

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF MISINFORMATION ON CHILDREN IN NIGERIA





A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH

Misinformation has become a pressing concern globally, with significant implications for various aspects of society. This study aims to assess the impact of misinformation on children in Nigeria. Nigeria, a country with a large population of children, faces unique challenges due to the spread of misinformation through various mediums, including social media, traditional media, and word-of-mouth. According to data from UNICEF, Nigeria is a country of the young with almost half the entire 180 million strong population, 46 percent, currently under the age of 15.

This research will employ a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to gather comprehensive data. The study will include surveys to gain insights into their experiences, perceptions, and responses to misinformation. Additionally, media analysis will be conducted to identify prevalent forms of misinformation targeting children. The findings of this study are expected to shed light on the ways misinformation affects children in Nigeria. It will examine the impact on their cognitive development, emotional well-being, and social interactions. Moreover, the study will explore the role of education in addressing and mitigating the effects of misinformation and identify strategies for promoting media literacy among children.

The implications of the study will contribute to the development of effective educational interventions and child protection policies. It provides valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and child protection agencies in designing curricula and programs to equip children with critical thinking skills, media literacy, and resilience to misinformation. The research also highlights the importance of collaboration between schools, parents, and the government in fostering a safe and informed environment for children.

Keywords: Misinformation, Children, Nigeria, Education, Media Literacy, Social Interactions.



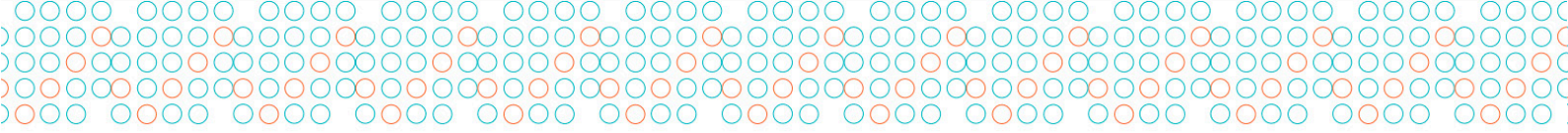
CHAPTER ONE

1. INTRODUCTION

In this age of rapid digitalization and easy access to information, children in Nigeria, like their counterparts around the world, are growing up in a world saturated with online content. The internet has become an essential part of their lives, providing a vast repository of knowledge and opportunities for social interaction. However, these benefits come with significant challenges, including the growing problem of misinformation. Misinformation refers to the dissemination of false or misleading information, often unintentionally, and it has become increasingly prevalent in the digital age.

The rise of social media platforms, the proliferation of user-generated content, and the speed at which information spreads online have made it easier for misinformation to take root and circulate widely. The emergence of mobile smart devices, or smartphones, has accelerated this social change because just adding to these internet-connected devices has been able to orient humans to a social environment that is connected synchronously, in real-time, in a data-generating environment, on a continuous basis, and has democratised the use of knowledge in this new digital environment. Social media is used by people to talk about a range of interests, including education. Utilising these technologies certainly provides advantages. However, they have also exacerbated a problem that has existed for centuries: the spread of rumours, incorrect information, and news with little regard for scientific accuracy that can misinform readers.

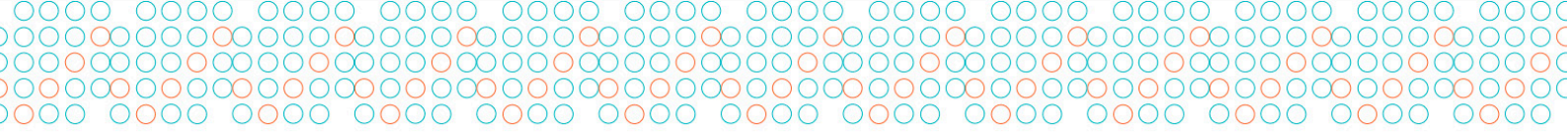
Children, in particular, are vulnerable to the impact of misinformation. Their cognitive and critical thinking skills are still developing, making them more susceptible to accepting false information at face value. Misinformation, the dissemination of false or misleading information, has become a prevalent issue in our present digital age. The rapid spread of misinformation poses a significant challenge, particularly for vulnerable



populations such as children. The introduction of disruptive new technologies such as the internet, Web 2.0, and social media has enabled humans to bring about a significant change in society by opening up previously unavailable avenues of communication. New ways to access, create, communicate, and exchange information in milliseconds have been made possible by this revolution. Furthermore, children often lack the experience and discernment to distinguish reliable sources from unreliable ones, exposing them to the risks associated with misinformation. Misinformation can range from satire and parody to dangerous conspiracy theories, and it is created and spread by a broad spectrum of people, both consciously and unknowingly. Its effects can range from moderate irritation to very catastrophic repercussions, including fatalities. Digital mis/disinformation can proliferate through people, bots, and troll factories—organized groups that wage coordinated mis/disinformation campaigns – for a range of reasons: to intentionally deceive and harm, to gain political influence, for financial gain, or unwittingly to share information or garner approval and popularity.

