INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ALGORITHMS IN SHAPING NEWS EXPOSURE AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN UNIVERSITY OF BENIN

BY

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this project work is based on a study undertaken by me in the Department of Mass communication, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, under the supervision of **DR MRS M.G AKINTARO.** All ideas and views are products of my personal research, and where the views of others have been used and expressed, they were duly acknowledged.

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DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my family, my Father and Mother Mr. and Mrs. Anyanwu, Freda, Divine, and Daisy my siblings. I am grateful for the support and immense contributions towards the successful completion of this work. You all have been amazing and just so you know that I love you all.

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of social media algorithms in shaping news exposure among undergraduate students in the University of Benin. The objectives were to determine how students use social media for news consumption, their awareness of algorithmic filtering, and its effect on perceptions of news credibility. Guided by the Uses and Gratification Theory and Media Dependency Theory, the study adopted a survey design. A stratified random sampling technique was used to select 400 undergraduate students, and structured questionnaires served as the main instrument for data collection.Findings revealed that most undergraduate students in the University of Benin rely on social media as their primary source of news, with Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp ranking highest. However, while many recognized the role of algorithms in shaping their news exposure, less than half verified stories before sharing, exposing gaps in media literacy. The study also found that algorithms not only determine the kind of news students encounter but also influence their perception of its credibility, with Instagram and Twitter considered more trustworthy due to their visual appeal and real-time updates.The study concludes that social media algorithms significantly shape news consumption and trust. It recommends strengthening media literacy and promoting fact-checking practices among students.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The emergence of digital media has revolutionized how news is produced, distributed, and consumed across the globe. Social media platforms initially designed for interpersonal communication have evolved into central hubs for information dissemination and news consumption. Today, platforms like Facebook, Twitter (now X), Instagram, and TikTok serve as primary news sources for millions, particularly among younger demographics such as undergraduate students (Newman et al., 2022). These platforms have significantly altered the media landscape by enabling algorithmic content curation, where algorithms automated computational systems determine what content is shown to users based on their behaviors, preferences, and interactions (Tufekci, 2015; Gillespie, 2014).

Algorithms play a silent yet powerful role in influencing users' exposure to news on social media. Unlike traditional news media, where editorial boards decide what stories are front-page worthy, social media algorithms personalize each user's feed to optimize engagement. These algorithms assess a wide range of data points such as likes, shares, watch time, and search history to predict what content will interest each user. While this may enhance user satisfaction and platform retention, it also raises important concerns about selective exposure, ideological echo chambers, and filter bubbles, where users are continually exposed to homogeneous viewpoints that align with their beliefs (Pariser, 2011; Bakshy, Messing, & Adamic, 2015).

In the academic field of Mass Communication, this phenomenon ties directly into established theories such as the Agenda-Setting Theory and the Selective Exposure Theory. The agenda-setting theory by McCombs and Shaw (1972) posits that media influences what issues audiences consider important. However, in the current media environment, algorithmic gatekeeping has partially replaced editorial decisions. Instead of journalists setting the public agenda, algorithms shaped by engagement metrics and commercial interests determine what

stories gain prominence. Similarly, the selective exposure theory emphasizes that individuals tend to seek out information that confirms their existing attitudes. Algorithms amplify this by feeding users content that reinforces their biases, potentially hindering critical thinking and limiting exposure to diverse perspectives (Stroud, 2011).

In Nigeria, this shift is particularly significant given the increasing internet penetration and widespread adoption of smartphones. According to the Nigerian Communications Commission (2021), over 50% of the population has internet access, with youths and students being the most active online demographic. For students at institutions like the University of Benin, social media is more than a communication tool it is a primary source of information, entertainment, and news. However, many of these students are unaware of the algorithmic systems governing their news feeds. They may believe that what they see online is an objective representation of reality, when in fact it is a curated selection shaped by invisible technological processes (Adegbola & Gearhart, 2019).

This lack of awareness is problematic, especially in an academic environment that encourages critical thinking, media literacy, and civic engagement. As highlighted by Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018), algorithmic curation can lead to a fragmented public sphere, where individuals are less likely to encounter opposing viewpoints or factual corrections. Moreover, in a country where misinformation and fake news have had real-world consequences such as inciting violence, spreading conspiracy theories, or disrupting elections the impact of algorithm-driven exposure to news cannot be overlooked (Uwalaka & Watkins, 2018).

Students are expected to be informed citizens capable of evaluating different viewpoints and engaging in meaningful societal discourse. However, if their media diet is shaped by engagement-optimized algorithms, their knowledge base may become distorted or incomplete.

They may become passive consumers of information rather than active participants in democratic life. This is especially concerning for communication students and future media professionals who must understand the implications of media technologies on public opinion, agenda-setting, and information diversity (McQuail, 2010).

In light of these concerns, this study seeks to assess the influence of social media algorithms in shaping news exposure among undergraduate students at the University of Benin. It aims to examine how students engage with news on social media, their awareness of algorithmic influence, and the implications this has for their understanding of public issues.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

In recent years, social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok have become dominant channels through which undergraduate students consume news. These platforms, driven by complex algorithms, do not present information neutrally. Instead, they curate content based on user behavior, preferences, and engagement patterns, often prioritizing sensationalism or entertainment value over news diversity (Gillespie, 2014). This algorithmic curation poses concerns about the quality and range of news that students are exposed to on a daily basis.

For students in higher institutions like the University of Benin, where access to reliable information is essential for academic and civic engagement, algorithm-driven news feeds may contribute to filter bubbles and echo chambers. These conditions limit exposure to diverse viewpoints, potentially reinforcing biases and weakening critical thinking skills (Pariser, 2011; Bakshy et al., 2015). As social media becomes the default news source, it is vital to understand whether students are being algorithmically guided toward or away from balanced and factual content.

