



Research Article

Verification Behaviour and Sharing of Unconfirmed Election Results among WhatsApp Users in Anambra State: A Socio-Technical Analysis of Electoral Integrity

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About Article

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of end-to-end encrypted messaging applications has fundamentally altered the landscape of political communication in Nigeria, with WhatsApp emerging as the primary conduit for information exchange during electoral cycles. This study interrogates the verification behaviour and sharing patterns of WhatsApp users in Anambra State with specific reference to unconfirmed election results circulated during the 2021 governorship and 2023 general elections. Anchored on the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB), the research examines the cognitive, emotional, social and structural drivers of misinformation sharing on a closed, encrypted platform. Using a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design and a multi-stage (stratified-cluster-systematic) sampling technique, the study drew a final sample of 1,200 registered voters equally distributed across Anambra State's three senatorial districts (Anambra North, Anambra Central and Anambra South). A structured questionnaire, validated by content experts and pilot-tested for reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.81), was administered electronically, and the data were analysed with Python-based statistical libraries (Pandas, NumPy, SciPy and Statsmodels). Descriptive statistics, Pearson product-moment correlation, multiple linear regression and the chi-square test of independence were applied to answer five research questions and test three hypotheses. The study documents a pronounced verification gap: only 14.0% of respondents reported verifying election-related content often or always before forwarding it, while 65.0% reported doing so rarely or never. A strong negative correlation was found between digital literacy and sharing frequency ($r = -0.83$, $p < .001$), and a multiple regression model containing digital literacy, in-group trust and verification likelihood explained 84.3% of the variance in sharing behaviour ($R^2 = 0.843$, $p < .001$). A chi-square test of independence found no significant association between gender and verification behaviour ($\chi^2(2, N = 1,200) = 0.001$, $p = .999$), indicating that the verification gap is a cross-demographic rather than a gender-specific phenomenon. The study concludes that the unchecked circulation of unconfirmed election results on WhatsApp in Anambra State is structurally produced by the interaction of an information vacuum created by delayed official collation, an architecture of trust that privileges strong social ties over source credibility, and a general deficit in digital and media literacy. The paper recommends real-time result-collation communication by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), targeted lateral-reading literacy campaigns coordinated by the National Orientation Agency (NOA), reform of the Cybercrimes Act to distinguish coordinated inauthentic behaviour from innocent forwarding, platform-level verification prompts, and the prioritisation of Igbo-language fact-checking content.

Introduction

The global democratic landscape is navigating a period of profound transformation driven by the rapid integration of digital communication technologies into the political process. In sub-Saharan Africa, and specifically in Nigeria, this shift has been characterised by the leapfrogging of traditional media infrastructure in favour of mobile-centric, social-media-driven political engagement (Oparaugo, 2021; Targema & Suntai, 2018). Where earlier generations of Nigerian voters depended on newspapers, radio and television for electoral information, the contemporary voter increasingly encounters the political world first through a smartphone screen and, more specifically, through a messaging application whose defining features (encryption, group architecture and low data cost) were never designed with electoral transparency in mind.

Among the platforms available to the Nigerian electorate, WhatsApp has attained near-total dominance, functioning as a digital town hall that facilitates everything from grassroots mobilisation to the real-time, informal reporting of election results as they emerge from polling units (Fisher et al., 2023; Okafor, 2023). Unlike Facebook or X (formerly Twitter), whose content is broadcast into a public, searchable and at least partially moderated space, WhatsApp operates as a lattice of overlapping private and semi-private groups, such as family groups, town-union groups, old students' associations and ward-level political mobilisation groups, through which information moves laterally, rapidly and largely outside the reach of institutional fact-checking.

In Anambra State, a state noted for its vibrant political culture, dense associational life and

high rate of small-business entrepreneurship, WhatsApp has become indispensable to the electorate's everyday experience of politics. The platform's low data requirements, ease of use and group-based architecture suit the Nigerian socio-technical environment, in which data cost, erratic electricity supply and uneven digital literacy continue to shape how citizens access information (O. A. Nwafor et al., 2023; Osuchukwu & Nguzoro, 2020; *Social Media and Voter Behavior during the Pandemic*, 2025). Media content also shapes how Anambra residents evaluate political actors: Aburime and G. U. Nwafor (2025) found that viewership of a televised political programme significantly influenced public perception of the state administration's policies and actions. However, the affordances that empower citizen participation (immediacy, privacy and virality within trusted networks) also facilitate the rapid spread of unconfirmed election results, inflammatory ethnic and party-political narratives and, increasingly, deliberate disinformation manufactured for strategic political ends (Targema & Suntai, 2018; Udupa & Wasserman, 2025). The 2021 governorship and 2023 general elections in Anambra State illustrated this duality: in both cycles, WhatsApp groups were inundated with conflicting collation figures, screenshots purporting to be leaked INEC result sheets and synthetic audio clips attributed to candidates and party officials, several of which continued to circulate for hours after being debunked (Ukwueze, 2026).

The challenge of misinformation on WhatsApp is exacerbated by the platform's encrypted architecture, which creates black boxes of communication that are structurally inaccessible to the large-scale monitoring, content flagging and fact-checking that have

become routine on open platforms (Chagas, 2023; Udupa & Wasserman, 2025). Because messages travel within closed, encrypted groups rather than an open public feed, WhatsApp relies almost entirely on in-group self-policing and on the verification behaviour of ordinary users rather than on platform-level moderation (Fisher et al., 2023; Pasquetto et al., 2022). This shift from public to private dissemination alters the locus of responsibility for electoral information hygiene: where Facebook or X can, at least in principle, be compelled to act on flagged content, the WhatsApp user who receives an unconfirmed result in a family group is, for practical purposes, the last and only line of defence against its further circulation.

It is this individual-level decision point, the moment at which a WhatsApp user decides whether to verify, ignore or forward an unconfirmed election result, that constitutes the central object of this study. Rather than treating misinformation sharing as a uniform behaviour, the study asks what psychological, social and structural conditions make verification more or less likely, and what this implies for the integrity of the electoral information environment in Anambra State. The study is guided by two complementary theories, the Uses and Gratifications Theory and the Theory of Planned Behaviour, which together allow the research to examine both the motivational why of sharing behaviour and the how of the intention-formation process that precedes it.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the significant and growing role of WhatsApp in the Nigerian electoral process, there is a profound disconnect between the volume of political information shared on the platform and the rigour of user-led verification applied to that information before it is

forwarded. In Anambra State, the dissemination of unconfirmed election results has become a recurring phenomenon that threatens to undermine public confidence in the democratic process and, in extreme cases, to incite localised post-election tension and violence. The problem, as this study frames it, has three dimensions.

First, an information vacuum is created by the delay that routinely characterises the official collation of results by INEC. Because ward, local government and state-level collation can take several hours, and considerably longer in contested elections, this vacuum is rapidly filled by unofficial, trending results circulating on WhatsApp. These results are frequently shared without cross-referencing against INEC's Result Viewing Portal (IReV) or other credible sources, and by the time an official result is announced, an unofficial and sometimes fabricated version may already have shaped public expectation and, in some cases, public grievance.

Second, the psychological architecture of WhatsApp, built on strong ties and pre-existing trusted social circles, creates an unexamined sense of reliability for information received from friends, relatives or respected community members. This trust bias reduces the perceived need for independent verification because users conflate the credibility of the sender with the veracity of the content. A result forwarded by one's uncle in a family group is treated very differently from an identical claim encountered on an anonymous public timeline, even though the accuracy of the claim is unaffected by who forwarded it.

Third, the level of media and digital literacy among a large segment of the Anambra electorate remains insufficient to cope with

contemporary disinformation techniques, which now extend to text generated by artificial intelligence, manipulated images and deepfake audio. Many users lack the technical skill to identify a fabricated INEC result sheet or a synthetically generated voice note, and lack the critical disposition, described in the literature as lateral reading, required to resist emotionally charged, identity-confirming narratives long enough to check them.

Taken together, these three conditions, an institutional information vacuum, a trust architecture that discourages scrutiny of strong-tie sources and an unevenly distributed literacy deficit, combine to produce a verification gap whose contours, correlates and predictors remain poorly documented in Anambra State, despite a growing literature on WhatsApp and political communication more broadly (Anunike et al., 2024; Nwankwo et al., 2025). It is this empirical gap that the present study sets out to close.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this research is to investigate the factors influencing the verification behaviour and sharing of unconfirmed election results among WhatsApp users in Anambra State. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. assess the frequency and methods of information verification among WhatsApp users during election periods in Anambra State;
2. identify the socio-psychological and technical barriers that hinder effective verification of election results;
3. examine the relationship between digital literacy and the propensity to share unconfirmed results;
4. analyse the role of social trust and in-

group dynamics in facilitating the viral spread of electoral misinformation; and

5. evaluate the perceived impact and adequacy of the current Nigerian legal and regulatory framework in mitigating online electoral disinformation.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How frequently do WhatsApp users in Anambra State verify election results before sharing them, and what tools or methods do they use?
2. What are the primary cognitive and environmental barriers to verification identified by users in the Anambra electoral context?
3. To what extent does digital literacy influence the sharing patterns of unconfirmed election results?
4. How do strong ties and emotional triggers contribute to the dissemination of misinformation within WhatsApp groups?
5. What are the perceived limitations of existing regulations, such as the Cybercrimes Act, in addressing WhatsApp-based electoral misinformation?

Research Hypotheses

To complement the research questions and enable inferential testing, the following null hypotheses were formulated:

1. H_{01} : There is no significant relationship between digital literacy and the frequency of sharing unconfirmed election results.

2. H₀₂: There is no significant combined predictive effect of digital literacy, in-group trust and verification likelihood on sharing frequency.
3. H₀₃: There is no significant association between gender and verification behaviour.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two complementary theories that together address the motivational and deliberative dimensions of sharing behaviour: the Uses and Gratifications Theory, which explains why users engage with WhatsApp as a source of political information, and the Theory of Planned Behaviour, which provides a structured account of how the intention to share, verified or not, is formed and acted upon.

