

## Fake News And Its Implications For The Achievement Of Sustainable Development Goals In Delta State

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### ABSTRACT

This paper has discussed the implications of fake news on the realization of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Delta State, Nigeria. The issue of fake news has progressively interfered with health communication, education programs, and peace-building efforts, as well as trust in institutions- all of which are at the core of SDGs 3, 4, and 16. A mixed methods design was adopted, and 385 valid responses out of 400 questionnaires issued were collected as quantitative data, and 18 key informant interviews with government officials, media professionals, civil society actors, and community leaders were conducted as qualitative data. The quantitative analysis with descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression found that there was a significant negative association between exposure to fake news and awareness of SDG-related initiatives and also demonstrated that exposure to fake news is a significant predictor of low engagement in development programs. Thematic analysis of the interview data proved that fake news dissemination is primarily supported by social media, political actors, blogs, and oral community networks, which erode the trust of people and disturb health, education, and peacebuilding. The research concludes that fake news is a serious challenge to sustainable development in Delta State. It proposes the intensification of media literacy, the improvement of open communication, the institutionalization of fact-checking systems, and community-based sensitization to reduce the effects of misinformation and lead to the achievement of SDGs.

**Keyword :** Delta State, Development Communication, Fake News, Media Literacy, Sustainable Development Goals.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The spread of fake news, as it is widely known, is a modern challenge of the 21st century, and has great consequences for governance, popular policy, as well as sustainable development. In a digitalized era, people are turning to online media as a source of news. Although the change has democratized access to information, it has exposed societies to the intentional transmission of falsehoods (Adekunle & Adnan 2016). The fake news usually resembles authentic news, and the citizens will find it hard to differentiate between genuine and deceptive news. When uncontrolled, this phenomenon destroys social trust, misinforms, and derails development. Nigeria, like many developing countries, is grappling with the harmful effects of fake news. This misinformation has influenced the perception of people in such areas as Delta State concerning the programs that the government offers to people, health campaigns, environmental protection policies, and peace-building campaigns. It is implication regarding the case of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a global initiative aimed at addressing poverty, inequality, climate change, and other significant issues by 2030. Fake news is a menace to the achievement of such

objectives as it undermines the confidence of the masses, changes the direction of civic participation, and propagates detrimental stories (Geise & Xu 2024).

Despite the growing awareness of the fake news epidemic, the actual and indirect effects of the issue on sustainable development on the local level are not fully understood. Empirical studies are few on the interference of misinformation in planning, implementation, and reception of SDG-compatible policies and programs in Delta State (Tomero Tejedor & Oliva 2015). This proposal seeks to investigate the prevalence and sources of fake news in Delta State, its influence on public perception and participation, and the efficacy of institutional efforts to curb the problem. Finally, this study is expected to add to the expanding literature on media, governance, and development in Nigeria and suggest the optimal process of enhancing communication structures towards sustainable development (Adekunle & Adnan 2016).

Fake news is an increasing major challenge to growth in development in Nigeria, especially in Delta State, where the development activities are especially skeptical. Government efforts have been sabotaged by misinformation, notably in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to vaccine resistance and the development of distrust among people about infrastructure projects. This fake news jeopardizes several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as good health (SDG 3), quality education (SDG 4), climate action (SDG 13), peace and justice (SDG 16), and development partnerships (SDG 17). Although the issue of the effect of fake news on sustainable development at the grassroots level is urgent, there is no systematic research on the same in Delta State. This research seeks to address this gap by analyzing the trends of misinformation, assessing the reaction of the stakeholders, as well as combining media research with development research in order to provide information that can be used to improve the way people communicate and participate in the development project (Dudziak, Ferreira & Ferrari 2014; Olaniyan & Akpojivi 2020).

### ***Objectives Of The Study***

This study aims to investigate how fake news disrupts sustainable development planning and participation at the grassroots level in Delta State. The general objectives of this study are to:

1. Identify the common sources and channels through which fake news spreads in Delta State.
2. Examine the implications of fake news on key SDGs such as health (Goal 3), education (Goal 4), and peace and justice (Goal 16).
3. Recommend strategic communication and policy measures to curb the spread of fake news for enhanced SDG implementation.

