

The Spread of Online Fake News and its implication for Reputation Management

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Abstract

The increasing use of smart mobile devices has made social media platforms to be irreversibly powerful in providing news and this is a development that has made a lot of people believe that *whatever they see on the internet is reliable*. The social media has become very popular among the populace that they have made the era of the internet to witness more creation and consumption of news and information in our society. Every channel of online communication such as Skype, What's App, Messenger and many others have contributed to the rampant increase in the spread of fake news. These no doubt has done a lot of damage to the reputation of people and mislead the consumer of the news into arriving at wrong conclusions and even luring them into making wrong decisions and choices politically or in any other way that may affect their wellbeing as citizens. The paper therefore seeks to establish that the spread of online fake news is a threat to reputation management using the Manipulation Theory. The paper carries out a content analysis of some selected fake news used by some disgruntled and faceless politicians to spoil the reputation of their supposed enemies in some social media. It concludes that online fake news is capable of

damaging the reputation of its victims and even capable of creating a state of anarchy. It is, therefore, suggested among other things, that awareness should be created for consumers of online news contents on the need to verify every news item they come across on the internet before accepting them as authentic.

Keywords: Fake News, Reputation Management, Internet, Social Media

Introduction

One of the most deliberated upon phenomena in the aftermath of the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria was the spread and possible influence of “fake news”—false or misleading content intentionally fabricated to look like factual news, often for the purpose of generating advertising revenue. Scholars and commentators like Emmanuel (2018) and Craig (2016) have raised concerns about the implications of fake news for the quality of democratic discourse, as well as the prevalence of misinformation more generally.

Fake news, also known as junk news or pseudo-news, is a type of yellow journalism or propaganda that consists of deliberate disinformation or hoaxes spread via traditional news media (print and broadcast) or online social media. The false information is often caused by reporters paying sources for stories, an unethical practice called checkbook journalism. Digital news has brought back and increased the usage of fake news, or yellow journalism. According to Hunt (2016, Dec. 19), fake news is written and published usually with the intent to mislead in order to damage an agency, entity, or person, and/or gain financially or politically, often using sensationalist, dishonest, or outright fabricated headlines to increase readership. In Republic of India, about twelve people have been killed just because of fake news of hoax messages (Elebeke, 2018). The victims were mobbed after they were falsely accused of child abduction based on fake messages circulated via the social media platform, WhatsApp.

The situation is not better in Nigeria. It is not restricted to the social media. On 5th July, 2018, the front page headline of a national newspaper was: *Court orders National Assembly to begin impeachment of Buhari*. The problem with that news item is that it is

fake news. According to the certified true copy of the order, the Presiding Judge of the Federal High Court in Oshogbo ordered and I quote: “*The applicants are hereby granted leave to issue and bring an Application for the order of Mandamus to compel 1st to 3rd Respondents to start impeachment proceedings against the 4th Respondent, the president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.* This was manipulated to read that the court has given the go-ahead for the National Assembly to commence impeachment proceedings against the President. In 2017, a fake report circulated on the social media claimed that five students of the College of Education, Gidan Waya, were ambushed and killed by Fulani herdsmen in Southern Kaduna. That report turned out to be false. No student was killed. I can go on and on (Egbeleke, 2018).

Fake news undermines serious media coverage and makes it more difficult for journalists to cover significant news stories. Lipson (2018) referred to an analysis by Buzz Feed (Buzz Feed, Inc. is an American Internet media, news and entertainment company), which found out that the top 20 fake news stories about the 2016 U.S. presidential election received more engagement on Facebook than the top 20 election stories from 19 major media outlets. The term, fake news, is also at times used to cast doubt upon legitimate news from an opposing political standpoint, a tactic known as the lying press. During and after his presidential campaign and election, Donald Trump popularized the term "fake news" in this sense when he used it to describe the negative press coverage of himself.

Concept Clarification: Fake News and Personalities' Reputational Damage

Bartolotta (2016) defines fake **news**, also known as junk news, pseudo-news, alternative facts or hoax news, as a form of news consisting of deliberate disinformation or hoaxes spread via traditional news media (print and broadcast) or online social media. Tufekci (2018) submits that digital news has brought back and increased the usage of fake news, or yellow journalism. Fake news is a global issue right now; there is an ongoing discussion about fake news and its impact on global affairs. There are several reports that Russia planted fake news stories to influence the outcome of the

United States elections. Also, social media was abuzz with certain 'Pizzagate' scandal- a news story claiming Hillary Clinton and her campaign chairman John Podesta were the ringleaders of a pedophilia ring running out of Washington DC. The story was proven fake when The New York Times and the Washington Post tracked it down and debunked it (Adeleke, 2016).