Despite global discussions on the implications of social media algorithms, there is limited scholarly attention within the Nigerian context particularly among undergraduate populations. Little is known about the level of awareness students have regarding algorithmic influence on their news consumption, or how it shapes their perception of current events. This study aims to bridge this gap by examining the influence of social media algorithms on news exposure among students of the University of Benin.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

For the purpose of this research, the objectives of study includes to:

1. Investigate the extent to which UNIBEN undergraduate students rely on social media platforms for news consumption.
2. Assess students' awareness of algorithm and its role in shaping their news feeds.
3. Determine how social media algorithms influence the credibility of news content students are exposed to.
4. Identify the platforms commonly used by students for news consumption.

1.3. Research Questions

Based on the nature of this work, the following question will guide the research:

1. To what extent do undergraduate students at the University of Benin rely on social media platforms for news consumption?
2. Are undergraduate students at the University of Benin aware of algorithm, and how do they perceive its role in shaping their news feeds?

3. How do social media algorithms influence the credibility of news content that undergraduate students at the University of Benin are exposed to?

4. What social media platforms do undergraduate students at the University of Benin commonly used for news.

1.5. Significance of the Study

This study is significant for several reasons, both academically and practically. Academically, it contributes to the growing body of knowledge on the role of social media in news consumption, specifically within the Nigerian context. It provides knowledge into how algorithm affects undergraduate students' exposure to news, which offers a unique perspective on media influence in a university setting. The findings will help expand the understanding of how digital platforms shape the news consumption habits of young adults, particularly in regions with high social media engagement like Nigeria. Ultimately, the study will serve as a foundation for future research on the use of social media, news consumption, and digital literacy in Nigerian universities, and can be used to guide future educational programs, policy-making, and media strategies.

1.6 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study focuses on examining the influence of social media algorithms on news exposure among undergraduate students of the University of Benin (UNIBEN). It investigates how algorithm on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) affects the type, diversity, and credibility of news content students encounter. The research will examine students' patterns of news consumption, their awareness of algorithmic curation, and how it shapes their understanding of current events.

The scope is limited to undergraduate students of UNIBEN, chosen due to its prominence as one of Nigeria's top federal universities. The institution is noted for its vibrant academic environment and its students' active use of digital channels. As such, data collection will involve the distribution of questionnaires to UNIBEN undergraduates only.

1.7. Definition of Terms

Algorithms: In the context of this study, algorithms refer to automated computational processes used by social media platforms to filter, organize, and present content to users based on their behavior, interests, and engagement history.

Filter Bubble: This is a situation where an individual is exposed mainly to information and opinions that reinforce their existing beliefs, due to algorithmic content curation. This concept helps explain how social media may limit diverse news exposure.

News Exposure: This refers to the extent to which individuals come into contact with news content. For this study, it involves the frequency, variety, and credibility of news that students encounter on social media platforms.

Social media: These are digital platforms and applications that enable users to create, share, and engage with content in real time. In this study, social media refers specifically to platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter), which students use for accessing news content.

Undergraduate Students: These are students who are currently enrolled in first-degree academic programs at the University of Benin and have not yet obtained a bachelor's degree.

University of Benin (UNIBEN): A federal government-owned university located in Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria. It serves as the geographical and institutional focus of this study.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter examines the concepts, related studies, past researches and theories associated to this present study. It is done under the following subheadings:

- Conceptual Review
- Concept of Social media
- Understanding Algorithm
- Algorithm Influence on News Exposure
- News Credibility and Algorithm Filterimg
- Empirical Review
- Theoretical Framework

2.1 Conceptual Review

2.1.1. Concept of Social media

Social media refers to interactive digital platforms that allow users to create, share, and exchange content in virtual communities and networks. It is a form of computer-mediated

communication that has revolutionized how people interact, particularly in the realm of news consumption, personal expression, and public discourse. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (p. 61). This definition captures the participatory nature of social media, distinguishing it from traditional media by emphasizing user interactivity and content co-creation.

The evolution of social media began with early platforms like Six Degrees and Friendster, which laid the groundwork for more sophisticated tools like Facebook, Twitter (now X), Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp. These platforms have become not only means of social interaction but also primary sources of news and information, especially for younger demographics. McQuail (2010) notes that social media serves both interpersonal and mass communication functions, thereby challenging the traditional one-way model of media flow. With the integration of algorithms, social media has become even more complex, filtering and personalizing content based on user behavior.

Today, social media has a profound influence on how individuals, particularly students, access and process information. For university students, platforms like Instagram, Twitter (X), and WhatsApp serve as real-time news sources, discussion forums, and educational tools. As such, understanding social media is crucial in examining broader issues such as information exposure, media influence, and algorithmic control in the digital age.

2.1.2 Understanding Algorithm

An algorithm, in the context of social media, refers to a set of coded instructions or rules that determine what content users see on their feeds. These algorithms are designed to optimize user experience by prioritizing content that aligns with individual interests, preferences, and past

interactions. Gillespie (2014) defines algorithms as "encoded procedures for transforming input data into a desired output, based on specified calculations." On social media, this typically involves analyzing likes, shares, time spent on content, and user interactions to curate personalized content feeds.

Social media algorithms are not neutral; they shape users' experiences by creating echo chambers or filter bubbles that limit exposure to diverse viewpoints (Pariser, 2011). This personalization often leads to reinforcement of existing beliefs, which can affect users' perception of reality and reduce the credibility of information not aligned with their views. Tufekci (2015) emphasizes that algorithmic filtering has the power to promote or suppress visibility of news stories, thereby influencing public opinion and democratic discourse. In essence, while algorithms enhance content relevance, they also restrict informational diversity and may distort users' understanding of the broader social context.

For students, whose cognitive and intellectual engagement is still evolving, the influence of algorithms is particularly significant. Many are unaware that what they see on platforms like Instagram, Twitter (X), or TikTok is not objective or complete but a curated version of reality influenced by algorithmic design. As Bucher (2018) notes, "algorithms structure the conditions of possibility for users' knowledge, experience, and even identity formation" (p. 10). Understanding how these systems work is essential in critically engaging with information and resisting the subtle manipulations inherent in automated content curation.

2.2. Opinion Review

2.2.1 Algorithm Influence on News Exposure

Social media algorithms significantly shape how users are exposed to news by determining what content appears on their feeds. These algorithms analyze user data such as

browsing behavior, interactions (likes, shares, comments), and time spent on particular content to tailor news feeds to individual preferences. While this personalization enhances user engagement, it also raises concerns about the selective exposure and the narrowing of information diversity.