Nigeria, being one of the most populous countries in Africa with a high proportion of children, faces unique challenges in combating the impact of misinformation on its young population. Children are more likely to believe the information they see online, and they may not have the critical thinking skills to evaluate whether or not it is true. This can lead to them being exposed to harmful or dangerous information, or even being recruited by extremist groups. Additionally, the high level of poverty in Nigeria means that many children do not have access to quality education, which can make them even more vulnerable to misinformation. As the digital landscape continues to evolve, it is essential to understand the implications of misinformation on Nigerian children comprehensively. This understanding should encompass its effects on their education, psychological well-being, and, most importantly, their safety.

Education is a fundamental right for every child, and the accuracy of the information they receive is paramount to their intellectual development. Misinformation can distort their understanding of subjects, create misconceptions, and hinder their ability to think critically. Moreover, exposure to false information may have psychological effects, causing anxiety, confusion, and eroding trust in information sources.

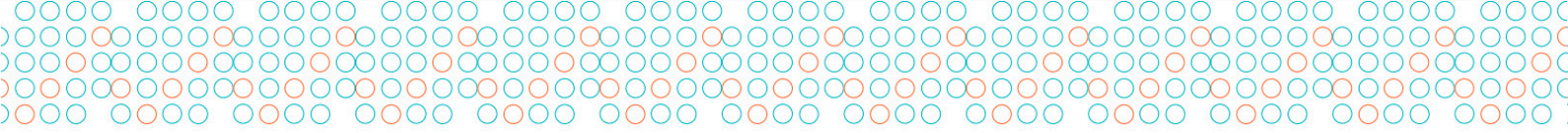


Child protection is another critical concern. Misinformation can expose children to harmful content, encourage risky behaviours, and even lead to exploitation. Recognizing these risks and mitigating them is imperative for safeguarding children's well-being and safety in the digital age.

Children can transmit or create false information, be its targets and subjects, as well as its spreaders and creators. They can also actively strive to dispel erroneous information. To acquire a clear and complete picture of how susceptible children are to misinformation and how it affects their development, well-being, and rights, researchers and policymakers do not have access to enough data. However, the rapid spread of digital misinformation and disinformation was named one of the top ten threats to society in 2014 by the World Economic Forum.

Given the enormous number of individuals who use the internet for communication, socializing, and consuming and sharing information - just over half of the world's population and over 69 percent of those aged 15 to 24 - this rapid spread is not surprising. Currently, at minimal cost to content producers and technology companies, algorithms that are created to serve up content that attracts user attention and encourages sharing are also likely to promote deceptive clickbait, conspiratorial rhetoric, and harmful mis/disinformation that endangers children. Dissemination takes place within a complex ecosystem that operates in real-time, on a global scale, and is populated by many different actors (human, corporate, government, and automated), meaning that responses need to be multi-faceted and involve a wide range of interested parties.

In the twenty-first century, the quick transmission of false and misleading information (mis/disinformation) online has become a serious problem for both online users and offline users. Children's lives are heavily influenced by false information due to their frequent use of the internet. Even if children are not directly exposed to misinformation or false information, it can nevertheless harm them. Spreading fabricated images that stigmatize or degrade people has real-world, negative effects, such as violence against ethnic minorities or victimization of children and young adults.



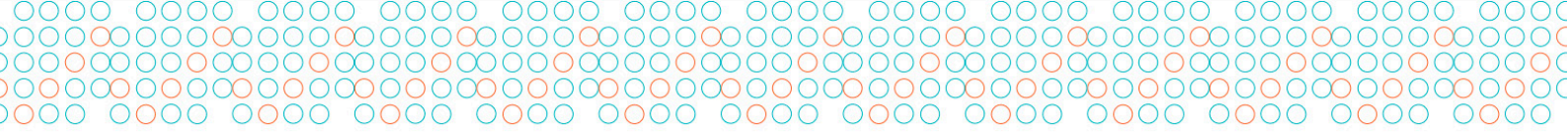
Child protection is a paramount concern when considering the impact of misinformation. Online platforms offer anonymity to predators, making it crucial to safeguard children from the risks associated with misinformation (Gorwa, 2021). Content moderation and parental guidance are essential in protecting children from harm (Adeyanju & Taiwo, 2018).

