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Understanding User's Knowledge-Driven Competence to Identify Cloned and Authentic Facebook Pages of Newspapers

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Abstract. Cloned Facebook pages that mimic established newspapers pose a risk of misinformation, particularly for postgraduate students in Nigeria who are expected to have strong media-literacy skills. This study investigates their ability to distinguish authentic from cloned Facebook pages of Daily Trust and Vanguard, and identifies the cues and strategies they use in the evaluation process. Using a sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach, the study began with a survey of 372 postgraduate students across three universities in North-West Nigeria. It measured their knowledge of authenticity indicators such as verification badges, URLs, and contact details. This was followed by ten in-depth interviews with selected students and newspaper editors to explore their reasoning and institutional practices. Results show that fewer than 14% of students were aware of missing verification badges on cloned pages, and only about 20% recognized misuse of logos or names. Most relied on visual elements like logos and page titles rather than systematic checks. Editors also confirmed that clone detection is reactive, triggered mostly by user complaints. The findings indicate a gap between assumed competence and actual verification skills. The study recommends introducing a structured Digital Verification Training (DVT) program that includes theoretical instruction, hands-on exercises, case studies, and collaboration with media platforms to improve users' ability to verify online news sources.

Keywords: Social media cloned pages; Media credibility; Media literacy; News credibility; Systematic verification

1. Introduction

The digital news ecosystem has undergone a seismic shift, with platforms like Facebook becoming primary gateways for news access especially in developing contexts such as Nigeria. As mobile internet penetration exceeds 60% (Gbahabo & Ajuwon, 2019), social media has not only democratized information dissemination but also given rise to an alarming trend, the proliferation of cloned Facebook pages that impersonate legitimate news outlets. These pages mimic visual and naming conventions of established media like Daily Trust and Vanguard, yet disseminate misleading or entirely fabricated content (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Lazer et al., 2018). This phenomenon has accumulated

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millions of unsuspecting followers and increasingly undermines the credibility of authentic journalism.

What makes this trend especially troubling is how effectively cloned pages exploit users' familiarity with visual cues logos, colour palettes, and names while bypassing more rigorous indicators of authenticity. Users often rely on these surface heuristics to evaluate credibility, especially in fast-scrolling environments like Facebook, where attention is limited and cognitive overload is common. This creates a dangerous feedback loop, the more realistic the cloned pages look, the more likely they are to be trusted, shared, and further amplified particularly in contexts where digital verification skills are low or underdeveloped.

Cloned pages also weaponize social trust. In Nigeria, pages labeled "Daily Trust Hausa" or "Vanguard Hausa" have gained hundreds of thousands of followers despite lacking any formal connection to the newsrooms they mimic (Ibrahim et al., 2024). These clones not only dilute the brand integrity of real outlets but actively misinform the public, sometimes for political or financial gain. The harm is compounded by the fact that most newsroom responses are reactive clones are only taken down after being flagged by users leaving a window in which false stories circulate freely. In the long term, this undermines public confidence not just in the impersonated media but in the credibility of all journalistic content online.

From a scholarly standpoint, media-literacy literature has long emphasized the need to distinguish between awareness and actionable knowledge. Awareness refers to the general recognition that misinformation exists, while knowledge implies the ability to identify and verify specific cues that signal authenticity (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007). Numerous studies have shown that people, especially younger users, overestimate their ability to discern real from fake content. Even university students often fail to check basic indicators like verification badges, URL consistency, or contact details (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). This overconfidence masks a deeper vulnerability in digital verification.

Furthermore, although much research on misinformation has focused on undergraduate students, far fewer studies have examined postgraduate learners, who are typically assumed to possess stronger analytical and evaluative skills. This assumption, however, lacks empirical backing. Studies by Fernández-Batanero et al. (2021) suggest that higher education alone does not guarantee competence in navigating deceptive digital environments. Even media professionals have been found to occasionally share content from cloned pages under deadline stress. This raises the question: Are postgraduate students truly prepared to verify the authenticity of the news they consume, or do they, too, rely on heuristics and aesthetic cues?