### ***Hypothesis***

Hypothesis 0<sub>1</sub>: There is no significant relationship between exposure to fake news and awareness of SDG-related initiatives in Delta State.

Hypothesis 0<sub>2</sub>: Fake news exposure does not significantly predict citizens' engagement in SDG-related programs.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***Understanding Fake News***

Fake news is the strategic release of fake or misleading information in the guise of legitimate news (Oyama & Okpara 2017). It is defined by sensationalism, emotionalism, and verifiability. The digital era has facilitated the diffusion of fake news on social media, blogs, and even mainstream media at a very fast pace. Researchers suggest that fake news prospers in settings with low media literacy, low institutional trust, and partisan politics (Adekunle & Adnan 2016). Presenting a favorable environment in terms of fake news spread, Nigeria has a complex socio-political environment, as well as a media ecosystem. Sources and Channels: Fake news is distributed. The adoption of digital media has brought a lot of change in the sharing and consumption of information in Nigeria. The circulation of fake news in Delta State is very fast, and there are several interrelated outlets and

channels through which this circulation is carried out, especially through social media, messaging systems, blogs, and informal community networks. Oyama and Okpara (2017) also contributing state that virality prevails in social media due to a lack of a strict gatekeeping mechanism, which makes this platform a fertile misinformation breeding ground. Facebook, Twitter, and most significantly, WhatsApp, are some of the platforms that have become key sources through which misleading information can be spread.

This is especially difficult to monitor or control because WhatsApp is encrypted, and forwarding messages is easy (Apuke & Omar, 2021). Citizen journalism and community blogs have become more popular in the Delta setting, and they frequently lack journalistic integrity and fact-checking (Barchetti, Neybert, Mantel & Kardes 2022). Unverified stories that are occasionally posted by local influencers and anonymous pages on social media contribute to ethnic tensions or instill panic around government initiatives. In the case of COVID-19, fake information about the risks of vaccination became viral on WhatsApp and Facebook, and it turned people off to health programs (Apuke & Omar, 2020). In the same way, false news of some imaginary government empowerment program or embezzlement of funds will spread so fast in politically sensitive regions.

The traditional media is more controlled; nevertheless, it is not completely spared. In other instances, radio stations or local newspapers fail to filter fake news because of the absence of editorial control or pressures to meet deadlines (Olaniyan & Akpojivi 2020).

In addition, the challenge is complicated by the word-of-mouth transmission, particularly in rural and semi-urban communities. The oral culture of most societies implies that the fake stories transmitted between the local markets and the town halls can be accepted with false assumptions before being verified and set straight, thus making the general population overly influence their thinking. This, therefore, shows that in Delta State, fake news travels through a nexus of digital virality, low media literacy, weak institutional checks and balances, and sociopolitical polarization, which in turn make up a misinformation ecosystem, which is both ubiquitous and difficult to rectify (Dudziak, Ferreira & Ferrari 2014; Swain & Wallentin, 2019).

#### ***Implications Of Fake News On Key Sdgs (Sdg 3, 4, And 16) Health (Sdg 3: Good Health And Well-Being)***

False news poses a great people's health danger especially in low- and middle-income countries such as Nigeria. In any given health crisis, like the Ebola outbreak and the COVID-19 pandemic, panic, vaccine hesitancy, and non-observance of preventative measures were the results of misinformation (Opuke & Omar 2020). In Delta State as opined by Ojobo, Okpako and Ivwighren (2022), rumors about the presence of tracking devices in vaccines or infertility were spread, preventing the population from using them and undermining state health programs. Long-term health planning is also influenced by the propagation of misinformation. An example is that communities have been pulling out of medical outreaches due to rumors of neglect by the government or conspiracy with foreign health aid, even when this is not the case. According to Dudziak, Ferreira and Ferrari (2017), fake news undermines the trust in institutions, which is essential to successful health governance and the willingness of the population to comply. Here, SDG 3 will be undermined because with misinformation, there will be obstacles to access, participation, and policy achievement (Schuldt & Roh 2014).