Uses and Gratifications Theory

The Uses and Gratifications Theory, associated with Katz et al. (1974), holds that individuals are not passive recipients of media content but active agents who select and use specific media to satisfy psychological and social needs. Applied to social media in Nigeria, the theory has been used to explain why undergraduates adopt TikTok for information, entertainment, self-expression and friendship (G. U. Nwafor & Nnaemeka, 2023) and why Anambra voters turned to social media during the 2021 governorship election (Nwankwo et al., 2025). In the Anambra electoral context, the theory suggests that WhatsApp users engage with election-related content in pursuit of several gratifications: social connection and belonging within a political in-group; the surveillance need to stay informed faster than official channels allow; and the status that accrues to a user who is first within a network

to share breaking news of a result. Among Nigerian youths, social media affordances encourage self-presentation and the pursuit of social validation through reactions and shares (G. U. Nwafor et al., 2026), which helps explain the reward attached to being an early sharer. The theory therefore implies that when the anticipated social reward of early sharing is high, users are motivated to forward a claim regardless of its veracity, because the gratification derives from the act and timing of sharing rather than from the accuracy of the content. This reframes misinformation sharing not as a simple failure of judgement but as a response to a genuine, if misdirected, social incentive structure.

Theory of Planned Behaviour

The Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991), which Pundir et al. (2021) applied to fake-news sharing on social media, provides the study's second anchor and a more granular account of the proximate determinants of the intention to share. The theory holds that behavioural intention, and in turn behaviour, is jointly determined by three factors: attitude toward the behaviour (the user's own evaluation of whether sharing an unverified result is acceptable), subjective norms (the perceived pressure from one's reference group to share promptly) and perceived behavioural control (the user's belief in their capacity to verify the content, which this study operationalises primarily through digital literacy) (Pasquetto et al., 2022; Ukwueze, 2026). The theory suits the WhatsApp group environment, where subjective norms are made unusually powerful by the visibility of a group's conversational momentum: a user who sees several members already discussing a purported result experiences strong situational pressure to participate, a pressure the theory predicts will often override a private attitude of caution.

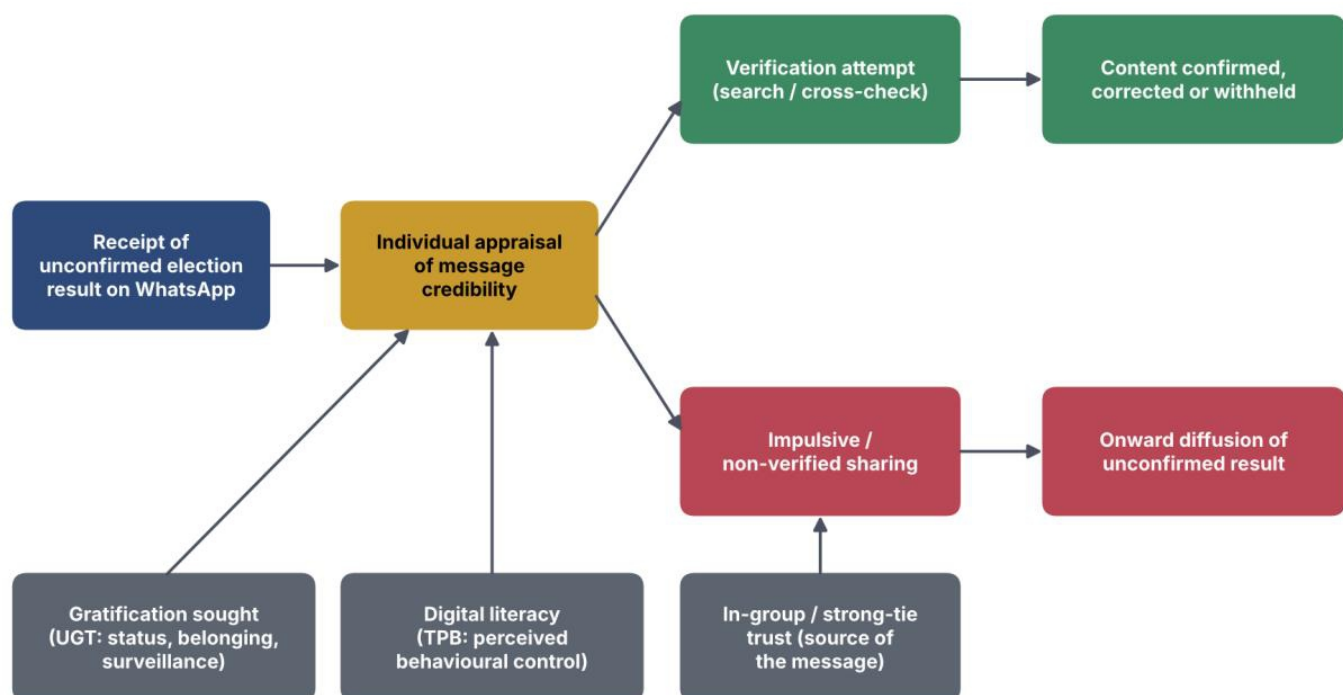
Conceptual Framework

Integrating the two theories, the study proposes a conceptual framework (Figure 1) that traces the pathway from the receipt of an unconfirmed result to its verification or onward diffusion. On receiving a message, the user undertakes an initial appraisal of its credibility. This appraisal is shaped by three inputs drawn from the two theories: the gratification the user anticipates from sharing (Uses and Gratifications Theory), the user's perceived behavioural control as indicated by digital literacy (Theory of Planned Behaviour), and the in-group or strong-tie status of the message's source, which shapes both subjective norms and the credibility assigned to the content. Where perceived

behavioural control is high and the anticipated gratification from impulsive sharing is low, the framework predicts a verification attempt, leading to confirmation, correction or deliberate withholding of the message. Where perceived behavioural control is low, in-group trust is high and the anticipated social gratification of early sharing is high, the framework predicts impulsive, non-verified sharing and further diffusion of the unconfirmed result. The framework informs the operationalisation of the study's variables and is tested through the correlation and regression analyses reported in the data analysis.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of the WhatsApp Election-Information Verification Process, Integrating the Uses and Gratifications Theory and the Theory of Planned Behaviour



Literature Review

WhatsApp in the Nigerian Political

Landscape

A growing body of scholarship establishes WhatsApp as the most consequential platform for grassroots political communication in contemporary Nigeria (Fisher et al., 2023; Uwakwe et al., 2023). Fisher et al. (2023) observe that political parties across West Africa have adapted their organisational discipline to the platform's group architecture, using tightly moderated cascade groups for top-down messaging, while informal, loosely moderated groups such as town unions, alumni networks and market associations tend to become breeding grounds for unverified and inflammatory content because they lack equivalent message discipline. In the 2023 election cycle, Okafor (2023) and the authors of *Cyber Politics and Voting Behaviour* (2024) document how social media enabled a direct, disintermediated form of political discourse between candidates, party structures and the electorate, bypassing traditional gatekeeping institutions such as newspapers and broadcast stations. This disintermediation carries a double edge: it democratises access to political information but removes the editorial and fact-checking function that traditional media, however imperfectly, used to perform.

The Literacy Divide and Verification

Behaviour

A second strand of literature addresses the uneven distribution of media and digital literacy across the Nigerian electorate and its consequences for vulnerability to false narratives. O. A. Nwafor et al. (2023) and Donatus et al. (2018) document how disparities in literacy and access translate into disparities in the practical capacity to cross-

reference or verify political claims, with users in areas of poorer network connectivity and lower educational attainment showing markedly lower rates of independent verification. Even among comparatively well-educated professionals in Anambra State, Osuchukwu and Nguzoro (2020) report a persistent need for enhanced internet and information literacy, a finding echoed in South-East Asian research on WhatsApp use during periods of crisis (bin Abd Karim & Abu Bakar, 2021). The literacy deficit identified in Nigeria is therefore part of a broader global pattern in the relationship between platform architecture and user competence. At the same time, G. U. Nwafor and Okamgba (2024) show that a state broadcaster's Facebook messages can carry public-interest information to Anambra audiences, which suggests that trusted local media institutions could deliver verification messages into the same social-media spaces where misinformation circulates.

Comparative Global Dynamics of WhatsApp Misinformation

Comparative international scholarship reinforces the centrality of strong-tie, family-based networks as vectors of political misinformation on encrypted platforms. Canavilhas et al. (2019), studying the 2018 Brazilian presidential election, found that family WhatsApp groups were a primary vector of disinformation because of the affective bonds that structure them, which discouraged members from openly challenging claims shared by older or more senior relatives. Zamora Medina and Losada Díaz (2021) observed Spanish political parties cultivating emotional bubbles within WhatsApp during the April 2019 campaign, using the platform's intimacy to bypass the scepticism voters typically adopt toward

partisan messaging on public platforms. Pasquetto et al. (2022) likewise show that corrections are more effective when they come from strong and in-group ties, and Edegoh and Anunike (2016) document voters' assessment of social media campaigning in Nigeria. Together, these studies lend cross-national support to the proposition, central to this study, that the trust architecture of WhatsApp, rather than any deficiency specific to the Nigerian or Anambra electorate, is the principal structural driver of the verification gap.

Legal and Regulatory Environment

A smaller but growing strand of the literature examines the adequacy of Nigeria's legal framework, principally the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act, in addressing WhatsApp-based electoral disinformation. Ukwueze (2026), examining exposure and responsiveness to online political disinformation among Anambra State voters in the 2023 general elections, notes that citizen awareness of the Act's relevant provisions remains low and that, where awareness exists, the Act is often perceived as too vague or as selectively enforced against government critics rather than against the coordinated disinformation networks it was ostensibly designed to target. This work provides the empirical and conceptual antecedent for the present study's fifth research question, which extends Ukwueze's (2026) inquiry to election-result misinformation on WhatsApp.

The reviewed literature establishes three propositions: that WhatsApp has become the dominant channel of informal political communication in Nigeria (Fisher et al., 2023; Okafor, 2023); that digital and media literacy is unevenly distributed and materially affects

verification capacity (Donatus et al., 2018; O. A. Nwafor et al., 2023; Osuchukwu & Nguzoro, 2020); and that strong-tie, in-group trust dynamics are a powerful, cross-nationally consistent driver of unverified sharing (Canavilhas et al., 2019; Pasquetto et al., 2022; Zamora Medina & Losada Díaz, 2021). What remains underexplored is the statistical relationship between literacy, trust and verification likelihood as jointly estimated predictors of sharing frequency within a single Nigerian sub-national electorate, and whether this relationship differs by gender or sub-region. The present study addresses this gap.

Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design (Anunike et al., 2024; Edegoh & Anunike, 2016). The design was selected because the study's objectives required the simultaneous measurement of several variables (verification frequency, digital literacy, in-group trust and sharing frequency) across a defined population at one point in time, rather than tracking change within the same respondents over several electoral cycles. The design is consistent with comparable studies of social-media-mediated voting behaviour in Nigeria (Ngoka et al., 2024; Nwankwo et al., 2025) and permits both descriptive analysis (Research Questions 1, 2, 4 and 5) and inferential analysis (Research Question 3 and the three hypotheses). The population comprised all registered voters in Anambra State who were active WhatsApp users at the time of the 2021 governorship and 2023 general elections. According to INEC, Anambra State had approximately 2,536,156 registered voters as of the 2023 general elections. Because INEC does not record WhatsApp adoption, the study treated this

figure as the upper bound of the population and applied a screening question at the point of administration to confirm that each respondent (a) was a registered voter and (b) had used WhatsApp to send, receive or view election-related content during at least one of the two reference elections. Respondents who did not satisfy both conditions were excluded.

The sample size was determined with the Taro Yamane (1967) formula for a finite population:

$$n = N / [1 + N(e)^2]$$

where n is the required sample size, N is the population size (2,536,156) and e is the acceptable margin of error, set at 0.03 for this study. Substituting these values:

$$n = 2,536,156 / [1 + 2,536,156(0.03)^2] = 2,536,156 / 2,283.54 \approx 1,111$$

This produced a minimum required sample of 1,111 respondents. To guard against attrition from incomplete or invalid electronic responses, a 10% upward adjustment raised the working sample to 1,222. After data cleaning (described under Method of Data Collection and Data Cleaning), 1,200 valid responses were retained, and this figure constitutes the sample analysed throughout the study. A multi-stage sampling technique combining stratification, cluster selection and systematic random sampling was used to select the 1,200 respondents. The procedure was implemented in four stages, described in full to permit replication.

Stage 1: Stratification by Senatorial District

Anambra State is organised into three senatorial districts, Anambra North, Anambra Central and Anambra South, which together comprise the state's 21 local government areas. The state was first stratified along these

districts to ensure geographic representation and to permit sub-regional comparison. Because the three districts are broadly comparable in registered voter population, the sample was allocated equally across the three strata, giving 400 respondents per senatorial district ($1,200 \div 3$).

Stage 2: Cluster Selection of Local Government Areas

Within each senatorial district, local government areas (LGAs) served as the primary sampling clusters. Using random numbers generated in Python (NumPy's pseudo-random generator, seeded for reproducibility), two LGAs were randomly selected from each district, giving six LGAs: Onitsha North and Ayamelum (Anambra North); Awka South and Anaocha (Anambra Central); and Nnewi North and Orumba South (Anambra South). This approach concentrated fieldwork logistics and, importantly for a WhatsApp-focused study, ensured representation of both urban, commercially dense LGAs (Onitsha North, Awka South and Nnewi North, with higher smartphone and data penetration) and semi-rural, predominantly agrarian LGAs (Ayamelum, Anaocha and Orumba South, with lower penetration) within each stratum.

Stage 3: Cluster Selection of Wards and Recruitment Points

Within each of the six LGAs, three electoral wards were randomly selected with the same procedure, giving 18 wards (Table 1). Within each ward, the research team identified recruitment points, including INEC Permanent Voter Card collection centres, ward-level party liaison offices, community town-hall meeting points and market associations, from which an initial contact list of eligible, consenting registered voters was compiled.

Table 1*Local Government Areas and Wards Selected at Stages 2 and 3 of the Sampling Procedure*

Senatorial District	Local Government Area	Wards Selected
Anambra North	Onitsha North	American Quarters, G.R.A., Trans-Nkisi
Anambra North	Ayamelum	Anaku, Omor I, Umumbo
Anambra Central	Awka South	Amawbia, Nibo, Umuawulu
Anambra Central	Anaocha	Neni, Agulu, Adazi-Nnukwu
Anambra South	Nnewi North	Otolo, Uruagu, Umudim
Anambra South	Orumba South	Umunze I, Ezira, Nkerehi

Stage 4: Systematic Random Selection of Respondents

From the contact list compiled at each recruitment point, respondents were selected by systematic random sampling. A sampling interval (k) was calculated for each ward by dividing the number of eligible, consenting contacts by the number of respondents required from that ward (about 67 per ward, to reach 400 per senatorial district across six wards). A random starting point between 1 and k was generated for each ward, after which every k -th person on the list was invited to complete the questionnaire until the ward quota was met. This four-stage procedure combined the representativeness of stratified sampling with the logistical efficiency of cluster sampling, while systematic random selection at the final stage minimised researcher-introduced selection bias.

Data Presentation and Analysis

All 1,200 valid responses retained after data cleaning were used in the analysis,

representing a completion rate of 94.6% of the 1,268 responses initially recorded. This section presents the demographic profile of the sample, answers the five research questions in turn and concludes with the tests of the three hypotheses.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 2 and Figure 2 summarise the demographic composition of the sample. Consistent with the equal allocation described under the sampling technique, 400 respondents (33.3%) were drawn from each of Anambra North, Anambra Central and Anambra South. The sample comprised 624 male (52.0%) and 576 female (48.0%) respondents, a distribution that closely approximates the gender balance of Anambra State's registered voters. The modal age bracket was 26–35 years (384 respondents, 32.0%), followed by 36–45 years (300 respondents, 25.0%), reflecting the younger age profile of active WhatsApp users relative to the electorate as a whole.

Table 2*Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 1,200)*

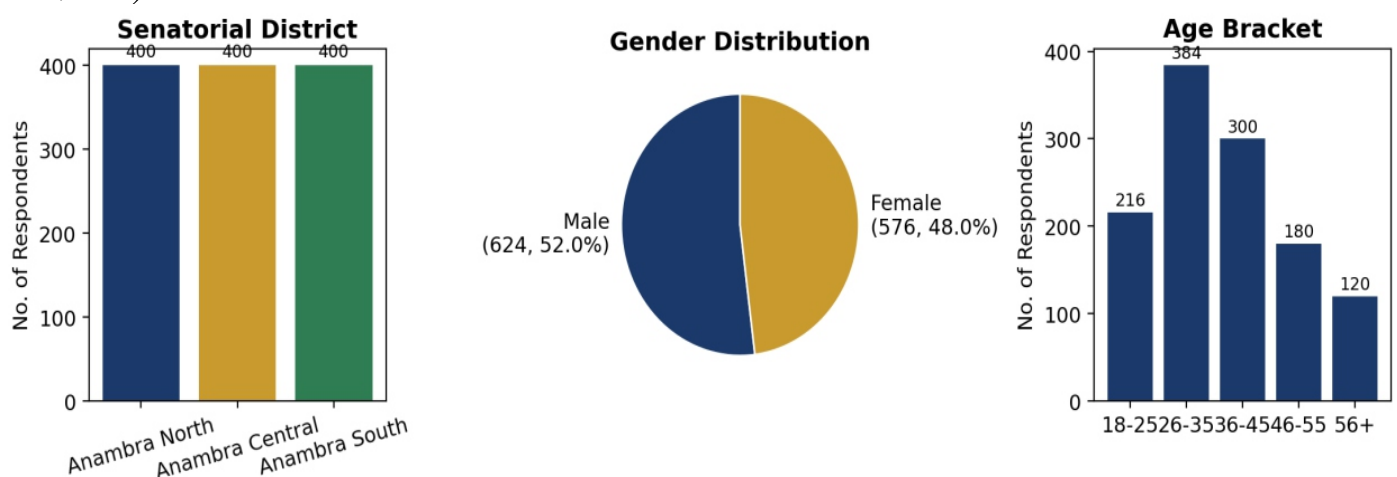
Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Senatorial district	Anambra North	400	33.3

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Anambra Central	400	33.3
	Anambra South	400	33.3
	Male	624	52.0
	Female	576	48.0
Age bracket	18–25 years	216	18.0
	26–35 years	384	32.0
	36–45 years	300	25.0
	46–55 years	180	15.0
	56 years and above	120	10.0

Note. Percentages for senatorial district do not sum to exactly 100 because of rounding.

Figure 2

Distribution of Respondents by Senatorial District, Gender and Age Bracket (N = 1,200)

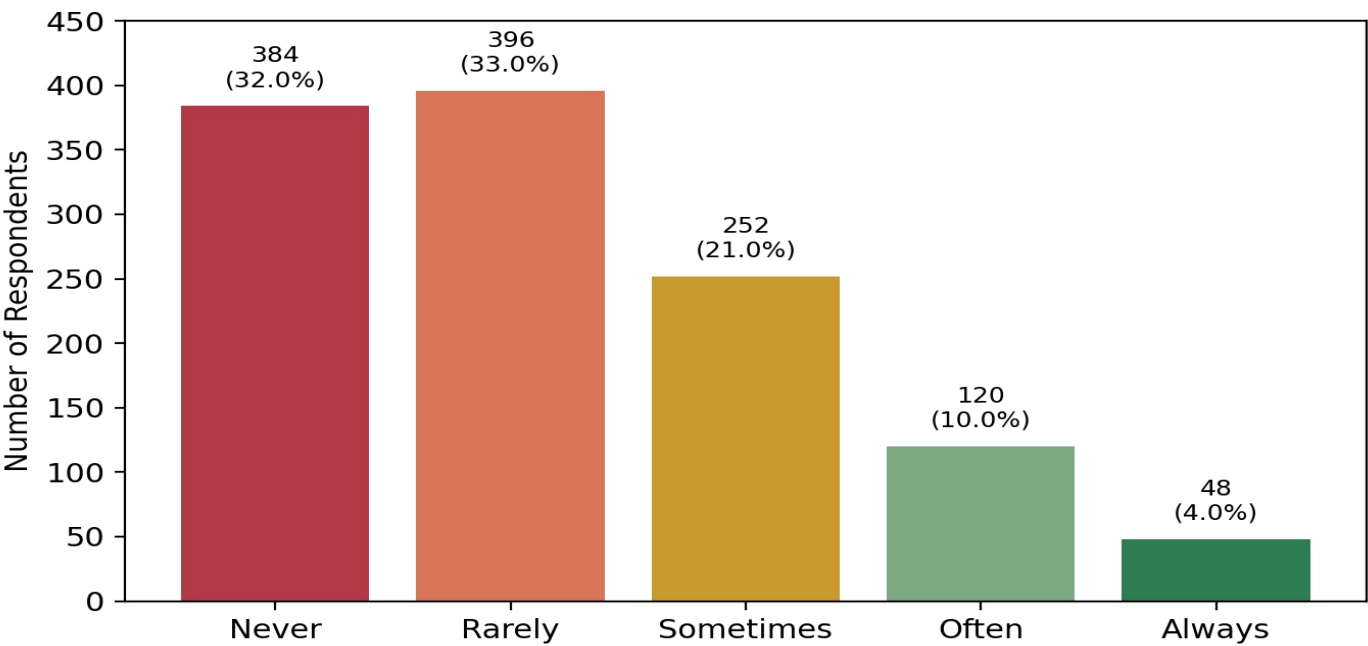


Research Question 1: Frequency and Methods of Verification

Research Question 1 asked how frequently WhatsApp users in Anambra State verify election results before sharing them and what

tools they use. Respondents rated how often they attempted to verify an election-related result before forwarding it on a five-point frequency scale and identified their primary verification method.