Fake news worsens herders/farmers crises in Nigeria: The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) has reported that fake news flowing in the social media is powering the farmers/ herdsmen crises in Nigeria. In the report by the media organisation, it stated that “fake pictures circulating on social media which users are falsely claiming depict inter-communal violence are inflaming already high tensions in Nigeria” (Adekunle, 2018). Yu et al (2000) define reputation management as the influencing and controlling of an individual's or group's reputation. Originally a public relations term, the growth of the internet and social media, along with reputation management companies, have made search results a core part of an individual's or group's reputation. Online reputation management, sometimes abbreviated as ORM, focuses on the management of product and service search website results.

With the all-encompassing developments in this field of public relations, in-sync with the growth of the internet and social media, along with the advent of reputation management companies, the overall outlook of search results has become an integral part of what defines "reputation" and subsequent to all these developments, reputation management now exists under two spheres: online and offline reputation management. Mudhakar et al (2005) write that online reputation management focuses on the management of product and service search results within the digital space. A variety of electronic markets and online communities like e-Bay, Amazon and Alibaba have Online Reputation Management (ORM) systems built in, and using effective control nodes these can minimize the threat and protect systems from possible misuses and abuses by malicious nodes in decentralized overlay networks.

Reasons for Fake News

- a. Recognising the creators of fake news, as well as their motivation, has been a major concern in recent media reports and academic articles about the phenomenon. Often it can be

unclear who has produced the disinformation, but actors ranging from governments, organizations, companies, and individuals have been identified as creators of fake news. Some sponsor fake news to make money, others do it to spread their world views while wicked beings do it for the fun of it. It is, therefore, pertinent to know that the motivation behind fake news is crucial to fighting it. Characteristically, three main motivations have been identified which are categorically *political*, *financial* and *social*.

- b. Political fake news is often called propaganda, and political actors who produce such fake news published as news intend to influence public perception, either on specific issues, individuals, or perceptions of the world and propaganda can thus be understood as a deliberate attempt to alter or maintain a power balance, advantageous to the propagandist. To identify a message as propaganda is to suggest something negative and dishonest. This kind of fake news can also be called *strategic narratives*, which can be seen as a tool for political actors to articulate a position on a specific issue and to influence perceptions and actions.
- c. It should be borne in mind that fake news like this is stereotypically used to create mistrust and confusion about what sources of information are authentic thereby making people to be utterly about what and whom to believe in. In the long run it can diminish trust in central institutions, such as news media.
- d. Furthermore, fake news published for financial gain might seem like a relative new dimension of disinformation. Yellow journalism is frequently linked with misconduct of newsgathering thereby making creators of fake news who are motivated by financial opportunities to have diverse approaches to achieving their set goal.
- e. Literally, deceptive contents produced by people seeking money are as well motivated by the algorithms on social media platforms. A post with many likes, shares, or comments is more likely to be further liked, shared, and commented on, as popularity on social media is a self-fulfilling cycle, one that lends well to the propagation of unverified information.
- f. Social desires might also be inspirations for producing fake

news, such as status, attention, identity building, or entertainment. Actors may create and share fake news to gain acceptance within online communities or to earn fame. Social media users are incentivized through likes, shares, and comments to “create content that will reverberate with their friends, followers and groups,” and media manipulation might be a way to gain status and express identity.

- g. Adopting a definite approach in which news reading is received and read as a formalized and theatrical act can make it easier to understand why certain types of fake news are consumed and shared. By producing and sharing fake news, users are connecting with other users thus making digital and social media gain access to effective tools to amplify fake news to large networks worldwide.

Media Manipulation Theory: Implications to the Spread of Fake News

Coxall (2013) puts Media manipulation theory as a series of related techniques in which partisans create an image or argument that favours their particular interests. Such tactics may include the use of logical fallacies, psychological manipulations, outright deception, rhetorical and propaganda techniques, and often involve the suppression of information or points of view by crowding them out, by inducing other people or groups of people to stop listening to certain arguments, or by simply diverting attention elsewhere. Public opinion can only express itself through channels which are provided by the mass media of communication – without which there could be no propaganda. It is used within public relations, propaganda, marketing, etc. While the objective for each context is quite different, the broad techniques are often similar.