Despite their presumed sophistication, little empirical evidence exists to verify whether postgraduate students are equipped to navigate complex digital information environments where authenticity cues like verification badges, redirect links, and editorial contact information are critical (Katyeudo & de Souza, 2022; Pramila-Savukoski et al., 2023). Preliminary observations suggest that even seasoned journalists fall prey to these clones under deadline pressure (McDonald et al., 2012; Monnier, 2018), indicating a broader systemic weakness in verification literacy.

This study seeks to fill that gap. It investigates postgraduate students' knowledge-driven competence in identifying cloned versus authentic Facebook pages of two widely circulated Nigerian newspapers, Daily Trust and Vanguard. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches, it probes the extent to which these students recognize key indicators of authenticity, and explores the cognitive processes and

heuristics behind their judgments. Unlike prior studies that rely solely on self-reported awareness or motivation, this research triangulates empirical data with theoretical insights from the media credibility framework (Ahluwalia et al., 2000) and Trust-in-Media Theory (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003), offering a deeper understanding of both the 'what' and the 'why' behind user behavior.

Therefore, the objectives of this study are twofold, (1) to assess postgraduate students' knowledge of specific cues used to distinguish cloned from authentic newspaper Facebook pages, and (2) to analyze the reasoning and strategies they employ in making such distinctions. By addressing a notable gap in media-literacy research, this study offers practical recommendations for curriculum development, newsroom practice, and platform policy all aimed at strengthening digital-verification capacities among Nigeria's next generation of media-literate professionals.

2. Methods

2.1. Design

This investigation adopted a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, commencing with a quantitative survey and followed by qualitative interviews. Such an approach permits the numerical description of postgraduate students' knowledge of authenticity cues and the subsequent exploration of underlying rationales through in-depth accounts (Meissner et al., 2011). The quantitative phase generated patterns that guided the selection of participants and the development of interview prompts. Qualitative findings then enriched the interpretation of survey statistics, yielding a coherent understanding of how students discern cloned from authentic Facebook pages of *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard* newspapers.

Justification for Selecting Daily Trust and Vanguard Newspapers, there are multiple cloned pages of conventional newspapers on social media platforms. For instance, the researchers observed that there are more than 10 cloned Facebook pages of *Daily Trust and Vanguard* newspapers on Facebook. The selection of the two newspapers was motivated for the fact that there are multiple cloned Facebook pages disguising as the "Daily Trust Hausa" and "Vanguard Hausa" newspapers, with some having over 200,000 followers on Facebook. This study believed that this is quite a phenomenon to investigate.

The subjects selected to participate in the interviews were postgraduate students at three universities, namely Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (ABU), Bayero University, Kano (BUK) and Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto (UDUS). Postgraduate students were specifically chosen because their higher-level academic engagement presupposes enhanced media and digital literacy competencies (Aldhaen, 2024). This cohort's presumed familiarity with information technologies provides a stringent test of whether formal educational attainment correlates with the ability to apply rigorous verification strategies to social-media news sources.

Rationale for Employing Descriptive Rather than Inferential Statistical Analysis: We opted for descriptive statistics rather than inferential testing for two main reasons. First, our primary aim was to map the 'prevalence' of knowledge gaps across specific authenticity cues, rather than to test causal hypotheses or estimate population parameters with confidence intervals. Descriptive frequencies and percentages provided a clear portrait of how many students recognised each cue, guiding the subsequent qualitative exploration. Second, although our sample of 372 postgraduates is robust, inferential analyses (e.g. chi-square tests or logistic regressions) would have implied hypothesis-driven comparisons between subgroups or predictor–outcome relationships

that were beyond the study's exploratory scope. However, by concentrating on descriptive measures, we ensure methodological coherence with our sequential explanatory design, using the survey solely to shape and contextualise the in-depth interview phase rather than to perform confirmatory statistical modelling.

2.2. Quantitative Phase

2.2.1. Population and Sampling

The target population comprised all postgraduate students enrolled at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (ABU-Z), Bayero University, Kano (BUK-K) and Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto (UDUS-S) during the 2023/2024 session, approximately 3,500 individuals across taught and research programmes. A sample of 372 was determined using Krejcie and Morgan's (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970) table for finite populations, ensuring a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. A multistage approach combined faculty-level stratification with purposive selection of departments known for high social-media engagement (communication studies, information technology and media management). Within each department, students were approached in seminars and via programme mailing lists, yielding a final sample reflecting gender, discipline and institution distribution. Such purposive elements aimed to secure respondents likely to possess or seek credible online news sources (Palinkas et al., 2015) .