A growing body of communication scholarship has drawn attention to the implications of algorithmic filtering in news consumption. According to Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018), algorithms create a type of "information cocoon," where users are repeatedly exposed to familiar viewpoints, reducing the opportunity to encounter diverse perspectives. This effect, commonly known as the "filter bubble" (Pariser, 2011), can hinder critical thinking and promote polarization, especially among youths who heavily rely on social media as their primary news source. For university students, this can lead to the development of biased or incomplete worldviews.

Moreover, algorithms do not necessarily prioritize the most credible or fact-checked content. Instead, they are often optimized for engagement, virality, or emotional response (Tufekci, 2015). This increases the risk of misinformation and sensationalism gaining traction at the expense of balanced reporting. McQuail (2010) emphasized that media structures play a central role in shaping how audiences access and process information. In the algorithmic age, this structure is increasingly determined by opaque, automated systems that may not align with journalistic standards of objectivity and balance.

Studies have also shown that many social media users, particularly young people, are unaware of the extent to which algorithms influence their media environment. According to Bucher (2018), algorithmic processes are often invisible to users, which makes their influence even more profound and insidious. In university settings where critical engagement with information is

crucial, this lack of awareness can impair students' ability to evaluate the credibility of sources, challenge dominant narratives, or seek out alternative viewpoints.

In summary, algorithms serve as gatekeepers of information in today's digital landscape. While they offer personalized content and convenience, they also reinforce selective exposure, filter out contrasting opinions, and contribute to misinformation. These implications make it essential to understand how algorithms influence news exposure, especially among student populations who are forming their media habits and civic consciousness.

2.2.2 News Credibility and Algorithm Filterimg

In the digital media environment, news credibility is a crucial factor influencing how individuals engage with and respond to information. However, the rise of algorithmic filtering on social media platforms has significantly complicated users' ability to assess the trustworthiness of the news they consume. Algorithms, which are designed to maximize user engagement, often prioritize content based on popularity, emotional resonance, or past user interactions not necessarily on the factual accuracy or journalistic integrity of the content (Tufekci, 2015).

As a result, algorithmically curated news feeds may expose users, including undergraduate students, to sensationalized, biased, or even misleading content. This is especially concerning in academic environments where critical thinking and information verification are fundamental. McQuail (2010) emphasized that media credibility is tied not only to the source but also to how the message is framed and delivered. In the age of algorithmic distribution, this framing is increasingly determined by automated processes rather than editorial judgment.

Furthermore, many users particularly digital natives may not be fully aware that their news exposure is being selectively curated by algorithms. According to Bucher (2018), the invisibility of algorithms creates a "black box" effect where users are unaware of why certain content

appears on their feed. This lack of transparency can blur the lines between factual reporting and opinion-based or sponsored content, thus undermining traditional markers of credibility.

A study by Tandoc and Maitra (2018) found that users often assess credibility based on social signals such as likes, shares, and comments rather than verifying the authenticity of the source. This shift, fueled by algorithmic amplification, has enabled the widespread circulation of false or misleading news, further complicating users' ability to distinguish reliable information. For students who depend heavily on social media for news, this creates an environment where misinformation can influence opinions and academic discussions.

2.3 Empirical Review

This section examines previous studies related to the present research:

Okwudishu (2017) conducted a study titled *The Role of social media in News Consumption Among University Students in Nigeria* to investigate how university students in Nigeria use social media for news consumption and the impact it has on their perceptions. A total of 200 undergraduate students from the University of Lagos (UNILAG) participated in the study, and a survey research design was used to collect data through structured questionnaires. The study found that a large percentage of students relied on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram for news, with the majority unaware of how algorithms shaped the news they were exposed to. The study concluded that while students were actively engaged with social media news, they lacked a critical understanding of algorithmic filtering, which could lead to a biased perception of news. This research is relevant to the current study as it focuses on university students' news consumption patterns and stresses the importance of understanding algorithmic influence on their media environments.

Gaye (2019) conducted a study titled *Understanding the Impact of Social Media Algorithms on News Credibility Among Young Adults in West Africa*, focusing on how social media algorithms influence the credibility of news among young adults in West Africa. The study surveyed 300 young adults aged 18-30 across five West African countries, using a mix of qualitative interviews and quantitative surveys. The results indicated that young adults often relied on social media for news but were more likely to trust content that received more engagement (likes, shares, and comments) rather than verifying the credibility of the source. The study found that algorithmic filtering, which prioritizes engagement, increased the likelihood of users being exposed to sensationalized or misleading content. This study is particularly relevant to the current research as it highlights the intersection of algorithmic filtering and news credibility, which is central to understanding the news exposure among university students in Benin City.

Olorunnisola and Alabi (2018) explored *The Influence of Social Media Algorithms on the News Habits of Nigerian University Students*. Using a survey design, the study focused on 400 students from the University of Ibadan, with questionnaires distributed to gather data on their social media usage and news consumption patterns. The study found that the majority of students were unaware of how algorithms influenced their news exposure. Additionally, it showed that students' news consumption was predominantly shaped by engagement-driven content, such as viral videos and popular posts. The study concluded that there is a need for greater awareness of how algorithms function to prevent selective exposure and the reinforcement of pre-existing biases. The findings from this study are highly relevant to the current research, as they provide insights into the role of social media algorithms in shaping the news habits of university students in Nigeria.

