fieldwork shows that many users conflate official and imitation pages because of near-identical branding and shallow indicators of authenticity.

Large-scale research on the dynamics of false information complements these regional findings. Vosoughi, Roy and Aral (2018) established that false stories spread more rapidly and more widely on Twitter (now X) than truthful reports, a pattern that creates fertile ground for cloning strategies that rely on rapid diffusion. Tandoc, Lim and Ling (2018) likewise report that a substantial share of internet users have encountered impersonated news pages internationally, and a non-trivial proportion misattribute such pages as genuine. Collectively, these studies point to a global pattern: where verification skills and newsroom signalling are weak, cloning and associated misinformation prosper.

While the literature provides useful benchmarks, important gaps remain. Few studies isolate postgraduate students as a distinct population of online news consumers in Nigeria, and there is limited qualitative investigation into how these comparatively educated users interpret visual cues of authenticity, weigh heuristics and decide whether to trust or share content. The present study, therefore, seeks to extend the empirical record by measuring engagement with specific cloned pages (*Daily Trust* and *Vanguard*) among postgraduates in North-West Nigerian universities and by exploring, through interviews, how such users understand and respond to confusing signals of authenticity.

### 2.3 Theoretical Framework

#### 2.3.1 Uses and Gratifications Theory

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), articulated by Blumler and Katz (1974), provides the principal theoretical lens for this study. UGT conceives media audiences as active agents who deliberately select media forms and content to satisfy particular cognitive, affective and social needs (Herzog, 1944; McQuail, 2010; Ruggiero, 2000). In contrast to models that treat audiences as passive recipients of media effects, UGT foregrounds the motives that underlie media choice, such as knowledge seeking, relaxation, social interaction, diversion and the fulfilment of practical tasks. The theory also recognises that media effects are mediated by individual differences and social contexts; that is, users' gratifications are shaped by prior needs, competencies and the social environment in which they operate (McQuail, 2010).

UGT has been applied across a wide range of media technologies and communicative practices (from radio and television to newspapers, mobile services and contemporary social platforms) and to topics that include media trust, participation, engagement and literacy (Ruggiero, 2000; Severin & Tankard, 1992). For the present study, UGT is useful in two connected ways. First, it helps explain why postgraduate students, as motivated information-seekers, might follow and repeatedly consult pages that appear to be reputable news outlets even when those pages are in fact clones. Second, it highlights that such engagements satisfy identifiable needs (for example, quick access to local news, confirmation of rumours and conversational currency in peer networks), which in turn moderates users' critical scrutiny of source authenticity. In short, UGT frames engagement with cloned pages as purposive behaviour driven by the search for gratification rather than mere accidental exposure.

## 3. Materials and Methods

### 3.1 Research Design

A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was employed (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The design comprised a quantitative phase that measured patterns of followership, visit frequency, session duration and self-reported encounters with false content, followed by a qualitative phase of semi-structured interviews that explained and contextualised the survey results. The two phases were integrated at the point of sampling (survey results informed purposive selection of interviewees) and at the point of interpretation (qualitative data elaborated the survey findings), yielding a coherent, triangulated account of postgraduate engagement with cloned Facebook pages and exposure to fake news.

### 3.2 Research Setting, Population, Sample Size and Sampling Procedure

The study was conducted among postgraduate students enrolled in the 2023/2024 academic session at three major universities in North-West Nigeria: Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (ABU); Bayero

University, Kano (BUK); and Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto (UDUS). The combined postgraduate population across these institutions was 12,460 at the time of study.

A target sample size of 375 was determined a priori using Krejcie and Morgan's table to achieve a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). To obtain representative coverage across institutions and academic disciplines we implemented a multistage sampling strategy. In the first stage we stratified each university by faculty; in the second stage we randomly selected departments from each faculty in proportion to postgraduate enrolment; and in the final stage we used systematic random sampling to select individual respondents from departmental postgraduate lists. Where necessary, we applied proportional allocation so that larger faculties contributed more respondents than smaller ones. Fieldwork procedures adhered to ethical norms: participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and personal identifiers were removed from the analytical dataset. Stage one allocated sample quotas proportionally to each university; stage two involved random selection of departments in faculties; stage three used systematic sampling of individual postgraduate students from departmental registers or class lists. The final analytic sample comprised 372 completed questionnaires (response rate of 99%), which is within the planned margin of error and acceptable for the study's descriptive aims.