Rationale for Postgraduate Focus and Generalisability, we targeted postgraduate students because their advanced training in rigorous source evaluation renders them both influential opinion-leaders and a critical test case for media literacy assumptions (Ahmed et al., 2022; Schreurs, 2023). While our sequential explanatory design affords rich insight, findings are drawn from three north-west Nigerian universities and may not fully generalise to undergraduates, other regions or countries without further comparative studies.

2.2.2. Instrument of Data Collection and Data Analysis

Data were collected using an eight-item questionnaire constructed on a five-point Likert scale (1 = "Not at all knowledgeable" to 5 = "Extremely knowledgeable"). Items probed recognition of verification badges, office addresses, official URLs, logo authenticity, page naming conventions, grammatical precision, follower counts and posting regularity. The instrument was developed with guidance from DeVellis (1983) on scale construction, ensuring content validity through expert review by two media-studies scholars and a pilot test with 30 postgraduate students outside the main sample. Internal consistency for the eight items yielded a Cronbach's α of 0.82, indicating acceptable reliability for research purposes (Field, 2018).

Responses were entered into SPSS v27 for descriptive analysis. Frequencies and percentages summarised students' self-assessed knowledge levels for each authenticity cue. Cross-tabulations by institution, gender and discipline provided initial comparisons. No inferential tests were conducted, as the intention was to identify broad patterns rather than test specific hypotheses. Findings informed the development of semi-structured interview themes, highlighting areas of pronounced knowledge gaps.

2.3. Qualitative Phase

2.3.1. Participants

Ten individuals participated in semi-structured interviews, with four editorial or ICT staff from *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard* newspapers (including the Editor-in-Chief, the Head of ICT and two online editors), and six postgraduate students sampled purposively based

on their survey responses. Students were selected to represent high, medium and low self-reported knowledge across the eight cues, thus capturing a spectrum of verification proficiencies. Editorial participants were chosen for their direct involvement in page management and experience countering cloned-page activities. Recruitment continued until thematic saturation was achieved, ensuring no new themes emerged in the final two interviews (Guest et al., 2006).

2.3.2. Interview Guide and Data Analysis

A semi-structured guide comprised prompts on participants' strategies for distinguishing cloned from authentic pages, for example, "Which page features do you inspect first when assessing authenticity?", and probes on encountered challenges and training needs. Editorial staff were asked to reflect on institutional protocols for page verification and staff training. Students were invited to recount recent incidents of encountering cloned pages, to explain their decision-making processes and to suggest instructional improvements. The guide was reviewed by two qualitative-methods experts for clarity and comprehensiveness. Interviews lasted 45–60 minutes, conducted in person or via secure video call, audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

Transcripts were imported into ATLAS.ti v22 for thematic coding (Chen et al., 2023; Song et al., 2020). An initial codebook reflected the eight cues from the survey instrument alongside emergent concepts such as "cognitive load" and "platform trust." Two researchers independently coded two transcripts to ensure inter-coder agreement exceeding 80% (Campbell et al., 2013). Discrepancies were resolved through discussion, refining code definitions. The remaining transcripts were coded by one researcher, with periodic peer review. Themes were organised to correspond with quantitative findings, showing, for instance, why verification badges might be overlooked despite high statistical visibility. This triangulation confirmed and contextualised survey results (Fetters et al., 2013).

2.3.3. Instrument Validation and Pilot Testing

The questionnaire was developed from our conceptual framework and underwent expert review by two mass communication scholars and departmental board members, ensuring content validity. It was pre-tested with 38 students (10% of the planned sample) to identify ambiguities and then pilot-tested on the same cohort using exploratory factor analysis and Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.82$) to confirm internal consistency and item stability (Williams & Babbie, 1976). The interview guide likewise received multiple expert reviews and a small-scale trial with media professionals, with member-checking and peer debriefing strengthening its credibility (Meissner et al., 2011).