While international organizations and some countries have begun to address the issue of misinformation affecting children, there is a notable gap in understanding its specific implications within the Nigerian context. Nigeria's unique cultural, linguistic, and regional diversities add complexity to the problem, demanding a tailored approach. This research seeks to fill this crucial gap by assessing the impact of misinformation on children in Nigeria. Ultimately, the goal is to equip children with the skills and knowledge needed to navigate the digital landscape safely and critically, ensuring that they can harness the benefits of the Information Age while protecting themselves from its pitfalls.

1.4 Aim and Objectives

The purpose of this study is to assess the impact of misinformation on children in Nigeria and explore its implications for education and child protection. The objectives of the research are as follows:

- Investigate the prevalent forms of misinformation targeting children in Nigeria.
- Understand the perceptions, experiences, and responses of parents, teachers, and children to misinformation.
- Provide recommendations for educational interventions and child protection policies to mitigate the impact of misinformation.



METHODOLOGY

This study will utilize a mixed-methods approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative methods. The research will involve surveys and interviews with parents, teachers, and children to gain comprehensive insights into their experiences and perceptions of misinformation. Additionally, media analysis will be conducted to identify prevalent forms of misinformation targeting children in Nigeria. The sample population will include children of various age groups, parents from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, and teachers from different educational settings. The data collected will be analyzed using appropriate statistical techniques and qualitative analysis methods to derive meaningful findings.



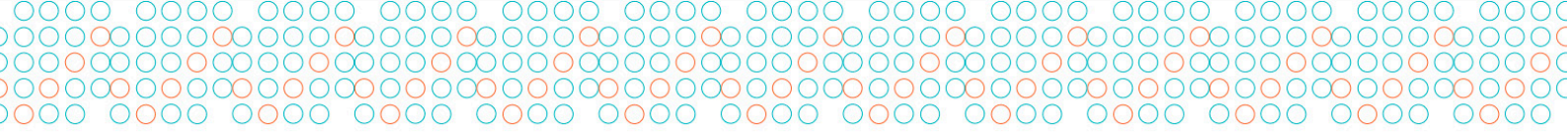
CHAPTER TWO

Understanding Misinformation and its Impact on Children in Nigeria

Misinformation, commonly defined as false or inaccurate information, is a pervasive issue in the digital age (Pennycook & Rand, 2020). The rapid spread of misinformation poses a significant challenge, particularly for vulnerable populations such as children. The introduction of disruptive new technologies such as the internet, Web 2.0, and social media has enabled humans to bring about a significant change in society by opening up previously unavailable avenues of communication. New ways to access, create, communicate, and exchange information in milliseconds have been made possible by this revolution.

In Nigeria, children are exposed to a wide array of information sources, making them susceptible to the unintentional spread of false information (Schneider et al., 2020). Not just in Nigeria, but in many other countries throughout the world, there is a problem with false information that targets children. Children may not have the critical thinking abilities to distinguish between true and erroneous information, which can have an enormous adverse impact on them. Children are particularly susceptible to false information, both in Nigeria and other nations, because of their inexperience and lack of knowledge. They might be more inclined to accept and spread false information without considering its veracity. Their comprehension of a variety of subjects, such as politics, social affairs, and health, may suffer as a result.

Health-related disinformation is one area where it is especially troubling that it targets youngsters. False information about vaccines, for instance, can result in immunization reluctance or rejection, which poses a risk. Misinformation about treatments for certain diseases or conditions can also lead to harmful practices or delays in seeking appropriate medical care. Additionally, misinformation targeting children can affect their worldviews, beliefs, and behaviour. False or misleading information about societal issues, politics, or cultural matters can shape children's perceptions and attitudes, potentially leading to bias, prejudice, or misunderstanding.



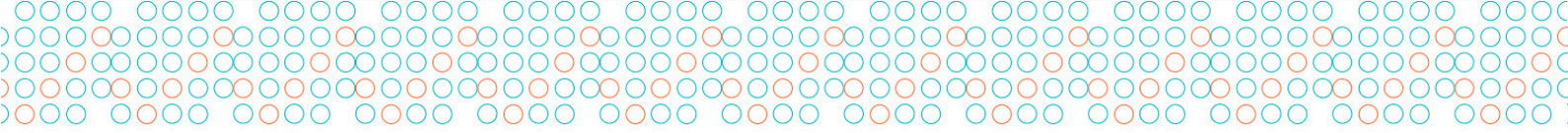
Online misinformation is created, disseminated, and shared by a wide range of players with various goals and objectives, resulting in a complex environment that is intricately entangled with social, political, and technological settings. By converting user attention into advertising money, those responsible for spreading false or misleading information may also aim to make a profit. Some people create fake usernames when posting online in an effort to spread false information and encourage followers to act in a certain way. These are known as “trolls,” attacking dissenting voices personally in an effort to make them seem outliers and less trustworthy.