#### ***Education (Sdg 4: Quality Education)***

Another sector that has been affected by misinformation is the education sector, as it has influenced the way the populace is informed about the reforms, school policies, and the funding of educational activities. As an illustration, in the times of COVID-19 lockdowns, fake news about school opening dates and online test fraud were shared among the parents and students, causing confusion and anxiety (Geise & Xu 2024). False allegations that Western education is dangerous or anti-cultural have also caused discouragement of school enrollment, particularly amongst girls in certain rural areas of Delta State. In addition, fake news erodes media and information literacy, which is one of the major aspects of SDG 4. In the absence of critical thinking and the availability of verified

information, students and communities are exposed to fake stories. Supporting this view, Grizzle, et al. (2020) in a NUESCO publication state that the lack of formal media literacy education at the school level also subjects youth to false information that negatively influences their academic growth as well as their social perspectives.

#### ***Peace And Justice (Sdg 16: Peace, Justice, And Strong Institutions)***

The ability of fake news to result in violence, encourage hate speech, and undermine confidence in public institutions is one of the most harmful consequences that interfere with the achievement of SDG 16. The politically or ethnically based fake news has been identified as the root cause of community conflicts in Delta State, particularly when the stories falsely attribute crimes or conspiracies to groups (Danielski et al. 2020). Unregulated in the presence of these divisive narratives encourages civil unrest and creates an atmosphere of distrust and enmity. Also, recurrent exposure to fake news discredits organizations like the police, courts, and election commissions. In cases where the citizens think, say that elections are fraudulent, using unverified facts, they will turn to protests or violence rather than legal remedies (Apuke et al., 2021). This destroys institutional capacity, interferes with the democratic process, and complicates the process of conflict resolution. Therefore, the literature is firmly in agreement that fake news can lead to instability and institutional deterioration if it is not properly dealt with, which prevents the development of peaceful and inclusive societies as proposed in SDG 16.

#### ***Strategic Communication And Policy Recommendations***

Due to the prevalence of fake news on SDGs, researchers and experts have developed several policy-based and communication-driven measures to curb the menace. Grizzle, et al. (2020) focuses on the incorporation of Media and Information Literacy into school and community training programs. Such programs can empower the citizens of Delta State, particularly youth and women, to be able to critically analyze content before accepting or sharing it. Becerra and Lau, (2020) advises local NGOs and CSOs to be assisted in undertaking grassroots campaigns on media literacy in the local language and locally representative materials. The use of such platforms as Dubawa, Africa Check, and AFP Fact Check has played a key role in dispelling fake news in Nigeria (Vese 2021). They, however, have limited reach in subnational regions such as Delta State. Schuldt and Roh (2014) hold the view that state governments ought to collaborate with local media houses to set up fact-checking desks and keep a check on the circulating stories, especially during election seasons or in the event of a significant health emergency.

Although freedom of expression should be guaranteed, specific regulation changes are necessary to make regular offenders responsible without violating civil liberties. The National Broadcasting Commission (NBC) and the Nigeria Communication Commission (NCC) need to work with the digital platform to screen the content that is labeled as fake (Stewart 2021; Vese 2021). It is advisable, however, not to over-regulate where possible, but instead adopt co-regulatory models that bring on board the media practitioners, the civil society, and state agencies (Olaniyan & Akpojivi 2020). Due to the importance of oral traditions in the Delta state, it can be effective to use the assistance of town hall meetings, churches, and market associations to sensitize the population. Becerra and Lau, (2020) records that the teachers, pastors, and youth leaders in the area can be influential in discussing fake news due to their credibility. Messaging must be adjusted to local values and dialects so that it resonates and has an effect. Including SDG-compliant materials in the newspapers of the country, various shows, and social media campaigns can inundate the population and combat misinformation. According to Lee (2021), routine updates on government activities tied to SDGs delivered in transparent and engaging formats can promote trust and accountability.

#### ***Theoretical Framework- Framing Theory***

The Framing theory began with Erving Goffman, who had to do with primary frameworks that people use to interpret events (Adams & Goffman 1979). The importance of this theory was enhanced by Todd Gitlin and Robert Entman, who identified framing as the choice of certain elements of reality

to advance some interpretations. The impact of media on how the audience interprets information, the use of cognitive shortcuts by participants, and the ability of emotional frames to persuade the audience are the major assumptions of According to the theory, media framing serves four functions: defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and proposing remedies, and fake news takes advantage of these functions to influence the way people react (Czvetkó, Honti, Sebestyén & Abonyi 2021). The applicable types of frames are conflict frames, which intensify tensions (SDG 16), human-interest frames, which control emotions (SDG 3), economic frames, which point at monetary problems (SDG 4 and 16), and morality frames, which demonstrate interventions as immoral (Swain & Wallentin 2019).

