Information Seeking and Sharing Practices of Journalists on Social Media in North-Central Nigeria

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Abstract
This study explores the challenges journalists face when using social media to seek and share information for public interest reporting, and how demographic and organisational variables influence these practices. Guided by the Uses and Gratifications Theory and the Diffusion of Innovations Theory, it examines the interplay between individual motivation and institutional adaptation in digital journalism. Using a qualitative design, data were gathered through focus group discussions with twelve purposively selected journalists from Plateau State, Benue State, and the Federal Capital Territory, Nigeria. Thematic analysis revealed recurring challenges such as exposure to misinformation and disinformation, algorithmic bias, verification pressures, infrastructural limitations, restrictive editorial policies, online harassment, and inadequate institutional support. The study further found that demographic factors, including age, experience, and organisational culture, significantly shape journalists' social media engagement patterns. It concludes that Nigeria's digitally stratified newsroom environment presents opportunities for innovation but remains constrained by ethical and systemic barriers. The study recommends continuous digital literacy training, stronger institutional support, and responsive policy frameworks. Its implications are both theoretical, in extending understanding of journalists' digital motivations, and practical, in guiding media organisations towards adaptive and accountable social media practices.

Keywords: Social media; journalism; information seeking and sharing; digital literacy

Introduction

The digital transformation of journalism has fundamentally redefined how information is gathered, verified, and disseminated. With the rise of social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp, journalists now operate in a fast-paced, interactive environment where immediacy, engagement, and accuracy shape professional credibility (Tandoc, 2022; Eldridge, 2020). This shift has repositioned journalists as active participants within algorithmic ecosystems, where audience feedback and digital trends influence not only how news is produced but also how it circulates in the public sphere (Waisbord, 2013). In Nigeria, this digital evolution carries unique implications due to structural, political, and economic constraints that affect media practice. Limited access to official data, political interference, and infrastructural challenges have historically hindered newsgathering (Akinfemisoye, 2023; Abubakar & Yusuf, 2021). Consequently, journalists increasingly rely on social media platforms to source, verify, and distribute information in real time. Social media has thus become an indispensable journalistic tool, facilitating participatory communication and

decentralising traditional gatekeeping roles (Ahmad & Alhassan, 2023). This digital integration, however, introduces new complexities regarding professionalism, ethical accountability, and the balance between speed and accuracy.

Within this broader transformation, information seeking and sharing have emerged as central journalistic functions shaped by technological mediation. Information seeking refers to the deliberate process of searching for knowledge to meet professional needs, while information sharing entails disseminating that knowledge across communication networks (Kim & Sin, 2021; Choo, 2017). On social media, these processes occur dynamically and continuously, influenced by algorithmic visibility, virality, and real-time audience feedback (Bergström & Belfrage, 2022). Although these tools enhance access to diverse sources and foster public engagement, they also expose journalists to misinformation, ethical dilemmas, and verification challenges that threaten the credibility of professional reporting (Hermida, 2022).

The North Central geopolitical zone of Nigeria, comprising Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger, Plateau States, and the Federal Capital Territory, offers a distinctive context for examining these dynamics. This region's ethnic diversity, recurring communal conflicts, and political volatility complicate journalistic operations (Ekeanyanwu, Soola, & Omenugha, 2022). Social media has, therefore, become an alternative platform for journalists to access and disseminate information amid security and infrastructural limitations. Platforms such as WhatsApp and X enable the verification of claims, crowd-sourced reporting, and real-time coverage (Ndinojuo & Okoro, 2020). However, this reliance also exposes journalists to online harassment, surveillance, and algorithmic bias, particularly in an environment marked by insecurity and weak institutional protection (Usaini & Ojo, 2023; Izuogu & Okoro, 2021).

Despite the growing body of literature on digital journalism, empirical evidence from Nigeria's regional contexts remains limited. Existing research tends to emphasise media practices in urban centres such as Lagos, Abuja, and Port Harcourt, while overlooking the experiences of journalists operating in conflict-prone or under-resourced regions (Olufadi, 2020; Eze, 2021). This study, therefore, fills a critical gap by investigating how journalists in North Central Nigeria utilise social media to seek and share information for service-oriented journalism. It explores how demographic and organisational factors shape these practices and how journalists navigate the interplay of innovation, ethics, and institutional constraints in their digital routines.