Additionally, dissenters may be bullied or shamed into silence. Alternative news sources, state-controlled news agencies, extremist organizations, and misinformation profiteers are some of the major disseminators of false and misleading information, inflammatory speech, and contentious clickbait. Common targets include contentious topics including immigration, gender politics, immunization, politics, and health-related topics.

Sources of Misinformation

Online Social Networks (OSNs) have recently emerged as one of the most effective channels for information sharing and discovery due to their ability to allow users to read and create new content simultaneously. While this advantage provides users more room to decide which content to follow, it also makes OSNs fertile grounds for widespread misinformation which can lead to undesirable consequences.

Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, have emerged as significant sources of misinformation. They provide a fertile ground for the rapid dissemination of false or misleading information, often leading to its viral spread (Oyedemi, 2020). Messaging apps like WhatsApp are particularly influential in widely used. These platforms can serve as echo chambers where misinformation can proliferate unchecked (Gorwa, 2021). Misinformation can also originate from websites and online forums. False information may appear legitimate when presented on websites designed to mimic credible sources (Adeyanju & Taiwo, 2018).

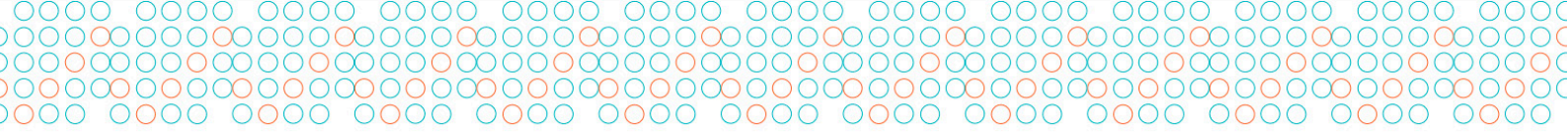


Even traditional media sources can inadvertently perpetuate misinformation when they amplify false narratives without verification (Ogu & Nwankwo, 2021). Children are often influenced by their peer networks and social circles, which can contribute to the spread of misinformation. False information shared within these groups can be seen as trustworthy, making it challenging for children to discern accuracy (Schneider et al., 2020). Cultural and societal factors, including myths, superstitions, and rumours, can contribute to misinformation in Nigeria. These deeply ingrained beliefs may be transmitted to children, further complicating their understanding of truth (Abubakar, 2019).

Sources of Misinformation

Misinformation can have significant psychological effects on children. Exposure to false information can lead to feelings of anxiety and stress (Del Vicario et al., 2016). This is because children are still developing their critical thinking skills and may not be able to distinguish between what is true and what is false. As a result, they may become anxious or stressed when they are exposed to information that contradicts what they believe to be true. Additionally, Children may experience cognitive dissonance when confronted with conflicting information, resulting in confusion and emotional distress (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). This is a state of mental discomfort that occurs when people hold two contradictory beliefs. When children are exposed to misinformation, they may experience cognitive dissonance because they may believe that the misinformation is true, but they may also know that it contradicts what they have been taught. This can lead to confusion and emotional distress.

Misinformation can distort a child's understanding of subjects, leading to the development of misconceptions (Marsh et al., 2020). For example, a child who is exposed to misinformation about the Earth being flat may develop a misconception that the Earth is actually flat. This can have a negative impact on their academic performance, as they may struggle to understand and learn new information. Additionally, Critical thinking skills, crucial for navigating the digital age, may be hindered as children struggle to differentiate between fact and fiction (Pennycook et al., 2020).



This is because misinformation is often designed to look like real news or information, making it difficult for children to know what to believe. As a result, children may be more likely to believe false information, which can have a negative impact on their education and future.

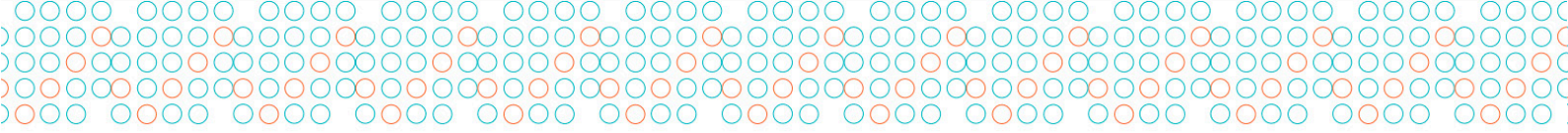
The Social and Behavioral Consequences

The social consequences of misinformation on children are profound. False information can strain social relationships as individuals may have differing beliefs based on the information they've encountered (Pennycook et al., 2020). Peer pressure within social circles can amplify the spread of misinformation, further entrenching false beliefs (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). Trust in information sources, including authoritative figures, can also be eroded, which can have lasting social repercussions (Ogu & Nwankwo, 2021).

