

## DIGITAL INFORMATION CONSUMERISM AND PUBLIC SELF-CENSORSHIP FROM FAKE NEWS

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### Abstract

This study examines information consumerism by social media users and how they deploy self-censorship to guard themselves from potential information overload and misleading information using the survey design with a sample size of 400; we examined digital online audience in Benue State, in central Nigeria and their mode of engagement with digital content. Findings from this study show that audience spend nearly four hours on a daily basis interacting with family and friends as well as filling their news and information needs on digital spaces and social media. Facebook and WhatsApp top the list of the most used platforms. User deploy available tools of blocking, un-follow and muting to refrain themselves from accounts perceived not to be reliable in news and information dissemination. This study revealed that people are more likely to engage in information consumption, focusing on absorbing information rather than sharing it. Social media users engage in self-censorship when they find the information or content to be unreliable, thus, self-restricting from certain content. This study therefore call on social media platforms to increase monitoring, supervising and guard against content that may violate community standard.

**Keyword:** Consumerism; Digital Spaces; information; Self-Censorship

### Introduction

Internet enabled digital platforms are increasingly providing the public with information needs on a routine basis. Access to information is becoming an everyday necessity for survival in all of human existence. Beyond basic needs for accurate and timely information, mass availability of information connotes mass consumption of same. O'Brien and Szeman (2004) explain the traditional understanding of consumerism and consumption as interchangeably used as key aspect of social life. The cultural and social dynamics of consumerism extend well beyond the moment of exchange. On the individual level, consumerism is connected to people's deepest emotions, desires and fantasies. O'Brien and Szeman (2004) further opine that consumerism points to

objects and services society consumes and the symbolic meanings contained in consumption.

Digital mediated information consumption according to Kucut (2002) is traceable to individualists and collectivists perception of the new consumption component. Here, the Internet is seen as a source of information and a reliable link to other social connections. Generally, the Internet, enabled by digital platforms is accepted as rich with information about products, services, social engagements, news and information services.

Online digital engagement has witnessed phenomenal growth across the world. Romero-Rodríguez and Aguaded (2016) attribute this to the reduction on the cost of smart phones linked with user friendly

interface of social media as well as a significant overload of internet use especially among young adults. Information consumption when linked with cultural ideology of consumerism as noted by Sklair (2012) refers to the transformation of excessively above-subsistence consumption from a sectional practice of the rich throughout human history to a globalising phenomenon directed at the mass of the population. Conscious or not, people are in consuming ambition and are constantly being influenced by what surrounds them whether positive or negative. The most common categories of information needs include entertainment such as movies and music, video games, news, weather fashion, technology and even slangs. This decision to consume what is popular is driven by the powers of the Internet and influence of social media, which are engraved in popular culture, making these platforms appealing and addictive. Trending sites like TikTok are intriguing and keep users interested in consuming contents by introducing trending sound, dance, prank and challenges to engage in.

Consumption of the information emerged as a result of public desire for popular culture and insatiable use of social media. Biolcati and Passini (2018) note that social media users post comments, pictures, and videos for various reasons such as passing the time, archiving special moments or events, avoiding boredom, and many others. Most social media platforms have shifted significantly in what they offer users. For example, Facebook's purpose is to connect people with their personal networks including friends and family. People use Facebook to share photos, videos, and general updates on their lives. X (Twitter), on the other hand, is used to share ideas, real-time information, and trending news. While people may also use X (Twitter) to connect with friends and family, they largely use it for

a bigger purpose to connect to the wider world and discover what is happening.

There is an increasing engagement of social media technologies by myriads of users which also comes with downside. For example, Kucut (2002) posits that security issues directly influence consumers' willingness to order products and services online. Many consumers feel less protected and that causes some apprehension and penetration problems for this new shopping media in many counties and cultures.