Media has played an important role in mass communication for decades. From newspapers to television, radio, and now the internet, it could, therefore, be said that it enables the transmission and reception of news and entertainment at the blink of an eye. But has our ability as a society to discern facts from fiction dissipated with the rise of new technology? What are the long term effects of the media on the world population as a whole if what we see, read, and

hear is deliberately misleading us? As media continues to be meticulously manipulated while simultaneously increasing in popularity and usability, people are facing some potentially serious consequences. Taking a critical look at this theory, it could be further explained that there were few threats to fear when it came to media manipulation some years ago: the government propagandists and the hustling publicists.

They were serious threats, but vigilance worked as a clear and simple defense. They were the exceptions rather than the rule—they exploited the fact that the media was trusted and reliable. Today, with blog and web driven media cycle, nothing can escape exaggeration, distortion, fabrication and simplification. Ryan (2012) stresses further:

Today, the media—driven by blogs and websites—is assailed on all sides, by the crushing economics of their business, dishonest sources, inhuman deadlines, page view quotas, inaccurate information, greedy publishers, poor training, the demands of the audience, and so much more. These incentives are real, whether you are the Huffington Post or CNN or some tiny blog. They warp everything you read online- thumbnail-cheating YouTube videos and paid-edit Wikipedia articles are only the beginning.

Everyone is in on the game, from bloggers to non-profits to marketers to the *rest of the media*. The lure of gaming you for clicks is too appealing for anyone to resist. And when everyone is running the same racket, the line between the real and the fake becomes indistinguishable. Particularly in the last decade, with the rise of social media hubs such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, and various websites that allow internet piracy and free downloads of television shows and movies, the world is now witnessing a time where most information is free and accessible, privacy is nearly nonexistent, and the fine line between reality and fiction is repeatedly blurred.

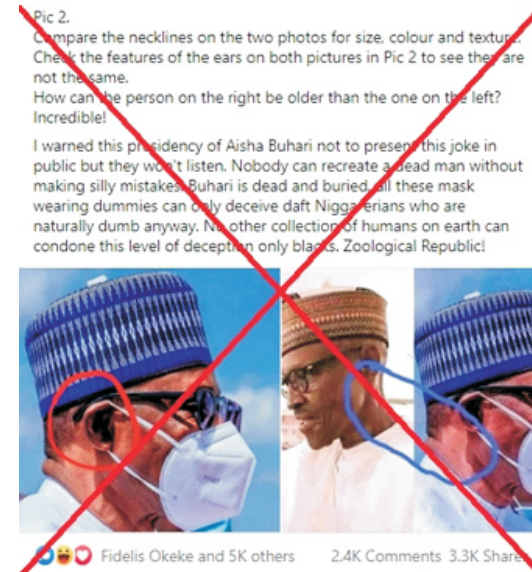
The technology available to ordinary citizens enables the

manipulation of truth, which is then spread as fact. There is often no independent corroboration of the facts in the rush to get the information out there. Information flows so quickly and in such huge quantities that all kinds of internet users — individuals, corporate executives, government officials, media editors, and television producers — have difficulty in keeping up effectively.

Content Analysis of Fake News in Relation to Personalities Reputational Damage

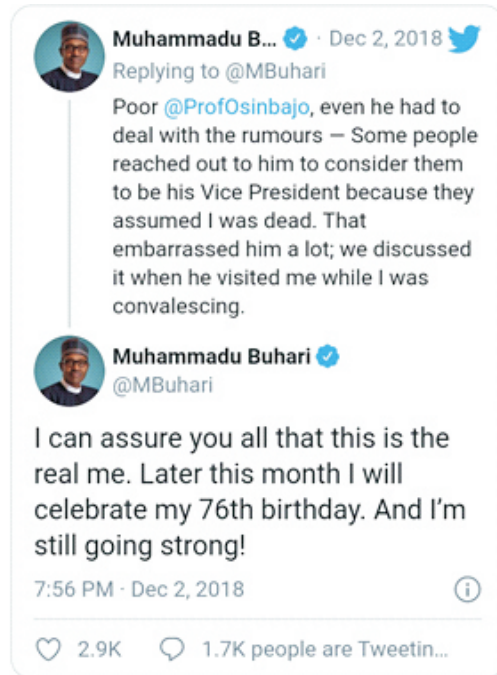
Samples: Fake and Real News

“Tomorrow (Saturday) on Radio Biafra at 6 PM Biafra land time, I will continue to unmask Jubril, the Sudanese impostor that replaced late President Buhari in Aso Rock. The Nigerian and Sudanese perpetrators of this despicable fraud of the century must be punished.” The leader of the proscribed Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), Nnamdi Kanu, tweeted on December 7 on his official Twitter and was published in the news report of [Chijioke Jannah](#) by Daily Post on December 8, 2018.