Misinformation can encourage risky behaviours among children. Exposure to false health information, for example, can lead to unsafe practices and potentially harmful outcomes (Pennycook & Rand, 2020). Children's lives are heavily influenced by false information due to their frequent use of the internet. Even if children are not directly exposed to misinformation or false information, it can nevertheless harm them. Spreading fabricated images that stigmatize or degrade people has real-world, negative effects, such as violence against ethnic minorities or victimization of children and young adults. Children may also be exposed to inappropriate or harmful content, compromising their well-being (De Keersmaecker & Roets, 2017).

ANALYSING THE PREVALENCE OF DIGITAL MEDIA USE AMONG CHILDREN

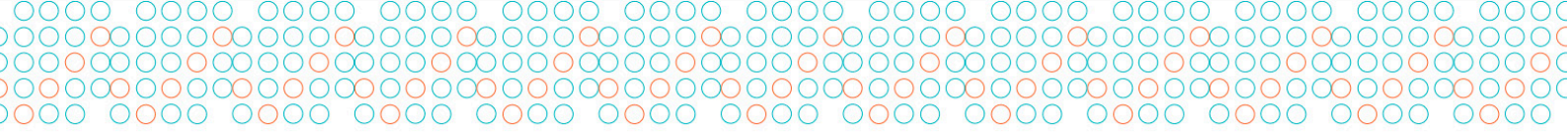
Internet usage among children is common; they “value technology” as a way to research the issues their communities face, to be informed about events and issues, to gather data, [and] to share views and experiences with others. Many people discover that they are both familiar with and interested in the internet world, as well as social media, more so than their parents, carers, and teachers. As people use technology more frequently, they are exposed to more false information. According to a 2020 survey, 76 percent of people between the ages of 14 and 24 reported seeing false material online at least once per week, a 50 percent increase over the preceding two years.



Additionally, when young children are presented with conflicting facts, they may find it difficult to separate facts from fables, which confuses them and impairs their capacity to critically analyze information. For children, misinformation can have extremely negative emotional effects. Misinformation can cause anxiety, worry, and anguish in young minds, especially when it is sensational or frightening. Children may experience irrational concerns or excessive worry over speculative situations, which can worsen stress levels and affect their emotional well-being.

Further affecting children's emotional stability and general well-being is misinformation exposure, which can further diminish faith in credible sources, aggravate emotions of uncertainty, and foster a sense of cynicism. Children's social relationships might suffer from misinformation, which limits their capacity for meaningful and productive communication. False information has the potential to cause miscommunication, disagreements, and even the emergence of polarized groups. Children may struggle to identify common ground, feel empathy for others, and have sensible dialogues when false information is deeply ingrained in social networks. This may have long-lasting effects on their social development since it may lead to more social division, decreased social cohesion, and a breakdown of peer trust.

There is growing evidence of the negative effects of misinformation in the real world, whether on an individual or social level. For instance, in Myanmar, it has been claimed that false or misleading information on social media is to blame for encouraging crime and violence against ethnic minorities, which has led to child refugees and mortality. Misinformation and disinformation pose serious hazards to democracy and public discourse on a societal and cultural level by obstructing the exchange of ideas, undermining confidence in government agencies, and silencing or drowning out underrepresented voices.



Identifying popular platforms and sources of misinformation

Children themselves, unwittingly or otherwise, share, amplify, and create mis/disinformation, most often among their peers. Apps such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram function as a fun space for children to share content without their parent's knowledge. The motivation to do so is tied to various social reasons: one study found that students in Singapore share mis/disinformation because of its perceived value and their desire for self-expression and socializing. Herrero-Diz and colleagues found that young people cared less about the accuracy of articles than their novelty or uniqueness. They conclude that the students in their study were “moved by the power of attraction of conspicuous, emotional, or outrageous language to camouflage hoaxes, rumours, or manipulations, under the guise of reliable information.”