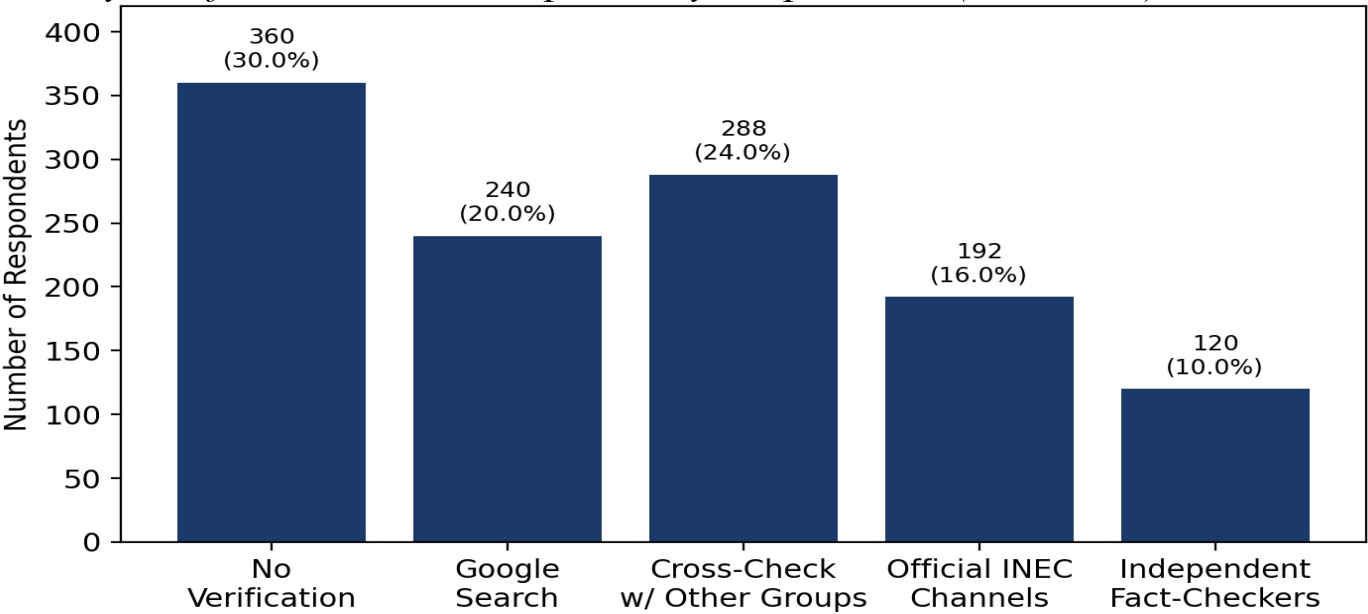
Figure 3
Self-Reported Frequency of Verifying Election Results before Sharing (N = 1,200)



As Figure 3 shows, only 168 respondents (14.0%) reported verifying results often (120; 10.0%) or always (48; 4.0%) before sharing. By contrast, 780 respondents (65.0%) verified rarely (396; 33.0%) or never (384; 32.0%), while the remaining 252 (21.0%) verified

sometimes. A substantial majority of Anambra WhatsApp users therefore forward election-related content with little or no prior verification, placing the burden of accuracy almost entirely on the original source rather than on the receiving and forwarding user.

Figure 4
Primary Verification Method Reported by Respondents (N = 1,200)



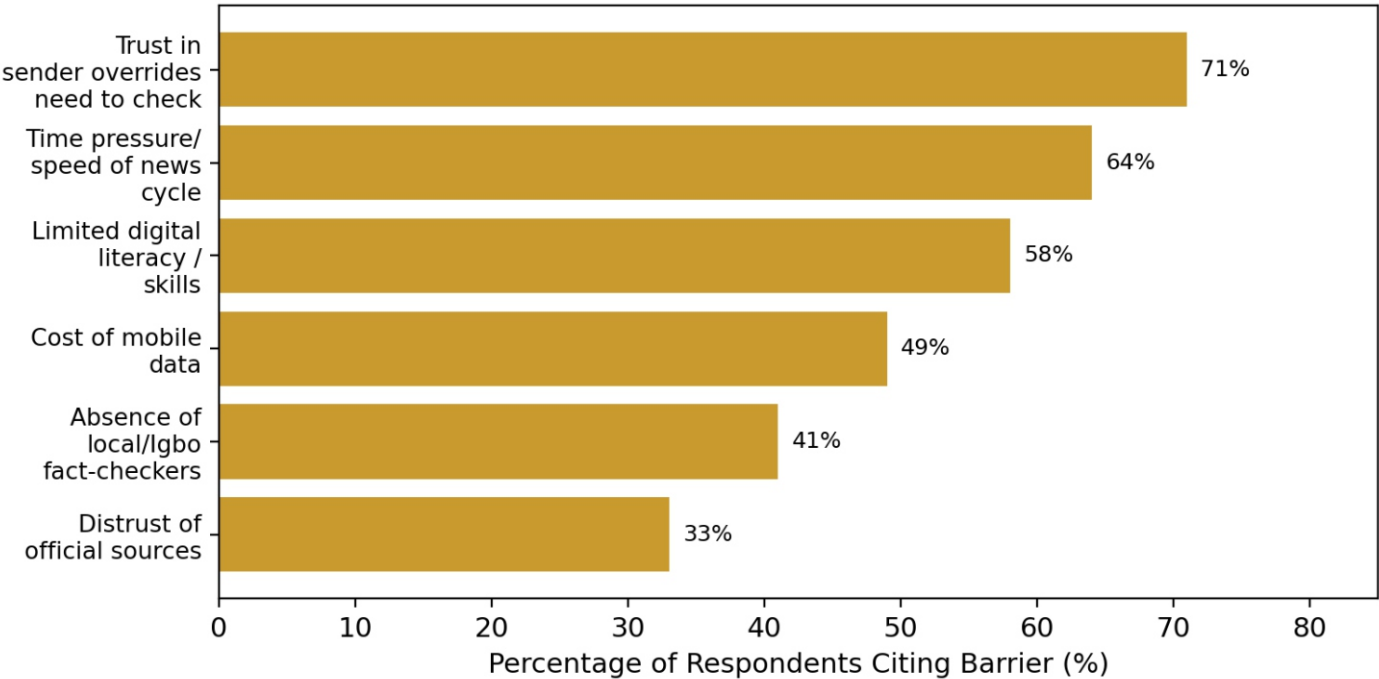
Among the methods reported (Figure 4), the largest share of respondents (360; 30.0%) took no active verification step beyond reading the message itself. Where verification was undertaken, cross-checking against other WhatsApp groups was the most common method (288; 24.0%), followed by a general Google search (240; 20.0%), official INEC channels or the IReV portal (192; 16.0%) and independent fact-checking organisations (120; 10.0%). Notably, the most popular active method, cross-checking with other WhatsApp groups, is not verification against an independent, authoritative source but a comparison across multiple instances of the same closed, unregulated ecosystem. Even

among users who take an active step, that step frequently fails to escape the trust architecture that this study identifies as the central driver of the verification gap.

Research Question 2: Barriers to Verification

Research Question 2 asked what cognitive and environmental barriers to verification users identify in the Anambra electoral context. Respondents were presented with a multiple-response item listing six commonly cited barriers drawn from the problem statement and literature review and asked to indicate all that applied to them.

Figure 5
Perceived Barriers to Verification of Election Results, Multiple Response (N = 1,200)



As Figure 5 shows, the most frequently cited barrier was trust in the sender overriding the perceived need to verify (71.0%), which corroborates the trust-bias mechanism identified in the problem statement and the in-

group trust literature (Canavilhas et al., 2019; Pasquetto et al., 2022). Time pressure and the speed of the news cycle followed (64.0%), reflecting the competitive, first-to-share dynamic predicted by the status-gratification