Ultimately, this study contends that while social media expands the scope of journalistic agency, it also redefines professional boundaries and introduces new vulnerabilities. Understanding how journalists in North Central Nigeria negotiate these tensions is vital for advancing digital literacy, strengthening ethical standards, and enhancing service-oriented reporting. This inquiry leads to a central research problem: How do demographic and organisational variables influence journalists' use of social media to seek and share information for public interest reporting amid Nigeria's socio-political and infrastructural realities?

Literature Review

Review of Concepts

This study revolves around four interrelated concepts: information seeking, information sharing, social media, and service delivery, each integral to understanding journalists' digital practices in contemporary media environments. Information seeking refers to the deliberate, goal-oriented pursuit of knowledge to bridge gaps in understanding (Wilson, 1999; Kuhlthau, 1991). It involves cognitive, emotional, and contextual processes influenced by professional demands and technological environments. Models such as Belkin, Oddy, and Brooks' (1982) Anomalous State of Knowledge and Dervin's (1983) sense-making approach highlight information seeking as both

a cognitive and interactive process. For journalists, this process includes searching, monitoring, and verifying information through social media platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp to enhance news credibility and service reporting.

Information sharing, on the other hand, involves the intentional exchange of data or ideas across interpersonal and organisational boundaries (Hendriks, 1999; Bock & Kim, 2002). It enhances collaboration, reduces uncertainty, and promotes informed decision-making (Taylor, 1986). Journalists share information through both informal digital interactions such as chats and group messages, and formal dissemination via reports, tweets, and public posts on service delivery and accountability. The effectiveness of this process depends on trust, digital literacy, and organisational support (Wasko & Faraj, 2005).

Social media, defined as internet-based platforms that enable interactive user participation (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Boyd & Ellison, 2007), has transformed how journalists source, verify, and disseminate news. Unlike traditional media, social media allows instant audience feedback and participatory reporting (Kietzmann et al., 2011). It thus functions both as a journalistic tool and as a public accountability mechanism. Similarly, service delivery refers to the processes and interactions through which essential services are provided to citizens (Grönroos, 1990; Osborne, 2006). Within journalism, it extends to monitoring, reporting, and evaluating public institutions to ensure transparency and responsiveness. However, social media's openness also exposes journalists to challenges such as information overload, misinformation, algorithmic gatekeeping, and harassment (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018; Posetti et al., 2021). These difficulties are compounded in developing contexts such as Nigeria, where weak infrastructure, political surveillance, and limited policy support hinder verification (Uche & Ngomba, 2020). Moreover, demographic factors such as age, gender, experience, and education shape how journalists use social media for public interest reporting (Aghili & Sanderson, 2017). Younger journalists tend to adopt digital platforms more readily, while organisational policies and resource constraints determine the depth of engagement (Nah & Saxton, 2012).

Review of Empirical Studies

Empirical evidence across developing contexts underscores how journalists negotiate credibility, ethics, and professionalism in social media use. Olise (2022) and Chioma (2024) reveal that journalists perceive social media as both a source of immediacy and a potential credibility risk. Older journalists approach digital content cautiously, while younger ones emphasise speed and visibility. Studies in Nigeria's South-East (Omosotomhe & Olley, 2018; Chukwuma & Agbo, 2016) and South-South regions (Nworah, 2010; Raji, 2016) similarly demonstrate high social media adoption but persistent ethical concerns regarding accuracy and source verification. Akanbi et al. (2022) and Edem (1993) highlight a broader shift in information-seeking behaviour towards digital sources, while Hidayat and Ortiz (2021) and Rahman and Sultana (2024) show that trust and digital literacy are vital determinants of effective online engagement. Ajiogu, Nwamini, and Ewa-Ibe (2024) find that journalists use Facebook extensively for news sourcing and dissemination, mirroring global patterns identified by Udenze (2020). Yet infrastructural challenges and uneven digital skills remain major obstacles (Omosotomhe & Olley, 2018).