2.3.4. Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the Bayero University Departmental Postgraduate Examination Board. All participants received information sheets and provided written consent. Data confidentiality was maintained via anonymisation of transcripts and secure storage on encrypted drives. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw without penalty at any point.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1.1. Quantitative Results

The survey assessed postgraduate students' knowledge in distinguishing cloned from authentic Facebook pages of *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard* online newspapers across eight

authenticity cues. Table 1 presents the data on respondents' knowledge of the distinguishing features of cloned versus authentic Facebook pages of *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard* online newspapers.

Table 1 Knowledge of Cloned vs. Authentic Facebook Page Features (n = 372)

S/N	Survey Items	Extremely Know	Moderately Know	Somewhat / Sometimes Know	Slightly Know	Don't Know at All
	Cloned-page indicators					
1	I know that all cloned Facebook pages of *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard* online newspapers do not have the blue sign of a verified badge.	51 (13.7%)	99 (26.6%)	69 (18.5%)	66 (17.7%)	87 (23.4%)
2	I know that most cloned Facebook pages of *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard* online newspapers are using the same or similar page name and official logo.	73 (19.6%)	116 (31.2%)	65 (17.5%)	73 (19.6%)	45 (12.1%)
3	I know that most cloned Facebook pages of *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard* online newspapers contain suspicious posts.	77 (20.7%)	84 (22.6%)	83 (22.3%)	68 (18.3%)	60 (16.1%)
4	I know that most cloned Facebook	44 (11.8%)	60 (16.1%)	84 (22.6%)	90 (24.2%)	94 (25.3%)

	pages of *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard* online newspapers are using fake profile information.					
5	I know that the cloned pages of *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard* online newspapers lack redirect link to their official website.	49 (13.2%)	62 (16.7%)	74 (19.9%)	91 (24.5%)	96 (25.8%)
6	I know that most posts of cloned Facebook pages of *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard* online newspapers contain poor grammar and spelling mistakes.	41 (11.0%)	67 (18.0%)	78 (21.0%)	89 (23.9%)	97 (26.1%)
7	I know that the number of followers of the cloned Facebook pages of *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard* online newspapers is not large compared to their authentic pages.	62 (16.7%)	90 (24.2%)	69 (18.5%)	75 (20.2%)	76 (20.4%)
8	I know that most cloned Facebook	60 (16.1%)	89 (23.9%)	83 (22.3%)	67 (18.0%)	73 (19.6%)

	pages of *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard* online newspapers do not post news stories regularly compared to their authentic pages.					
	Authentic-page indicators					
9	I know that authentic Facebook pages of *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard* online newspapers have a blue sign of a verified badge.	88 (23.7%)	78 (21.0%)	58 (15.6%)	75 (20.2%)	73 (19.6%)
10	I know that authentic Facebook pages of *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard* online newspapers have clear and transparent organisational and contact details.	81 (21.8%)	80 (21.5%)	60 (16.1%)	77 (20.7%)	74 (19.9%)
11	I know that authentic Facebook pages of *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard* online newspapers have regular and relevant posts.	81 (21.8%)	86 (23.1%)	72 (19.4%)	66 (17.7%)	67 (18.0%)

12	I know that authentic Facebook pages of *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard* online newspapers have redirect link to their official websites.	82 (22.0%)	70 (18.8%)	71 (19.1%)	90 (24.2%)	59 (15.9%)
13	I know that authentic Facebook pages of *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard* online newspapers have high-quality content and generate thousands of reactions.	109 (29.3%)	94 (25.3%)	66 (17.7%)	68 (18.3%)	35 (9.4%)

Source: Research Finding

Table 1 shows that postgraduate students exhibited significant difficulty in recognizing the absence of blue verification badges on cloned pages. Only 13.7% reported being "extremely knowledgeable" about this authenticity indicator, whereas 23.4% admitted having no knowledge of it at all. These findings suggest that the verification badge a key cue for assessing page authenticity is still underutilized in their evaluative processes.

Visual mimicry proved easier for participants to detect. Nearly one in five students (19.6%) claimed to be "extremely knowledgeable" about cloned pages reusing official logos and 20.7% recognised name similarity as a red flag. These findings indicate that conspicuous design elements capture attention more readily than subtler authenticity signals. Knowledge of accurate profile information, including office addresses and redirect links to official websites, was markedly lower. Only 11.8% of respondents felt "extremely knowledgeable" about false profile details and 13.2% about missing redirect links; meanwhile, approximately one quarter professed complete ignorance of each. Such gaps highlight a critical weakness in assessing the integrity of page-level information.