Real News

"It is the real me I assure you," President Muhammadu Buhari said recently to a group of Nigerians during a visit to Poland, where he was attending the United Nations Climate Conference" (Reported by CTV News on December 3, 2018). He also tweeted regarding his being alive on his official Tweeter handle.



Analysis

Taking a critical look at the fake news and its source, it could be submitted here that the news that broke out regarding President Mohammedu Buhari being cloned left many into believing that the presidency had not being sincere with Nigerians thereby denting the public image of President Mohammedu Buhari. Many high-profile Nigerians claimed Mr. Buhari, nicknamed “Johnny Walker” for his frequent months-long trips abroad for medical treatment, had died and had been replaced by a lookalike. Social-media posts alleging the president is in fact a Sudanese body double called “Jubril” were being shared and viewed by numerous people across the globe.

Nigerians are scouring through photos to see if they can detect changes to the president's distinctive nose or cleft ear. Enterprising traders in Lagos have begun selling “Where's Buhari?” T-shirts. All of these have degraded the public image of President Mohammedu Buhari as someone who had, on many occasions presented himself to Nigerians as a crusader against corrupt practices.

An unfortunate phenomenon that lent credence to the spread of the fake news about Buhari being cloned was how thousands of Nigerians shared a scene from the 1997 movie “Face/Off” starring John Travolta and Nicolas Cage to show how a dead Mr. Buhari's face could have been transplanted to a body double. The scandal has even reached U.S. late-night television, with Jimmy Kimmel on Tuesday joking that Mr. Buhari was a clone before launching into a skit about the cloning of his co-host, Guillermo. The fake news which appeared to have no basis in fact, evolved from speculation over Mr. Buhari's health after he took a five-month medical leave in London in 2017 for an illness never publicly identified. Fake news it that he had been replaced by a Sudanese doppelganger being supercharged by social media, doctored photos and Nigeria's highly partisan and underfunded press.

Looking at this incident of President Mohammedu Buhari's rumoured demise, it could be further submitted here that the scourge of fake news in Africa is more than what it is in the U.S. or Europe. Those likes, shares or retweets can be lethal. Fake news and incendiary images on Facebook have created a lot of crises in the country among different ethnic groups. Similarly, the Vice President Yemi Osinbajo lamented on being a victim of fake news. A social media user with pseudonym Toblesh published it on *Nairaland* on October, 2018 that Vice President Yemi Osinbajo was spotted with some strippers from the USA during an interactive session with the Vice President last night in Lagos. It went further to say that the Strippers were popular all over Social Media and Escorts services websites could be seen uploading invitation pictures for the programme and Pastor Yemi Osinbajo took time out to show up for *selfies*. Two strippers were said not be new to Nigeria, one of them was named Ms St Lucian Princess.

Real News

CTV News on December 3, 2018 reported that Vice President Yemi Osinbajo cleared the air on the published fake news that he was caught with strippers. It was further reported by the same news medium (CTV News) that Prof. Yemi Osinbajo affirmed that the news medium even went on to post a photograph of him standing between two perfectly clothed ladies, but just underneath it, the same ladies were not wearing much cloths. A development he said was digitally manipulated. Prof. Osinbajo said that he was never caught anywhere as reported by mischief social media makers.

Analysis

Starting the with the fake news about Prof. Yemi Osinbajo being spotted among strippers, its spread by social media users made many Nigerians perceive him as unreliable thereby making people challenge him on the genuineness of his Christian calling as a renowned pastor in the Redeemed Christian Church of God as well as the Vice President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Apart from the public outrage, his marriage must have also suffered a heavy blow as Prof. Yemi also asserted that his wife was among those who called him and questioned him on what he was doing among strippers. His public image came under a various attack. In all of these, one would say that the implications the published fake news might have on the reputation of Prof. Yemi Osinbajo that prompted him to shed light on the fake news, which eventually helped people in knowing the truth.