Scholars such as Smith and Lee (2017) and Mbeeria (2024) emphasise that ethical literacy and institutional policy shape journalists' online conduct, influencing how they filter and verify content. Onuegbu, Anorue, and Oghwie (2025) add that although journalists possess high awareness of digital tools, limited organisational support curtails full utilisation. Across these studies, consistent gaps persist: most focus on southern Nigeria, neglecting regional contexts such as the North Central zone; few examine social media's contribution to public service delivery; and

many lack theoretical grounding or robust analytical frameworks. Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to fill these gaps by exploring how journalists in North Central Nigeria seek and share information through social media for service delivery, while analysing the influence of demographic and organisational factors.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and the Diffusion of Innovations Theory (DOI), both of which illuminate the interplay between individual motivation and social adoption in journalists' digital practices. UGT (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974) posits that media users actively select platforms to fulfil specific informational and social needs. Within this study, journalists use social media to meet professional objectives such as sourcing, verifying, and disseminating information, and to enhance audience engagement and accountability (Ruggiero, 2000; Kim & Sin, 2021). Although UGT effectively explains individual motivations, it overlooks structural and institutional barriers such as censorship and resource limitations (Choo, 2017).

Complementing UGT, Rogers' (2003) DOI theory explains how new technologies and practices spread within a social system through stages of knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation. The rate of adoption depends on relative advantage, compatibility, and organisational culture. In the Nigerian media context, DOI clarifies how journalists adopt and integrate social media differently depending on institutional capacity, leadership support, and infrastructural access (Onyebadi & Alajemba, 2019). Together, these theories provide a dual lens: UGT focuses on why journalists are motivated to use digital platforms, while DOI addresses how adoption and adaptation occur. This integration allows for a nuanced understanding of journalists' digital engagement in North Central Nigeria, where individual agency interacts with systemic constraints. The combined framework thus offers a balanced interpretation of information-seeking and sharing behaviours, situating them within both psychological and socio-technical dimensions of media transformation.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how journalists in North Central Nigeria seek and share information on social media for service delivery. The qualitative approach was chosen to enable an in-depth understanding of journalists' lived experiences, subjective meanings, and professional negotiations within the evolving digital landscape. As Creswell and Poth (2018) note, qualitative inquiry is particularly suitable for examining complex social phenomena within their natural contexts, allowing participants' voices to illuminate the interplay between structure, agency, and technology. The study's epistemological stance was interpretivist, grounded in the belief that journalistic engagement with social media is contextually and socially constructed. Given the socio-political and infrastructural peculiarities of North Central Nigeria, marked by intermittent connectivity, political volatility, and uneven media resources, a qualitative design provided the most suitable means of capturing the situated realities of journalists' digital practices. This design emphasised depth over breadth, seeking to generate rich, contextualised insights rather than statistical generalisations (Tracy, 2020; Patton, 2015).

Sampling and Participants

Sampling followed a multi-stage purposive strategy designed to ensure both contextual diversity and analytical depth. Three locations: Plateau State, Benue State, and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) were purposively selected due to their vibrant media activities and relative exposure to digital transformation in journalism. Within these settings, journalists were stratified

according to their professional affiliations across print, broadcast, and online media organisations to ensure representational balance. Twelve (12) journalists were purposively recruited four from each location based on their active professional use of social media for news gathering, verification, and dissemination. The sample size was determined by the principle of data saturation, defined as the point at which no new insights or patterns emerged from subsequent interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Saturation was achieved by the tenth interview, but two additional participants were included to confirm the stability of emerging themes. This approach aligns with Mason's (2010) view that in-depth qualitative studies prioritise the richness and complexity of data over numerical adequacy.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which allowed for flexibility, reflexivity, and deeper exploration of participants' perspectives. The interview guide was developed from literature-derived constructs related to social media use, information verification, ethical practice, and organisational culture. Questions were open-ended and adaptive, enabling participants to narrate experiences in their own terms. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was conducted face-to-face. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed verbatim to preserve linguistic and contextual integrity. Prior to data collection, the interview guide underwent expert review by three scholars in mass communication and qualitative methods to ensure content validity and contextual appropriateness. Field notes were also taken to capture non-verbal cues, contextual nuances, and researcher reflections, providing additional layers of meaning for interpretation.

Data Analysis

Data analysis employed thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) six-phase model: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) generation of initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report. This iterative process allowed for inductive coding, where meanings and patterns emerged organically from participants' narratives rather than being imposed by preconceived categories. MAXQDA software facilitated systematic organisation, retrieval, and comparison of data across participants and themes. Analytical rigour was ensured through reflexive engagement, peer debriefing, and multiple readings of transcripts to enhance interpretive depth. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participants for validation of interpretations, ensuring that the analysis authentically represented their lived experiences.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

To ensure trustworthiness, the study adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was reinforced through triangulation of sources, peer review, and member validation. Dependability was maintained by keeping a detailed audit trail of analytic decisions and methodological reflections. Confirmability was strengthened by reflexive journaling, where the researcher documented assumptions, positionalities, and potential biases throughout the research process. Ethical integrity was a central concern at every stage. Participants were provided with informed consent forms outlining the purpose, confidentiality, and voluntary nature of participation. Pseudonyms were used in transcripts and reports to protect identities, and data were securely stored in password-protected files.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

The data were analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2012) six-phase process of thematic analysis: familiarisation, coding, theme development, review, definition, and interpretation. MAXQDA (Version 2020) software facilitated the organisation and retrieval of data. The findings are presented thematically to address the research questions guiding the study.

