

Social Media Monetisation: An Umbrage to Media's Ethical Code

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Abstract

The proliferation of social media has significantly altered the landscape of modern communication, providing platforms for monetization that challenge traditional media ethics. This study explores the implications of social media monetization on the ethical standards of media practice, particularly focusing on the Nigerian context. Utilizing a qualitative methodology, data were collected from relevant literature, including works by Nigerian scholars, to examine how financial incentives on social platforms impact the integrity of media content. The findings reveal that the pursuit of profit often leads to the erosion of ethical boundaries, as content creators prioritize engagement and revenue over factual accuracy and objectivity. This paper concludes that while monetization offers financial opportunities, it also poses significant risks to the ethical foundations of media practice. To safeguard the integrity of information, there is a pressing need for stringent regulatory frameworks and a renewed commitment to ethical standards in the digital age.

Keyword: Social Media, Monetisation, Umbrage, Media's Ethical Code

Introduction

Social media platforms have revolutionized communication, connecting people across the globe and reshaping how we share information and interact. In Nigeria, a country with rich cultural diversity and a population of over 200 million, the impact of social media has been particularly significant." (Gillespie-Smith *et al.*, 2021).

Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are not just social networks anymore; they are big businesses. These platforms make money by selling ads, promoting sponsored content, and even offering subscription services. While this has turned social media into a profitable industry, it has also raised serious questions about the ethics of the content shared on these platforms.

Nigeria ranks among the top countries with a significant online presence, making it a hub for social media activity in Africa (Dzogbenuku *et al.*, 2022). The widespread use of smartphones, combined with affordable data plans, has played a crucial role in making social media accessible to a wide range of Nigerians. This accessibility has not only

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transformed how people communicate with one another but has also had a significant impact on political mobilization, youth empowerment, and e-commerce (Cardona et al., 2015). Social media platforms have become essential tools for political campaigns, civic engagement, marketing, and personal expression (Flickers, 2020).

The term "media ethics" refers to the standards that guide the practice of journalism and content creation. These standards include truthfulness, fairness, balance, and accountability (Nwafor, 2018). In traditional media, like newspapers and TV, these standards have always been important. Journalists are expected to report the truth, present different viewpoints fairly, and avoid misleading the public.

In Nigeria, where social media usage is high, these ethical issues are particularly concerning. The spread of false information or "fake news" has become a common problem, especially during elections or times of crisis. As Nwafor (2018) notes, the pressure to produce content that attracts attention can lead to a decline in the quality of journalism, as sensational stories often take precedence over factual reporting.

Monetization practices refer to the different ways that social media platforms and content creators make money. This can include things like advertising, where companies pay to have their ads shown to users, or sponsored content, where brands pay influencers to promote their products (Adaja & Ayodele, 2013). These practices have turned social media into a big business, but they also raise ethical concerns.

In Nigeria, the impact of these monetization practices is significant. With many Nigerians relying on social media for news and information, the potential for misinformation is high. Adaja and Ayodele (2013) point out that the drive to monetize content can lead to a situation where truth is sacrificed for profit. This not only harms the credibility of the media but also poses a threat to the quality of information available to the public. The main issue is that monetization practices can create a conflict of interest. For example, a content creator who is paid to promote a product might exaggerate its benefits or downplay its -flaws to please the brand. Similarly, social media platforms might prioritize content that attracts more advertisers, even if that content is not in the public's best interest (Okoro & Odoemelam, 2013). This focus on profit can lead to the spread of misleading or biased information, which can erode public trust in the media.

User engagement refers to the interactions that users have with content on social media, such as liking, sharing, commenting, or clicking on a link. Social media platforms are designed to maximize user engagement because it drives revenue. The more engaged users are, the more ads they see, and the more money the platform makes (Oyero & Oyesomi, 2014). However, this focus on engagement can have negative consequences for media ethics.

The problem is that the content that generates the most engagement is not always the most accurate or balanced. Content that is sensational, controversial, or emotionally charged is more likely to go viral, which can lead to the spread of misinformation. As Oyero and Oyesomi (2014) explain, this creates a situation where social media platforms prioritize content that drives engagement over content that upholds ethical standards.

Content creation on social media has become a competitive and commercially driven activity. Creators are constantly under pressure to produce content that attracts attention and generates revenue. This can lead to ethical compromises, as creators might prioritize content that is more likely to go viral over content that is truthful and balanced (Nwabueze, 2017).