For the qualitative phase, purposive sampling selected ten interview participants: six postgraduate students identified from the survey (selected because they reported high engagement with or notable exposure to cloned pages) and four editorial staff purposively chosen from *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard* (including two Editors-in-Chief, the Head of ICT and an online editor). Editorial participants were selected on the basis of their operational role in online content management and their experience with cloned-page incidents. Interviews proceeded until thematic saturation was achieved (no new themes emerged in the final interviews) (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006).

### 3.3 Instrumentation

Questionnaire (quantitative instrument). Data were gathered with a ten-item questionnaire. Eight items formed the core psychometric scale (behavioural and attitudinal measures), and two items captured demographic and platform-use information. Responses used a five-point Likert format (1 = Strongly agree to 5 = Strongly disagree). Item construction followed DeVellis's guidance on scale development (DeVellis, 2017); face and content validity were established through expert review by two media-studies scholars and a pilot test with 30 postgraduate students outside the sampling frame. The eight scale items produced satisfactory internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.82$), indicating acceptable reliability for social-science research (Field, 2018).

Interview guide (qualitative instrument). A semi-structured interview schedule was prepared for two respondent groups (students and editorial staff). Student prompts explored motivations for following pages, credibility cues, experience of encountering and sharing questionable content, and perceived consequences. Editorial prompts covered awareness of cloned pages, institutional verification and takedown practices, and impressions of audience confusion. The guide was reviewed by two qualitative-methods experts and piloted with one participant to ensure clarity.

### 3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Quantitative data were collected by trained enumerators using a combination of face-to-face administration and secure online forms as circumstances required. Enumerators received training on instrument administration, respondent rights and confidentiality. For the qualitative phase, interviews were conducted in private settings or via secure video-conferencing platforms; each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, was audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. All participants received an information sheet and provided written informed consent before participation.

*Quantitative analysis*. Survey data were entered, cleaned and analysed in SPSS v27. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations) characterised followership, visit frequency, session duration and reported exposure to fake news. These descriptive results identified patterns requiring further qualitative explanation and guided the purposive selection of student interviewees.

*Qualitative analysis*. Verbatim transcripts were imported into ATLAS.ti v22 for thematic analysis. An initial codebook adopted items from the survey instrument and allowed for inductive codes that emerged during close readings (for example, "cognitive load" and "platform trust"). Two researchers independently double-coded a subset of transcripts to establish inter-coder reliability (agreement > 80%) (Campbell et al., 2013); coding disagreements were resolved through discussion and codebook refinement. The remaining transcripts were coded with periodic peer review. Themes were then organised to correspond with the quantitative findings, enabling methodological triangulation and strengthening the validity of interpretations (Fetters, Curry & Creswell, 2013).

### 3.5 Ethical Concerns

Ethical approval was obtained from the Departmental Postgraduate Examination Board, Department of Mass Communication, Bayero University, Kano. Participants were provided with information sheets and given written informed consent. Data confidentiality was protected through anonymisation of transcripts and secure storage of audio files and electronic data on encrypted drives. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Editorial staff who discussed potentially sensitive organisational practices were assured of additional anonymisation in reporting.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Results

#### 4.1.1 Quantitative Findings

The quantitative data summarised in Table 1 below describe postgraduate students' patterns of followership and interaction with cloned Facebook pages purporting to be *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard*, together with their self-reported encounters with false content circulated via those pages. These results provide an empirical snapshot of how these imitation pages register in the news-consumption routines of educated young adults in North-West Nigeria.

A substantial majority of respondents reported following at least one cloned page: 75.2% follow a cloned *Daily Trust* page, and 70.0% follow a cloned *Vanguard* page. Among followers of the *Daily Trust* impersonator (n = 280), the modal follow-duration categories are 1–2 years (24.7%) and 3 to 4 years (21.0%), with only a small minority reporting follow periods exceeding five years. A similar temporal pattern obtains for the *Vanguard* impersonator: the largest group have followed for 1 to 2 years (24.2%), with 48.7% overall reporting more than one year of followership. These distributions indicate that many postgraduate users began subscribing to these impostor pages as they rose in prominence over the recent years.