Research Question 1. What challenges do journalists face when using social media to seek and share information for public interest reporting?

Table 1. Thematic Analysis of Journalists' Challenges in Using Social Media for Public Interest Reporting

Theme	Code Description	Excerpts from Data
1. Misinformation & Disinformation Threats	Journalists struggle to counter viral false content, verify sources, and manage the effects of disinformation.	- "Fake reports get more traction than real ones." (P1) - "Viral videos… I contacted witnesses and used Google Lens to confirm." (P3) - "Deepfakes… I investigated metadata and consulted experts." (P7)
2. Algorithm Bias & Visibility Issues	Algorithms often suppress credible content, especially from rural or marginalized areas, affecting reach.	- "Platform algorithms sometimes suppress my most important posts." (P9) - "Credible stories from rural voices rarely get algorithmic visibility." (P12)
3. Verification Pressures & Speed vs. Accuracy	The pressure to publish quickly impairs proper fact-checking and verification practices.	- "The fast pace makes it difficult to fully verify before sharing." (P5) - "Speed pressures from editors make it hard to double-check." (P11)
4. Technical & Infrastructure Limitations	Poor internet, high data costs, and unreliable electricity affect social media use, especially in rural areas.	- "Internet lag and high data costs slow my work." (P1) - "Spotty internet and power cuts are a major barrier in Kogi." (P5) - "Weak signal in rural coverage zones is a persistent issue." (P9)
5. Organisational and Editorial Constraints	Institutional rules restrict what, how, and when journalists can post content online.	- "We have a guideline not to post breaking news without clearance." (P1) - "Only allowed to post via our official newsroom handles." (P5) - "Policy restricts sharing unedited video clips." (P8)
6. Online Harassment & Surveillance	Journalists face personal threats, trolling, impersonation, and surveillance for reporting sensitive issues.	- "Fake profiles created to discredit my reporting." (P4) - "Trolls threaten to dox me." (P9) - "Faced abuse for covering gender and minority issues." (P12)
7. Digital Literacy & Access to Tools	Limited access to verification tools and inadequate training reduce effectiveness in social media journalism.	- "Lack of access to digital verification tools and audience trust issues." (P7) - "More newsroom-led training in fact-checking tools like InVID." (P1) - "Need platform-specific training… on spotting manipulated content." (P9)

Theme	Code Description	Excerpts from Data
8. Emotional & Psychological Stress	Exposure to online attacks, speed demands, and verification burdens cause mental strain.	- "Trolling messages when covering gender-related stories." (P2) - "Harassed online by fanatics over investigative reports." (P3) - "Veiled threats in my inbox." (P8)
9. Content Moderation & Platform Limitations	Inadequate moderation tools in local languages and lack of ethical content guidance hinder operations.	- "Need local language content moderation tools." (P6) - "More language-sensitive AI filters and ethical reporting refresher courses." (P12)
10. Lack of Institutional Support Systems	Journalists seek legal, technical, and emotional support for dealing with social media pressures.	- "Need institutional legal support and more robust digital security protocols." (P4) - "A digital support fund and access to platform-based journalist protection." (P7)

Source: Thematic Analysis, Participants Interview, February, 2025

Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed ten interrelated challenges that journalists encounter when engaging with social media for public interest reporting in North Central Nigeria. These challenges, ranging from misinformation threats to institutional and psychological pressures, reflect the complex interplay between digital affordances, newsroom constraints, and broader sociotechnical contexts. The analysis showed that journalists face multifaceted difficulties in using social media as a tool for information seeking and dissemination for public interest reporting. The emerging sub-themes include threats of misinformation and disinformation, algorithmic bias, verification pressures, infrastructural limitations, institutional restrictions, online harassment, limited digital literacy, emotional stress, content moderation gaps, and inadequate institutional support.