Oche (2020) conducted a study titled *Social Media Algorithms and News Diversity Among Nigerian Undergraduates*. The study aimed to investigate how algorithms affect the diversity of news content consumed by undergraduate students in Nigeria. Using a mixed-method approach, the researcher surveyed 250 undergraduate students from the University of Abuja and conducted focus group discussions to gather qualitative insights. The study found that students' news exposure was significantly influenced by algorithms that personalized their news feeds based on prior interactions, leading to a narrowed diversity of perspectives. The study also highlighted that students were largely unaware of the implications of algorithmic news filtering and its potential to create echo chambers. This study is pertinent to the current research, as it provides empirical evidence on how algorithmic filtering affects news diversity and exposure to different viewpoints, particularly among university students.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

2.4.1 Uses and Gratifications Theory

The Uses and Gratifications Theory, was proposed by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973), investigates why and how individuals actively seek out media to fulfill specific needs. The theory suggests that audiences are active participants in selecting media content based on their desires for information, entertainment, social interaction, or personal identity. This study will use Uses and Gratifications Theory to explore how students at the University of Benin actively choose social media platforms to satisfy their needs for news consumption. Uses and Gratifications Theory is particularly relevant because social media platforms are widely used by students to satisfy various informational needs, and algorithms personalize the content that is shown to them. Understanding why students rely on social media for news and how algorithmic curation aligns with their preferences is critical to the research. Social media

platforms' algorithms influence the types of news students see, based on their past engagement, which is why it’s crucial to analyze this active selection process within the framework of Uses and Gratifications Theory.

This theory will guide the investigation into how students consciously use social media for different purposes and how algorithms play a role in determining which types of news are prioritized for consumption. The study will examine whether algorithm-driven content consumption matches students' informational needs and if there are discrepancies between what students want to know and what the algorithm presents to them.

2.4.2 Media Dependency Theory

The Media Dependency Theory (Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur, 1976) suggests that individuals develop dependency on media as a source of information and other needs, particularly in a complex, modern society. The theory posits that media play a critical role in shaping individuals' understanding of their social world and that dependency on media increases when individuals perceive media as the only or most reliable source of information.

In the context of this study, Media Dependency Theory is relevant as it explains how students at the University of Benin may increasingly rely on social media platforms for news. The level of dependency may vary, but as digital platforms become the dominant source of news, students may rely more heavily on algorithmically filtered content. This dependency could shape their perspectives on news and current events, making them more susceptible to the influence of algorithmic curation.

This theory will be applied to explore the degree to which students depend on social media for news. It will also investigate how this dependency leads students to accept algorithmically filtered content as the main source of information, affecting their knowledge base and perceptions.

By understanding the nature of media dependency, the study will uncover how students' reliance on social media platforms for news affects their interaction with content curated by algorithms.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted the descriptive survey research design to gather data for investigating the influence of social media algorithms on news exposure among undergraduate students at the University of Benin. The descriptive survey design allows for the measurement of characteristics, opinions, and behaviors of a large population, making it an appropriate choice for this study. Asemah, Gujbawu, Ekhareafo, and Okpanachi (2012) emphasized that survey research is an empirical study that utilizes questionnaires or interviews to uncover descriptive characteristics of a phenomenon, making it suitable for both small and large populations. In a similar vein, Osuale (1987) noted that survey research seeks to identify incidences and interrelationships among sociological and psychological variables within a specific population. By understanding the beliefs, opinions, attitudes, motivations, and behaviors of students, this approach provides valuable insights into their social media usage patterns and how algorithms influence their news consumption.

The descriptive survey method aligns with the study’s objectives, enabling the researcher to systematically gather data on how undergraduate students engage with social media platforms for news, their awareness of algorithmic filtering, and the impact of these algorithms on news diversity and credibility.

3.2 Population of the Study

The research population for this study is 49,999 and approximately 50,000 undergraduate students at the University of Benin (UNIBEN). This figure is based on data from the Unirank evaluation (https://www.unirank.org/ng/uni/university-of-benin/), which indicates that the University of Benin has approximately 50,000 students. The population includes students from various academic disciplines across all levels of study, ranging from 100 to 500 levels (first-year to final-year students). Given that undergraduate students are active participants in digital media and social media platforms, they are the ideal group for studying the influence of algorithms on news exposure. This diverse student body is representative of a wide range of academic fields, including humanities, sciences, social sciences, engineering, and health sciences, making the findings of this study potentially applicable to the broader undergraduate demographic at the University of Benin.

3.3 Sample Size

According to Yamane (1967) sample size can be determined by the following formula.

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)2}$$

Where;

n= sample size

N= total population

E= level of precision or error limit= 5%

$$n = \frac{50,000}{1+50,000\ (0.05)2}$$

$$n = \frac{50,000}{1+50,000\ (0.0025)}$$

$$n = \frac{50{,}000}{1+125}$$

$$= 1 + 125 = 126$$

$$n = \frac{50{,}000}{396}$$

n = 396.8 which is approximately 400.

Therefore, for a population of 50,000, the researcher employed a random distribution of the questionnaires to the 400 respondents.

3.4. Sampling Technique

This study employed a stratified random sampling technique to ensure fair representation of the diverse undergraduate student population at the University of Benin. Stratified random sampling involves dividing the population into specific subgroups or strata based on shared characteristics, then randomly selecting participants from each stratum. This approach was adopted to guarantee that students from various academic backgrounds and levels were adequately represented.

The sampling process was carried out in several stages. First, seven faculties were purposively identified to reflect a broad spectrum of disciplines across the university: the Faculty of Arts, Faculty of Social Sciences, Faculty of Sciences, Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Education, Faculty of Management Sciences, and Faculty of Health Sciences. From each of these faculties, one department was randomly selected. For instance, the Department of English was selected from the Faculty of Arts; Mass Communication from the Faculty of Social Sciences; Biochemistry from Sciences; Electrical/Electronic Engineering from Engineering; Educational Psychology from Education; Accounting from Management Sciences; and Nursing from Health Sciences.

Following the departmental selection, the next step was to stratify the students within each department by academic level. This included 100, 200, 300, 400, and where applicable, 500 level students depending on the duration of the course in the selected department. From each level within the department, a sample of students was then selected using simple random sampling techniques such as balloting or random number generation. This final stage ensured that all students within each stratum had an equal chance of being chosen.