The Framing Theory is relevant to the current research since fake news is one of the key factors that influence how people see SDG programs and institutions, affect trust, and influence civic engagement, and empirical evidence shows that exposure to fake news is a predictor of lower participation in the SDG projects. Also, qualitative knowledge shows that political power brokers and actors exploit the masses by using framing to strategically influence people (Nelson and Oxley, 1997). Although the Framing Theory is useful in the examination of communication, it has drawbacks in terms of difficulties in measurement, variance in cultural interpretation, and overlap with agenda-setting. Nevertheless, it is an effective instrument for comprehending the effects of fake news on social attitudes and development outcomes, which presents a strong conceptual framework of the current study (Stewart 2021). The research links a conceptual basis for exploring fake news and its effects on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Delta State, Nigeria, based on Framing Theory. This communication theory elucidates how media shape perceptions and behaviors via misleading frames that influence the interpretation of government programs and development initiatives.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The paper takes a mixed approach where both quantitative and qualitative data appeared most suitable according to Sale, Lohfeld and Brazil (2002), to unravel the implications of fake news on the attainment of SDGs in Delta State. In the case of quantitative data, a structured questionnaire will be given to 400 residents (4 Local Government Areas) of the four Local Government Areas (Warri South, Ughelli North, Ndokwa East, and Isoko South) that will be sampled through stratified random samplings to represent the demographics. The survey implies the evaluation of exposure to fake news, trust in different media sources (social, traditional, official), and awareness/attitudes to SDG-related initiatives. In the case of Qualitative application, they have Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with 16-20 stakeholders: government representatives, media workers, civil society participants, educators, and community leaders. The interviews explored perceived sources of fake news and its effects and assessed institutional responses. SPSS is used to analyze quantitative data through descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analysis to determine the associations between fake news exposure and SDG awareness/engagement. The results obtained after analysing the data collected will be interpreted as agreed or positive, and a mean outcome [3] less than the result will be considered as negative or disagreed. NVivo coded and analyzed qualitative data consisted of thematic analysis to reveal the responses of the institutions, trust mechanism, and community level dynamics. Informed consent, anonymity, protection of data, and cultural sensitivity are some of the ethical concerns that will be incorporated.

Here, quantitative and qualitative research results of the work are presented and interpreted. SPSS was used to analyse quantitative data from 400 questionnaires that had been administered to establish the correlation between fake news and SDG success in Delta State. Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) of stakeholders identified by the researcher enhance the quantitative findings by giving more insights into the implications of fake news and institutional reactions.

### Questionnaire Distribution and Return Rate

Four hundred structured questionnaires were also handed out in the four chosen Local Government Areas of Delta State: Warri South, Ughelli North, Ndokwa East, and Isoko South. Among these, 385 were duly filled and sent back, and 15 were not sent back or could not be analyzed. This is equivalent to a 96.25 percent return rate, which is deemed to be sufficient in the quantitative analysis and generalization of findings.

**Table 1.** Distribution and Retrieval

LGA	Distributed	Returned	Lost or Invalid	% Returned
Warri South	100	97	3	97.0
Ughelli North	100	96	4	96.0
Ndokwa East	100	95	5	95.0
Isoko South	100	97	3	97.0
Total	400	385	15	96.25

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The overall response rate of 96.25% indicates excellent participation and reflects the respondents' strong interest in the study topic. According to research standards, a response rate above 70% is considered reliable for survey-based studies (Creswell, 2018). The high return rate ensures that the data accurately represents the population of the four selected LGAs in Delta State.