A recent study found that at least 81 nations use social media to spread political misinformation, sway public opinion, and erode public trust. These activities can seriously harm stability and prosperity, which in turn have an immediate negative impact on children's safety and well-being. Even for adults, this distinction might be challenging to understand because it is frequently so arbitrary. Children and young people may not have developed the literacy and maturity necessary to navigate the complicated online terrain circumspectly. Not all misinformation is spread by children simply voluntarily. There are several well-documented instances of children becoming enlisted in the deliberate dissemination of false information.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PERCEPTIONS, EXPERIENCES, AND RESPONSES OF PARENTS, TEACHERS, AND CHILDREN TO MISINFORMATION

Introduction

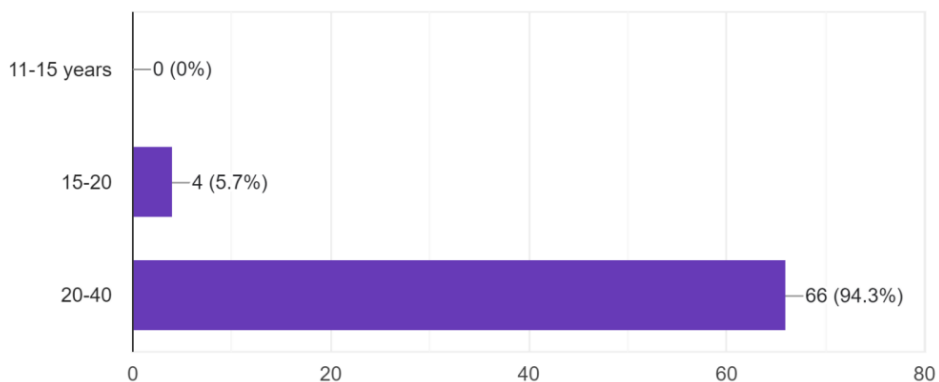
The objective of this chapter is to analyze and interpret the data collected for this study: Assessing the Impact of Misinformation on Children in Nigeria. To achieve this, the data gathered with the sheets were interpreted and analyzed. Analysis of the data on Assessing the Impact of Misinformation on Children in Nigeria reveals several important implications. These implications are based on the key findings from our respondents:

Demography:

- The majority of respondents fall within the age range of 20-40 years, which indicates that the survey captures the perspectives of adults who are likely to be parents, teachers, or individuals closely associated with children’s lives.
- The gender distribution highlights that males are more represented in the survey, which may have implications for understanding how different genders perceive and respond to misinformation.

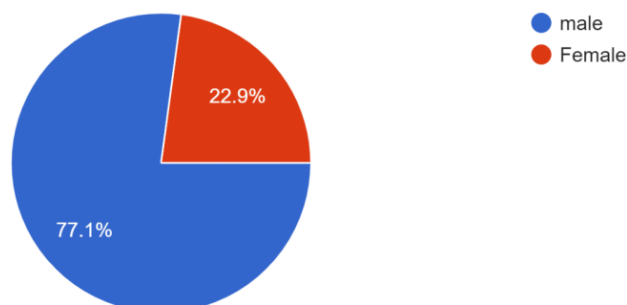
What is your age?

70 responses



b. What is your gender?

70 responses

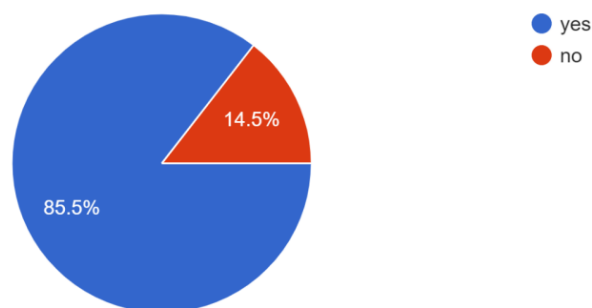


Prevalent Forms of Misinformation:

- With 85.6% of respondents having come across misinformation targeting children in Nigeria, it is evident that this is a pervasive issue in society and requires attention.

Prevalent Forms of Misinformation: a. Have you come across misinformation targeting children in Nigeria?

69 responses

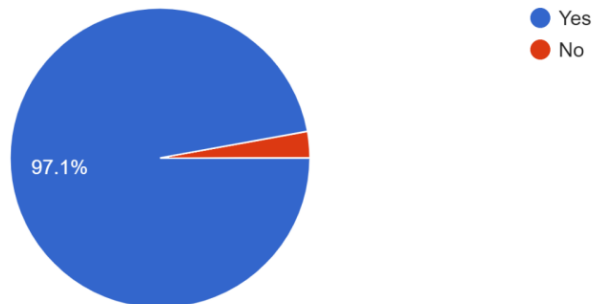


Effects of Misinformation on Children's Cognitive Development:

- The overwhelming consensus among respondents (97.1%) on misinformation's negative impact on children's cognitive development emphasizes the urgent need for interventions that promote critical thinking skills and the ability to discern accurate information.

Effects of Misinformation on Children's Cognitive Development: a. Do you believe that exposure to misinformation affects children's ability to think critically and make informed decisions?