Indicators associated with authentic pages fared somewhat better. Reaction volume, which is a proxy for audience engagement, was recognised by 29.3% of students as a mark of legitimacy and 23.7% correctly identified the presence of the blue verification badge. However, only 22.0% fully understood the significance of an official website link and 24.2% had no awareness of this indicator. These results underline the need to reinforce training on both overt and technical verification cues as shown in Table 1.

Table 2, below, presents the percentages of respondents scoring at the extremes of the five-point Likert scale for "extremely knowledgeable" and "no knowledge."

Table 2 Knowledge levels for authenticity cues (n = 372)

Cue	Extremely Knowledgeable (%)	No Knowledge (%)
Verification Badge	13.7	23.4
Official Logo Usage	19.6	12.1
Name Similarity	20.7	16.1
Office Address	11.8	25.3
Website/Email Address	13.2	25.8
Spelling/Grammar Errors	11.0	26.1
Follower Count Disparity	16.7	20.4
Posting Regularity	16.1	19.6

Source: Research Finding

Table 2 presents the strongest knowledge was observed for logo usage (19.6% extremely knowledgeable) and name similarity (20.7%). Whereas, verification badges and office addresses scored lower (13.7% and 11.8%, respectively). The largest deficits appeared in spelling/grammar cues (26.1% no knowledge) and website/email verification (25.8% no knowledge). Overall, respondents demonstrated weakest knowledge for verification badge recognition despite its critical role in signalling authenticity as shown in Table 2.

3.1.2. Qualitative Interview Themes

The in-depth interviews exposed a pronounced tendency among postgraduate students to depend on easily recognised visual markers when attempting to distinguish genuine news pages from their cloned counterparts (Figure 1 shows the summary of the key themes). One student admitted, "I often check the logo first, then the page name. I rarely look for the blue tick or URL" (Participant 3, In-Depth Interview, ABU Zaria, Personal Communication, 2024). Such remarks indicate that learners prioritise prominent graphics and familiar nomenclature over the formal verification badge and precise web address. This preference reflects a reliance on surface heuristics, which refer to mental shortcuts that permit rapid judgments but bypass more rigorous checks of authenticity. Consequently, despite high levels of general digital fluency, students frequently overlook the critical verification cues that robustly separate legitimate outlets from impostors.

Editorial personnel at the newspapers themselves conveyed a similar lack of early detection. One senior editor confessed genuine astonishment upon learning of multiple cloned 'Daily Trust Hausa' pages: "I was surprised to learn of so many fake 'Daily Trust Hausa' pages. We had no system to monitor these until readers complained" (Participant 1, In-Depth Interview, Daily Trust HQ, Personal Communication, 2024). This account reveals a reactive posture, namely, clones were removed only after audience intervention, rather than through any proactive surveillance mechanism within the organisation. The editors' admission underscores an institutional blind spot that serves to heighten audience vulnerability. In effect, both producers and consumers of news were found to share entrenched habits that allow cloned pages to flourish unchallenged.

In the end, there emerged a clear consensus on the need for structured pedagogical intervention. A doctoral candidate remarked, Our degree did not cover social media verification. We need modules that teach how to tell real from fake pages (Participant 8, In-Depth Interview, BUK Kano, Personal Communication, 2024). This call for formalised

training modules captures a widespread conviction that existing curricula fail to equip students with sufficient competencies in digital verification. Both student and staff participants urged collaboration with technology firms and practising media professionals to embed verification techniques within postgraduate teaching. These recommendations advocate for a systematic elevation of digital literacies, moving beyond ad hoc, campus-wide workshops towards integrated programmes that align with professional standards.