Fake News- Muhammad Lawal published it on his blogsite on February 12, 2012 that President Goodluck Jonathan made stupid decisions because he married an illiterate woman thereby prompting him (President Goodluck Ebele Jonathan) make him himself a tyrant and number one enemy of Nigeria.

Real News- CTV News on December 3, 2018 reported that Prof. Wole Soyinka insisted that he never said former President Goodluck Jonathan married an illiterate woman as ascribed to him in 2014.

Fake News

Looking critically at the fake news regarding Prof. Wole Soyinka referring to the former first lady of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Madam Patience Jonathan, as an illiterate woman, one would submit that Prof. Wole Soyinka, being a highly respected elder statesman

and great scholar, must have been seen by many as having goofed, a development that would have adversely affected the public image he had kept for many years. In all of these, one would say that the timely intervention of Prof. Wole Soyinka to the fake news published about him that helped the public know the truth.

Fake News- On March 10, 2017, Sahara TV reported that Stephanie Ootobo alleged that General Overseer of the Omega Fire Ministries, Apostle Johnson Suleman, liked too much sex, threesomes and once gave her proceeds of crusades. In the report, she petitioned the police to investigate the allegation that Apostle Johnson Suleman had explicit sexual affair, financial transactions and romantic meetings with her. The story went viral and the public image of Apostle Johnson Suleman was brought to disrepute.

Real News

Vanguard Newspaper reported on February 4, 2018 that a 23 year-old Miss Stephanie Ootobo appeared on the altar of Omega Fire Ministries in Auchu to confess to having been used by “powerful politicians and pastors to implicate Apostle Suleman. It was further captured that she confessed she fell into the hands of powerful politicians and pastors who manipulated her in a wrong way with the intention to bring down Apostle Johnson Suleman. It was further reported that she confessed she was paid a lot of money by the powerful politicians and pastors to make indict the man of God.

Analysis

Following the allegation sex scandal leveled against Apostle Johnson Suleman which went viral on the social media, it could, therefore, be submitted the efforts of Miss Stephanie Ootobo were to malign and convict the pastor through media trial. Considering the blackmail the pastor suffered through the media -both traditional and social media, it could be said that conjuring, manufacturing and synthesizing bogus and unverifiable exhibits in the social media and newspapers poisoned public opinions against Apostle Johnson Suleman and reduced his esteem and reputation in the eye of any reasonable man. The fake news published about the pastor portrayed him in the public light as a fake man of God and fraudster thereby subjecting his self-esteem to ignominy.

Implications of Fake News for Personalities' Reputational Damage

Fake news as a global phenomenon has been a problem in the business world for a long time. While a bad news story can cause dropping stock prices, destroy the reputation of a business, or cause unreasonable customer expectations, disreputable businesses can also generate fake news or reviews in order to boost their own stature or profits. Adeleke (2016) recognises *astroturfing* as one of the methods used for the spread of fake news to make reputation management a very problematic task to accomplish and describe it as when there is intent and attempt to create the illusion of support for a particular cause, person, or stance. While this is mainly connected to and seen on the internet, it has also happened in newspapers during times of political elections.

Corporations and political parties try to imitate grassroots movements in order to sway the public to believe something that is not true thereby tarnishing the image of their political opponents or people considered to be their contenders in a political race. Geometric increase in fake news stories across the Internet is a troubling trend. Many people get their news from social media but the disconcerting influence of fake news- intentionally false but realistic looking articles promulgated by clickbait and tabloid websites, as well as extremist political groups- is likely to deepen as the Internet continues to replace traditional media as a news source.

It could thus be further submitted here that the disconcerting influence of fake news is really annoying; especially for traditional media outlets, but businesses in general have particular reason for concern. Websites that propagate misinformation often try to add credibility to articles by placing mainstream advertisements next to them. The tactic is possible because many large brands advertise through third-party or automated platforms. As a result, marketers lose control over advertisement placement, and brand advertisements can appear next to fraudulent content that does not reflect, or that even conflicts with, a firm's values. It is thus crucial for firms to understand how the proliferation of fake news might harm their marketing efforts thereby destroying the reputation of their establishments. As a matter of concern, fake news has a definitely negative effect on the readers' attitudes- notwithstanding whether it appears to be on a "truthful" or "deceitful" site.