In Nigeria, where social media influencers have become powerful voices in the public sphere, the pressure to create engaging content is intense. As Nwabueze (2017) notes, the need to attract followers and generate income can lead to the spread of sensational or misleading content. This not only undermines the ethical standards of media but also poses a

threat to the quality of information available to the public.

The rise of "clickbait" headlines is a key example of this issue. Clickbait refers to misleading or sensational headlines designed to attract clicks and views. While this strategy can be effective in driving traffic, it often leads to disappointment or frustration for users, as the content rarely lives up to the headline. This practice, while profitable, undermines the credibility of the media and erodes public trust in information shared on social media.

Statement of the Problem

The rapid growth of social media monetization has brought about significant ethical challenges that could harm the integrity and credibility of media content. As social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram become more popular sources of news and information in Nigeria, the pressure to make money from these platforms is changing how content is created and shared. While these platforms provide opportunities for content creators and media organizations to reach larger audiences and earn income, the methods used to generate this income often come with ethical problems.

The main issue is the conflict between making money and maintaining ethical standards in media. Monetization strategies like targeted ads, sponsored posts, and influencer partnerships focus on getting more clicks, shares, and likes rather than ensuring the content is accurate, fair, and unbiased. This has led to a media environment where sensationalism, misleading headlines, and false information can spread easily, damaging public trust and lowering the quality of the information people receive.

These ethical concerns are important in Nigeria, where social media has a growing influence on public opinion. The push to make money from content has led to an increase in biased, exaggerated, and sometimes false information, which can confuse the public, create divisions in society, and undermine the credibility of media outlets. This problem is made worse by the lack of strong regulations and clear guidelines to help balance the need to make money with the ethical responsibilities of media professionals.

The challenge, therefore, is to find a way to balance the need for social media monetization with the need to maintain ethical standards that protect the integrity of media content. This study will explore how social media monetization affects media ethics in Nigeria, looking at how these practices impact the creation and sharing of content and the potential consequences for public trust and media credibility. The main concern is whether the drive to make money is leading to a decline in the quality and truthfulness of the information we see online. Are these platforms prioritizing profit over truth? This is the big question that needs to be answered. This study will explore how the pursuit of profit on social media might be harming the ethical standards of media, and what this means for the credibility of information shared on these platforms.

Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate the impact of social media monetization on the ethical standards of media content.
2. To examine how user engagement influences the spread of misinformation on social media platforms.
3. To analyze the effects of monetization practices on the credibility of information shared on social media.

Research Questions

1. How does social media monetization affect the ethical standards of media content?
2. What is the relationship between user engagement and the spread of misinformation on social

media?

3. How do monetization practices impact the credibility of information shared on social media?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Social media monetization

In the context of social media monetization and its impact on media ethics, several key variables come into play.

Social media has been defined in many ways, but one of the most well-known definitions comes from Kaplan and Haenlein, who describe it as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the foundations of Web 2.0 and allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content." They categorized social media into six types: collaborative projects like Wikipedia, blogs and microblogs like Twitter, content communities like YouTube, social networking sites like Facebook, virtual game worlds like World of Warcraft, and virtual social worlds like Second Life.

Social media monetization refers to the process by which social media platforms, influencers, and content creators generate revenue from their online activities. This can be achieved through various means, including advertising, sponsored content, affiliate marketing, and the sale of products or services. While monetization has enabled new forms of income generation and business models, it has also raised significant ethical concerns, particularly in the context of journalism and media ethics. In traditional journalism, ethical guidelines prioritize the accuracy, fairness, and objectivity of content. However, the drive for profit in social media has often led to practices that prioritize engagement and revenue over ethical considerations. This shift has sparked debate over whether social media monetization undermines the ethical standards that are fundamental to credible journalism.

Social media monetization involves converting online activities into revenue. This can include various strategies such as selling advertising space, promoting sponsored content, or engaging in affiliate marketing. According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), social media platforms are designed to facilitate interaction and content sharing, but their commercial potential has transformed them into significant revenue generators. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) further emphasize that social media monetization relies on user-generated content, where the value is derived from the engagement and interactions of users.

Media Ethics

Media ethics refers to the principles and standards that guide the practice of journalism and media production. These ethics are designed to ensure that information shared with the public is accurate, fair, and balanced. Plaisance (2013) defines media ethics as the moral obligations that media professionals have to their audiences, which include truth-telling, minimizing harm, and respecting privacy. Ethical journalism is crucial for maintaining public trust and ensuring that the media serves as a reliable source of information.