Frequency and depth of visits show regular, recurring engagement rather than fleeting curiosity. Combined, 72.1% of respondents visit the cloned *Daily Trust* and/or *Vanguard* pages several times a week or once a week (33.3% several times a week; 38.8% once a week). Regarding time-on-page per visit, nearly half (46.7%) report spending about 30 minutes on each visit; a further 21.2% spend less than 30 minutes, while smaller minorities report sessions of 30–60 minutes or longer.

When we look at students' encounters with cloned *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard* Facebook pages, the picture is plain and worrying. Just over half the sample (51.0%) indicated that they had observed misleading or fabricated stories on these impersonator pages to a degree ranging from "somewhat" to "a great deal." Put simply, more than one in two postgraduate respondents have noticed false content on the clones. Equally important, nearly half of participants (48.0%) reported that friends or contacts on Facebook circulated material from these cloned pages, signalling clear interpersonal pathways for the spread of false items.

Levels of suspicion and awareness varied but were non-trivial. About 30.4% of respondents fell into the two highest categories of suspicion regarding whether the "authentic" Daily Trust or Vanguard pages had ever published dubious items, while 38.4% reported being either extremely or moderately aware of at least one widely circulated fake story on the cloned pages. In plain terms, a substantial minority harbour doubts about authenticity and a similar share are routinely aware of specific false items originating on clones.

Concisely, these results show that cloned newspaper pages are both visible to and regularly consulted by postgraduate students in North-West Nigerian universities. Their persistent followership, which was indicated by their sustained visits over months or years, frequent page checks and lengthy session times, means these pages consume meaningful attention and so have real capacity to shape perceptions unless users adopt stronger verification habits (see Table 1).

**Table 1: How Postgraduate Students Follow and Experience Fake or Misleading Content on Cloned Facebook Pages of *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard* (n = 372)**

| S/N | Survey Item | Responses |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | I currently follow a Facebook page that impersonates *Daily Trust* (i.e. a cloned *Daily Trust* page). | Yes: 280 (75.2%) No: 92 (24.8%) |
| 2 | (If Yes) For how long have you followed the impersonator *Daily Trust* page? | More than six years: 27 (7.3%), 5–6 years: 25 (6.7%), 3–4 years: 78 (21.0%), 1–2 years: 92 (24.7%), Less than one year: 58 (15.6%) |
| 3 | I currently follow a Facebook page that impersonates *Vanguard* (i.e. a cloned *Vanguard* page). | Yes: 259 (70.0%) No: 113 (30.0%) |
| 4 | (If Yes) For how long have you followed the impersonator *Vanguard* page? | More than six years: 19 (5.1%), 5–6 years: 23 (6.2%), 3–4 years: 49 (13.2%), 1–2 years: 90 (24.2%), Less than one year: 78 (21.0%) |
| 5 | How frequently do you visit the cloned *Daily Trust* and/or *Vanguard* pages? | Every hour: 15 (4.0%) Several times a day: 38 (10.2%) Once a day: 51 (13.7%) Several times a week: 124 (33.3%) Once a week: 144 (38.8%) |
| 6 | On a typical visit, how long do you spend on the cloned pages? | More than 1 hour: 30 (8.1%) 1 hour: 40 (10.8%) Less than 1 hour but more than 30 minutes: 49 (13.2%) 30 minutes: 174 (46.7%) Less than 30 minutes: 79 (21.2%) |
| 7 | How often have you encountered fake news items on the cloned pages of *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard*? | A great deal (many): 31 (8.3%) Quite a bit: 71 (19.1%) Somewhat: 75 (20.2%) Very little: 87 (23.4%) Not at all: 108 (29.0%) |
| 8 | I have observed Facebook friends sharing content that originated from the cloned *Daily Trust* and/or *Vanguard* pages. | Always: 48 (12.9%) Often: 85 (22.8%) Sometimes: 67 (18.0%) Rarely: 121 (32.5%) Never: 51 (13.7%) |
| 9 | I have suspected that the official *Daily Trust* and/or *Vanguard* pages have published fake content (i.e. I have been uncertain about authenticity). | Strongly agree: 38 (10.2%) Agree: 75 (20.2%) Neither: 76 (20.4%) Disagree: 79 (21.2%) Strongly disagree: 104 (28.0%) |
| 10 | My awareness of at least one widely circulated fake story on the cloned *Daily Trust* and/or *Vanguard* pages is: | Extremely aware: 51 (13.7%) Moderately aware: 92 (24.7%) Somewhat aware: 58 (15.6%) Slightly aware: 65 (17.5%) Not aware at all: 106 (28.5%) |

