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Influence of Social Media Algorithms on News Consumption among Imo Youths: A Study of Obowo Facebook Users

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Abstract

This study investigated the influence of social media algorithms on news consumption among youths in Imo State, focusing on Facebook users in Obowo Local Government Area. Anchored on Algorithmic Gatekeeping Theory and Uses and Gratifications Theory, the study adopted a survey research design. Data were collected from 312 respondents using structured questionnaires. Analysis revealed that social media algorithms significantly shape news exposure patterns, credibility evaluation, and engagement behaviours such as liking, sharing, and commenting on posts. Findings further indicated that personalised news feeds influence the type of content youths encounter, while algorithm-driven distribution may limit exposure to diverse viewpoints, fostering selective information consumption. The study concluded that social media algorithms play a critical role in shaping youth news behaviour in digital environments. It recommended that youths enhance digital media literacy, social media platforms improve algorithmic transparency, and educators and stakeholders promote responsible news consumption practices to mitigate the effects of biased or filtered content on information access and critical thinking.

Keywords: Digital, Algorithmic, Facebook, Social Media, Obowo LGA



Introduction

The emergence of social media has significantly transformed global news production, distribution, and consumption patterns, particularly among young people. Social media platforms have evolved from simple communication tools into powerful digital information ecosystems that influence political communication, social interaction, and public opinion formation (Newman et al., 2023; Salleh et al., 2024). Contemporary media scholarship argues that digital communication technologies have disrupted traditional journalism structures by enabling real time news circulation, participatory communication, and personalised information delivery. According to Nielsen et al. (2021), social media has become one of the most dominant sources of news consumption globally, particularly among younger populations who prefer fast, interactive, and mobile friendly news platforms. Similarly, Van Dijck (2020) conceptualised social media platforms as socio technical systems that operate through algorithmic governance, data surveillance, and automated content distribution processes. These developments have fundamentally changed how audiences access and interpret news information in contemporary societies. Furthermore, Newman et al. (2022) observed that digital platforms have reshaped journalism practices by increasing audience participation in news production and dissemination processes.

Social media algorithms play a central role in determining the type of news content users are exposed to on digital platforms. Algorithmic systems operate using machine learning and data analytics to track user behaviour patterns such as search history, engagement frequency, time spent on content, and interaction preferences. The primary purpose of these algorithms is to improve user experience by delivering personalised content recommendations. However, scholars have raised concerns about algorithmic bias and selective exposure effects. Sundar (2020) argued that digital media environments influence perception formation through repeated exposure to emotionally charged or sensational information. In addition, Tufekci (2021) stated that algorithmic recommendation systems significantly influence political awareness, social perception, and information credibility evaluation among digital users. Similarly, Kümpel et al. (2021) explained that algorithmic news personalisation systems may reinforce ideological beliefs by repeatedly exposing users to similar categories of content, thereby limiting exposure to diverse perspectives.

In developing countries such as Nigeria, social media usage has increased significantly, particularly among youths who constitute the most active digital media users. The widespread availability of affordable internet services and smartphone technology has accelerated social media adoption across urban and semi urban communities. Studies show that Nigerian youths increasingly rely on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram for news consumption, social interaction, and political communication (Newman et al., 2022). This shift from traditional media to digital media platforms has raised concerns about information credibility, misinformation spread, and digital media literacy among young audiences. Fletcher and Park (2020) noted that digital media environments have increased exposure to unverified information, which may influence public perception of political, social, and economic realities.

Youth news consumption behaviour is particularly important because young people play a significant role in shaping social discourse and political participation. Social media algorithms may influence news preferences by prioritising trending, sensational, or emotionally appealing news stories. Bode and Vraga (2020) argued that social media exposure influences political knowledge acquisition and civic engagement behaviour among young audiences. Similarly, Marchal, Au and Howard (2021) noted that misinformation and fake news dissemination remain major challenges in digital communication ecosystems, especially in regions with limited media verification mechanisms. Continuous exposure to



algorithmically curated news content may therefore influence how youths interpret social realities and make socio political decisions.

In Nigeria, where social media usage among youths is rapidly increasing, there is growing concern about misinformation and biased information environments. Despite the increasing dependence of youths in Imo State, particularly in Obowo Local Government Area, on Facebook for news consumption, there is limited empirical research examining how algorithm driven news exposure influences their news preferences, credibility assessment, and engagement behaviour. However, concerns remain about how algorithm driven news exposure influences information credibility assessment and behavioural responses among young social media users. Understanding these digital communication dynamics is important because news consumption behaviour can influence political awareness, social participation, and economic decision making among youths.

The problem therefore lies in the inadequate understanding of how social media algorithms shape news consumption patterns among Imo youths. Without empirical investigation, it remains unclear whether algorithmic filtering enhances informed participation or reinforces biased information exposure. This study therefore seeks to address this gap by examining the influence of social media algorithms on news consumption among Facebook users in Obowo Local Government Area.

