

Digital Deception: A Sociological Understanding about Youth Media Use and Misinformation

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Abstract: In today's tech-savvy digital era, young people are increasingly immersed in social media environments for communication, information, and entertainment. However, these digital spaces have also become fertile ground for the spread of misinformation and disinformation. This study investigates how youth navigate, interpret, and are influenced by the complex information ecosystems of social media and digital platforms. Drawing on primary data, the research examines the interplay between young people's media practices and the structural factors that enable misinformation to spread.

The study highlights the crucial role of digital literacy and socio-cultural contexts in shaping how young users engage with online content. It also explores the social consequences of misinformation, such as the erosion of trust, polarization of beliefs, and the shaping of public opinion. By addressing these dynamics, this research aims to contribute to strategies that ground youth in critical media literacy, empowering them to evaluate information responsibly and to understand the broader power structures that influence the digital sphere.

Key Words: Fake news, youth, digital literacy, misinformation, social media influence.

1. INTRODUCTION:

In this digital era and instances of rapid speed information flow, there are immense times when we are surrounded by misinformation while reading a website or scrolling on social media and are not even aware that it is so. The capability to be aware of what information to trust is increasingly difficult especially on digital platforms such as social media, where false claims frequently are disguised as facts with undistinguishable representation. Hence it is of very significant need to understand how today's younger generation and the future leaders are capable of knowing how to check information online, create and consume content responsibly and especially be able to handle and deal with misinformation.

UNICEF defines Fake news to news stories or headlines that are deliberately fabricated to mislead or manipulate readers. These stories often look like real news articles but are entirely made-up or twisted versions of true events, created with the intention to deceive.

Fake news is a type of disinformation: false information that is created with the intention to mislead. Disinformation includes not only fake news, but also other types of claims, such as those put out as government propaganda, or by social media accounts or brands in order to sell a product or service.

Misinformation, on the other hand, is any kind of false or inaccurate information – whether it's shared intentionally or not. People often spread misinformation because they genuinely believe it's true and don't realize they're sharing something incorrect.

The need for genuine information highlights the importance of obtaining accurate, reliable, and truthful information, particularly in situations where misinformation or fraud could have serious consequences. This is especially crucial when it comes to personal information, financial transactions, or accessing important resources like government services

This study gains importance as it highlights how the process of Propaganda, misinformation and fake news have the potential to polarise public opinion, to promote violent extremism and hate speech and, ultimately, to undermine democracies and ultimately undermine democratic processes and public trust in institutions which are reoccurring in recent times.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

¹Kumar A (2023) in the article “A Study to analyze Awareness and Detection Level of Fake News among University Students” explores the ability of university students to detect fake news and their awareness of misinformation on social media. The research shows that most of the respondents avoid sharing fake news and instead warn others, showing a proactive attitude. The study also revealed that the students have a moderate level of media literacy, emphasizing the need for media literacy education to combat misinformation effectively.

²Olan, Femi, et al.(2023) "Fake News on Social Media: The Impact on Society." Information Systems Frontiers". This study introduces a novel meta-framework, based on literature and societal acceptance theory, to analyze the effects of fake news using survey data. Findings reveal a societal divide in distinguishing true news from fake news, highlighting growing fragmentation in values and perceptions.

³Musa, Aminu & Adam, Fatima. (2021) study “The role of social media in spreading fake news and its implication on Covid-19 vaccine reveals social media’s role in circulating fake news about COVID-19 vaccines, which has significantly impacted public attitudes and vaccine acceptance.

⁴Pérez-Escoda et al. (2021) examine Fake News Reaching Young People on Social Networks: Distrust Challenging Media Literacy. The study explores how Generation Z in Spain (aged 18–22) consumes information, particularly through social media, amid rising misinformation. The findings emphasize the urgent need for rethinking media literacy in the face of widespread distrust in politicians, media, and journalists.

3. OBJECTIVES / AIMS OF THE STUDY:

1. To analyse patterns of media access among college students for news consumption.
2. To identify the trends and motivations behind social media use among youth.
3. To examine their ability to critically assess and distinguish genuine information from misleading or false content online.

4. RESEARCH METHOD:

The study is descriptive in nature and is based on primary data collected from undergraduate college students from Chennai city, using a questionnaire as the tool of data collection. The respondents were selected through a probability sampling technique, specifically the simple random sampling method. The sample size was 71 college students from Chennai city.

5. DISCUSSION:

The respondents for the study were college students aged between 18 years to 23 years. Among them the average age of the respondents is 19 years. The student respondents are from urban setup predominantly and have access to digital devices and connectivity with better infrastructure and facilities. The socio economic strata of the student respondents also influences their continued access to social media platforms.

The interpretation of the responses gathered from the respondents are sociologically broken into insights in knowing more about the manner in which youth consume media and are bound to participate in dissemination of the social media content.

Most of the respondents 40.8% spend four hours regularly on social media and 16.9% of the respondents devote more than four hours on a daily basis on social media. Their access to digital space is 24x7 connected as most of their devices are always online and never disconnected. They have notifications turned on and will always keep looking into what would newly pop up.