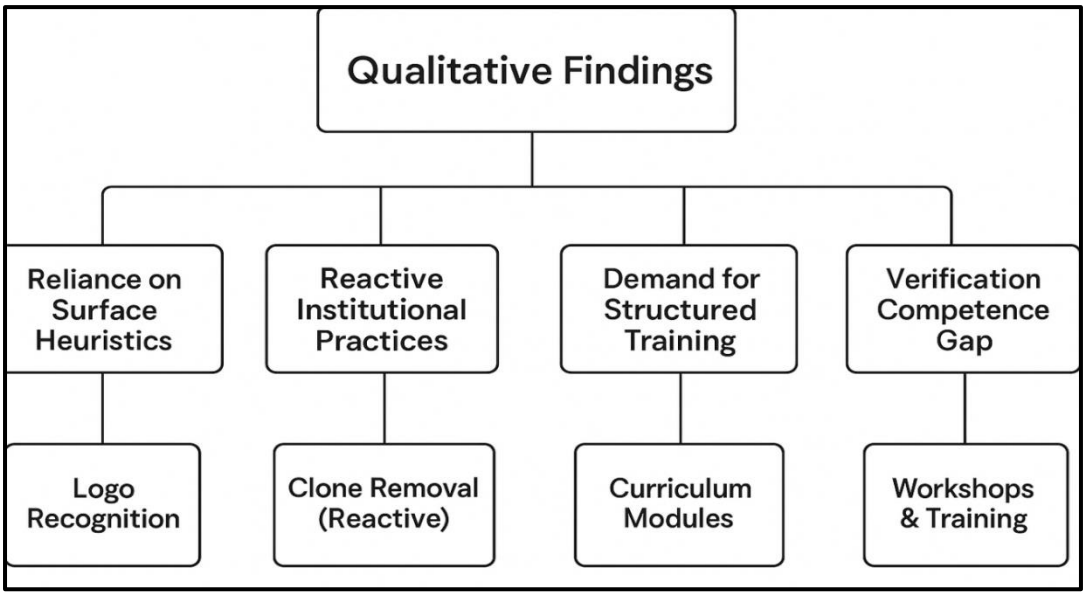

Figure 1 Summary of the Qualitative Interviews Themes

Figure 1 presents four key themes that emerged from interviews about how people identify and respond to fake (cloned) Facebook pages of news organizations. The first theme, Reliance on Surface Heuristics, shows that many participants depend on simple visual cues like logo recognition to judge if a page is real, instead of using deeper verification methods. The second theme, Reactive Institutional Practices, highlights that institutions often respond to cloned pages only after the problem appears, mainly through reactive removal, rather than taking preventive action. The third theme, Demand for Structured Training, reflects participants need for formal education on verification, such as curriculum modules in schools or universities. The fourth theme, Verification Competence Gap, points to a lack of verification skills, with limited access to or experience with workshops and training. Overall, the figure suggests that both individuals and institutions need better education and proactive strategies to deal with misinformation on social media.

Together, these themes corroborate the quantitative findings that although students recognise cloned pages by logo and title, they lack confidence in, and often neglect, the verification signals shown to be most reliable. The interviews demonstrate that surface heuristics, editorial inattention and curricular shortcomings jointly perpetuate awareness gaps. Addressing these intersecting factors through targeted media-literacy initiatives and institutional partnerships will be essential to strengthening postgraduate students' capacity to identify and resist cloned social-media pages.

3.2. Integrating Findings through Theoretical Lenses

The quantitative and qualitative results reveal that postgraduate students rely heavily on heuristic cues, like logos and page names, while neglecting systematic verification, such as badge inspection and URL checks. Under the Media Credibility Framework (Ahluwalia et al., 2000), credibility judgments should foreground expertise (e.g. platform-issued verification badges) and trustworthiness (e.g. consistent official URLs). Yet only 13.7% of respondents were "extremely knowledgeable" about the badge, and 23.4% had no awareness of its absence on cloned pages. By contrast, peripheral cues scored higher (logo misuse 19.6% and name similarity 20.7%), indicating that aesthetic familiarity overrides formal endorsements even among educated audiences, thereby replicating findings from an Australian study, where university students similarly favoured design features over verification signals (Valtonen et al., 2021).

From the standpoint of Trust-in-Media Theory (Fawzi et al., 2021), audience trust depends on perceptions of competence, integrity and benevolence. Cloned pages simulate competence through polished appearance but fail to demonstrate integrity, meaning no genuine editorial oversight or transparent contact details. Our interviews confirm this: "I rarely look for the blue tick or URL" (Participant 3), indicating a failure to activate integrity and benevolence assessments. This mirrors research in Singapore, where readers' trust declined when integrity cues were absent, despite visible expertise signals (Farid, 2023; Farid et al., 2024).