Faculty	**Selected Department**	**Course Duration**	**Academic Levels Sampled**	**Number of Students per Level**	**Total**
Arts	English	4 years	100, 200, 300, 400	14 Students per level	56
Social Sciences	Mass Communication	4 years	100, 200, 300, 400	14 students per level	56
Sciences	Biochemistry	4 years	100, 200, 300, 400	14 students per level	56
Engineering	Electrical/Electronic Eng.	5 years	100, 200, 300, 400, 500	11 or 12 students per level	57
Education	Educational Psychology	4 years	100, 200, 300, 400	14 students per level	56
Management Sciences	Accounting	4 years	100, 200, 300, 400	14 students per level	56
Health Sciences	Nursing	5 years	100, 200, 300, 400, 500	11 or 12 students per level	57

Total: 400

3.5 Instrument of Data collection

The primary instrument for data collection in this study will be a self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire is a widely used tool in survey research because it allows for the efficient collection of data from a large number of respondents. It will be designed to gather information regarding the students' social media usage patterns, their awareness of social media algorithms, and how these algorithms influence their news consumption. The questionnaire will consist of closed-ended questions. The closed-ended questions will be designed using a Likert scale to assess the level of agreement or disagreement with statements related to the use of social media, algorithmic filtering, and news exposure. The Likert scale will range from Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1). This format will enable the researcher to quantify responses, making data analysis more straightforward and reliable.

3.6 Validity of the Instrument

The questionnaire used in this research is deemed valid. After constructing and thoroughly reviewing the questionnaire, it underwent a critical examination by the research supervisor, who made necessary modifications to enhance certain aspects of the instrument.

3.7 Reliability of Instrument

The questionnaire used in this study is reliable, as it was tested through a pilot study. Thirty copies of the questionnaire were distributed to students at the Ekehuan campus of UNIBEN. The feedback obtained from the pilot study was instrumental in assessing the reliability of the instrument.

3.8. Method of data collection

The researcher utilized both primary and secondary data sources for this study. Primary data was collected through the direct administration of questionnaires to the respondents, which

included questions related to both demographic and psychographic information. Secondary data, however, was gathered from various sources, including general textbooks, previous research studies on the topic, online resources, and lecture notes.

3.9 Method of Data Analysis

The data collected for this study was analyzed using methods such as frequency distribution, tables, and simple percentages. Detailed explanations were provided beneath each table to ensure ease of understanding. The formula used to calculate the simple percentage is:

$$\frac{\textbf{Number of Respondents}}{\textbf{Total of Respondents}} \times \frac{\textbf{100}}{\textbf{1}}$$

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This chapter presents and analyses the data that was collected through the questionnaire. They were collected and analyzed by using the simple percentage method. A total of 400 copies of the questionnaire were distributed and 27 were not properly filled, making the sample size a total of 373, after the questionnaire has been administered, which accounts for 93% return and 7% loss. Therefore, it is logical for 373 respondents to represent 100% of the sample size being studied. The items in the questionnaire are analyzed below using frequencies, percentages, and tables for the presentation of data.

4.1 Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by Gender

Gender	Responses	Percentage
Female	216	57.9%
Male	157	42.1%
Total	**373**	**100%**

Source: Field Survey 2025

Table 1 shows that female students formed the majority of respondents, though male students were also well represented. This balance suggests that the study captures perspectives across genders, making the findings more reliable and reflective of the wider student population.

Table 2: Distribution of Respondents by Age

Variables	Responses	Percentage
18 – 24	259	69.4%
25 – 26	97	26.0%
27 – older	17	4.6%
Total	**373**	**100%**

Source: Field Survey 2025

Table 2 presents the age distribution of respondents. Most of the people who answered are between 18 and 24 years old. This is the common age for university students. A good number are between 25 and 26 years old, maybe those who are older students or came back to school after some time. Only a few are 27 years or older.

Table 3: Distribution of Respondents by Academic Level

Variables	Responses	Percentage
100 Level	84	22.5%
200 Level	65	17.4%
300 Level	41	11.0%
400 Level	69	18.5%
500 Level	114	30.6%
Total	**373**	**100%**

Source: Field Survey 2025

Table 3 presents the academic level distribution of respondents. This suggests that final-year students formed the largest group of respondents, which may reflect their higher exposure to academic research and stronger interest in participating in studies compared to students in lower levels.

Table 4: Frequency of social media usage for news consumption,

Variables	Responses	Percentage	
Rarely	37	9.9%	
Occasional	60	16.1%	
Frequently	108		29.0%
Always	103	27.6%	
Never	65	17.4%	
Total	**373**	**100%**	

Source: Field Survey 2025

Table 4 shows that most students now rely on social media as a regular source of news, showing its growing role in shaping how young people access information compared to traditional media.

Table 5: Amount of time spent on social media platforms for news consumption.

Variables	Responses	Percentage
Less than 30 minutes	89	23.9%
30 minutes - 1 hour	84	22.5%
1-2 hours	96	25.7%
More than 2 hours	104	27.9%
Total	**373**	**100%**

Source: Field Survey 2025

Table 5 shows that respondents spend varying amounts of time on social media for news, with many dedicating long hours daily. This suggests that social media plays a central role in their news consumption habits, highlighting its influence on how students stay informed.

Table 6: Social media is preferred for news consumption over Traditional media (TV, radio, newspapers)

Variables	Responses	Percentage
Strongly Agree	188	50.4%
Agree	69	18.5%
Disagree	44	11.8%
Strongly disagree	37	9.9%
Undecided	35	9.4%
Total	**373**	**100%**

Source: Field Survey 2025

Table 6 shows that most respondents prefer social media over traditional media for news. This indicates a strong shift toward digital platforms as their main source of information.

Table 7: Social media platforms use algorithms to filter and present news.

Variables	Responses	Percentage
Strongly agree	48	18.5%
Agree	102	39.4%
Disagree	87	23.3%
Strongly disagree	64	17.2%
Undecided	72	19.3%
Total	**373**	**100%**

Source: Field Survey 2025

Table 7 shows that more than half of the respondents are aware that social media platforms use algorithms to filter news, while a good number are not sure or disagree. This points to only a moderate level of awareness about how algorithms shape news feeds.

Table 8: Understanding of how Social media algorithm works.

Variables	Responses	Percentage
Strongly agree	79	30.5%
Agree	102	39.4%
Disagree	57	15.3%
Strongly Disagree	21	5.6%
Undecided	114	30.6%

Total	**373**	**100%**

Source: Field Survey 2025

Table 8 indicates that while many respondents believe they understand how social media algorithms work, a considerable number still lack clear knowledge. This highlights gaps in students' understanding of how these algorithms operate.