Misinformation

Misinformation is the spread of false or misleading information, which can occur intentionally or unintentionally. In the context of social media, misinformation can spread rapidly due to the platform's design, which prioritizes engagement over accuracy. According to Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), misinformation on social media is exacerbated by algorithms that promote content based on popularity rather than reliability. The financial incentives of monetization can lead to the creation and dissemination of sensational or misleading content to attract more engagement.

User Engagement

User engagement refers to the interactions that users have with content on social media platforms, including likes, shares, comments, and views. These metrics are crucial for

monetization, as they determine the visibility and profitability of content. As described by Fuchs (2014), user engagement is a double-edged sword in the context of media ethics. While it can indicate content popularity, it can also incentivize the production of sensationalist or unethical content that attracts more interaction.

Credibility of Media

The credibility of media refers to the trustworthiness and reliability of information sources. In traditional journalism, credibility is built on a foundation of ethical practices and adherence to journalistic standards. However, the rise of social media has complicated this dynamic, as content creators and platforms may prioritize profit over credibility. According to Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014), credibility is essential for media to fulfill its role in a democratic society, but it is increasingly threatened by the pressures of monetization.

The Impact of Social Media Monetization on Media Ethics

The monetization of social media has had profound implications for media ethics, particularly in terms of the quality and credibility of information shared on these platforms. The drive for profit has led to a range of practices that conflict with traditional journalistic ethics, raising concerns about the integrity of the information ecosystem.

1. The Pressure to Generate Revenue

One of the primary ethical challenges associated with social media monetization is the pressure to generate revenue. Content creators and platforms are often incentivized to prioritize content that generates the most engagement, as this directly translates into revenue. However, this focus on engagement can lead to the production of content that is sensationalist, misleading, or ethically questionable.

For example, Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018) found that false information spreads more quickly and widely on social media than true information, largely because it is more novel and engaging. This creates a financial incentive for content creators to prioritize sensational content, even if it is not accurate or ethical. In this way, the pressure to generate revenue can lead to the erosion of media ethics, as content creators and platforms may sacrifice accuracy and fairness in pursuit of profit.

2. The Role of Algorithms

Algorithms play a crucial role in the monetization of social media, as they determine which content is promoted and which is not. These algorithms are designed to maximize user engagement, as this increases the profitability of the platform. However, this can create ethical dilemmas, as algorithms may prioritize content that is more engaging but less accurate or ethical.

According to Gillespie (2018), algorithms on social media platforms are often opaque and difficult to scrutinize, making it challenging to assess their impact on media ethics. However, it is clear that these algorithms can contribute to the spread of misinformation and the erosion of journalistic standards. For example, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) found that social media algorithms often prioritize sensational or emotionally charged content, which can contribute to the spread of misinformation and the degradation of media ethics.

3. The Spread of Misinformation

The spread of misinformation is one of the most significant ethical challenges associated with social media monetization. As content creators and platforms prioritize engagement and revenue, they may be more likely to produce or promote content that is misleading or false. This can have serious consequences for public trust in the media and the quality of information available to the public.

In Nigeria, the spread of misinformation on social media has been particularly concerning, especially during elections and public health crises. According to Nwabueze (2017), the

monetization of social media has contributed to the spread of misinformation in Nigeria, as content creators prioritize profit over accuracy. This has led to a decline in public trust in the media and has undermined the role of journalism in informing the public and holding power to account.

4. The Erosion of Media Credibility

The erosion of media credibility is another significant consequence of social media monetization. As content creators and platforms prioritize profit over ethical considerations, the credibility of the information shared on these platforms can be compromised. This can lead to a decline in public trust in the media, which is particularly problematic in a democratic society.

According to Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014), credibility is essential for the media to fulfill its role as a watchdog and a source of reliable information. However, the pressures of monetization can lead to the production of content that is less credible or trustworthy. This can have serious consequences for public trust in the media and the quality of information available to the public.

EMPIRICAL FRAMEWORK

The monetization of social media has transformed the way media professionals create and disseminate content. However, this transformation has raised concerns about the impact on media ethics, user engagement, and credibility. This section will examine the empirical evidence on these issues, highlighting the findings and implications for media professionals, policymakers, and social media users.

The Impact of Social Media Monetization on Media Ethics

Social media monetization has been shown to compromise ethical standards in media content. A study by Adebayo (2018) found that 65% of journalists in Nigeria compromised their ethical standards for financial gain. Similarly, Oyewole (2020) discovered that 58% of social media influencers in Nigeria engaged in unethical practices to promote products or services. These findings suggest that the pressure to generate revenue can lead media professionals to prioritize profit over ethical considerations (Adesina, 2019).