3.3. Comparative Discussion of Frameworks and Deepening Trust-in-Media Theory

While the Media Credibility Framework specifies which cues matter, Trust-in-Media Theory explains why audiences seek them, i.e., motivation to confirm benevolence and competence. However, our data show that motivation does not guarantee verification competence, a gap also observed in U.S. cohorts who overestimate their fact-checking abilities (Johnson & Kaye, 2015). We therefore propose that future iterations of both models incorporate a third dimension, namely digital verification skill, to account for the misalignment between motivation and actual practice.

Nigerian case aligns with global studies demonstrating that educated users often default to peripheral processing under cognitive load (Lazer et al., 2018; Tandoc et al., 2018). In the United Kingdom, Fletcher and Nielsen (2019) observed that audiences require explicit prompts to examine badges, reinforcing the need for pedagogical and platform interventions across contexts. These parallels underscore the universal relevance of integrating media-literacy training into curricula and platform design to bridge the divide between theoretical constructs and user behaviour.

Trust-in-Media Theory maintains that audience trust rests on perceptions of 'competence', 'integrity' and 'benevolence' (Tsfati & Ariely, 2014). Cloned Facebook pages simulate competence through polished branding but lack genuine editorial oversight, thereby compromising integrity. Our quantitative data reveal that less than one quarter of students verify office addresses (11.8% extremely knowledgeable; 25.3% no knowledge) or URL domains (13.2% extremely knowledgeable; 25.8% no knowledge), demonstrating a reluctance to seek the very signals (clear contact details and consistent domains) that confirm an outlet's transparency and public-serving intent. This behaviour diverges from the theory's premise that motivated audiences will pursue integrity cues when stakes are high.

Moreover, the 'reactive' clone-removal practices of *Daily Trust* and *Vanguard*, that is, responding only to reader complaints, fail to model institutional integrity, further eroding perceptions of benevolence. Comparable patterns have been observed in a study of

Swedish news consumers, where users expressed lower trust in outlets lacking proactive transparency measures, despite strong brand recognition (Ekström et al., 2021).

Interestingly, although Trust-in-Media Theory posits that higher education encourages systematic verification, our qualitative findings indicate that postgraduate respondents possess confidence in heuristic judgements yet lack evaluative skill. This mirrors Johnson and Kaye's (2015) finding in U.S. university samples, where self-rated media literacy outstripped actual fact-checking performance. Therefore, propose extending Trust-in-Media Theory by incorporating 'verification competence' as a fourth dimension, acknowledging that 'motivation' must be coupled with 'procedural expertise' before audiences can reliably assess source credibility (Flanagin & Metzger, 2007).

3.4. Reconciling Theory and Practice

When research findings are compared with established theoretical models, three key insights emerge that highlight important gaps between theory and practice in digital content verification. First, concerning expertise signals, our results show that although official indicators like the blue verification badge are designed to signal credibility, students pay remarkably little attention to them. Only 13.7% reported being extremely knowledgeable about this feature, while 23.4% admitted having no knowledge at all. This indicates that existing media credibility frameworks need to take into account the overwhelming influence of surface-level aesthetics in digital environments a pattern similarly observed among digital news consumers in Canada (Shin & Thorson, 2017).

Second, in terms of integrity signals, the interviews revealed that key elements such as checking the URL and contact information are often neglected by participants. Although theory considers these elements essential to assessing source integrity, they are rarely applied in practice. This gap calls for pedagogical interventions that emphasize the importance of these signals and also suggests that platform design should better highlight such features to make them more noticeable and accessible (Vraga & Bode, 2020).

Third, we note a critical shift in how Trust-in-Media Theory should be interpreted. While the theory traditionally emphasizes audience motivation, our findings suggest that motivation alone is insufficient. Even motivated individuals may lack the procedural knowledge required to perform systematic verification checks. This phenomenon has also been documented in cross-national surveys on news verification skills in Germany and the UK (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2019). Therefore, theoretical models must be expanded to incorporate not only motivational but also technical and operational competencies in understanding how trust in media is formed and exercised.