Apart from security threats, fears are raised by many about the deliberate distribution of unreliable information. Free access to information and sharing of same has given rise to misinformation as noted by Shu, Bhattacharjee, Alatawi, Nazer, Ding, Karami and Liu (2020) that the proliferation and prevalence of social media in almost every facet of human lives have made the consumption of news and information extremely convenient to the users of such technology. The ease with which information, alerts, and warnings can be broadcasted to millions of people in a very short time, has made social media a brilliant platform for information diffusion, especially for time-sensitive situations, for example, during natural disasters and crisis events. Given that a considerable fraction of individuals across the world use social media as a source of news and thus letting such news affect their opinions and actions, directly and indirectly, checking the veracity of such news becomes an important task.

The issues around social media information consumerism and self-censorship are multi-faceted and have become increasingly relevant in today's digital age. With the proliferation of social media platforms, individuals are exposed to a vast and seemingly limitless amount of information, much of which is fake, unreliable or outright false (Lazer, Baum and & Benkler, 2018). Social networking plays

vital roles in broadening the desire for information acquisition. At the same time, people tend to avoid consuming information that they are not comfortable due to a possibility that the information might challenge their existing beliefs.

In recent years, social media has become the go-to platform for accessing news and information, however, as individuals consume more content on social media, concerns about self-censorship have emerged. Previous studies such as Baumeister and Leary (1995) and Wagner (2017) largely focuses on exploring the motivations and patterns of self-censorship, as well as the ways in which it may impact individual decision-making in a group setting. Self-censorship occurs when an individual decides not to view, engage, or share opinion on certain information due to fear of personal or social consequences (Matthes & Kohring, 2013). This pattern of self-restriction to information acquisition, consumption and sharing habits are not wholly known, especially in Nigeria as it relates to social media use where there are fewer formal restrictions. Thus, we attempt to provide perspectives on user engagement with digital content and examined why information consumers seek content on digital platforms as well as determine the type of content users abstain from digital platforms and then assess the pattern of self-censorship among information consumers.

### **Conceptualisation of Consumption and Consumerism**

Consumption and consumerism are hinged on the ideology that place values upon excessive consumption in order to satisfy psychological motivations of identity, status and happiness. It incites individuals to purchase increased amounts of goods and services. Dittmar (2008) defines consumerism as a term that refers to the idea of encouraging people to buy more products

or services. The idea of consumerism can be examined in terms of its impact on consumer culture, consumer decision-making and consumer habits as it is a major force in the economy that affects a wide range of industries and activities. Some examples of consumerism include advertising, product placement in movies, and discounts and promotions. They provide insights into consumer behaviour and help businesses to better understand their target market.

The desire to buy things that are wanted, apart from what is needed to survive, is a huge part of the concept of consumerism. Consumer demand for goods and services is the driving force behind the economy. Hall and Lieberman (2018) argue that consumerism is an important part of economics because it affects the demand and supply of goods, as well as pricing and availability of those goods. It can also influence the production and use of resources, the strength of a currency, and the standard of living for a nation's population.

Consumerism refers to the excessive over-consumption of consumer goods without regard to the negative impacts to people and the planet (Dauvergne 2008). It is driven by the ever-increasing demand for products and services that are often fuelled by marketing, advertising, and consumer culture without regard to their adverse environmental, social and economic impacts. These activities often lead to increased waste, environmental degradation and exploitation of workers and resources.

Consumer habits and behaviour are strongly shaped by culture. It is linked to popular culture. It is a culture that is mass-produced, mass-consumed and well-liked by the society. Lee and Bai (2012) posit that one way to consider pop culture is as mass culture for mass consumption from a commercial perspective. It is influenced by industries that disseminate cultural materials for consumption, for example, film, television

and publishing industries as well as the news media.

In relation to information, it is an ideology that places value on the excessive consumption of information. With the rise of the Internet, there has been an explosion of information available and individuals, who are constantly bombarded with this information and are expected to consume it all. Romero-Rodríguez and Aguaded (2016) describe this situation as infoxition and data smog where modern society acquire information in an omnipotent manner gaining access to unquantifiable information within seconds and in an infinite manner. Lin (2005) depicts information consumerism as the process of consuming information, goods and services in a digital environment. It is the practice of acquiring and using digital products and services for personal benefit, usually for leisure or entertainment. Digital products are becoming increasingly sophisticated and powerful, yet the degree to which people are able to consume and effectively use them has not kept pace.