It is against this background that this study examines the influence of social media algorithms on news consumption among Imo State youths, with particular focus on Facebook users in Obowo Local Government Area. The study seeks to investigate how algorithmic content distribution influences news exposure patterns, credibility evaluation, and news engagement behaviour among young social media users in the study area.

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives are to:

1. Examine how social media algorithms influence news exposure patterns among Facebook using youths in Obowo Local Government Area.
2. Determine the extent to which algorithm driven news feeds affect credibility evaluation of news content among Imo youths.
3. Investigate how personalised news recommendations shape news engagement behaviour (likes, shares, comments) among Facebook users in the study area.
4. Assess whether algorithm curated news content limits exposure to diverse viewpoints and contributes to selective news consumption among youths in Obowo Local Government Area.

Theoretical Framework

Algorithmic Gatekeeping Theory

Algorithmic Gatekeeping Theory is an extension of the traditional gatekeeping theory originally developed by Kurt Lewin in 1947 and later expanded in media studies. In contemporary digital communication scholarship, the concept has been redefined to explain how automated systems now perform the gatekeeping function once carried out by human editors. According to Napoli (2020), algorithmic systems determine what information becomes visible to users by prioritising content based on engagement metrics and behavioural data. Similarly, Van Dijck (2020) explains that social media



platforms operate through algorithmic governance, where automated processes filter, rank, and distribute content to users.

In relation to this study, Algorithmic Gatekeeping Theory explains how Facebook algorithms determine the type of news content Obowo youths are exposed to. Unlike traditional media where editors select news stories, Facebook's algorithm selects content based on user interaction history. This influences news exposure patterns, credibility assessment, and engagement behaviour among youths in the study area.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and Gratifications Theory was developed by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1973) and focuses on how audiences actively select media content to satisfy specific needs. Contemporary scholars such as Sundar and Limperos (2020) argue that digital media environments have expanded user control and interaction, making users active participants in content selection and engagement. The theory assumes that individuals use media platforms to satisfy needs such as information seeking, entertainment, social interaction, and identity formation.

In the context of this study, Uses and Gratifications Theory explains why Imo youths use Facebook for news consumption. Youths actively engage with algorithm curated content to satisfy information and social needs. However, their choices are also influenced by algorithmic recommendations, which shape the type of news they encounter. The theory therefore helps explain the interaction between user motivation and algorithm driven content exposure.

Method

The study adopted a quantitative research approach using a descriptive survey design to examine the influence of social media algorithms on news consumption among youths in Imo State, with particular focus on Facebook users in Obowo Local Government Area. This design was appropriate as it allows for the systematic collection of measurable data on respondents' news exposure, credibility evaluation, and engagement behaviours.

The study area, Obowo Local Government Area, is a semi-urban community with growing internet penetration and high social media usage among youths, making it suitable for this study. Due to the absence of reliable statistics on the exact number of Facebook users or youth population, the population for the study was treated as unknown. Accordingly, the sample size was determined using Cochran's (1977) formula for unknown populations, with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, resulting in a sample of 384 respondents. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that only youths who actively use Facebook for news consumption were included, enhancing the relevance and accuracy of responses.

A structured questionnaire was developed by the researcher as the primary data collection instrument. It consisted of 20 items across four sections, covering demographic characteristics, news exposure, credibility evaluation, and engagement behaviours such as liking, sharing, and commenting on posts. The questionnaire was administered over a two-week period in the study area. Out of 384 distributed questionnaires, 312 were successfully retrieved and deemed valid, representing a response rate of 81.3%. Data analysis was conducted using percentages and frequency distribution tables to provide clear interpretation in line with the study objectives.



To ensure validity, the questionnaire underwent face and content validation by experts in Mass Communication and research methodology, who assessed item clarity, relevance, and appropriateness. Reliability was tested through a pilot study involving 20 respondents outside the study area, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.78, indicating acceptable internal consistency for social science research.

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study. Respondents were fully informed about the research purpose, and informed consent was obtained prior to participation. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. No personal identifiers were collected, and all data were used solely for academic purposes.

Findings

This section presents and analyses data collected from respondents in Obowo Local Government Area, Imo State. Based on the scientifically determined sample size of 384 using Cochran's formula for an unknown population, 384 questionnaires were distributed. Out of this number, 312 copies were successfully retrieved and found usable, representing a response rate of 81.3 percent. The analysis is therefore based on 312 valid responses. Data were analysed using simple percentages and frequency distribution tables in line with the research objectives.

Findings

Table 1: Respondents' response on influence of social media algorithms on news exposure

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	228	81.4
No	52	18.6
Total	280	100

The result shows that a significant majority of respondents agreed that social media algorithms influence their news exposure patterns.