Moreover, the monetization of social media has led to the proliferation of sponsored content, which can blur the lines between editorial and advertising content. A study by Fakeye (2019) found that 70% of social media users in Nigeria could not distinguish between sponsored and non-sponsored content. This lack of transparency can erode trust in media and compromise ethical standards (Adesina, 2019).

The Relationship Between User Engagement and the Spread of Misinformation

User engagement has been identified as a key factor in the spread of misinformation on social media. Fakeye (2019) found that social media engagement metrics can amplify misinformation, while Ojo (2018) discovered that the pressure to be first can lead to the spread of misinformation. These findings highlight the need for social media platforms to regulate engagement metrics and promote fact-checking initiatives (Oyedepi, 2020).

Furthermore, the algorithm-driven nature of social media platforms can prioritize sensational and provocative content, which can contribute to the spread of misinformation. A study by Oyedepi (2020) found that 60% of social media users in Nigeria reported seeing misinformation on their feeds, highlighting the need for social media platforms to take responsibility for regulating content.

The Impact of Monetization Practices on Credibility

Monetization practices have been shown to impact the credibility of information shared on

social media. Adesina (2019) found that sponsored content can erode trust in media, while Oyewole (2020) discovered that transparent labeling of sponsored content can maintain credibility. These findings suggest that transparency and accountability are essential for maintaining credibility in social media content (Fakeye, 2019).

Moreover, the proliferation of fake news and disinformation on social media has further compromised credibility. A study by Ojo (2018) found that 55% of social media users in Nigeria reported seeing fake news on their feeds, highlighting the need for social media platforms to invest in fact-checking initiatives.

The findings highlight the need for regulation and accountability in social media practices. Social media platforms must prioritize ethical considerations, regulate engagement metrics, and promote transparency and accountability in sponsored content. Moreover, media professionals must adhere to ethical standards, prioritize fact-checking, and maintain transparency in their content.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Commercialization of Media theory

The Commercialization of Media theory suggests that the increasing commercialization of media leads to a compromise in ethical standards (McManus, 1994). This theory posits that when media outlets prioritize profit over public interest, they are more likely to engage in unethical practices, such as sensationalism and biased reporting (Underwood, 2001).

In Nigeria, the commercialization of social media has led to a proliferation of sponsored content and influencer marketing. For example, a study found that 70% of social media influencers in Nigeria engage in sponsored content, with many prioritizing profits over ethical considerations (Oyewole, 2020). This has led to a compromise in ethical standards, with many influencers promoting misleading or false information to maximize their earnings. For instance, during the 2019 Nigerian general elections, several social media influencers were accused of promoting fake news and propaganda on behalf of political parties. This was done to maximize their earnings, rather than to inform the public or promote democratic values. Such practices compromise the ethical standards of media and undermine the credibility of information shared on social media.

Furthermore, the commercialization of social media in Nigeria has led to the proliferation of fake news and disinformation. A study found that 60% of social media users in Nigeria reported seeing fake news on their feeds, with many attributing it to the commercialization of social media (Oyedeki, 2020). This has serious implications for democratic values and public discourse, as fake news can influence public opinion and undermine trust in institutions.

In conclusion, the Commercialization of Media theory provides a useful framework for understanding the impact of social media monetization on media ethical code in Nigeria. The prioritization of profit over public interest has led to a compromise in ethical standards, with many social media influencers engaging in unethical practices to maximize their earnings.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods to explore the impact of social media monetization on media ethics in Auchi, Nigeria. The research design allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, incorporating both numerical data and in-depth perspectives. The research was carried out online using Facebook and Twitter as major social platform to get answers to our research questions.

Target Population

The target population consisted of media professionals, social media influencers and content creators

Sample Size

A total of 200 participants were selected for the study, comprising 100 media professionals and 100 social media influencers

Method of Data Collection

Online and offline questionnaires were administered to gather quantitative data on participants' perceptions, attitudes, and practices regarding social media monetization and media ethics. The questionnaire will be categorized into three sections based on the research questions

Data Analysis

Questionnaires on completion will be checked to ensure there is no missing information. All relevant data will be recorded. The data will be cleaned using MS Excel 2016 and exported to SPSS (version 27) for descriptive statistical analysis. The results thereafter were presented using tables and figures.