### Response Demographic Data

**Table 2.** Demographic Distribution of Respondents (N = 385)

VARIABLE	GENDER	AGE	EDUCATION	LGA
CATEGORY	Male 210 (54.5)	18-30 135 (35.1)	Secondary 95 (24.7)	Warri South 100 (26.0)
	Female (45.5)	31-45 160 (41.6)	Tertiary 250 (64.9)	Ugheli North 95 (24.7)
		46-Above 90 (23.3)	Postgraduate 40 (10.4)	Ndokwa East 95 (24.7)
				Isoko South 95 (24.7)

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The demographic table shows the distribution of respondents in terms of their gender, age, educational qualification, as well as Local Government Area (LGA) in Delta State, which emphasizes the diversity of the sample. The most important findings are: 54.5% of respondents are males, and 45.5% of the respondents are females; the highest percentage of the sample was aged 31-45 years, comprising 41.6% of the total population, 35.1% aged 18-30, and 23.3% aged 46 and above. Education-wise, sixty-four-point nine percent of them are tertiary educated, twenty-four-point seven percent are secondary, and ten percent are postgraduate. The survey includes four LGAs, with balanced representation from Warri South (26.0%) and other LGAs (24.7% each). These characteristics support the study's validity and aid in interpreting findings related to fake news and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

## Thematic Data

### Objective 1: Exposure to Fake News

**Table 3.** Respondents' Exposure to Fake News

Statement	Mean	Decision
I frequently encounter fake news on social media platforms	3.84	Agreed
Fake news is common during political campaigns in Delta State	3.76	Agreed
I find it difficult to differentiate between authentic and fake news online	3.62	Agreed
Average Mean	3.74	High Exposure

Source: Field Survey, 2025

From the above table, it can be deduced that Delta state residents are highly exposed to fake news, especially through social media, where the mean is found to be high at 3.7, showing that the residents agree with this experience. The participants were found to have been exposed to fake news many times (Mean = 3.84), particularly when political campaigns were involved (Mean = 3.76), which has been identified as a means of influencing the population through misinformation. Moreover, it is important because the challenge of differentiating real news and fake information on the Internet (Mean = 3.62) is a sign of the lack of media literacy and the vulnerability to fake information. These results highlight the need to improve media literacy levels, implement verification mechanisms, and initiate popular awareness programs to fight fake news.

### Objective 2: Trust in Media Sources

**Table 4.** Trust Levels in Various Media Channels

Media Type	Mean	Decision
Social Media Platforms	2.48	Disagreed
Traditional Media (Radio, TV, Newspaper)	3.65	Agreed
Government/Official Channels	3.21	Agreed
Online Blogs/Influencers	2.21	Disagreed

Source: Field Survey, 2025

On the second objective, respondents have different degrees of trust towards different media channels, with the traditional media (mean = 3.65) having the highest level of trust, and the government/ official channel with the next highest level of trust (mean = 3.21). The level of trust in social media (mean = 2.48) tends to be low because of the fear of untrustworthy information and unverification. The lowest trust rating (mean = 2.21) was given to blogs and influencers, which were related to sensationalism and unsubstantiated claims. The results show that there exists a definite order of trust whereby any attempt to combat fake news in Delta state should be directed to the traditional media and government sources, which are perceived to be more reliable.

### Objective 3: Awareness and Attitudes toward SDG Initiatives

**Table 5.** Awareness and Perception of SDG-related Activities

Statement	Mean	Decision
I am aware of government programs promoting SDGs in Delta State	3.35	Agreed
Fake news discourages me from participating in SDG-related activities	3.49	Agreed
Fake news affects people's trust in government-led development projects	3.65	Agreed

Average Mean	3.28	Moderate Awareness
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Source: Field Survey, 2025

The above table shows that the knowledge of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Delta State is average, as the respondents were aware of the government programs such as health programs, educational programs, and environmental programs (Mean = 3.35). Nonetheless, fake news has a very negative effect on participation (Mean = 3.49) and trust in government-led resources (Mean = 3.65), presenting them as corrupt or inactive. In general, although the awareness is rather high, the impact of misinformation on the general perception is so significant that it should be replenished with more correct and consistent information and promote the SDG initiatives and overcome such negative predispositions against governmental activities.

### Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between exposure to fake news and awareness of SDG-related initiatives in Delta State.