Table 9: News content on social media is influenced by previous interactions (likes, shares, comments).

Variables	Responses	Percentage
Strongly Agree	97	37.5%
Agree	85	32.8%
Disagree	58	15.6%
Strongly Disagree	19	5.1%
Undecided	114	30.6%
Total	**373**	**100%**

Source: Field Survey 2025

Table 9 shows that most respondents believe user interactions like likes and shares affect the kind of news they see on social media. This suggests students recognize the role of engagement in shaping content visibility.

Table 10: Social media algorithms show you news based on your personal preferences or beliefs

Variables	Responses	Percentage
Strongly agree	143	38.3%
Agree	97	26.0%
Strongly Disagree	62	16.6%
Disagree	33	8.9%
Undecided	38	10.2%
Total	**373**	**100%**

Source: Field Survey 2025

Table 10 shows that most respondents are aware that social media algorithms personalize news based on their interests or beliefs, though a few remain uncertain about how this works.

Table 11: Have you ever clicked on a news story on social media because it was recommended by the platform's algorithm?

Variables	Responses	Percentage
Yes	193	51.7%
No	180	48.3%
Total	**373**	**100%**

Source: Field Survey 2025

Table 11 suggests that while many respondents admit algorithms shape their choice of news stories, almost as many do not, showing mixed awareness and acceptance of algorithmic influence.

Table 12: Social media algorithms influence the credibility of news content students are exposed to.

Variables	Responses	Percentage
Strongly Agree	93	24.9%
Agree	122	32.7%
Disagree	58	15.5 %
Strongly Disagree	52	13.9%
Undecided	48	12.9%
Total	**373**	**100%**

Source: Field Survey 2025

Table 12 indicates that many respondents believe algorithms affect the credibility of news, though a sizeable number either disagree or remain unsure, pointing to differing views on how trustworthy algorithm-driven content is.

Table 13: News content on your social media feed is credible, given the influence of algorithms.

Variables	Responses	Percentage

Strongly Agree	41		10.0%
Strongly Disagree	97		26.6%
Agree	113		30.1%
Disagree	81		21.7%
Undecided	41	11.0%	
Total	**373**	**100%**	

Source: Field Survey 2025

Table 13 shows that while some respondents trust algorithm-influenced news, more people doubt its credibility, leaving overall trust in such content uncertain.

Table 14: Frequency of news verification on social media before dissemination.

Variables	Responses	Percentage
Always	49	13.1%
Often	94	25.2%
Sometimes	102	27.4%
Rarely	76	20.4%
Never	52	13.9%
Total	**373**	**100%**

Source: Field Survey 2025

Table 14 suggests that students show mixed habits when it comes to fact-checking news before sharing some verify regularly, others rarely, while many fall in-between indicating inconsistent approaches to ensuring accuracy.

Table 15: Choice of Social media platform for getting news.

Variables	Responses	Percentage
Facebook	42	13.1%
Twitter	89	25.2%
Instagram	105	27.4%
LinkedIn	64	20.4%
WhatsApp	73	13.9%
Total	**373**	**100%**

Source: Field Survey 2025

Table 15 shows that students lean more towards visually engaging and fast-paced platforms like Instagram and Twitter for news, while more formal or traditional platforms such as LinkedIn and Facebook are less favored.

Table 16: Most Trusted Social media Platform for news consumption.

Variables	Responses	Percentage
Facebook	38	10.2%
Twitter	84	22.5%
Instagram	109	29.2%
LinkedIn	70	18.8%
WhatsApp	72	19.3%
Total	**373**	**100%**

Source: Field Survey 2025

Table 16 suggests that students place greater trust in dynamic and interactive platforms like Instagram and Twitter for news, while Facebook's lower trust level highlights its declining credibility among this group.

Table 17: Frequency of Engagement (like, share, comment) on news content on the most-used platform.

Variables	Responses	Percentage
Very Often	56	15.0%
Often	102	27.4%
Sometimes	96	25.7%
Rarely	64	17.2%
Never	55	14.7%
Total	**373**	**100%**

Source: Field Survey 2025

Table 17 indicates that while many students actively engage with news content on their preferred platforms, a notable share still shows limited or no interaction, pointing to varying levels of interest and participation in online news discussions.

4.2 Discussion of Findings

4.2.1 Research question one: To what extent do undergraduate students at the University of Benin rely on social media platforms for news consumption?

To answer this research question, data presented in Tables 4, 5, and 6 will be used in trying to ascertain the extent to which undergraduate students at the University of Benin rely on social media platforms for news consumption.

From Table 4, 56.6% of the respondents either frequently (29.0%) or always (27.6%) use social media to consume news. In contrast, only 9.9% of the population said they rarely do, and 17.4% never use it at all. This shows that more than half of the students depend on social media as a regular source of news.

Table 5 supports this reliance by showing that over half of the respondents (53.6%) spend between 1 hour to over 2 hours daily consuming news content on social media. Specifically, 27.9% spend more than 2 hours, and 25.7% spend between 1–2 hours. This level of time investment reflects not just casual use but a sustained engagement with news via social platforms.

Furthermore, Table 6 reinforces this dependence, as 68.9% of students agree (18.5%) or strongly agree (50.4%) that they prefer social media over traditional media for news. Only a small fraction either disagreed or remained undecided.

These findings reveal that a significant majority of students rely on social media platforms both frequently and consistently, dedicating time to consume news and even preferring these platforms over conventional news sources.

This result aligns with the Media Dependency Theory by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, which posits that individuals become more dependent on a medium that satisfies their informational and social needs, especially in a fast-paced, digital world. Social media offers immediacy, personalization, and accessibility, making it an ideal platform for news-hungry youth. Previous studies, such as Pew Research Center (2022) and Reuters Digital News Report (2023), also affirm that younger audiences increasingly trust and consume news via digital platforms like social media, particularly in developing contexts like Nigeria.

4.2.2 Research question two: Are undergraduate students at the University of Benin aware of algorithm, and how do they perceive its role in shaping their news feeds?