A recurring theme across participants' responses was the threat of misinformation and disinformation. Journalists frequently encounter viral content that is misleading or fabricated, which complicates their efforts to verify facts before publication. As one participant noted, "Fake reports get more traction than real ones," highlighting the competitive disadvantage that accurate journalism faces in the digital environment. This challenge is compounded by the emergence of deepfakes and AI-generated content, which further blur the line between authenticity and falsehood. Participants reported using advanced tools such as Google Lens and metadata verification; however, these tools remain insufficient in the face of increasingly sophisticated digital manipulation. Closely related to this is the issue of algorithmic bias and visibility constraints, where credible reports are often suppressed by platform algorithms that privilege engagement-driven content. Journalists expressed frustration that their most socially valuable stories, particularly those from rural or marginalised communities, receive limited reach due to algorithmic filtering. This reflects global concerns about the role of platform algorithms in distorting public visibility of information, thereby limiting journalism's capacity to inform and mobilise.

Another major challenge identified was the speed-versus-accuracy dilemma, reflecting the pressure to publish or share updates instantly. Participants acknowledged that social media's real-time nature demands rapid content production, often at the expense of thorough verification. As one journalist stated, "The fast pace makes it difficult to fully verify before sharing." This pressure generates ethical and professional risks, as journalists must balance timeliness with credibility in

their reporting. Technical and infrastructural limitations further complicate social media usage for journalists, particularly those working in underdeveloped or rural contexts. Poor internet connectivity, high data costs, and unreliable electricity supply emerged as persistent barriers. These limitations restrict journalists' ability to upload multimedia content, engage audiences, and participate effectively in online news cycles. The challenge of infrastructural inadequacy is especially pronounced in states such as Kogi and other rural coverage zones, highlighting structural inequalities in digital journalism access across Nigeria.

The findings also underscore organisational and editorial constraints that regulate how journalists interact online. Many participants reported working under restrictive editorial policies that prohibit spontaneous or independent posting without clearance from their newsrooms. While these institutional controls aim to maintain professionalism, some journalists viewed them as barriers to innovation and real-time engagement with audiences. Public-sector media, in particular, were found to enforce stricter posting guidelines compared to private media organisations. A significant concern expressed by participants was online harassment and surveillance. Journalists covering politically sensitive, gender-related, or minority issues reported being targets of trolling, impersonation, and cyberbullying. Such experiences have psychological and professional repercussions, often leading to self-censorship. This aligns with broader research indicating that online harassment undermines press freedom and the mental well-being of media practitioners. Furthermore, the theme of digital literacy and access to tools emerged as critical. Several participants acknowledged that they lacked adequate training and access to advanced digital verification or monitoring tools such as InVID or CrowdTangle. This deficiency limits journalists' capacity to counter misinformation effectively, highlighting the need for newsroom-led training and the integration of digital safety modules into professional development programmes.

Research Question 2. How do demographic and organisational variables influence journalists' use of social media for service delivery?

Table 2. Thematic Analysis of Demographic and Organisational Variables Influencing Journalists' Social Media Use

Themes	Codes	Description	Excerpts from Participants
1. Age and Digital Literacy	Youthful Fluency	Younger journalists use social media intuitively, showing high digital literacy.	"Being 24, I grew up with digital tools, so using Instagram or TikTok for news feels natural." – P4 "At 29, I find it easy to switch between platforms and adapt to digital trends." – P10
	Tech Adaptation by Older Journalists	Older journalists are more cautious and require effort to adapt to digital tools.	"At 45, I've had to make a conscious effort to learn." – P2 "I'm in my 50s and still rely on younger colleagues to help with social media tools." – P6
	Generational Usage Divide	Younger journalists use visuals and trends; older ones prefer formality and structure.	"We're faster with trends, hashtags, and visuals. Older ones post links only." – P4 "Older journalists are more formal and selective." – P2
2. Organisational Policy and Culture	Restrictive Policies	Government or conservative organisations discourage or limit social media use.	"Our policy is strict; we must avoid anything political or controversial." – P2 "We're advised not to post anything