**Table 6.** Correlation between Fake News Exposure and SDG Awareness

Variables	N	r-value	Sig. (p)	Decision
Fake News Exposure vs SDG Awareness	385	-0.62	0.000	Significant

Table 6 shows a correlation analysis that has a strong negative relationship ( $r = -0.62$ ) between exposure to fake news and awareness of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) initiatives among the respondents in Delta State, with a sample size of 385. The statistical significance is confirmed by the p-value of 0.000, which means that the higher the exposure to fake news is, the less aware and knowledgeable the audience is about SDG programmes the audience is. The null hypothesis has been rejected, and it shows that fake news works as a significant and negative influence on sustainable development and decreases the trust and engagement in SDG initiatives. This observation is in line with the Framing Theory, which emphasizes the influence of information presentation on the population.

Hypothesis 2: Fake news exposure does not significantly predict citizens' engagement in SDG-related programs.

**Table 7.** Regression Analysis on the Impact of Fake News Exposure on SDG Engagement

Model	Unstandardized Coefficient ( $\beta$ )	Std. Error	t	Sig.
(Constant)	4.521	0.181	24.98	0.000
Fake News Exposure	-0.42	0.07	-5.98	0.000
$R^2 = 0.46$	F(1,384) = 35.76		p < 0.05	

Table 7 shows regression model indicates that exposure to fake news is a major predictor of low participation in SDG-related programs. The model accounts for 46 percent of the variance, which proves that misinformation has a negative effect on participation in the development-oriented initiatives. Regression analysis also revealed that exposure to fake news is a predictor of low SDG program engagement ( $b = -0.42$ ,  $p = -0.05$ ), and it has a 46% variance in SDG programs.

### Qualitative Findings (Key Informant Interviews)

Eighteen (18) stakeholders were interviewed for 7minutes each via phone calls, and their views were analyzed using thematic analysis. Four dominant themes emerged:

<b>Table 8. Key Information Interview</b>	
Theme	Key Insights
Theme 1: Sources and Spread of Fake News	Most participants identified social media and political actors as major sources of misinformation. Poor media literacy and a lack of regulation worsen the situation.
Theme 2: Impacts on SDG Achievement	Fake news undermines health campaigns (SDG 3), education initiatives (SDG 4), and environmental sustainability efforts (SDG 13).
Theme 3: Institutional and Community Responses	Fact-checking collaborations exist but are limited. Civil society efforts on digital literacy are still emerging.
Theme 4: Building Trust and Transparency	Stakeholders emphasize open communication, transparent governance, and digital education as ways to rebuild trust and counter misinformation.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings showed that the respondents who indicated frequent exposures to misinformation, especially on social media had high exposure to fake news. This coincides with Oyama and Okpara (2017), who indicate that social media is the platform that allows societal un-fact-checked information to go viral due to a low number of gatekeeping mechanisms. Similarly, Adekunle and Adnan (2016) have also found that fake news is more popular than information, particularly on such tools as Twitter. The qualitative feedback of the key informants that supported these findings included information that, in Delta State, the most common avenues of fake news were WhatsApp, Facebook, and local online blogs. This corroborates Apuke and Omar (2021), who identified encrypted messaging apps as major conduits for misinformation in Nigeria because forwarded messages are difficult to trace or regulate. The high exposure suggests that residents are operating within a saturated misinformation ecosystem, increasing their vulnerability to harmful narratives that influence social behaviour and developmental participation.

Nevertheless, in the Nigerian environment, researchers like Olaniyan and Akpojivi (2020) have observed that the institutional weakness can be compensated by the traditional media, where journalistic norms and some regulations cover the media, which makes them more trustworthy as compared to online sources. In the same way, Becerra and Lau (2020) also found that media stakeholders in Delta State considered social media to be quite unregulated and easy to manipulate political players and anonymous producers of material. This means that interventions against fake news must strengthen the relationships with reliable channels of communication.