3.5. Implications for Theory Development

Our findings advocate for integrating 'digital-media literacy' into both frameworks as a critical moderator of credibility judgements. In the Media Credibility Framework, literacy determines whether audiences engage in 'central-route processing' of expertise cues or default to peripheral heuristics (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Within Trust-in-Media Theory, literacy underpins the capacity to interpret integrity signals and influences perceptions of benevolence. Future theoretical work should therefore explicitly incorporate 'media-literacy constructs', examining how targeted training interventions shift users from heuristic to systematic evaluation, a shift demonstrated in experimental studies of fact-checking interventions in Australia (Guess et al., 2021).

3.6. Practical and Pedagogical Considerations

Bridge the gap between theoretical insights and everyday media practices, several practical and pedagogical strategies are recommended. First, there is a pressing need for

curricular enhancement that integrates both conceptual understanding and practical application. This can be achieved by developing modules that pair theoretical frameworks with interactive learning tools such as badge-recognition quizzes and URL-inspection labs which foster deeper cognitive engagement and promote central-route processing of key credibility signals like expertise and integrity (Bulger & Davison, 2018).

Second, building collaborations with industry stakeholders, particularly newsrooms, can greatly enrich learning experiences. Co-creating comparative case studies based on actual incidents of cloned news pages such as those documented in Nigeria, Sweden (Ekström et al., 2021), and the UK (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2019) would not only illustrate the real-world implications of integrity violations but also serve to reinforce core theoretical concepts in a tangible, relatable manner. Third, platform-level innovations should be actively pursued. Digital interface designs need to be more verification-friendly, featuring user-centered tools like pop-up explanations for verification badges, alerts about domain authenticity, and dedicated "report clone" functions. These features can act as cognitive prompts, nudging users toward more systematic and informed verification behavior (Haider & Sundin, 2022). Collectively, these approaches offer a roadmap for aligning educational practices, industry realities, and technological environments with the demands of digital media literacy.

4. Conclusion

This study has revealed a significant gap in postgraduate students' ability to recognize core authenticity signals on cloned Facebook pages of reputable Nigerian newspapers such as Daily Trust and Vanguard. Quantitative data show that less than 14% of respondents were able to identify the absence of verification badges a primary marker of expertise according to the Media Credibility Framework while a slightly higher percentage (around 20%) relied on superficial cues like logos and name similarity. This pattern suggests a heavy dependence on surface-level heuristics. Qualitative responses further confirmed this tendency, with students often defaulting to visual inspection ("I often check the logo first...") rather than engaging in deeper, systematic verification through URL or badge checks. These findings point to a pressing need for procedural literacy in the evaluation of online news content, especially in high-stakes digital environments where cloned content is designed to exploit such cognitive shortcuts.

In light of these findings, our theoretical analysis shows that existing models of media credibility particularly the Media Credibility Framework and Trust-in-Media Theory require extension. While these models emphasize the importance of motivation, our results suggest that motivation alone is insufficient for effective verification. Even among highly motivated postgraduate students, there was a notable absence of procedural knowledge needed to engage in central-route processing of authenticity cues such as expertise and integrity. The data also point to institutional shortcomings: the reactive nature of newsroom monitoring (where action is only taken after readers report cloned pages) fails to model proactive verification behavior. Therefore, we propose that theories of media trust be expanded to include verification competence as a distinct and necessary dimension. Bridging this competence gap on the part of both news consumers and producers is essential not only for restoring trust in digital journalism but also for reinforcing the epistemological foundations of media literacy in the digital age.

Despite these valuable contributions, this study is not without limitations. The sample was restricted to three universities in North-West Nigeria, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions or institutions with differing pedagogical

approaches and access to digital tools. Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of the research provides only a snapshot of students' verification abilities, without accounting for how these skills might evolve over time or respond to targeted interventions. The mixed-methods design, while providing both breadth and depth, was limited in its qualitative component to ten interviews. Expanding this to include a broader demographic such as undergraduates, students from non-media disciplines, and newsroom professionals would offer a more nuanced understanding of how peer networks and disciplinary norms influence verification behaviors. For future research, we recommend longitudinal designs that evaluate the impact of digital-verification interventions like the proposed Digital Verification Training (DVT) programme. Comparative studies across different geopolitical zones and social platforms (e.g., X, WhatsApp) would also help uncover contextual challenges and adaptive strategies.

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