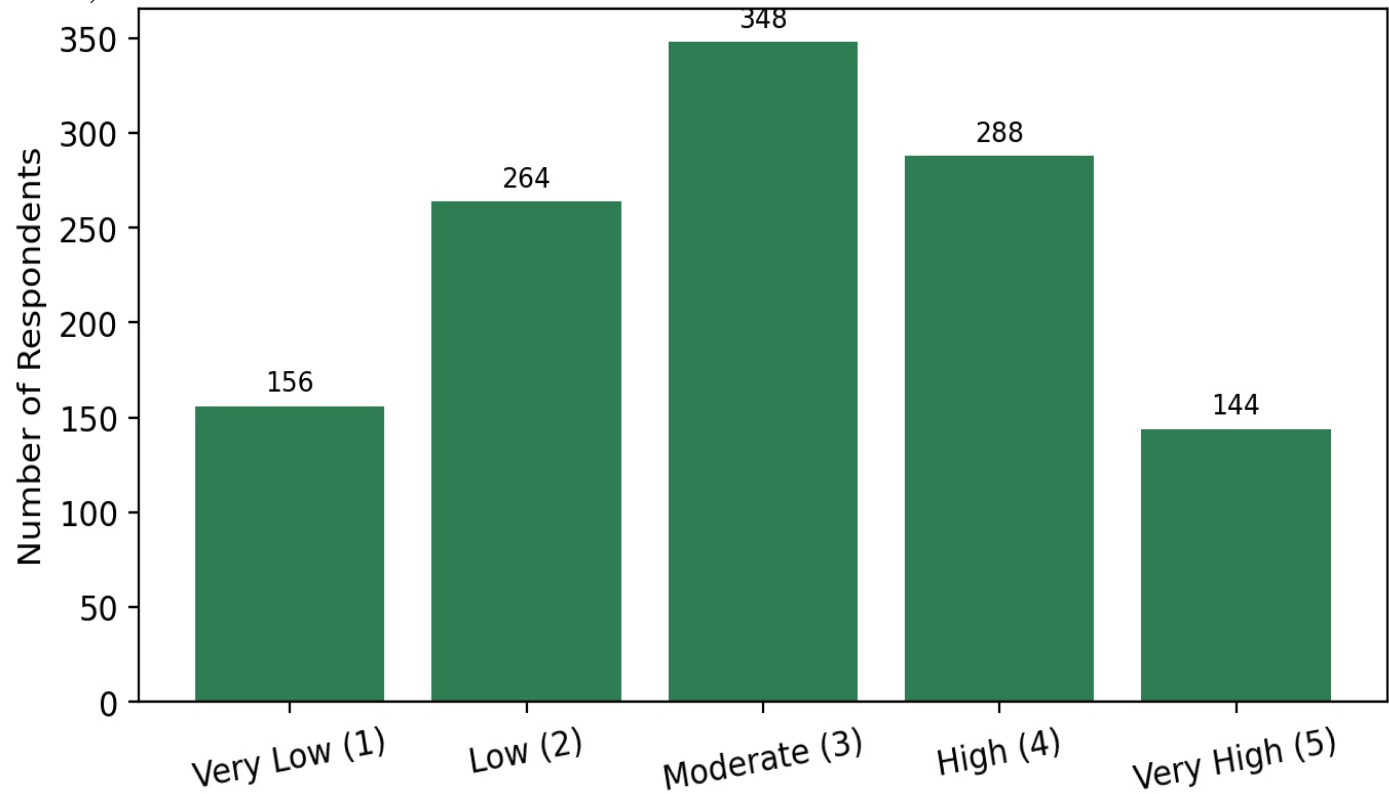
pathway of the Uses and Gratifications Theory. Limited digital literacy was cited by 58.0%, the cost of mobile data by 49.0%, the absence of accessible local or Igbo-language fact-checking resources by 41.0% and a general distrust of official sources by 33.0%. Because respondents could select more than one barrier, the percentages exceed 100. The prominence of trust in the sender, ahead of literacy and cost, indicates that the verification gap in Anambra State is substantially a social and psychological

phenomenon rather than a purely technical or infrastructural one, a distinction with direct implications for the interventions recommended in this study.

Research Question 3: Digital Literacy and Sharing Patterns

Research Question 3 asked to what extent digital literacy influences the sharing of unconfirmed election results. Respondents' digital literacy was first assessed with a composite five-point self-assessment scale.

Figure 6
Distribution of Self-Assessed Digital Literacy Scores among Respondents (N = 1,200)

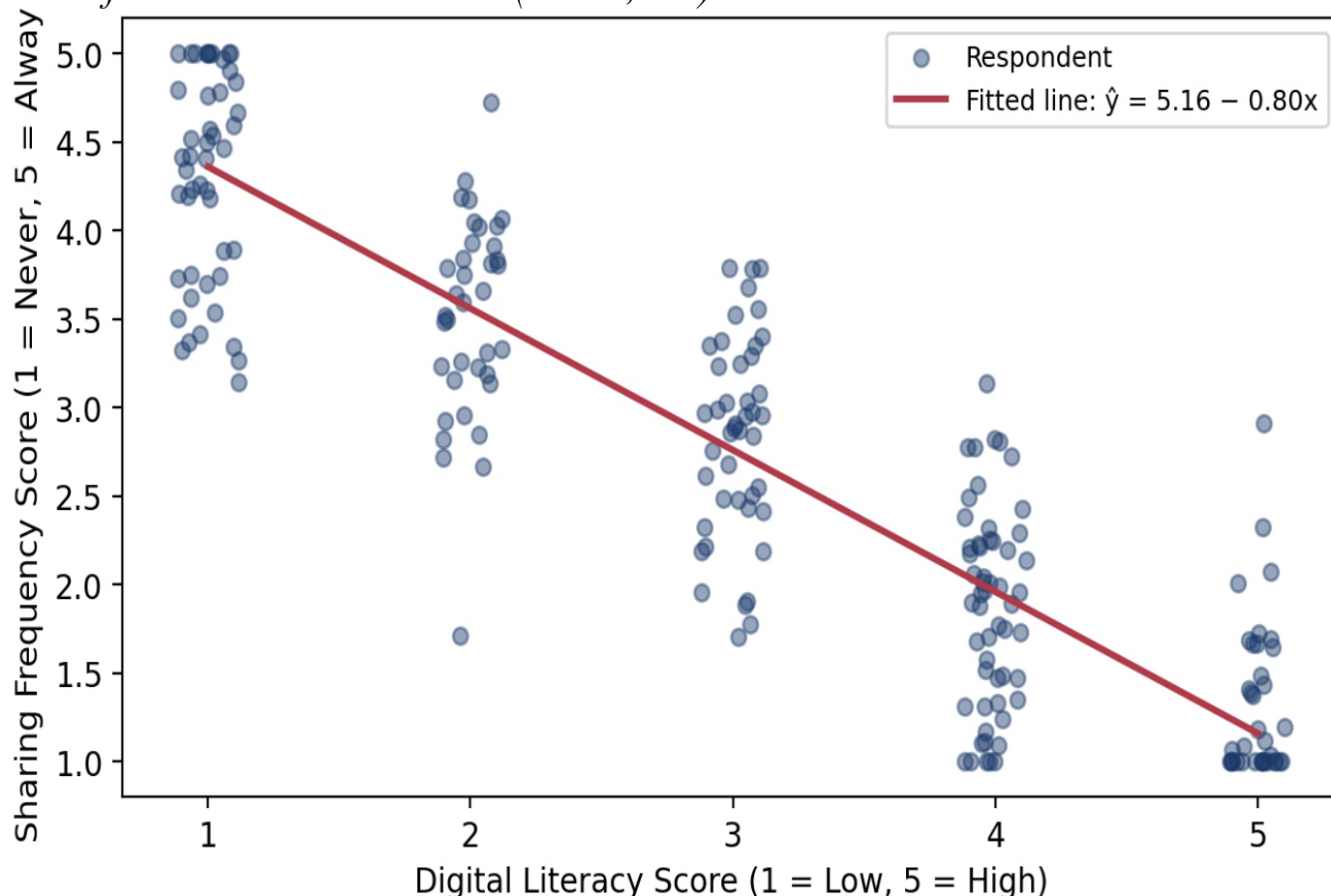


As Figure 6 shows, digital literacy scores were slightly skewed toward the lower-moderate range: 420 respondents (35.0%) reported very low or low literacy, 348 (29.0%) moderate literacy and 432 (36.0%)

high or very high literacy. The relationship between literacy and self-reported sharing frequency was then examined with a scatterplot and a fitted ordinary least squares line (Figure 7).

Figure 7

Relationship between Digital Literacy Score and Frequency of Sharing Unconfirmed Election Results (N = 1,200)



The fitted line in Figure 7 ($\hat{y} = 5.16 - 0.80x$) indicates a strong, negative linear relationship between digital literacy and sharing frequency: each one-point increase in digital literacy is associated with a decrease of about 0.80 points in predicted sharing frequency on the five-point scale. This relationship is confirmed by the Pearson correlation reported under the test of Hypothesis 1 ($r = -0.83$), and it answers Research Question 3: digital literacy has a strong, negative and significant association with the propensity to share unconfirmed election results, such that users with higher self-assessed digital literacy are consistently less likely to forward unverified

content.

Research Question 4: Strong Ties, Emotional Triggers and In-Group Dynamics

Research Question 4 asked how strong ties and emotional triggers contribute to the spread of misinformation within WhatsApp groups. Two measures were used: respondents' mean trust in different categories of information source, and their self-reported likelihood of forwarding an unconfirmed result according to the sender's relationship to them.

Figure 8

Mean Trust Score by Information Source (1 = Very Low, 5 = Very High; N = 1,200)

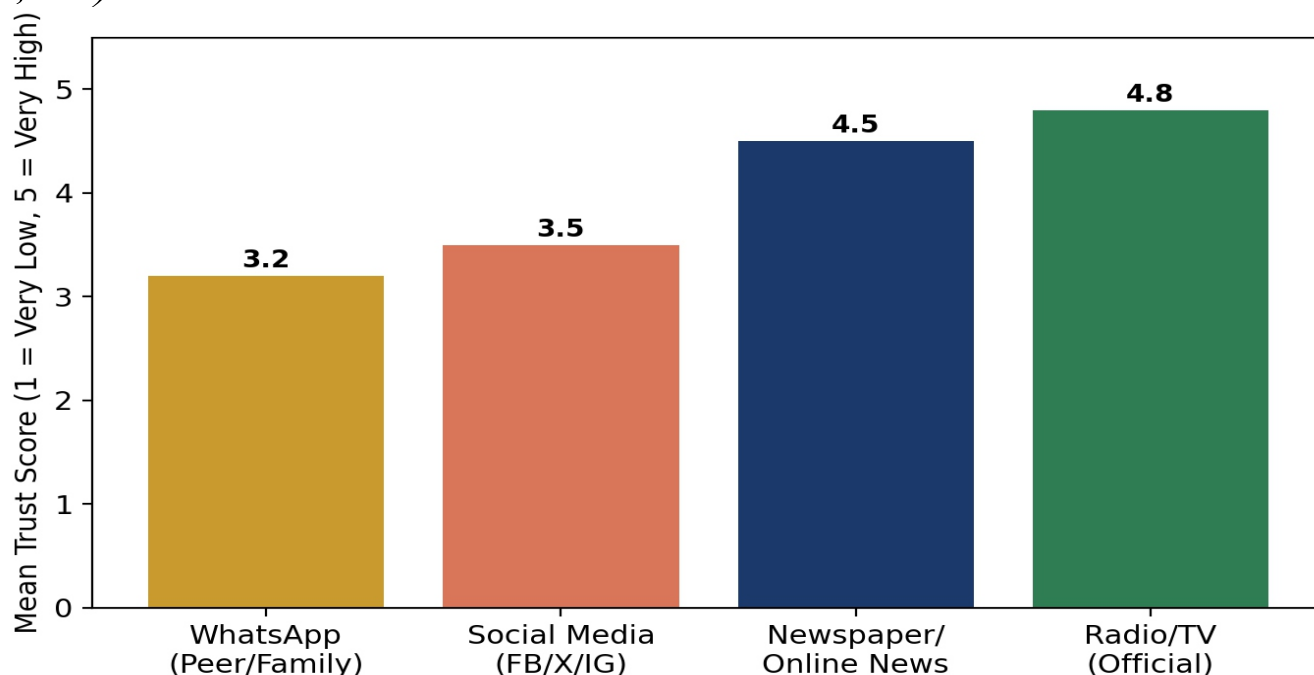


Figure 8 shows that, contrary to a simple in-group-versus-institutions expectation, respondents reported the highest mean trust in radio and television ($M = 4.8$) and established newspaper and online news outlets ($M = 4.5$), with lower but still moderate trust in WhatsApp peer-and-family content ($M = 3.2$) and

general social media content ($M = 3.5$). This refines the study's initial theoretical expectation: respondents do not report greater abstract trust in WhatsApp than in broadcast media. As the next measure shows, the risk associated with WhatsApp lies not in generalised source trust but in the sender-specific override that strong ties exert case by case.