Themes	Codes	Description	Excerpts from Participants
			that contradicts government positions." – P6
	Flexible Guidelines	Private or progressive organisations offer flexible or encouraging policies.	"Policies exist, but they're flexible, we're trusted to use good judgment." – P8 "Yes, our organisation actively monitors what we post. It's part of our review process." – P7
	Editorial Expectations	Organisational expectations influence frequency and style of posting.	"We're encouraged to post updates and link back to our website." – P1 "We're expected to post official stories only. No personal commentary." – P12
3. Type of Media Ownership	Private vs. Public Media Divide	Private media houses are more digitally driven, creative, and liberal in social media use.	"Private media is more active and digital-friendly." – P1 "In private media, social media is a strategy. In public, it's a risk." – P8
	Government Media Limitations	Journalists in public organisations face constraints on public engagement.	"Government media is conservative. We avoid public debates or criticisms." – P12 "We can't post anything unofficial in government media." – P5
4. Training and Professional Development	Limited or Unequal Access	Social media training is inconsistent or targeted only at younger staff.	"Only the younger reporters get selected for training programs." – P6 "None at all. We learn on the job." – P2
	External Support and NGO Training	Some journalists access training via partnerships with NGOs or donors.	"We got training from a donor agency on digital safety and storytelling." – P8 "Our newsroom partners with an NGO for digital media workshops." – P12
	Need for Capacity Building	Participants emphasize the need for regular and structured digital training.	"Regular digital skills training should be mandatory." – P1 "There needs to be more training on ethical storytelling and audience engagement online." – P12
5. Institutional Encouragement and Incentives	Encouragement to Use Platforms	Some organisations actively promote social media use as part of reporting duties.	"Encouraged. It's part of our KPIs." – P1 "Yes, we're reminded to be active online." – P10
	Management Apathy or Discouragement	Others either discourage use or remain neutral, affecting engagement.	"Management prefers we use official channels." – P2 "I don't feel any support or discouragement." – P9
	Incentives and Performance Links	Journalists suggest incentives or professional recognition for effective use.	"Provide incentives for journalists who consistently use social media to highlight important community issues." – P6
6. Experience, Beliefs, and Risk Perception	Empowerment through Social Media	Many see social media as revolutionary for journalism and public engagement.	"It's been a game-changer. I've broken stories faster than traditional channels ever could." – P1

Themes	Codes	Description	Excerpts from Participants
			"Social media gives journalists a voice beyond the newsroom." – P12
	Risk and Trust Concerns	Older or less tech-savvy journalists express skepticism or fear of social media.	"I don't trust social media that much." – P9 "I worry about the long-term credibility of journalism when anyone can 'go live' and claim authority." – P6
	Workload and Mental Stress	The pressure to constantly engage and fear of backlash also affects use.	"The pressure to stay visible is high, and mistakes can go viral." – P2 "It can be overwhelming without organisational support." – P3

Source: Thematic Analysis, Participants Interview, February, 2025

Findings from the table above revealed several intersecting dimensions: age and digital literacy, organisational culture, type of media ownership, access to training, institutional incentives, and individual risk perception. The findings indicate that age is a significant determinant of social media fluency among journalists. Younger journalists (under 30) exhibited higher levels of adaptability, creativity, and confidence in using social media platforms such as Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and TikTok for news dissemination. They tend to incorporate visual storytelling, hashtags, and trending formats into their professional routines. In contrast, older journalists displayed a more cautious approach, emphasising credibility, formal tone, and editorial gatekeeping. As one participant admitted, "At 45, I've had to make a conscious effort to learn," highlighting a generational divide in digital adaptability. This suggests that newsroom cultures must balance intergenerational learning and mentorship to bridge the digital skills gap.

Organisational policy and culture also emerged as a defining factor. Journalists in private or progressive media environments described relatively flexible and encouraging policies that promote social media engagement. They reported having the autonomy to experiment with digital storytelling, provided that ethical guidelines are observed. Conversely, journalists in government or publicly owned media houses operate under restrictive frameworks that discourage engagement with politically sensitive or controversial topics. Such environments tend to stifle innovation and reduce the dynamism of journalistic expression online. Similarly, the type of media ownership significantly influences the scope of social media use. Private media organisations were characterised by digital openness and creativity, with social media integrated into newsroom routines and strategic communication. Government-owned institutions, on the other hand, were marked by conservative editorial hierarchies and bureaucratic controls. These structural contrasts underscore the broader institutional inequalities between public and private sector journalism in Nigeria's digital landscape.