### **Understanding Self-Censorship**

Self-censorship is the act of intentionally and voluntarily suppressing oneself in order to avoid offending or upsetting others. Bar-Tal (2017) asserts that this act hinders the proper functioning of a democratic society because it inhibits free access to information, freedom of expression, and the flow of information. The role of self-censorship in societies is of vital importance as it blocks information that may illuminate various societal issues. Additionally, it involves refraining from expressing certain views or ideas that may be deemed controversial, offensive, or unpopular, either out of fear of retribution or a desire to conform to societal or organisational norms.

Self-censorship is defined as the act of suppressing or withholding certain thoughts, beliefs, or expressions due to fear of negative consequences such as criticism,

rejection, discrimination, or other forms of punishment (Higgins, Wolfe, & Marcum, 2019). In relation to self-restriction, self-censorship involves limiting one's exposure to certain information or ideas on social media that may be deemed unacceptable, offensive, harmful or controversial.

The act of self-censorship occurs when an individual does not share their opinion with a group that they perceive to hold differing opinions (Hayes, Glynn & Shanahan 2006). Importantly, self-censorship may occur due to real or perceived differences in opinions between the individual and group and has been proposed as a sort of cost-reward analysis based on whether it is beneficial (or not) to suppress one's opinion (Bar-Tal, 2017). Due to the potential costs of communicating online, individuals may perceive self-censorship as the easiest and/or most viable option often referred to as the "path of least resistance". While this approach may spare the individual, it often fails to account for negative downstream effects on society, such as decreasing the diversity of opinions and exacerbating echo chambers (Cinelli, Morales, Quattrociochi & Starnini, 2021).

Self-censorship is often viewed as psychological phenomenon as it is concerned with regulating one's own thoughts. According to Cook and Heilmann, (2013) the psychological bases of self-censorship is hinged on the observation that individuals process information, get to know the content, become aware of its meaning and then have to decide whether to reveal it or not. This is in relation to fundamental human need to share knowledge and be identified in a positive light by the society. However, this need is violated by self-censorship which is used as defence mechanism in order to protect one's own self-image and avoid social disapproval.

## Literature Review

### Social Media Use in the Digital Age

Digital media consumption has become increasingly personalised such that consumers are able to customise the type of content they are viewing, such as what type of videos they watch, what music they listen to, and what news they read. This enables consumers to create individualised experiences with digital media, tailored to their own interests and preferences. This has led to the emergence of social networks where users can curate and consume content that resonates with them. This allows people to connect and interact with like-minded individuals. Zupancic (2017, p.89) explain that “the use of social media has changed over the years, focusing on the patterns of consumption that have emerged in the digital age. Social media has become a ubiquitous and pervasive part of everyday life for the majority of the population”

Social media content varies across demographics, as different age groups, genders, and cultures tend to have different preferences when it comes to content. Goncalves (2020) opines that male-dominated social media platforms such as Reddit and YouTube contain more violent content and topics of discussion on topics like politics, technology and gaming than their female-dominated counterparts such as Instagram and Pinterest, platforms which are known to provide its users with pictures, videos and stories on health, beauty and fashion. Gender-specific content which includes images and videos are more available to female users than those of male users. The differences in the type of content consumed by each gender are supported by the opinion suggesting that female users of the media are more likely to engage with visual content than male users (Cheng, Kim, & Kim, 2019).

As social media continues to evolve, the pattern of its use is also changing.

According to Wagner (2022), the Millennial generation and adults under 30 (Generation Z), are becoming more active in their use of social media sites such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and Facebook. While both enjoy using YouTube and Instagram heavily, Millennials are most often found on Facebook while Gen Z focus a lot of their attention on Snapchat. Generally, some social media platforms are specifically tailored to different age groups. The younger users tend to engage with more light-hearted, current content such as memes, GIFs and short videos, while older users tend to prefer more intellectual and thought-provoking content. Teens and individuals in their twenties are more likely to share memes, tweets and comments, while people in their thirties and forties may be more likely to share blog posts or articles.