70 responses



Effects of Misinformation on Emotional Well-being:

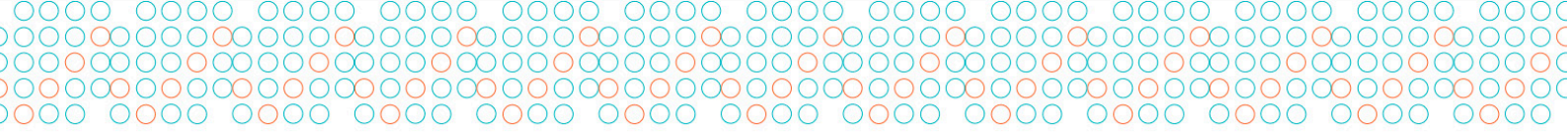
- The data highlights that exposure to misinformation is linked to emotional distress for almost all respondents (98.6%). This underscores the importance of protecting children's emotional well-being and mental health.

Effects of Misinformation on Social Interactions:

- The impact of misinformation on social relationships is evident, as a significant number of respondents reported changes in their relationships with friends or conflicts due to differences in belief on misinformation. This suggests that addressing misinformation can also have broader societal benefits.

Perceptions of Parents, Teachers, and Children:

- The high level of concern expressed by respondents (97.1%) about the impact of misinformation on children's well-being signals a shared responsibility among adults in society to address this issue.
- The unanimous agreement on the role of parents and teachers in educating children about misinformation highlights the importance of involving these stakeholders in educational efforts.



Experiences and Responses to Misinformation:

- The low percentage of respondents who have received guidance from parents or teachers on dealing with misinformation (27.5%) indicates a potential gap in educational efforts that needs to be addressed.
- On the positive side, the high number of respondents seeking accurate information to counter misinformation (88.4%) demonstrates a willingness to combat this issue actively.

Role of Education in Addressing Misinformation:

- The overwhelming belief that education can help children recognize and navigate misinformation (98.6%) reaffirms the significance of integrating media literacy and critical thinking skills into the educational curriculum.

Strategies for Promoting Media Literacy:

- The low percentage of respondents who have received formal education or training in media literacy and critical thinking (50%) suggests that there is room for expanding educational initiatives in this domain.
- The high interest in participating in workshops or programs to promote media literacy and critical thinking skills (98.6%) indicates a positive reception to potential interventions.

Media Consumption Habits:

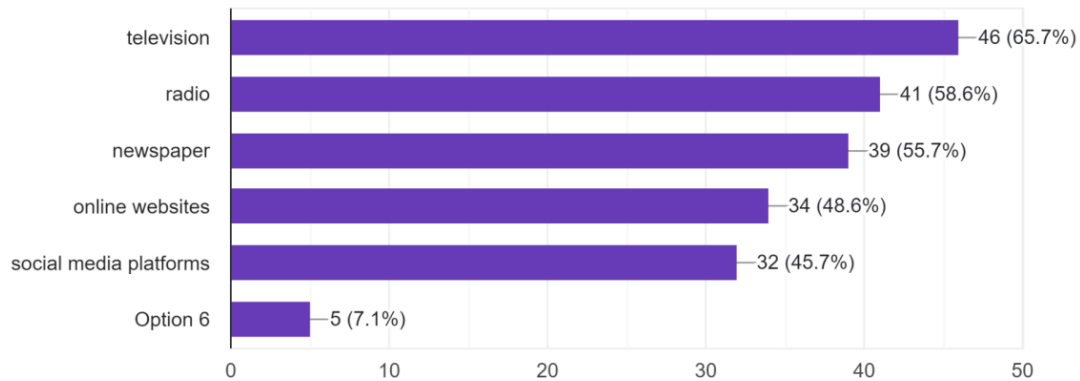
- The prevalence of frequent access to social media platforms or online news sources among respondents highlights the importance of addressing misinformation in these digital spaces.

Trusted Sources of Information:

- Understanding the trusted sources of information, as well as the least trusted sources, can guide efforts to disseminate accurate information effectively.

Trusted Sources of Information: a. Which of the following sources do you consider most trustworthy for obtaining information? (Select all that apply)

70 responses



Impact of Misinformation on Decision-making:

- The finding that 68.8% of respondents have made decisions based on false information underscores the potential consequences of misinformation on individual choices and actions.

