

**Title: Fake online identities are the discrete criminals of the Instagram platform.**

**Stream: Communities and Social Media**

**Abstract**

Fake online identities have been the main cause of misinformation in today's world following the drastic changes in the digital culture. This paper assesses that fake online identities have the ability to mislead a community through politics, fake news, anonymity and authenticity within the Instagram platform. More analysis is also highlighted on the Generation Z's approach to memes and the impact that fake identities have on the online football community. The pretentious approach engaged by fake online identities to dismantle a political agency has nonetheless been unethical and against the policy of a good governance. Such pretenders have put forward a mirror image of the society who wants to trust a false sense of the third space compared to the actual reality. Moreover, conspiracy theories often make the headlines and these become distressing for the society since it's difficult to trust a reliable source of information online. Within the online football community, some fake online identities utterly fail to respect the person whom they target and thus, create a feeling of xenophobia among the community. Additional research have been made to counteract these fake online impersonations.

Keywords: #fakeonlineidentities #instagram #politics #anonymity #authenticity #thirdspace

Social media has grown into becoming a communicative and collaborative platform, through the emergence of Web 2.0 (Hampton, 2015). This type of modern platform enables individuals around the globe to conform to online communities. Such platform has also enabled users to obtain information on a daily basis without the traditional methods of news gathering (Hampton, 2015). As long as social media benefits the network of individuals on a long term basis, it unfortunately acknowledges the liability of authentic self and anonymity. Since digital culture has

become easily accessible, the presence of fake identities has been largely envisaged (Krombholz et al., 2012). These pretenders act as real persons to lure other users' perception on a given information. This indicates Instagram as being the forefront of the third space world whereby more and more fake accounts are being created to mislead information and invade privacy of active users (Graham et al., 2015). Furthermore, this paper argues that fake online identities have been a strong force in misleading a community within the areas of politics, incidental news, authenticity and the football pyramid.

### **Political Instability**

The significant rise of fake online identities within the digital era has been advocated towards political instability. With this in mind, some modes of gathering information have been considered as fake and politically incorrect towards a government organisation (Allcott et al., 2019). The online community is heavily influenced by online news as it has become one of the easiest and quickest way to obtain articles regarding a given matter. Considerably, fake profiles are created to target an audience who are politically envisioned and who are attached to a political party (Allcott et al., 2019). These fake identities are often associated to mislead the online community about elections through the spreading of fake news towards a governmental alliance. The pretentious approach to gather followers under the basis of a political agenda, has been more or less deemed as unethical for online journalism since such means of news sharing are often anonymous while having the ability to manipulate the mindset of people (Dawes, 2013). The population becomes the 'bait' of politics as they are trapped within the sensationalism of fake political news. In order to gain audience interactions, fake news become the main headlines with an increase number of likes, shares and followings (Mena et al., 2020). For instance, investigations conducted by the US Congress into the spread of misinformation and propaganda during the 2016 presidential election revealed that approximately 20 million Instagram users in the United States were reached by fake accounts created by Russian sources (Mena et al., 2020). As a result, they fail to properly inform the right audience but rightly address the wrong audience. The online community lamentably endorses a certain trust

towards these news as most of them believe the counterfeit facts rather than the reality. Government organisations need to enhance their mode of news distribution in order to avoid any condemnations due to anonymity. This proves that fake online identities have the freedom to control some part of the third space methodology which could in turn gather the wrong sets of audiences towards political bias instead of having political opinions, often leading to misinformation.

### **Incidental News**

Concisely, fake online identities have adopted a new way to gain the audience attention through incidental news (Boczkowski et al., 2018). News present across social media platforms are an unprecedented approach to accumulate various online audiences of all ages to consume news articles. By this means, some fake pages found on Instagram have been able to seize the audience's curiosity towards sensitive news such as the COVID-19 in order to create a certain image on the people's mind (Ali, 2020). These include the sensation of trendy news headline to capture those who frequently surf the web to look for information that interest them and not the other way round. That is, it is not regarded as a news article that is trying to reach its audience but rather the latter who wants to quench their thirst for a news material to be displayed in front of them (Boczkowski et al., 2018). Following the pandemic, several news articles have made the headline within seconds of publishing online. The engagement on the viral information prompted active users to know more about the virus whereby they were being exposed with fake news from fake Instagram pages (Cinelli et al., 2020). While some news highlighted conspiracy theories regarding the origin of the virus, some were misinforming the active online community concerning the number of cases arising. As a consequence, this clarifies that anonymity come in different forms and shapes (Larsson et al., 2012). Despite that the World Health Organisation (WHO) cautioned the population about disinformation, this can still hinder people's perception on the matter as it becomes difficult to find a credible source of information online (Ali, 2020). This unfortunately distresses a society since fake online identities publish news that appear authentic to the general public. A more

concise approach on the matter needs to be applied to control the implication of incidental news across social media platforms.