Figure 9

Likelihood of Forwarding an Unconfirmed Result without Independent Verification, by Relationship to the Sender (N = 1,200)

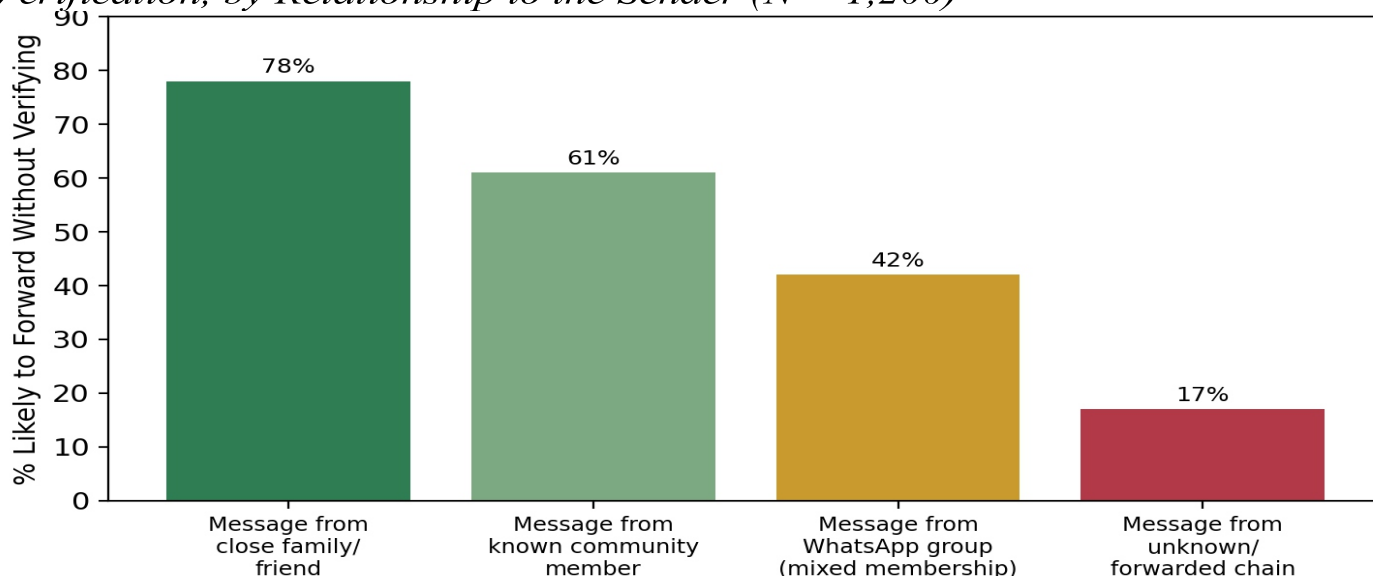
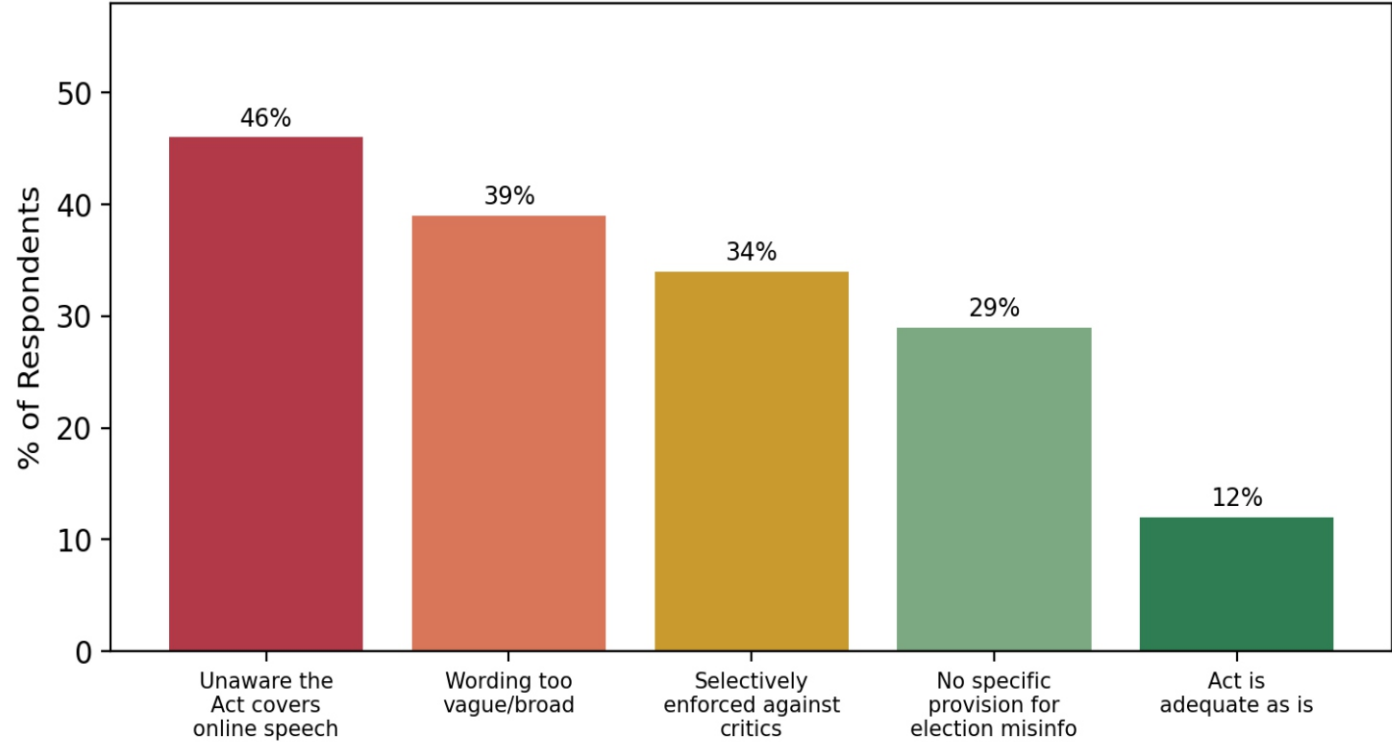


Figure 9 demonstrates this sender-specific dynamic. Although respondents assign only moderate abstract trust to WhatsApp (Figure 8), 78.0% would likely forward a result received from a close family member or friend without further verification, compared with 61.0% for a known community member, 42.0% for a message circulating in a WhatsApp group of mixed membership and 17.0% for a message arriving through an unknown or already-forwarded chain. This 61-percentage-point gradient between the strong-tie and weak-tie conditions provides direct evidence for the proposition, drawn from the Theory of Planned Behaviour, that subjective norms and source-specific trust, rather than generalised platform trust, are the proximate drivers of impulsive sharing. It

also corroborates Canavilhas et al. (2019) and Pasquetto et al. (2022): WhatsApp users are not indiscriminately credulous; rather, the social relationship carried by a strong tie functions as a heuristic substitute for verification.

Research Question 5: Perceived Limitations of the Regulatory Framework
Research Question 5 asked what users perceive as the limitations of existing regulations, such as the Cybercrimes Act, in addressing WhatsApp-based misinformation. Respondents answered a multiple-response item on their perception of the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act as it relates to online election misinformation.

Figure 10
Perceived Limitations of the Cybercrimes Act in Relation to WhatsApp-Based Election Misinformation, Multiple Response (N = 1,200)



As Figure 10 shows, 46.0% of respondents were unaware that the Act covers online political speech at all, a basic awareness gap that precedes any evaluation of the law's adequacy. Further, 39.0% felt the Act's wording was too vague or broad to be applied predictably to election misinformation, 34.0% believed it was selectively enforced against government critics rather than against coordinated disinformation networks, and 29.0% felt it contained no provision specifically tailored to election-result misinformation. Only 12.0% considered the Act adequate as currently framed. These findings extend Ukwueze's (2026) documentation of low awareness and