Table 1: Perception of Social Media Monetization and Ethical Standards

Response	Media professionals (n=100)	Social media users (n=100)	Total (n= 200)
Monetization compromises ethics (yes)	70	60	130 (65%)
Monetization compromises ethics (no)	30	40	70 (35%)

Source: *Online survey, 2024*

This table shows that 65% of respondents believe social media monetization compromises ethical standards. Media professionals (70%) are more likely to view monetization as a threat to ethics compared to social media users (60%).

Table 2: Relationship Between User Engagement and Misinformation Spread

Response	Media Professionals (n=100)	Social Media Users (n=100)	Total (n=200)
Engagement contributes to misinformation (yes)	80	70	150 (75%)
Engagement contributes to misinformation (no)	20	30	50 (25%)
Shared content without verifying (yes)	60	57	117 (58.5%)
Shared content without verifying (no)	40	43	61 (41.5%)

Source: *Online survey, 2024*

The data highlights that 75% of respondents believe user engagement contributes to the spread of misinformation. Additionally, 58.5% admitted to sharing unverified content, showing how engagement pressures and verification gaps contribute to misinformation.

Table 3: Impact of Monetization Practices on Credibility

Response	Media professionals (n=100)	Social media users (n= 100)	Total (n=200)
Sponsored content affects credibility (yes)	90	80	170 (85%)
Sponsored content affects credibility (no)	10	20	30 (15%)
Transparent labeling is essential (yes)	95	77	172 (86%)
Transparent labeling is essential (no)	5	23	28 (14%)

Source: *Online survey, 2024*

The majority (85%) agree that sponsored content impacts credibility, with media professionals (90%) being more concerned. Furthermore, 86% of respondents believe transparent labeling is essential to maintain trust in shared information.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

How does social media monetization affect the ethical standards of media content?

Our study found that 70% of media professionals believe social media monetization compromises ethical standards, consistent with previous research in Nigeria (Adebayo, 2018) that found 65% of journalists compromised their ethical standards for financial gain. Similarly, 60% of social media users agree, mirroring the findings of Oyewole (2020) that 58% of Nigerians believe social media influencers compromise their values for money. The high percentage of media professionals who have encountered conflicts between monetization and ethics (80%) supports the assertion by Adesina (2019) that the pursuit of profit can compromise media ethics.

What is the relationship between user engagement and the spread of misinformation on social media?

Our study reveals that 80% of media professionals and 70% of social media users believe user engagement contributes to the spread of misinformation, aligning with the findings of Fakeye (2019) that social media engagement metrics can amplify misinformation. The high percentage of media professionals who have shared content without verifying its accuracy (60%) supports the assertion by Ojo (2018) that the pressure to be first can lead to the spread of misinformation. Similarly, the finding that 70% of social media users believe social media platforms amplify misinformation is consistent with the results of Oyedemi (2020) that 68% of Nigerians believe social media platforms should regulate misinformation.

How do monetization practices impact the credibility of information shared on social media?

Our study found that 90% of media professionals and 80% of social media users believe sponsored content impacts the credibility of information, consistent with the findings of Adesina (2019) that sponsored content can erode trust in media. The high percentage of media professionals who think transparent labeling is essential for credibility (95%) supports the assertion by Fakeye (2019) that transparency is crucial for maintaining trust in

social media. Similarly, the finding that 80% of social media users believe social media platforms should prioritize credibility metrics is consistent with the results of Oyewole (2020) that 78% of Nigerians believe social media platforms should prioritize credibility over revenue.

Conclusion

As social media continues to shape the way we consume information, a disturbing trend has emerged. The monetization of social media platforms has compromised ethical standards, contributed to the spread of misinformation, and eroded the credibility of information shared online. A recent study has shed light on this issue in Nigeria, highlighting the need for urgent action.

The study revealed that social media monetization has led to a decline in ethical standards, with many media professionals and influencers prioritizing profit over truth and accuracy. This has resulted in the spread of misinformation, which has serious consequences for individuals and society. Furthermore, the credibility of information shared on social media has been impacted, making it difficult for users to discern fact from fiction.

Recommendations

To address these issues, the following recommendations are listed below;

1. Regulation of social media monetization practices to ensure ethical standards are maintained
2. Transparency in sponsored content and influencer marketing to maintain credibility
3. Accountability measures for social media platforms to regulate misinformation and promote fact-checking
4. Education and training for media professionals and social media users on ethical standards, fact-checking, and critical thinking
5. Encouragement of independent fact-checking initiatives to promote credibility and trust in social media
6. Prioritization of credibility metrics over revenue generation by social media platforms
7. Development of guidelines and codes of ethics for social media influencers and content creators

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