*Note: Source: Authors.*

From the figures presented in Table 3, certain patterns stand out clearly and deserve some attention before moving to the qualitative aspect of the study. To start with, it is obvious that many postgraduate students actually follow the cloned Facebook pages of *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard*, and not just casually, the followership appears strong and has been consistent over time. Secondly, the level of engagement is not occasional. Many of the respondents visit these pages quite often and even spend a reasonable amount of time there. That alone increases the chances of coming across different kinds of content, whether genuine or fake.

Thirdly, the issue of exposure to false or doubtful stories is not isolated. A good number of the respondents mentioned that they have seen materials from these cloned pages being shared by friends or colleagues. This simply means the false content does not stop with the individual follower; it circulates further within their social networks. In the next phase of the study, therefore, the qualitative interviews explore how these students decide what to believe or doubt when they come across such posts, and also how some newsroom professionals interpret and respond to this challenge from their own end.

### 4.1.2 Qualitative Findings: Interview Themes

From the qualitative stage of the study, we gathered rich and practical accounts from both postgraduate students and newsroom professionals on how they come across and engage with cloned Facebook pages that carry the names of *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard*. Many of the participants could recall specific instances where such pages shared misleading stories, from slightly twisted versions of official government statements to completely fabricated news items that still attracted heavy attention online. Three principal themes emerge from the interviews: habitual engagement, cues and confusion, and recurrent exposure to fabricated content. These themes complement the survey results and deepen understanding of why educated users remain vulnerable to imitation pages.

First, habitual engagement. Five of the six student interviewees displayed routine interaction with the impersonator pages. For clarity and anonymity, participants are here labelled Participant S1–S6 with brief descriptors: S1 (PhD candidate, BUK, male), S2 (MSc candidate, UDUS, male), S3 (MSc candidate, BUK, male), S4 (MLA candidate, ABU, male), S5 (PhD in Law candidate, BUK, male) and S6 (PhD candidate, ABU, male). Participants S1–S5 reported following and frequently consulting the cloned pages for local news, event updates and conversational cues for social networks. Their engagement was described as purposive, often to obtain quick local headlines or Hausa-language items and persisted despite occasional doubts about authenticity.

Second, cues and confusion. Interviewees attributed the difficulty of distinguishing clones from originals to near-identical logos, page names that append regional labels (for example, "Hausa") and reused headline styles. Several participants noted that platform affordances, such as the absence of blue verification ticks on some authentic pages and the prominence of likes and shares as social proof, complicated verification. While S6 exhibited partial scepticism and reported checking for corroboration elsewhere, most participants relied on heuristic cues (visual similarity, prior sharing by friends) rather than formal verification procedures.

Third, recurrent exposure to fabricated content. Four participants (S1, S3, S5 and S6) recounted frequent encounters with fabricated stories, sensational headlines, doctored images and articles whose context had been altered. One striking thing that came out from the discussions was how these stories spread. Several of the students pointed out that, at times, even when they had doubts about a particular post, once they saw it shared by a friend or a classmate they trusted, their guard dropped. That trust in the contact often made them accept and even share the story again without further checking.

Generally, the interviews show that even among educated users, there is still a tendency to rely on these cloned pages to meet their immediate information needs. However, many of them do not crosscheck properly before believing or forwarding what they see. The conversations also helped to explain the earlier survey findings, which states that exposure to fake news from cloned pages is quite common, and they reveal how the deception works in practice. Participants mentioned issues like the way the pages copy the official logo and writing style of the real newspapers, the use of familiar Hausa or Nigerian English expressions, and the confidence people have when their friends endorse a story. Altogether, these insights point to the urgent need for stronger media literacy efforts and clearer communication from newsrooms on which pages are truly theirs.

## 4.2 Discussion

What emerges from the mixed-methods evidence is straightforward and, frankly, rather worrying. Postgraduate students in North-West Nigeria do use social media purposively, they look for news that is quick, local and easy to talk about with peers, yet that very practicality leaves them open to impersonator

pages. Read through the lens of Uses and Gratifications, respondents are active seekers of surveillance and social currency; they prefer platforms that meet those needs quickly. But the gratification they seek is not reliably the gratification they get: many expect accurate, timely information and instead encounter fabricated or misleading items on cloned pages.