Influence of Peer Groups on Misinformation:

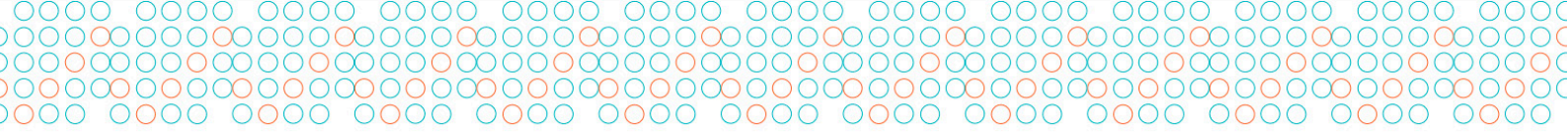
- Recognizing the role of peer groups in spreading and sharing misinformation among children necessitates targeted awareness and education campaigns to address this issue at the grassroots level.

Reporting Misinformation:

- The relatively low percentage of respondents who have reported encountering misinformation suggests a need to increase awareness and encourage proactive reporting to counter the spread of false information.

Awareness of Fact-checking Resources:

- The positive level of awareness of fact-checking resources among respondents (70%) indicates a potential avenue for disseminating accurate information and enhancing media literacy.



Overall, the analysis underscores the importance of addressing misinformation’s impact on children in Nigeria through comprehensive educational efforts, and media literacy programs, and involving parents, teachers, and children themselves in the process. By doing so, it becomes possible to mitigate the adverse effects of misinformation on children’s cognitive development, emotional well-being, and social interactions, thereby creating a safer and more informed environment for the younger generation.



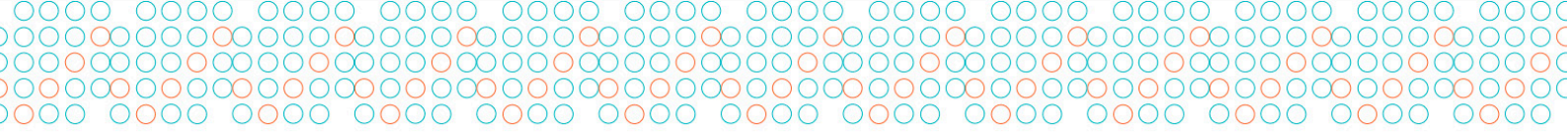
CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings from this study highlight the significant impact of misinformation on children in Nigeria, both on their cognitive development and emotional well-being, as well as their social interactions and decision-making processes. The prevalence of misinformation targeting children is alarming, with a vast majority of respondents reporting exposure to false information. This exposure has led to difficulties in discerning between true and false information, causing anxiety and distress among the children. Parents, teachers, and society at large are deeply concerned about the negative effects of misinformation on children's well-being. However, the lack of guidance from parents and teachers on how to identify and deal with misinformation is concerning, as is the relatively low percentage of respondents who have received formal education or training in media literacy and critical thinking skills. This indicates the urgent need for comprehensive educational strategies to promote media literacy and critical thinking among children.

Recommendations:

- **Strengthen Media Literacy Education:** Education plays a crucial role in addressing the impact of misinformation on children. Efforts should be made to incorporate media literacy and critical thinking skills into the educational curriculum at all levels. Workshops and programs should be organized to train teachers, parents, and children on identifying misinformation and developing critical thinking abilities.
- **Collaborative Efforts between Parents and Teachers:** Parents and teachers should work together to educate children about misinformation and its potential consequences. Regular communication and collaboration between parents and teachers can enhance the effectiveness of educating children about misinformation.



- **Enhance Fact-Checking Resources:** Fact-checking resources and organizations that verify the accuracy of the information should be widely promoted and made easily accessible to children. Raising awareness about these resources will empower children to verify information independently and make informed decisions.
- **Promote Responsible Media Consumption:** Children's media consumption habits, especially their reliance on social media platforms, can significantly impact their exposure to misinformation. Awareness campaigns should be launched to promote responsible media consumption habits and encourage children to critically evaluate information from different sources.
- **Reporting Mechanisms for Misinformation:** Encouraging and simplifying the process of reporting misinformation encountered online or through other sources can aid in curbing its spread. Social media platforms and other information-sharing platforms should provide easy-to-use reporting tools to empower children to flag false information.
- **Peer Education and Influence:** Peer groups play a significant role in spreading and sharing misinformation. Initiatives should be designed to leverage positive peer influence and empower children to educate their peers about media literacy and the importance of fact-checking.
- **Partnership with Trusted Sources:** Given that television is considered the most trustworthy source of information, partnerships with reputable media organizations can be established to create informative and accurate content aimed at children, promoting critical thinking and media literacy.
- **The impact of misinformation on children in Nigeria demands urgent attention and action.** By implementing these recommendations and working collaboratively, parents, teachers, policymakers, and relevant stakeholders can protect children from the harmful effects of misinformation and equip them with the necessary skills to navigate the information landscape responsibly. Only through a concerted effort can we ensure the well-being and development of the younger generation in an increasingly information-driven world.



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