### **Generation Z and Authenticity**

Aside its interactiveness, Instagram has been an underlying tool in negatively influencing teenagers' authenticity through the involvement of fake profiles. Due to their growing interest of the online world, the Generation Z appeals for more engagement from their followers to have a better grasp of their online identity (Goodyear et al., 2018). Nonetheless, some youngsters feel the need to develop fake online identities, also known as Finsta (Fake Instagram) in order to feel better about themselves in terms of self confidence and self-esteem. The statement made by Charoensukmongkol (2017) demonstrates that the younger online community do depend on the amount of likes they receive and the opinions of others to uphold an evaluation. These have unfortunately encouraged them to falsify their online identity upon the belief that this technique will help them acquire more followers to their platform. This misinformed the younger generation who are in a growing phase. Consequently, the wrong interpretation of social acceptance over the online community has done less in helping those who are psychologically prone to the fake online personality that they project to others. To an extent, the depiction of many celebrities has caused a downturn in the online world, with the definition of "flawlessness" being questioned (Ouvrein et al., 2018). For instance, a teenager may perpetuate his or her favourite public figure's footprint in order to seek social acceptance among his or her followers. The fake impersonation being made through the inclusion of a fake profile explains a lot about the online community and its repercussion it has on an adolescent's lifestyle. Evidently, this assesses the way Instagram's algorithm operates to standardise the viewer's experience yet has been unsuccessful in tackling the main issue.

### **A Community of Memes**

Subsequently, memes have become a trending element in today's world questioning both anonymity and authenticity of the younger public sphere on the Instagram

platform. Memes have somewhat become a humorous way of exchanging a message through the inclusion of digital pictures and texts (Marwick, 2013). However, it is usually the vulnerable people who are prone to face toxicity in the meme world by fake online identities, such those discrimination towards the lower classes or ethnic minorities, racism, sexism and even body shaming. One can therefore make out that the same group of people who tend to be victimised in the real world, are the same ones that are targeted in memes based discrimination, camouflaged as what is currently known as “dark humour” (Neuendorf et al., 2014). As a result, this can have a negative impact on a community or a person’s cultural identity. While memes may project some sense of humour, it can be a terrible means at invading the privacy of a person as well. Fake identities, being mostly anonymous, have made this form of content creation a pivotal aspect at targeting the younger community who are now more exposed with memes. The aspect of memes as a form of freedom of expression within the Instagram platform has by far triggered many individuals’ point of views on different topics (Reade, 2020). As such, it has reached a whole new level of morality within the online community to perceive topics like sexism or even body shaming as something enjoyable rather than regarding it as a serious issue. These misinformed instances can unfortunately instil wrong beliefs or messages in the mindset of the general audience. To another perspective, memes are building a community of essentialism, stereotyping and prejudices which can have severe consequences on a society’s growth. Instagram should therefore have a better acknowledgement in tackling such issue given that the platform helps in publishing user generated contents.

### **The football pyramid**

From this point onwards, the football community has also been affected by the various incrimination of fake online identities. Instagram, being a focal point of this discussion, entails different aspects of being an online football fan, both positively and negatively. Nevertheless, the negative aspects somehow outweighs the positive as footballers have been mostly subjected to racism within the online world (Kilvington & Price, 2017). The involvement of fake online identities has been largely the main

recipient at invoking racist messages to the targeted footballers. For example, in 2017, the Manchester City star, Raheem Sterling, has received racist abuses on his Instagram following his performance on the pitch (Kilvington & Price, 2017). This symbolises that racism on the online platform is still increasing and causing more damage to the player's identity and is hardly benefitting the targeted player. These cases of racism are an alarming issue to be raised in the community be it online or offline since anyone's reputation can be at stake. This further contributes to the demeaning factor of the digital world contemplating fake identities. In addition to the above, some supporters are also concerned by this matter but often degenerate to detect the main root. As a whole, the football community is heavily impacted by xenophobia and the existence of fake online identities often makes it hard to uncover who are behind this plight. From this point onwards, Instagram has encouraged the mere specimen the freedom of creating fake identities, impacting the public sphere at large.

### **The tool to reduce Fake Identities**

The Instagram algorithm, though has its downsides, has favourably its merits in tackling the issue of fake online identities. Self harm on such social platform has gained surface ever since fake profiles paved their way to the online world, affecting an individual's mindset (Scherr et al., 2019). Instagram, being the most used social networking site, has often effectively dealt with these scenarios in order to reduce the number of interactions engaged by online pretenders. Presenting an authentic self within the digital era can sometimes challenge the profiling algorithm to distinguish the fake from the real or vice versa since falsifying online identities has been normalised by many users (Scherr et al., 2019). As a matter of fact, the digital tool has given the online community the freedom to report fake accounts to make it easier for the algorithm to detect and thus, reducing fake accounts which has somehow lead to misinformation. However, the online community still need to be aware about the proper functions of the Instagram platform so that they can collaborate with the mechanism to further help in dealing with the matter in hand more efficiently given the large amount of users present online.

## Conclusion

In the online world, Instagram has undoubtedly benefitted a network of individuals but has at times failed to properly address its audience with factual news. This has been the case as fake online identities have the freedom to misinform its online audience for the basis of audience interaction. It can be for political reasons or for important social issues. The public sphere has been heavily impacted with misinformation and only reporting the fake accounts will not necessarily tackle the issue as hundreds of thousands of fake online identities are being created almost everyday. A potential stricter law may be implemented by the social media platform to be able to cease the creation of fake accounts. A sense of censorship should also be encompassed to properly inform the online community concerning sensitive topics. On top of that, a better education approach based on social media needs to be put forward to provide the younger generation with much knowledge on the topic.

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