Our interviews help explain why. Educated users often rely on visual familiarity and language fit: a familiar logo, Hausa phrasing or casual Nigerian English, together with social endorsement from friends. Those cues lower vigilance. Newsroom editors confirmed a steady stream of public confusion over which pages are official, and several student respondents described sharing items they later discovered were false because the post "looked like" the real paper or was circulated by a trusted contact. In short, motivation to obtain information remains strong, but verification routines are uneven; this combination creates what we might call brand vulnerability, where a well-known name becomes a short-cut for trust even when misappropriated.

From a technical perspective, the evidence supports three operative mechanisms behind cloned-page success: (1) visual and linguistic mimicry that blunts initial scepticism; (2) pragmatic gratification (speed, language and relevance) that makes clones functionally useful; and (3) social endorsement via peer sharing that reduces critical scrutiny and amplifies reach. These mechanisms explain why even relatively educated audiences can be repeatedly exposed to falsehoods.

Quantitatively, large proportions follow and regularly visit cloned *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard* pages, often over sustained periods. Qualitatively, interviewees explained this followership in pragmatic terms: cloned pages frequently supply quick local updates, republish items in preferred languages and present familiar visual cues. Five of six student interviewees (hereafter S1–S5) described routine consultation of impersonator pages for news and peer discussion; one (S6) reported more active scepticism and routine cross-checking. Representative testimony included S2 (MSc candidate, UDUS), who said, "I didn't even know it was a fake page until someone pointed it out. The stories looked real and were always in Hausa, which made it more relatable" (In-depth interview: UDUS, 29 April 2024). Such remarks show that language-targeted content and apparent brand familiarity materially reduce initial suspicion.

Exposure to false content is not merely incidental: over half of respondents reported encountering fake stories on these pages, and many observed friends sharing such material. The study carries several practical and theoretical implications. Theoretically, it contributes to debates on media trust and platform governance by showing how socio-cultural heuristics, namely language affinity, brand recognition and peer endorsement, shape vulnerability to disinformation in local contexts.

Practically, the findings demand targeted interventions. Media organisations must do more to signal authenticity: continuous monitoring for impersonator accounts, proactive audience communication about official handles, and investment in visible verification markers. Newsrooms also need staff trained in rapid digital monitoring and takedown procedures so impersonation is challenged promptly.

At the user level, media-literacy efforts should be specific and pragmatic. Training must focus on the heuristics students actually use, such as how to check URLs, how to spot visual mimicry and how to pause before sharing material passed on by friends. Interventions are most likely to succeed if they pair simple verification skills with the channels students already use.

Policy action is urgently needed. Cloned pages sit in a regulatory blind spot: platforms cannot be left to self-police alone. Collaboration between social platforms, regulators (for example, the NBC and NCC), news organisations and civil society should establish clearer procedures for detecting and removing impersonator pages, public alerts when impersonation is detected, and legal instruments that deter deliberate cloning intended to mislead or defraud. Such measures would protect citizens and help preserve the credibility of legacy news brands, both essential for robust democratic information flows.

### 4.3. Implications of the Findings

The study's findings carry important implications for theory, practice and policy in the field of digital journalism and information society. Through analysing the behaviour of postgraduate students in relation

to cloned Facebook pages of *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard*, the research has drawn attention to both enduring and emerging dynamics of media use in Nigeria's hybrid information environment.

From a theoretical standpoint, the results extend the explanatory scope of Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT). Traditionally, UGT has emphasised the active role of audiences in selecting media to satisfy needs such as information, surveillance, companionship, entertainment and identity formation (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973). In this study, participants were indeed shown to act purposefully in their media choices, gravitating to cloned pages in order to meet informational, cultural and linguistic gratifications. What is novel, however, is the evidence that gratification needs can override credibility concerns: users knowingly or unknowingly turn to unverified sources, not because they are indifferent to accuracy, but because these outlets appear to satisfy more immediate demands of accessibility, linguistic familiarity, speed and peer relevance. This expands UGT by highlighting that, in digital settings marked by impersonation, gratification-seeking may co-exist with the suspension of traditional credibility checks.