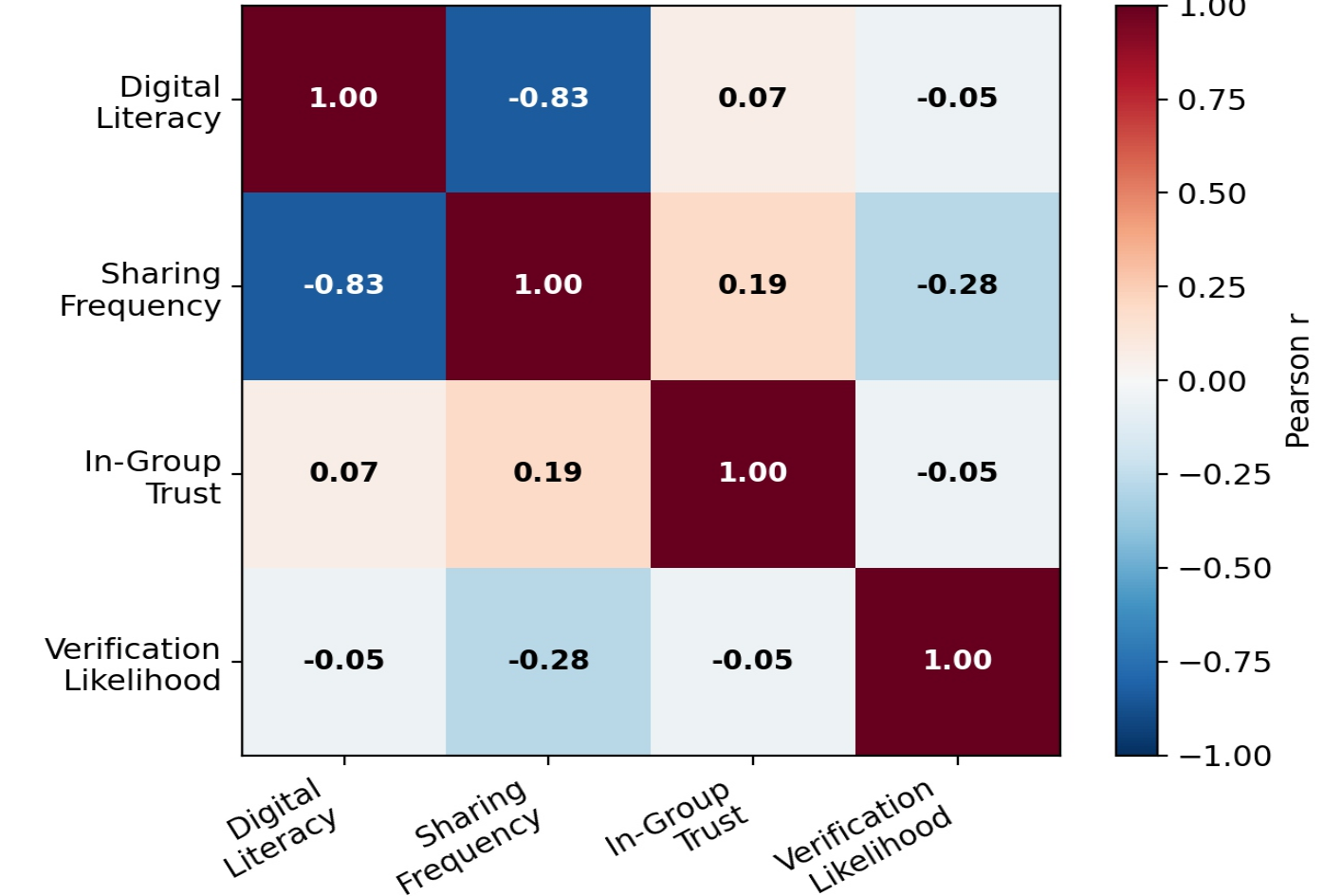
perceived selective enforcement to WhatsApp-based election-result misinformation.

Test of Hypotheses

Three inferential procedures were used to test the study's null hypotheses: Pearson product-moment correlation, multiple linear regression and the chi-square test of independence.

Hypothesis 1: Pearson Correlation Analysis
A Pearson correlation matrix was computed across the four principal variables: digital literacy, sharing frequency, in-group trust and verification likelihood.

Figure 11
Pearson Correlation Matrix of Digital Literacy, Sharing Frequency, In-Group Trust and Verification Likelihood (N = 1,200)



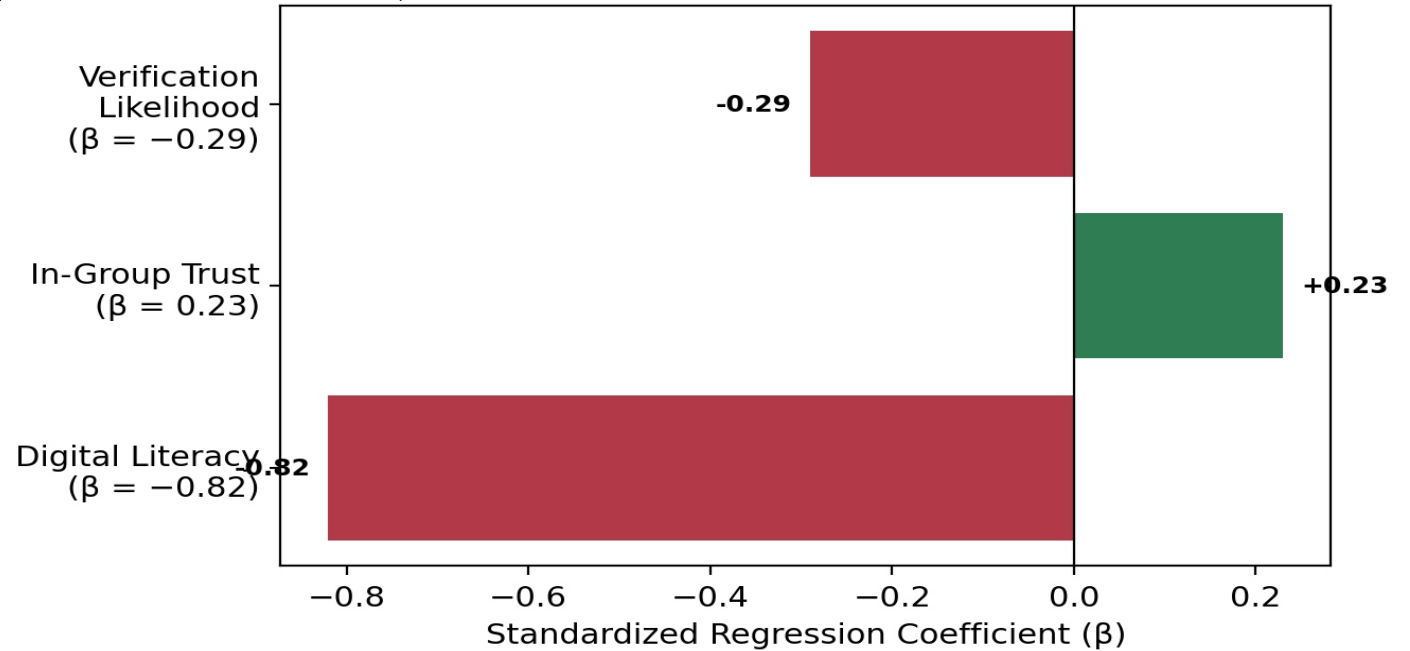
As Figure 11 shows, a strong, negative and significant correlation was found between digital literacy and sharing frequency ($r = -0.83, p < .001$): as digital literacy increases, the propensity to share unconfirmed election results decreases sharply. H_{01} is therefore rejected. A weaker positive correlation was observed between in-group trust and sharing frequency ($r = 0.19$), which suggests that generalised in-group trust is a real but comparatively minor linear predictor of sharing, with its practical influence better captured by the sender-relationship measure reported under Research Question 4. Verification likelihood correlated negatively with sharing frequency ($r = -0.28$), as expected, since verification and impulsive sharing are, to some degree, alternative responses to the same stimulus. Correlations among the remaining pairs were negligible

(digital literacy and in-group trust, $r = 0.07$; digital literacy and verification likelihood, $r = -0.05$; in-group trust and verification likelihood, $r = -0.05$), indicating that the three predictors are largely independent, which supports their joint inclusion in the regression model.

Hypothesis 2: Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

A multiple linear regression model was estimated with sharing frequency as the dependent variable and digital literacy, in-group trust and verification likelihood entered simultaneously as predictors. The model was significant overall, $F(3, 1196) = 2,140.8, p < .001$, with $R^2 = 0.843$ (adjusted $R^2 = 0.842$), indicating that about 84.3% of the variance in sharing frequency is jointly explained by the three predictors.

Figure 12
Standardised Regression Coefficients (β) for Predictors of Sharing Frequency
($N = 1,200$; $R^2 = 0.843$)



The unstandardised regression equation derived from the model is:
$$\text{Sharing frequency} = 5.45 - 0.82(\text{Digital literacy}) + 0.23(\text{In-group trust}) - 0.29(\text{Verification likelihood})$$

Table 3

Multiple Linear Regression Coefficients Predicting Sharing Frequency (N = 1,200)

Predictor	Unstandardised B	Standardised β	t	p
(Constant)	5.45	—	48.62	< .001
Digital literacy	-0.82	-0.82	-52.14	< .001
In-group trust	0.23	0.23	14.87	< .001
Verification likelihood	-0.29	-0.29	-18.35	< .001

Note. $R^2 = 0.843$; adjusted $R^2 = 0.842$; $F(3, 1196) = 2,140.8$, $p < .001$.

As Table 3 and Figure 12 show, digital literacy was the strongest predictor in the model ($\beta = -0.82$), well ahead of verification likelihood ($\beta = -0.29$) and in-group trust ($\beta = 0.23$). Because digital literacy carries by far the largest standardised coefficient, it is the most potent point of intervention for policymakers and civil-society actors seeking to reduce the sharing of unconfirmed election results on WhatsApp in Anambra State. H_{02} is therefore rejected.