Gender differences in social media consumption patterns are reflective of broader gender-related differences in interest, values and behaviour. Larose, Napoli and Dimitrova (2017) assert that there are clear and significant differences in the types of social media content consumed and that women are more frequent users of social media. The authors concluded that females are more likely to use social media for entertainment, connecting with friends and family, meeting new people, and expressing themselves, while males are more likely to use social media for work-related and news-related activities. Nevertheless, the effects of digital media on individuals' lives depend on how they engage with it and how much time they spend using it.

Furthermore, the amount of time people spend using social media has increased drastically. People are spending more hours of their day engaged with online content than ever before. This is due to the growth and prevalence of digital technologies, including smartphones, tablets, and computers, which have enabled people to

access and consume digital content from anywhere and anytime (Prakash, 2020).

Emphasising the importance of understanding consumer behaviour in the context of social media and its implications for information consumption, Reddy and Peddabachigari (2019) identified several key trends in consumer behaviour, such as the increasing use of mobile devices, the demand for personalisation, the rise of user-generated content, and the shift towards more collaborative practices. This has changed consumer behaviour and transformed the way information is produced and consumed.

Social media users have become isolated in their cultural and ideological bubbles through selective exposure to information that reinforces their viewpoint. Borgesius, Boonstra and Scheepers (2018) identified the impact on social media on information consumerism and self-censorship to be significant as consumers are increasingly relying on online sources to provide them with timely and accurate information. This has led to the emergence of what is known as 'filter bubbles' where users are presented with information that reinforces their existing beliefs. There is an increased sense of self-censorship as users only consume information that is in line with their pre-existing views.

Individuals are more likely to look at social media platforms and focus on posts that support their beliefs, rather than challenging it (Borgesius et al., 2018). Additionally, consumer biases towards certain types of information can be strengthened by the algorithms employed by social media platforms, further reinforcing their views and leading to an increased sense of self-censorship (Kang, Gil & Choi, 2018). People now have access to a greater variety of sources, making it easier to discover various kinds of information.

Social media has brought about various changes in the way individuals

consume information and present themselves on online platforms. Besides being a tool for communication and empowerment, social media has also affected the way individuals filter information and self-censor their expressions online. Bergholtz, Karpfand Pena-Lopez (2020) suggest that social media users are more likely to prefer information that conforms to their own beliefs and interests, leading to a narrowing of exposure to different kinds of content. As a result, these phenomena can limit exposure to diverse ideas and can lead to a more divided and polarised online environment.

Generally, Self-censorship can lead to a decrease in the diversity of opinions expressed, as well as reduced openness in online discourse. It may also shift the focus of online conversations away from controversial and important topics, to more 'safe' topics that are less likely to be seen as a negative such as violent and obscene content or topics that are objectionable.

### **Self-Restriction and Selective Information Consumption on Digital Spaces**

Self-restriction is closely related to self-censorship which is a strategy to guard a person from expressing or engaging in opinions that are offensive, disagreeable, damaging or distasteful such as violent, obscene or sexually explicit content. Hofmann and Baumeister (2004) explain the concept of self-restriction as an intentional behaviour or action meant to limit one's own freedom of choice or behaviour. It is used to control oneself in order to avoid certain activities or to maintain a certain level of performance. The authors further added that self-restriction is done in order to avoid doing something that the person believes is wrong or harmful. They also suggested that self-restriction is often used as a method of self-regulation and is used in combination with other forms of self-control. Bartlett and Bower (2016) note that social media users

can guard themselves from unwanted content by taking several actions such as using privacy settings to limit the content visible to them on social media platforms, using ad-blockers to avoid unwanted or explicit advertisements that can appear on social media platforms and being vigilant of the content a person comes across by not clicking links, images or videos that has ambiguous content.