On questioning the preference of social media platform used by the respondents among the given list, Youtube ranked first with 85.9% usage followed by Whatsapp 74.6%, very closely with the Instagram users of about 64.8%. The other social media platforms included twitter, facebook and Reddit. 9.7% of the respondents have mentioned they prefer other type of social media.

It was interesting to find that 57.75% of the respondents prefer social media mainly for entertainment purposes. The other common purposes of social media include news and information seeking, for actively engaging in social interaction and academic endeavours

Frequency of respondents using social media for news and information seeking including casual browsing is predominantly higher and the respondents 54.9% have felt the information to be fake and misleading sometimes and 29.6 % of the respondents have often felt so while 14.1% have felt it rarely.

And when probed on whether the respondents have shared news that turned out to be fake on social media only 33.8% have accepted to done so while 66.2% of the respondents have kept silent on their participation in circulating news that turned out to be fake. 53.5% of respondents have become cautious and stopped sharing news on social media after bitter experience of fake news being wrongly passed on by them hence they have withdrawn completely from random forwarding on social media platforms. Equally 46.5% of respondents though have faced instances of fake news circulation they are still causal in forwarding and passing on whatever information that they come across.

The accessibility of respondents in being able to utilize the sources for news consumption was also discussed. The respondents have reflected on their passive tendency to randomly scroll through information and news rather than with focus browsing for such intentions on social media.

The respondents seem to be utilizing the latest easy to go digital media as a source for global, national and local news in comparison with the traditional ways that are prevalent for the searching for the same.

The popularity and instant updates with easy availability also motivates students to choose social media over traditional news sources

Identification of fake news with confidence among the respondents has been rated as low by about 43.7% of the respondents whereas 32.4% of the respondents are neither confident nor sure on identification of fake news. 14.1% alone are very surely confident of their capability in identification of fake news.

To find out how the respondents are usually determining the credibility of news on social media platforms, certain indicators that they look out for was listed from which 35.2% of the respondents have mentioned that they cross verify with other sources on the genuiness of the information. The sources of the news being reputed and well known was a choice for about 31% of the respondents. The basis of comments and reviews have been the reasons for 14.1% of the respondents to determine credibility.

The impact of fake news affecting public opinion has been greatly recognised and accepted by 62% of the respondents. Even among the remaining respondents the impact has been in moderate (22.5%) and slight levels (12. 7%).which shows the impact of social media fake news have definitely in one way or another has been influential in framing public opinion.

The recent incidence of conflict and war related news shared on social media was questioned in which 50.7% of the respondents felt very strongly that misinformation about the war on social media disrupted public opinion. Similarly, 47.9% of the respondents felt that decision making was also influenced at a much greater level based on the fake news circulating on social media.

53.5% of respondents have also modified their opinion and sometimes behaviour on the basis of fake news from social media. They have also engaged in arguments and debates among peers on the basis of such information. 66.2% of the respondents have been spectators and victims to misunderstanding and conflicts among peers relying on fake news and information.

73.2% of the respondents have strongly agreed to the need for initiating awareness on identification or detection of fake news on social media and media literacy. This option was hugely recommended for setting right the impact generated by fake news.

For methods that reduce spread of fake news among students, the suggestions included stricter regulation 25.4% awareness campaign 16.9% initiating media literacy courses 15.5% peer education also plays role which was indicated by 11.3% respondents

Awareness needs to spread on the steps to be taken to authenticate news content from social media

To begin with it is important that when unsure not to repost contents as sharing unverified content contributes to misinformation. One must verify the motive and understand the vested interest of politically/financially motivated pages. Always check official government handles or institutional websites, the most common factors in fake news involves sensational and emotionally charged language and grammatical mistakes, it becomes essential to cross verify from credible news sites. The source of origin of news is extremely important to authenticate news content from social media.

6. CONCLUSION:

As this study has shown, the intersection of youth media consumption and misinformation in the social media era is a complex and evolving phenomenon. Social media platforms have become central to how young people engage with the world, form opinions, and access information—but this unprecedented connectivity also exposes them to a heightened risk of encountering false or misleading content.

From a sociological perspective, it's clear that misinformation is not merely a technological problem but a deeply social one—shaped by peer networks, cultural norms, and the broader media environment. Young users often struggle to distinguish between credible and unreliable sources, especially when content is framed in emotionally engaging or familiar ways.

Usually in olden days any clarification was sought from people to verify and receive a more in-depth understanding of how things are turning out to be. Even the complex political scenarios were discussed at ease over tea kadai benches. This also brought bonding and trust building among social groups. But with the intervention of technology and sophisticated devices it is with the click or swipe so much of chaos is casually caused.

Yet, this challenge also presents an opportunity to rethink media literacy, digital education, and the responsibilities of platforms, educators, and communities. Encouraging critical thinking, fostering open discussions, and equipping youth with the tools to question and verify information are essential steps toward building resilience against misinformation.

Ultimately, addressing misinformation in the social media era requires more than fact-checking; it demands a deeper understanding of the social dynamics that drive media consumption and belief formation. As digital landscapes continue to evolve, so too must our approaches to empowering the next generation of media-literate citizens.

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