The findings also emphasise the role of training and professional development in shaping social media competence. Participants revealed that access to digital skills training is uneven, with younger journalists often prioritised for such opportunities. In many cases, external agencies, such as NGOs and donor organisations, serve as the primary providers of digital media capacity building. However, respondents highlighted the need for regular, in-house training sessions focusing on ethical storytelling, audience engagement, and digital safety. This points to the necessity of institutionalising digital capacity development as a continuous professional practice rather than an occasional event. Another important dimension is institutional encouragement and incentives. Some media organisations actively promote social media participation by linking it to performance evaluation or key performance indicators (KPIs). Others, however, remain indifferent

or discouraging, resulting in uneven engagement levels across the sector. Several journalists suggested that incentive schemes or recognition for impactful online reporting could motivate more consistent participation. Also, individual beliefs, experience, and risk perception mediate how journalists engage with social media. While younger and digitally fluent journalists view social media as empowering and transformative, older or less tech-savvy colleagues approach it with caution, citing concerns about credibility, privacy, and ethical boundaries. Additionally, the emotional labour associated with maintaining visibility and managing potential backlash contributes to mental strain. These findings suggest that journalists' use of social media for service delivery is not merely a function of technological availability but is deeply influenced by social, organisational, and psychological factors.

Discussion of Findings

This chapter discusses the key findings of the study in relation to its two guiding research questions: (1) What challenges do journalists face when using social media to seek and share information for public interest reporting? and (2) How do demographic and organisational variables influence journalists' use of social media for service delivery? The discussion is situated within the frameworks of Uses and Gratifications Theory and Diffusion of Innovations Theory and interpreted against existing scholarly literature on digital journalism, social media, and professional practice in developing media systems.

Challenges Journalists Face When Using Social Media for Public Interest Reporting

The study identified ten interrelated challenges shaping journalists' experiences with social media in North Central Nigeria. The most pervasive of these was the threat of misinformation and disinformation, which participants unanimously described as undermining journalistic credibility. Journalists noted that false information spreads faster than verified reports, creating constant pressure to verify and correct misleading narratives. This pattern supports Tandoc et al. (2020) and Wardle (2018), who assert that the virality of misinformation threatens journalism's gatekeeping role in the digital age. Despite the adoption of verification tools such as Google Lens and metadata analysis, participants acknowledged the difficulty of maintaining credibility in a "post-truth" environment dominated by user-generated content.

Algorithmic filtering on platforms such as Facebook and X (formerly Twitter) also emerged as a major barrier. Journalists perceived that opaque algorithms prioritise sensational or viral content over factual, public-interest reporting, thereby distorting visibility and engagement. This aligns with Bucher (2018) and Noble (2018), who argue that algorithmic curation privileges attention-grabbing material at the expense of democratic inclusivity. For journalists covering underrepresented communities, this structural bias constrained their capacity to amplify marginalised voices through digital platforms. A third challenge related to speed and ethical pressure. The demand for immediacy in social media reporting frequently conflicted with journalism's traditional emphasis on accuracy and verification. Respondents described the tension between maintaining professional credibility and meeting audiences' expectations for instant updates, often resulting in stress and ethical compromise. Carlson (2018) conceptualises this tension as part of the temporal transformation of journalism, whereby the race for speed redefines the value system of newswork.

Infrastructural deficits, including unreliable internet access, high data costs, and erratic electricity, further limited journalists' digital participation, particularly in rural contexts. These findings echo Uwalaka and Watkins' (2018) argument that infrastructural inequalities shape journalistic practice across Africa. Such digital disparities not only reduce productivity but also reinforce existing socio-geographical divides in information access. Institutional restrictions were

also prominent, particularly in government-owned media organisations. Journalists reported that rigid editorial policies and bureaucratic clearance systems constrained real-time audience engagement and spontaneous reporting. These findings support Hanitzsch and Vos's (2018) view that newsroom hierarchies persist as powerful gatekeeping structures even within the participatory logic of social media. Consequently, journalists in state media often operated within risk-averse environments that prioritise message control over civic dialogue.

Another widespread concern was online harassment and psychological risk. Both male and female journalists recounted experiences of trolling, cyberstalking, and impersonation when reporting politically sensitive or gender-related issues. This echoes findings by Chen et al. (2020) and Posetti et al. (2021), who highlight the global rise of networked harassment targeting journalists. The emotional toll manifested in fear, anxiety, and occasional self-censorship, consistent with the "chilling effect" described by Marwick and Lewis (2017). In addition, participants reported limited access to digital verification tools and inadequate training opportunities. While some newsrooms offered capacity-building workshops, most were irregular or selectively targeted at younger staff or urban-based reporters. This aligns with Tandoc et al. (2021) and UNESCO (2023), who underscore the importance of continuous digital literacy as a foundation for ethical social media journalism. The uneven distribution of such opportunities perpetuates generational and institutional skill gaps.