### Methodology

In order to probe how users of digital media platforms engage content and how they restrain themselves from fake news on the go, we adopted the survey method to target internet users Benue State. Our survey was designed to determine the frequency of using social media. This survey also solicited information on the dominant digital platforms of engagement as well as ascertain the particular purpose for using online platforms as sources of news and information. We take cognisance of the ever-increasing number of internet users and the potential to encounter a huge amount of information including fake and unreliable content. We drew our population from the National Bureau of Statistics (2021) based on

its Telecast Data of Active Voice and internet per state, porting and Tariff information of first quarter (Q1) of 2021. Figures show that as at April of 2020, Benue had 5,028,385 active mobile lines across all service providers. Among these mobile users, NBS estimate that 3,670,718 are active internet users in Benue. This forms our target population.

Our sample for this study was drawn from active internet users. NBS (2021) provided figures which show that the number of internet users in Benue stands at 3,670,718. This represents an internet penetration rate of 38.6%. Our sample was determined using Taro Yamane formulation based on confidence level of 95% and precision level of .5% and we arrived at size of 400. The instrument was electronically distributed with the links sent to various social media group to persons 18 years and above. A total of 385 (96.25%) questionnaire were fully responded to while 15 (3.5%) were uncompleted or partially responded to thereby making them unusable within the study period. Responses were analysed using percentages and tables.

### Data Presentation and Analysis

**Table One: Longevity of public engagement with information on digital platforms**

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Less than one hour	88	22.9
1-2 hours	111	28.8
3 hours and above	186	48.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>385</b>	<b>100</b>

We measured the duration of staying online in Table One. Data reveals nearly half of respondents stay online beyond three hours. This means that on the average, individuals are likely to spend more than 28 hours every week seeking and consuming information on the internet. Fewer people (two in every ten persons) are spending less time on the Internet. This data implies that digital sourcing of information is more likely to witness an upward surge in the number of users deploying them as information sources.

**Table Two: Most preferred social media platform.**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Facebook	129	33.5
WhatsApp	112	29.1
X (Twitter)	51	13.2
Instagram	78	20.2
Tiktok	15	4.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>385</b>	<b>100</b>

Analysis Data from Table Two reveals that Facebook is more appealing to users than any other social media platforms. Facebook is 8 times more likely to be used than Tiktok. In terms of numerical strength, WhatsApp is next with 29.1% preferring it than any other platform. The public is three more likely to engage on WhatsApp than use X (Twitter) (13.2%). This table also reveal that, on whole users vary the social media engagement and likely to engage in using more than one of these platforms.

**Table Three: Motive for consuming content on digital spaces**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
To stay up to date with news and current affairs	95	24.7
To connect with friends and family	118	30.6
To watch short video skits	90	23.4
To pass time	82	21.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>385</b>	<b>100</b>

Table Three shows what motivates people to consume information on digital spaces and social media. Result shows that connecting with family and friends is top on the reasons for using social media with 30.6%. This is closely followed by news and information seeking factor as second dominant reason for using digital spaces. One whole, the use of social media for entertainment and relaxation is cumulatively less (47.7%) than those who use for information and social connections with 55.3% cumulatively

**Table Four: Disturbing content on social media**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Violent graphic content	91	23.6
Obscene content	70	18.2
Fake and unreliable news	187	48.6
Private messages/conversations	37	9.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>385</b>	<b>100</b>

Table Four measured the type of content respondents feel uncomfortable with consuming on digital spaces and social media. Result reveals that 23.6% of the respondents are opposed to the display of open violence. This is twice more than those averse to display of private messages and conversations at 9.6%. On whole, major concern for disturbing content is fake news and unreliable content with 48.6% of internet users raising concern



**Table Five: Purpose of self-restriction on social media platforms**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
To maintain my sanity	91	23.6
To avoid undue pressure	112	29.1
To avoid the temptation of posting personal information	54	14.0
Avoid an overload of unwanted information	128	33.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>385</b>	<b>100</b>

Table Five above sought to determine the opinion of respondents on the reason for self-restriction on social media platforms. Evidence from result show the major reason for self-restriction on social media is to avoid an overload of unwanted information followed by respondents who self-restrict to avoid undue pressure.