Table 2: Respondents' response on influence on credibility evaluation

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	217	77.5
No	63	23.5
Total	280	100

The findings indicate that most respondents believe that algorithm driven news feeds influence how they evaluate the credibility of news content.

Table 3: Respondents' response on influence on engagement behaviour

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	220	78.5
No	60	21.5
Total	280	100

The data reveal that personalised news recommendations significantly influence engagement behaviours such as liking, sharing, and commenting.

Table 4: Respondents' response on exposure to diverse viewpoints

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	219	78.2
No	61	21.8
Total	280	100

The result suggests that a majority of respondents believe algorithm curated news content limits exposure to diverse viewpoints.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that social media algorithms play a central role in shaping news consumption patterns among youths in Obowo Local Government Area.

The first finding revealed that a significant proportion of respondents acknowledged that algorithms influence their exposure to news content. This indicates that youths no longer access news randomly, but are guided by automated systems that prioritise content based on user preferences, interactions, and behavioural patterns. This observation supports the assumptions of Algorithmic Gatekeeping Theory, which explains that digital platforms now perform the traditional gatekeeping role of editors by determining which information becomes visible to users (Van Dijck, 2020). The implication is that news exposure is increasingly personalised and shaped by platform logic rather than user intention alone.

The second finding showed that algorithm-driven news feeds influence how youths evaluate the credibility of news. Repeated exposure to similar types of content may create familiarity and perceived trust, even when such content lacks verification. This aligns with the Uses and Gratifications Theory, which posits that individuals actively select media content that satisfies their informational, cognitive, or social needs (Ruggiero, 2020). In algorithmic environments, however, these choices are subtly guided by



platform recommendations, potentially leading to biased perceptions of credibility based on repetition rather than objective assessment.

The third finding indicated that personalised news feeds significantly influence engagement behaviour. High levels of interaction observed among respondents reflect the participatory nature of social media, where users are active participants in content creation and dissemination. Algorithms tend to amplify emotionally appealing or trending content, encouraging users to like, share, and comment, thereby creating a feedback loop that reinforces algorithmic recommendations (Hermida, 2020; Sundar, 2020).

The fourth finding revealed that algorithm-curated content may limit exposure to diverse viewpoints, contributing to echo chambers. Users are consistently exposed to information that aligns with their existing beliefs, reducing opportunities for alternative perspectives and critical reflection. This further supports Algorithmic Gatekeeping Theory, illustrating how digital platforms shape public discourse and influence selective news consumption (Van Dijck, 2020; Kümpel et al., 2021).

Overall, while social media enhances access to information and facilitates engagement, the study highlights challenges related to content bias, credibility, and restricted exposure to diverse viewpoints. These findings underscore the critical role of algorithms in shaping youth news behaviour in contemporary digital environments and reinforce the importance of promoting digital media literacy to enable critical and informed news consumption.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that social media algorithms significantly shape how youths in Obowo Local Government Area access, interpret, and engage with news content. The findings show that algorithm driven systems determine the type of news users are exposed to, influence their perception of credibility, and affect their level of interaction with news content.

Furthermore, the study establishes that while social media provides easy and rapid access to information, it also encourages selective exposure and limits diversity in news consumption. This creates a situation where youths are more likely to encounter information that aligns with their existing views, thereby reinforcing biases.

In essence, the study reveals that social media has become a powerful but complex news environment where algorithmic systems influence both access to information and user behaviour. This calls for conscious efforts to promote critical thinking and responsible media consumption among youths.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Youths should be encouraged to develop strong digital media literacy skills that will enable them to critically evaluate news content and identify misinformation.
2. Social media platforms should enhance transparency in their algorithmic operations and promote balanced content distribution to expose users to diverse viewpoints.
3. Government and relevant agencies should implement media literacy campaigns aimed at educating youths on responsible news consumption and the dangers of misinformation.
4. Media organisations should strengthen professional standards and fact checking processes to improve the credibility of online news content. Educational institutions should incorporate digital literacy education into their curriculum to equip students with the skills needed to navigate modern media environments effectively.



Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the study focused exclusively on Facebook users in Obowo Local Government Area, which limits the generalisability of the findings to youths in other local government areas or users of other social media platforms such as Instagram, X (Twitter), or TikTok. Second, although a scientifically determined sample of 384 was targeted, only 312 valid responses were retrieved, which may affect the representativeness of the data. Third, the study relied solely on self-reported data from structured questionnaires, making it susceptible to social desirability bias, where respondents may provide answers they perceive as acceptable rather than fully reflecting their behaviours. Fourth, the cross-sectional survey design captures responses at a single point in time, which may not account for changes in algorithmic influence or news consumption patterns over time. Finally, the study did not explore qualitative perspectives in depth, which could have provided richer insights into the reasoning behind youths' news engagement and credibility evaluation.

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