Strategies for Identifying Fake News in Relation to Personalities' Reputational Damage

Hunt (2017) submits that fake news has become increasingly prevalent over the last few years, with over 100 incorrect articles and rumors spread incessantly with regard to the 2016 United States presidential election. These fake news articles tend to come from satirical news websites or individual websites with an incentive to propagate false information, either as clickbait or to serve a purpose (Hunt, 2017). Since they typically hope to intentionally promote incorrect information, such articles are quite difficult to detect. When identifying a source of information, one must look at many attributes, including but not limited to the content of the email and social media engagements Liu, et al (2017).

It has also been seen as a source for validating and debunking urban legends and similar stories in American popular culture.) try to detect this information manually, while certain universities are trying to build mathematical models to do this themselves. Creagh, et al (2017) opine that one of IFCN's verified signatories, the independent, not-for-profit media journal *The Conversation*, created a short animation explaining its fact checking process, which involves "extra checks and balances, including blind peer review by a second academic expert, additional scrutiny and editorial oversight".



Figure 1.0
Pictorial illustration on *How to spot fake news*
Source: the International Federation of Library Associations, 2017

Having critically examined the concept of fake news, its spread and how it serves as a threat to reputation management, government at all levels can adopt a system through which students in high schools will be taught how to read critically with a view to detecting propaganda, identifying fake news and the evaluation of sources. Such a subject could be called "Media Literacy". The subject will provide training in journalism for students at that level while Media Literacy should be made a borrowed course for those who are offering courses that are not journalism-based in institutions of higher learning since our world is driven by information dissemination and news consumption.

Additionally, the following must be carefully considered by an individual who is a consumer of news or any form of information:

- a. Ask experts (to get confirmation from independent people with knowledge);
- b. Ask if it is a joke (to determine if it is meant to be satire);
- c. Assess the supporting sources (to ensure they support the claims);
- d. Check the authors (to see if they are real and credible);
- e. Check the date of publication (to see if the story is relevant and up to date);
- f. Consider the source (to understand its mission and purpose);
- g. Read beyond the headline (to understand the whole story);
- h. Review your own biases (to see if they are affecting your judgment);
- i. Verify from the right source, especially the victim's source.

Governments, companies and users of social media should wake up to how serious public opinion manipulation—as manifested in “fake news”—can be. That is, governments should start to recognise that fake news is a disastrous phenomenon that must be actively fought.

Furthermore, services to debunk stories considered to be false could be set up by government agencies with a view to engaging law enforcement agencies to arrest those caught in the act. Imposition of regulations with severe sanctions is another practice the government can adopt while the targets of these new regulations would include social networking services as this would make fake

news *very* bad for business thereby challenging them to take steps to fight it.

Conclusion

Spread of fake news as a threat to the reputation management of Nigerian public figures must be seen as a practice to be avoided as it is closely associated with politics and propaganda aiming at defaming the target person or group. At this juncture, it should be borne in mind that lots of news stories people read online, especially on the social media feeds may appear to be true because these stories are created to influence people's views, push a political agenda or cause confusion and can often be a profitable business for online and offline publishers. Considering the menace of fake news, people will likely encounter false and misleading information (fake news) on a daily basis. Hence, being able to identify what is fake news and real news is a phenomenon that must be well understood every time as discussed in this paper. Understanding fake news would help the society and also go a long way into opening the eyes of news consumers to being able to differentiate between what is fake and real as discussed in this paper.

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Accessibility, Knowledge Acquisition and Acceptability of Learning Management Systems among Young Undergraduates in University of Lagos, Nigeria

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Abstract

Digital learning is increasingly becoming the norm in most institutions across the globe due to impact of Covid-19 pandemic which has made it a compelling alternative. University of Lagos has also yielded to this new learning style owing to learning gap created during lockdown. This study examined accessibility, knowledge acquisition and acceptability of learning management system among young undergraduates in University of Lagos. The study adopted expo facto research design because it is an after-the-fact study. The population for the study was 6,600 students. Samples of 495 students were selected through convenient sampling from Faculties of Arts, Education, Sciences and Management sciences. Four hypotheses were tested and the instrument used for data collection was students' LMS usability scale 0.72. Data collected were analysed using ANOVA and Multiple regression analysis. The results revealed a significant difference in the accessibility of learning management system among students in different Faculties, also a significant difference in students' acceptability of LMS across Faculties; there is significant difference in knowledge acquisition on learning management system among participants and accessibility and acceptability of LMS by students across Faculties that participated jointly contributed to knowledge acquisition by the participants. It is recommended that the LMS be sustained for teaching and learning at the University of Lagos.