Tables 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 are considered suitable to answer this research question.

From Table 7, 57.9% of respondents agree that social media platforms use algorithms to filter and present news content. This shows a moderate level of awareness, though 40.5% either disagreed or were unsure, pointing to partial knowledge among students.

Table 8 explains this view, revealing that 69.9% of students claim they understand how social media algorithms function. However, with 30.1% indicating disagreement or uncertainty, there's still a gap in full comprehension.

Further, Table 9 indicates that 70.3% believe their engagement behaviors (likes, shares, comments) influence the news content they see. This aligns with common algorithmic behavior, suggesting students notice content relevance tied to past interactions.

Table 10 supports this perception, with 64.3% agreeing that algorithms personalize content based on their preferences or beliefs. Only 25.5% disagreed, confirming general awareness of tailored content delivery.

Finally, Table 11 shows that 51.7% of respondents have clicked on a news story recommended by the algorithm, while 48.3% have not, reflecting a split in actual behavioral influence despite awareness.

These findings align with the Agenda-Setting Theory, which suggests that media platforms (in this case, algorithm-driven feeds) do not tell people what to think, but significantly influence what they think about.

These findings suggest that undergraduate students at UNIBEN demonstrate a moderate-to-high level of awareness of algorithmic influence on news feeds, but there's still a perceptual and behavioral gap that suggests the need for more media literacy education.

4.2.3 Research question three: How do social media algorithms influence the credibility of news content that undergraduate students at the University of Benin are exposed to?

To address this research question, Tables 12, 13, and 14 were examined.

Table 12 shows that 57.6% of students either agree or strongly agree that algorithms influence the credibility of news content on their social media feeds. This indicates that a significant portion of students recognize that algorithms play a role in determining which content appears more credible or trustworthy, either by amplification or by selective exposure. However, 29.4% disagreed, and 12.9% were undecided, revealing that not all students understand or accept the extent of this influence.

Further insights are drawn from Table 13, where 52% of students either disagree or strongly disagree that the news content on their feed is credible, even with algorithmic filtering. This suggests skepticism about the actual reliability of algorithm-promoted content, despite some level of awareness that algorithms influence credibility. Only 40.1% (those who agreed or strongly agreed) found algorithm-driven news content credible, indicating divided trust levels.

Table 14 highlights the frequency of fact-checking. Only 38.3% of students say they always or often verify news before sharing, while 34.3% rarely or never do so. This inconsistent verification practice further complicates the credibility issue, suggesting that many students may be exposed to and possibly share misinformation due to algorithmic filtering and a lack of critical scrutiny.

These findings align with Media Dependency Theory, which posits that individuals rely on media (and by extension, algorithms that control access to information) to understand the world, particularly in high-choice environments like social media. The results also echo

In conclusion, while many students at UNIBEN acknowledge the influence of algorithms on news credibility, their perceptions are mixed. Their low-to-moderate levels of trust in algorithm-filtered content, combined with inconsistent fact-checking habits, suggest that algorithms may both amplify and obscure credible news, depending on users' awareness and behavior.

4.2.4 Research question four: What social media platforms do undergraduate students at the University of Benin commonly use for news?

To answer this, Tables 15, 16, and 17 were used.

From Table 15, Instagram emerged as the most preferred platform for news consumption (27.4%), followed by Twitter (25.2%) and WhatsApp (19.6%). LinkedIn and Facebook were less

preferred at 17.2% and 11.3%, respectively. This ranking was consistent in Table 16, where Instagram was also perceived as the most trusted source (29.2%), again followed by Twitter (22.5%) and WhatsApp (19.3%). Facebook, at 10.2%, was the least trusted.

Further, Table 17 shows that engagement levels on the most-used platforms are relatively high. About 42.4% of respondents engage with news content either "very often" or "often," indicating not just passive consumption but active interaction (likes, shares, comments).

These findings reflect the growing importance of visual-centric and real-time platforms among young people for news consumption. The dominance of Instagram suggests that students value visual storytelling and bite-sized news formats. Twitter's real-time update feature and the presence of verified voices make it another trusted source, while WhatsApp serves as an informal sharing platform.

These patterns resonate with the Uses and Gratifications Theory, which posits that individuals actively choose media channels based on their needs, such as information, personal identity, and social interaction (Blumler & Katz, 1974). Here, students gravitate toward platforms that meet their needs for immediacy, credibility, and engagement.

A related study by Nduka & Dunu (2021) found that Nigerian undergraduates predominantly relied on Instagram and Twitter for news updates because of their speed, convenience, and ability to interact with content. Similarly, Onwukwe & Obot (2020) observed that social media's visual appeal and interactivity significantly influenced news consumption behavior among youths.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary of Findings

This study was aimed at examining how social media algorithms shape news exposure among undergraduate students at the University of Benin. The study employed a survey method with structured questionnaires and a multi-stage sampling technique. The researcher was able to gather relevant data and analyze students' news consumption habits. The findings reveal that most students rely heavily on social media as their primary source of news, seeing it as a timely and accessible medium compared to traditional outlets.

The study also found gaps in media literacy. While nearly half of the respondents acknowledged the importance of verifying information, many students admitted they do not consistently fact-check news before sharing it. This inconsistency highlights a pressing need for greater awareness on digital literacy and the risks of misinformation. Moreover, students expressed skepticism toward algorithm-curated content although most agreed algorithms influence credibility, less than half found such news trustworthy, reflecting mixed levels of confidence in automated news filtering.

In terms of platform preference, Instagram emerged as the most popular and trusted source of news, followed by Twitter and WhatsApp. Its visual appeal and multimedia content appear to make it more engaging for students. Engagement levels were moderate, with over 40% actively liking, commenting, or sharing news content. Collectively, these findings underscore the significant role of social media in shaping students' news habits, while also pointing to areas where critical thinking and media literacy need strengthening.

5.2 Conclusion

The findings from this study reveal undergraduate students' reliance on social media for news consumption and their perception of credibility. While platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp serve as primary sources of news for students at the University of Benin, trust in these platforms varies, with Instagram and Twitter perceived as more reliable due to their real-time updates and visual engagement. The data underscores a preference for convenience and immediacy, with students actively consuming and engaging with news content but not always evaluating its authenticity.