Linguistic and cultural moderation issues also emerged, as journalists highlighted the absence of localisation in content moderation tools and ethical frameworks for indigenous languages. This resonates with Graham and Dutton's (2020) argument that global digital platforms frequently overlook local linguistic and cultural dynamics, resulting in partial or distorted representation. digital safety funds, and counselling programmes for journalists facing digital intimidation. This corroborates Alhassan's (2020) assertion that institutional resilience and policy protection are critical for safeguarding press freedom in the digital age.

Influence of Demographic and Organisational Variables on Journalists' Use of Social Media

Findings indicate that both personal characteristics and institutional contexts significantly influence journalists' digital practices, confirming assumptions within Uses and Gratifications Theory and Diffusion of Innovations Theory. A prominent pattern observed was the generational divide in social media competence and creativity. Younger journalists, often digital natives, demonstrated higher adaptability, employing innovative storytelling formats on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and X. In contrast, older journalists, typically digital immigrants (Prensky, 2001), displayed cautious engagement and relied on younger colleagues for technical guidance. This generational distinction mirrors Uwalaka's (2022) findings that age strongly correlates with digital adoption and confidence among Nigerian journalists.

Organisational culture and ownership structure also emerged as strong determinants of social media use. Journalists from public or government-owned outlets described restrictive environments discouraging independent commentary or off-duty posting. Conversely, those in private or hybrid media enjoyed greater editorial freedom and creative autonomy. This dichotomy aligns with Shoemaker and Reese's (2014) hierarchical model of influence, which posits that institutional structures strongly mediate journalistic routines and autonomy.

Participants from private media organisations reported a culture of digital innovation and experimentation, supported by management's emphasis on audience engagement. By contrast, those in state-owned media lamented bureaucratic inertia, risk aversion, and rigid command chains that inhibit responsiveness. This reflects Okoro and Oyedepo's (2020) observation that

institutional inertia in government-controlled media often constrains innovation and accountability in Nigeria.

Training and capacity-building disparities also reflected organisational priorities. Respondents noted that newsroom training programmes were inconsistent or selective, often benefiting urban-based or younger staff. NGO-led workshops filled some gaps, highlighting the sector's dependence on external interventions for digital literacy. Nyamnjoh (2021) contends that reliance on donor-driven capacity building perpetuates structural dependency and weakens institutional ownership of digital transformation. The study also found that incentive structures varied widely across organisations. While some media houses integrated social media engagement into staff performance evaluations and key performance indicators (KPIs), others regarded it as peripheral to formal duties. Journalists advocated for institutional policies that reward innovative digital reporting, consistent with Deuze's (2020) call to redefine newsroom cultures that value hybrid professionalism in a convergent media environment. Finally, journalists' personal beliefs about social media revealed a spectrum of perceptions, from optimism about empowerment to apprehension about ethical and reputational risks. This duality reflects Hermida's (2019) argument that journalists continually negotiate between traditional professional norms and emerging digital expectations. The study demonstrates that both demographic and organisational factors act as filters through which social media adoption and utilisation occur. Age, ownership, policy environment, and access to training collectively shape how journalists perceive, appropriate, and sustain their digital practices.

Viewed through the lens of Uses and Gratifications Theory and Diffusion of Innovations Theory, the findings not only validate UGT's premise that individual motivations drive media use but also support DOI Theory, which explains the uneven rates of technology adoption based on perceived usefulness, organisational support, and compatibility with existing professional norms.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that journalists in North Central Nigeria actively engage with social media platforms as vital tools for information seeking, content dissemination, and audience interaction in public interest reporting. However, their experiences reveal significant challenges that shape the quality and efficiency of journalistic service delivery. Demographic and organisational variables also influence journalists' social media practices. Younger journalists demonstrate higher digital fluency and adaptability, while older counterparts often exhibit cautious engagement due to limited training and risk aversion. Similarly, private media organisations show greater flexibility and innovation compared to state-owned institutions, where bureaucratic and political controls restrict online interaction. Based on these insights, the study recommends continuous digital capacity-building programmes for journalists to enhance verification and fact-checking skills. Media organisations should establish clear and supportive social media policies that protect journalists' autonomy while ensuring ethical accountability. Furthermore, government and professional bodies should provide legal and psychological support frameworks to mitigate harassment and promote safe digital practices.

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