The study demonstrated a moderate level of awareness regarding SDG initiatives, yet the fake news has a strong negative influence on the desire to engage in SDG-related activities and the development of trust towards government-led programs. The correlation between exposure to fake news and SDG awareness is negative, which justifies the assumption that the more the exposure, the less understanding and acceptance of the development programmes. Geise and Xu (2024) supported this by stating that misinformation undermines national cohesion and misinterpretation of development policies by the citizens. This was supported by qualitative interviews, which found that falsehoods had created resistance in health campaigns (SDG 3), misunderstanding of education policies (SDG 4), and strained peace-building processes (SDG 16). Stakeholders cited that in the time of major health emergencies, including COVID-19, polio campaigns, malaria interventions, fake news causes fear, generates vaccine hesitancy, and diminishes the levels of cooperation with the people. This echoes Danielski, et al. (2020), who described fake news as a disruptive force capable of provoking hostility, violence, and institutional distrust. Together, these findings confirm that fake news threatens the foundation of sustainable development by disrupting informed participation, policy effectiveness, and community cohesion.

Although some efforts, such as partnerships with national fact-checking bodies, qualitative data revealed that such initiatives are poorly coordinated and insufficient at the state level. The stakeholders acknowledged that fact-checking does not usually go to rural areas where false information is spread orally. This confirms Schuldt and Roh (2014), who noted that the regulation process of fake news in Nigeria is not systematic but reactive and usually politicized and poorly implemented. According to Becerra and Lau (2020), the activities of civil societies are still few because of the lack of funds and manpower. It is the limitation of existing institutional responses that indicates the necessity of decentralized community-based misinformation verification and countermeasures. The paper established that there was a wide consensus between the respondents and stakeholders that better media literacy, open communication, and community-based sensitization are important in dealing with misinformation. This is consistent with Goubitz (2014), which advocates integrating Media and Information Literacy (MIL) into formal and informal education systems. Lee (2021) argues that transparent, community-centred communication enhances institutional legitimacy, thereby reducing the influence of misinformation. The qualitative findings particularly emphasized the role of local influencers. Teachers, religious leaders, youth leaders, and women's groups as trusted gatekeepers who can counteract misinformation in culturally resonant ways.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This paper investigates the impact of fake news on the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Delta State, Nigeria, employing a mixed-methods approach that involved quantitative data from 385 respondents and qualitative insights from 18 key informants. Findings highlight that fake news poses a significant risk, particularly to health (SDG 3), quality education (SDG 4), and peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16). A high exposure to fake news, mainly through social media platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp, was identified, indicating these channels are effective for misinformation dissemination. Despite respondents' greater trust in traditional media, online sources remain low in credibility, yet they are prolific in spreading misinformation. This contradiction shows that while citizens recognize the dangers of fake news, they are still significantly influenced by its pervasive nature.

The findings revealed that the framing of fake news shapes public perception and responses towards SDG initiatives, aligned with Framing Theory. A statistically significant negative correlation was found between exposure to fake news and awareness of SDG programs. Regression analysis further indicated that misinformation predicts reduced involvement in SDG-related actions, explaining 46% of the variance in public engagement. Qualitative data reinforced these findings, indicating that misinformation is often propagated by political actors and interest groups, especially in rural areas, where media illiteracy exacerbates the issue. Moreover, existing fact-checking institutions are underperforming, remaining centralized and disconnected from grassroots communities.

The study concludes that fake news is a critical barrier to achieving SDGs in Delta State, undermining public confidence in institutions and community engagement in crucial development efforts. To address this challenge, a multi-faceted strategy is recommended, focusing on enhancing technological controls, improving media literacy, fostering trust through transparency, and encouraging community-based interventions to effectively counter misinformation. Without these proactive measures, the progress towards SDGs in Delta State may be significantly hindered by misinformation.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Delta State Government, in collaboration with educational institutions and civil society organisations, should introduce continuous media literacy campaigns. These programmes should teach citizens, especially youth, rural communities, and women, how to identify fake news,

- verify information, and understand media framing techniques. Integrating MIL into school curricula and community outreach will reduce vulnerability to misinformation.
2. To counter misinformation quickly and effectively, local radio stations, community newspapers, and LGAs should host fact-checking units that work with national organisations such as Dubawa and Africa Check. These units should operate in local languages and disseminate verified information through radio jingles, town-hall meetings, and community influencers to ensure grassroots reach.
  3. Government agencies implementing SDG programmes should adopt open, timely, and consistent communication practices. This includes publishing regular updates on development projects, engaging community leaders in feedback processes, and using clear, accessible messaging. Transparent communication builds trust and counters the negative frames promoted by fake news.

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