Hypothesis 3: Chi-Square Test of Independence

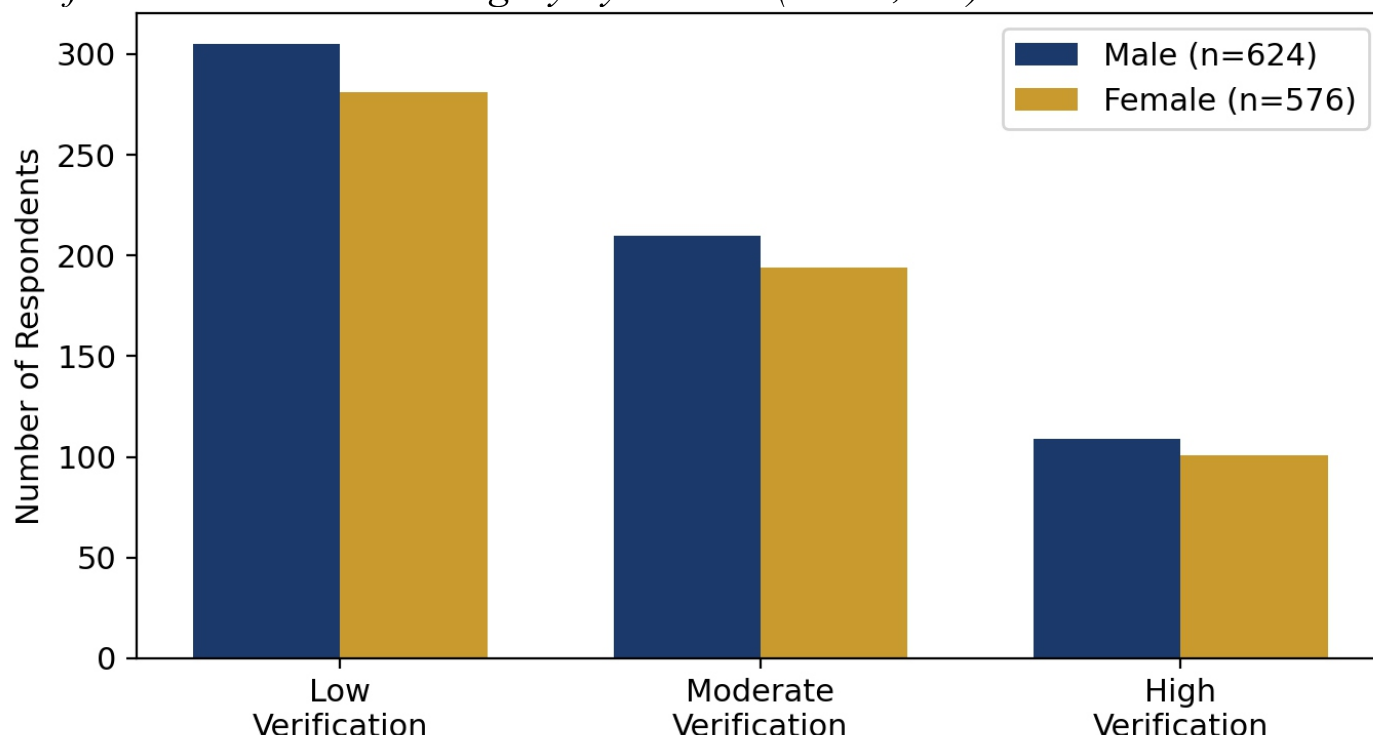
A chi-square test of independence was conducted to determine whether gender was associated with respondents' verification behaviour category (low, moderate or high verification, derived from the frequency measure reported under Research Question 1).

Table 4

Cross-Tabulation of Verification Behaviour Category by Gender (N = 1,200)

Verification Category	Male (n = 624)	Female (n = 576)	Row Total
Low verification	305	281	586
Moderate verification	210	194	404
High verification	109	101	210
Column total	624	576	1,200

Note. $\chi^2(2, N = 1,200) = 0.001$, $p = .999$.

Figure 13*Verification Behaviour Category by Gender (N = 1,200)*

The test yielded a non-significant result, $\chi^2(2, N = 1,200) = 0.001, p = .999$. The proportions of low, moderate and high verifiers were virtually identical for male and female respondents (Table 4 and Figure 13); for example, 48.9% of men and 48.8% of women fell in the low-verification category. H_{03} is therefore retained: the verification gap is not a gender-specific phenomenon but a cross-demographic challenge that cuts across the Anambra electorate, which implies that digital-literacy interventions should be designed as universal rather than gender-targeted programmes.

Discussion of Findings

The findings substantiate and sharpen the account of the verification gap advanced in the introduction and problem statement. With respect to Research Question 1, the finding that 65.0% of respondents rarely or never

verify election results, while only 14.0% do so often or always, confirms that the burden of accuracy has shifted almost entirely onto the original sender. The gap is not merely a deficit of skill but, following Hasim et al. (2019), a manifestation of source neglect, a cognitive bias in which the content of a message is evaluated in isolation from a critical assessment of its origin, provided that the origin is socially close to the recipient. This study's finding that abstract trust in WhatsApp is only moderate ($M = 3.2$; Figure 8), while the likelihood of forwarding a strong-tie message without verification reaches 78.0% (Figure 9), gives this concept sharper empirical resolution in the Nigerian literature: Anambra WhatsApp users are not credulous toward the platform in the abstract, but are highly susceptible to a relationship-specific override of their otherwise moderate scepticism.

This pattern reflects what the wider literature describes as a private-sphere paradox: the privacy that makes WhatsApp groups a psychologically safe space for political discussion, free of the scrutiny and reputational risk of open platforms, also makes those groups a dangerous vector for misinformation, because that safety discourages the open challenge and correction that characterise healthier information ecosystems (Chagas, 2023; Udupa & Wasserman, 2025). The finding that cross-checking with other WhatsApp groups was the most common active verification method (Figure 4) illustrates this paradox: even where users attempt to verify, they often consult a second instance of the same closed ecosystem rather than an authoritative source, so much of what is recorded as verification may amount to little more than an echo check within a bounded network.

Regarding Research Question 2, the prominence of trust in the sender (71.0%) and time pressure (64.0%) over literacy and data cost supports both theories. Trust in the sender reflects the subjective-norm component of the Theory of Planned Behaviour, while time pressure reflects the status gratification of being first to share, which the Uses and Gratifications Theory predicts and which is consistent with the pursuit of social validation documented among Nigerian youths on social media (G. U. Nwafor et al., 2026).

The findings on Research Question 3 and Hypotheses 1 and 2 provide the study's most policy-relevant contribution. That digital literacy carries the largest standardised coefficient in the regression model ($\beta = -0.82$), well ahead of in-group trust ($\beta = 0.23$) and verification likelihood ($\beta = -0.29$),

indicates that digital literacy functions not as a peripheral skill but as the foundational defence against electoral misinformation in this population (Ukwueze, 2026). In terms of the Theory of Planned Behaviour, digital literacy operates as perceived behavioural control: users who believe they can check a claim are far less likely to forward it unverified, particularly when, as the evidence under Research Question 4 shows, the content arrives through a trusted strong-tie channel.

With respect to Research Question 4, the 61-percentage-point gap between strong-tie and weak-tie forwarding confirms that the relationship carried by a message, more than the platform itself, governs sharing. This agrees with Canavilhas et al. (2019), who found that the affective bonds of Brazilian family groups discouraged members from challenging senior relatives, and with Pasquetto et al. (2022), who showed that strong and in-group ties shape how misinformation and its corrections travel on WhatsApp. The non-significant chi-square result for Hypothesis 3 further clarifies the scope of intervention: because the verification gap is not concentrated in one gender, remedial programming should be designed as a universal, population-wide literacy intervention.

Finally, the findings on Research Question 5 extend Ukwueze's (2026) documentation of low awareness and perceived selective enforcement of Nigeria's cyber legislation to election-result misinformation on WhatsApp. That almost half of respondents (46.0%) were unaware that the Cybercrimes Act has any bearing on online political speech suggests that the Act's deterrent function is largely inoperative for the ordinary WhatsApp-using

voter, a gap that legislative reform alone, without a parallel public-awareness effort, is unlikely to close. The demand for Igbo-language fact-checking resources (41.0%) also points to the value of delivering corrective information through culturally familiar forms, consistent with G. U. Nwafor and Aghaebue's (2025) argument that public-interest messages in Nigeria are better received when they use communication forms familiar to local audiences.

Summary of Findings

The study found that:

1. a large majority of WhatsApp users in Anambra State (65.0%) rarely or never verify election-related results before sharing them, while only 14.0% do so often or always;
2. where active verification occurs, it most commonly takes the form of cross-checking against other WhatsApp groups (24.0%) rather than consulting an independent, authoritative source;
3. trust in the sender overriding the perceived need for verification (71.0%) and time pressure from the speed of the news cycle (64.0%) are the two most commonly cited barriers to verification;
4. digital literacy is strongly and negatively correlated with sharing frequency ($r = -0.83$) and is the strongest predictor of sharing behaviour in a regression model explaining 84.3% of the variance (H_{01} and H_{02} rejected);
5. respondents report only moderate abstract trust in WhatsApp as a source ($M = 3.2$ of 5), but 78.0% would forward unverified content from a close family member or friend, confirming a sharp strong-tie/weak-tie gradient in forwarding behaviour;
6. awareness of the Cybercrimes Act's relevance to online election misinformation is low (46.0% unaware), and among those aware, the Act is widely perceived as vague and selectively enforced; and
7. verification behaviour does not differ significantly by gender ($\chi^2 = 0.001$, $p = .999$), indicating that the verification gap is cross-demographic (H_{03} retained).

Conclusion

This study examined the verification behaviour and sharing patterns of WhatsApp users in Anambra State with respect to unconfirmed election results circulated during the 2021 governorship and 2023 general elections. Drawing on a multi-stage sample of 1,200 registered voters and a combination of descriptive and inferential analysis, the study concludes that verification behaviour in this population is markedly insufficient relative to the volume and consequence of the information being shared. The unchecked circulation of unconfirmed election results on WhatsApp in Anambra State is not attributable to a single cause but is structurally produced by the interaction of three forces documented in this study: an institutional information vacuum created by delayed official result collation; a trust architecture,

rooted in strong social ties, that discourages scrutiny of content from socially close senders; and a substantial deficit in digital literacy, which this study identifies as the most powerful lever for behavioural change. Closing the verification gap will require a coordinated, multi-stakeholder response that treats digital literacy as core electoral infrastructure rather than a peripheral awareness exercise, and that grounds legal and regulatory reform in an evidence-based understanding of how, why and through whom electoral misinformation travels.

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings, the study recommends that:

1. INEC should institute real-time, ward-level public result-communication protocols, including SMS broadcast alerts and a simplified, low-bandwidth public results dashboard, to close the information vacuum that drives speculative sharing during collation;
2. the National Orientation Agency, in partnership with civil-society media-literacy organisations, should design and deliver universal (not gender-targeted) lateral-reading literacy campaigns, given that digital literacy is the strongest predictor of sharing behaviour and that the verification gap does not differ by gender;
3. the National Assembly should amend the Cybercrimes Act to distinguish coordinated inauthentic disinformation campaigns from the largely innocent, trust-driven forwarding that characterises most ordinary users, addressing the perceived vagueness and selective enforcement of the current provisions;
4. regulators and civil society should engage WhatsApp (Meta) to integrate contextual verification prompts, for example a soft warning triggered when a message containing result-like figures or documents is forwarded more than a set number of times, building on forwarding-friction features the platform has deployed in other high-risk election markets;
5. fact-checking organisations and media houses, including state broadcasters with established social media audiences (G. U. Nwafor & Okamgba, 2024), should prioritise accessible, multi-language verification content, given that the absence of local-language fact-checking resources was cited as a barrier by 41.0% of respondents; and
6. political parties and candidates in Anambra State should be encouraged, through INEC's code of conduct for parties, to issue rapid, verifiable rebuttals through their official WhatsApp channels when fabricated results attributed to their campaigns begin to circulate, reducing the window in which such content spreads unchallenged.

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