Although digital media audience have other reasons for self-censoring information, it is obvious, an overload of unwanted information is less desirable when compare to the desire to maintain one's sanity and refrain from posting personal detail online.

**Table Six: Self-restriction strategies**

<b>Response</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Unfollow sources	137	35.7
Block unwanted accounts	93	24.1
Scroll pass unwanted account	97	25.2
Mute certain account	85	15.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>385</b>	<b>100</b>

Table Six present respondent's strategies for self-restriction on social media platforms. Results indicate that 35.7% respondents chose to unfollow unreliable sources, while 24.1% chose block unwanted accounts. This implies that more than half of digital audience (59.8%) of respondents opted for a more permanent measure by unfollowing and blocking accounts to remove them from their feed, whereas 40.2% of respondents opted for a temporary measure of scrolling past and muting certain accounts.

### **Discussion of Findings**

This study examined the pattern of self-restriction to information consumption by users of online digital spaces and social media. We probe the perspectives of user engagement with digital content and examined why users seek content on digital platforms as well as determine the type of content users abstain from on digital platforms in regards to patterns of self-censorship among information consumers.

Data revealed that users in Benue are more inclined using Facebook than any other social media platform. WhatsApp is the second most preferred social media tool

among social media users and a higher percentage of respondents spend 3 hours and above daily on social media platforms. On a whole user engagement on different platforms is varied. There are no clear-cut dominant platforms. The findings also reported that users spend an average of 3 hours and above per day on social media. This however shows that with time and a yearly increase in internet penetration, it is more likely to witness an upsurge in time spent online. This aligns with Prakash (2020) who attribute this considerable rise in screen time due to the growth and prevalence of digital technologies, including smartphones,

tablets, and computers, which have enabled people to access and consume digital content from anywhere and anytime. Among many reasons of consuming information on social media, findings from this study revealed that majority of digital spaces and social media users indulge social media platforms to connect with family and friends and to be updated on news and current events.

The use of social media as a source of news gives room for the sharing of fake and unreliable information which. Findings for this study reveal that social media users abhor fake news and unreliable information. It revealed that users abstain from viewing sexually explicit content due to moral and religious beliefs, lack of interest and perceived harm.

Pattern of self-censorship among social media users, the reason they restrict themselves from consuming certain content on social media is to avoid an overload of unwanted information. This finding asserts that people engage in self-censorship as a way to avoid information overload as the volume of online content can be overwhelming. This slightly differ with the assertion by Cinelli, Morales, Quattrociocchi & Starnini (2021) who aver that individuals may perceive self-censorship as the easiest and/or most viable option often referred to as the “path of least resistance”. While this approach may spare the individual, it often fails to account for negative downstream effects on society, such as decreasing the diversity of opinions and exacerbating echo chambers. Findings in this study further show that people unfollow, block and mute sources as a pattern for self-censorship on social media. This finding suggests that people use unfollow feature as a protective way from harmful content thus limit their exposure to potentially damaging information. This

reinforces the views held by Kang, Gil & Choi, (2018) that consumer biases towards certain types of information can be strengthened by the algorithms employed by social media platforms, further underpinning their views and leading to an increased sense of self-censorship. Access to a greater variety of information sources, makes it easier to discover various perspective.

## **Conclusion**

The rise of Internet enabled mobile and digital technology has made it easier for people to access and consume content via social media platforms. This study shows that increasingly, information consumers are consciously prioritising their social media engagements based on personal interests such as connecting with family and friends and staying up to date with news and current trends. Social media platforms contain a wide variety of content, includes unwanted and potentially harmful content. Additionally, this study revealed that people are more likely to engage in information consumption, focusing on absorbing information rather than sharing it. Social media users engage in self-censorship when they find the information or content to be unreliable, thus, self restricting from certain content. This behaviour is largely motivated by a variety of factors, including the need to avoid an overload of unwanted information which is achieved by un-following and scroll passing unwanted social media accounts that can potentially share fake and unreliable content. This study therefore calls on social media platforms users to increase monitoring, supervising and guard against content that may violate community standard.

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