Furthermore, the study advances theoretical debate on digital vulnerability in developing contexts. Where literacy and critical verification practices are uneven, familiar media brands become shorthand for trustworthiness, even when misappropriated. This creates what may be termed "brand vulnerability": audiences conflate the presence of a trusted name (such as *Daily Trust* or *Vanguard*) with guaranteed authenticity, leaving them prone to exploitation. Such insights contribute to scholarship on media trust, platform governance and disinformation by underscoring how socio-cultural contexts shape digital risk exposure.

In practical terms, the findings underscore the urgent need for media literacy initiatives tailored to Nigerian users. High engagement with cloned pages reveals significant gaps in basic digital awareness and verification habits. Many students, who are regarded as future opinion leaders, were unable to distinguish between authentic and impersonated pages, even when consuming content daily. This poses a dual risk: first, to the credibility of journalism as a profession and second, to the reputational integrity of legacy newspapers whose names and logos are being co-opted. Nigerian news organisations therefore need to adopt stronger digital security measures, such as continuous monitoring of impersonator pages, proactive audience engagement to signal official accounts and investment in verification badges and official apps. Editorial staff must also be trained in digital monitoring, allowing them to detect and act swiftly against cloned accounts.

The policy implications are equally pressing. Cloned news pages represent a regulatory blind spot in Nigeria's information ecosystem. Social media companies, particularly Facebook, cannot be left to self-regulate. Rather, collaboration between platforms, regulators such as the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) and the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC), and civil society is essential. Such collaboration should focus on more robust mechanisms to detect and remove cloned pages, clearer communication to users when impersonation is identified, and the development of laws that criminalise deliberate cloning with the intent to mislead or defraud. In this way, digital policy can protect not only consumers but also the legitimacy of democratic information flows.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has drawn attention to a rather disturbing trend in the country's digital media space, how even well-educated users such as postgraduate students are routinely engaging with cloned Facebook pages of respected newspapers like *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard*. The data show clearly that many of these students not only follow such pages but also interact with them over time, often without realising that they are not official sources. This pattern exposes a serious paradox: those who consciously seek credible information increasingly find themselves consuming misleading or fabricated content circulated under familiar media names.

The persistence of this problem speaks to deeper structural weaknesses in Nigeria's information environment. Limited media literacy, weak digital verification habits and overreliance on brand familiarity combine to create a fertile ground for deception. Some respondents showed awareness that

not every post on social media can be trusted, but most still lacked the tools and routines for proper verification. The implication is that misinformation is no longer only a problem of the uneducated public; it has also crept into the habits of those who should ordinarily serve as knowledge leaders in society.

If left unchecked, this situation will continue to erode public confidence in journalism and undermine the credibility of reputable media houses. Cloned pages do not merely confuse individuals; they damage the collective trust that sustains professional journalism and democratic communication. There is therefore an urgent need for coordinated action across educational, regulatory and professional sectors to reclaim the credibility of digital news in Nigeria.

**6. Recommendations**

(i) *Scale up media and digital literacy programmes*: Universities, civil society organisations and professional associations should work together to design and implement continuous media literacy programmes. Such initiatives should equip students and the general public with practical skills to identify cloned pages, cross-check online news, and evaluate sources before sharing information. In the long run, media and information literacy should be integrated into school curricula from the basic to the tertiary level.

(ii) *Tighten regulatory and legal frameworks*: Agencies such as the National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) and the Nigerian Communications Commission (NCC) must collaborate closely with social media companies to detect and shut down cloned media accounts. Legislative frameworks should be updated to criminalise deliberate impersonation of legitimate news organisations, with clear penalties and mechanisms for enforcement.

(iii) *Institutionalise fact-checking and public alerts*: Fact-checking organisations, newsrooms and technology companies should develop shared systems for tracking and flagging cloned content. Regular public advisories should be issued when impersonation is detected, and audiences should be encouraged to report suspected fake pages through verified channels. This will promote a culture of shared responsibility.

(iv) *Empower news organisations with digital security capacity*: Media houses should train their staff in online security, digital verification and early detection of cloned accounts. They should also invest in verified social media badges, official apps, or secure digital portals where audiences can access authentic content directly. Through creating trusted digital spaces, newspapers can reduce the public's dependence on unreliable intermediary platforms.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in this study.

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