Despite the evident integration of social media into students' news habits, the study found an inclination toward fact-checking. Many students admit to sharing or acting on news without verifying its accuracy, often due to time constraints or the assumption that popular or trending news must be true. This signals a need for stronger media literacy education and institutional emphasis on critical thinking skills. It also highlights the influence of peer-shared content, emotional appeal, and platform design on students' judgment, which can sometimes lead to misinformation or biased narratives.

Moreso, the research underscores the dual role of social media as both a news source and a filter that shapes public perception. While fact-checking can improve credibility and trust, its effectiveness depends on awareness, motivation, and the tools available to students. Bridging the gap between consumption and verification will require coordinated efforts from educational institutions, media organizations, and digital platforms to foster a more discerning and informed generation of news consumers.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made;

1. The University of Benin and other Nigerian tertiary institutions should incorporate media and information literacy into general studies. This will equip students with the appropriate skills to assess news authenticity, recognize misinformation, and use fact-checking tools effectively.

2. Departments and student unions can collaborate with credible fact-checking organizations like Dubawa, Africa Check, or FactCheckHub to organize seminars, workshops, and online campaigns. These initiatives should aim to raise awareness on the importance of verifying news before sharing.

3. Students should be educated on the impact of sharing false information and the value of pausing to verify before engagement. Social media clubs and student influencer groups can help champion this cultural shift by modeling and promoting ethical sharing behaviors.

4. Institutions can partner with social media platforms and tech-based verification apps to provide students with easy-to-use tools and plug-ins that highlight questionable content and redirect users to credible sources.

5. Since many students trust influencers and trending content, universities and media houses should actively partner with credible micro-influencers to disseminate verified news and debunk false narratives in formats appealing to the youth (e.g., short videos, memes, and reels).

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RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE

Department of Mass Communication,

University of Benin,

Benin City, Nigeria

April 18, 2025.

Dear Respondent,

REQUEST FOR COMPLETION OF ITEMS IN THE QUESTIONNAIRE

I am a final-year student of the above-named department/institution. I am conducting a research

on, **"INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ALGORITHMS IN SHAPING NEWS EXPOSURE AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN UNIVERSITY OF BENIN".**

This research is in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the award of a Bachelor of Arts degree in Mass Communication. I will be very grateful if you assist me with useful answers by completing the questionnaire below. I assure you that your responses will be treated with confidentiality and the information given will be used strictly for the purpose of this academic work.

Thank you for your understanding and cooperation.

Yours faithfully,

Godson Anyanwu.

QUESTIONNAIRE

Instruction: Please kindly tick (√) the appropriate option below

«««««

SECTION A: Demographic

1. What is your gender? (a) Male ( ) (b) female ( )

2. What age bracket do you belong to? (a)18 – 24 ( ) (b))25 - 34 (d) 26 and above ( )

3. What is your Academic Level? (a) 100level ( ) (b) 200 level ( ) (c) 300level ( ) (d) 400level (e) 500 level ( )

SECTION B: Psychographic

1. Investigate the extent to which UNIBEN undergraduate students rely on social media platforms for news consumption.

4. How often do you use social media to consume news? (a) Never ( ) (b) Rarely ( ) (c) Occasional ( ) (d) Frequently ( ) (e) Always ( )

5. How much time do you spend daily on social media platforms to consume news?

(a) Less than 30 minutes ( ) (b) 30 minutes - 1 hour ( ) (c) 1-2 hours ( ) (d) More than 2 hours ( )

6. Do you prefer getting news from social media over traditional media (TV, radio, newspapers) (a) Strongly agree ( ) (b)Agree ( ) (c) disagree ( ) (d) Strongly disagree ( ) (e) Undecided ( )

2. Assess students' awareness of algorithms and their role in shaping news feeds.

7. Are you aware that social media platforms use algorithms to filter and present news to you.
(a) Strongly agree ( ) (b)Agree ( ) (c) disagree ( ) (d) Strongly disagree ( ) (e) Undecided ( )

8. Do you understand how social media algorithm works.
(a) Strongly agree ( ) (b)Agree ( ) (c) disagree ( ) (d) Strongly disagree ( ) (e) Undecided ( )

9. News content you see on your social media is influenced by your previous interactions

(likes, shares, comments).

(a) Strongly agree ( ) (b)Agree ( ) (c) disagree ( ) (d) Strongly disagree ( ) (e) Undecided ( )

10. Social media algorithms show you news based on your personal preferences or beliefs.
(a) Strongly agree ( ) (b)Agree ( ) (c) disagree ( ) (d) Strongly disagree ( ) (e) Undecided ( )

11. Have you ever clicked on a news story on social media because it was recommended by the platform's algorithm? (a) Yes ( ) (b)No ( )

3. Determine how social media algorithms influence the credibility of news content students are exposed to.

12. Social media algorithms limit the diversity of news you are exposed to.
(a) Strongly agree ( ) (b)Agree ( ) (c) disagree ( ) (d) Strongly disagree ( ) (e) Undecided ( )

13. News content on your social media feed is credible given the influence of algorithms.
(a) Strongly agree ( ) (b)Agree ( ) (c) disagree ( ) (d) Strongly disagree ( ) (e) Undecided ( )

14. How often do you verify news from social media before believing or sharing it?
(a) Always ( ) (b) Often ( ) (c) Sometimes ( ) (d) Rarely ( ) (e) Never ( )

4. Identify the platforms most commonly used by students for news consumption.

15. Which of the following social media platforms do you primarily use for getting news?
(a) Facebook ( ) (b) Twitter ( ) (c) Instagram ( ) (d) LinkedIn ( ) (e) WhatsApp ( )

16. Which platform do you trust the most for news?
(a) Facebook ( ) (b) Twitter ( ) (c) Instagram ( ) (d) WhatsApp ( )

17. How often do you engage (like, share, comment) on news content on your most-used platform?
(a) Very often ( ) (b) Often ( ) (c) Sometimes ( ) (d) Rarely ( ) (e) Never ( )