

FAKE NEWS DETECTION BEHAVIOR AMONG GENERATION Z UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN THE DIGITAL MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

The rapid growth of digital media has drastically altered the way that primarily Gen Z students receive information. They primarily retrieve news and maintain contact with others through social media. However, as social media expands, so too does the incidence of fake news on social media platforms, making it increasingly difficult for Gen Z (as well as others) to discern what is real and therefore cannot feel confident in making informed decisions. This study examines how Gen Z college students interact with fake news in digital spaces. This study did not focus on quantitative analysis; instead, it utilized an ethnographic approach, conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a group of heavily engaged with social media. The researchers identified themes reflected in student responses in an attempt to understand how they identify, respond to, and interpret fake news as part of their everyday digital interactions. Findings suggest that the manner in which Gen Z students identify fake news is influenced by factors such as their scrolling habits, whom they feel they can trust, emotional response to information, and platform-specific behaviors. In lieu of fact-checking, the majority of the students that were interviewed relied upon the opinions of peers, gut instinct, and small digital indicators to identify fake news. The gap between student perception and actual ability creates a unique problem. Many students perceive themselves to be digitally savvy, but have difficulty determining whether media is legitimate or not based upon artificial intelligence generated content (e.g., photo editing software). Some of the difficulty for Gen Z youth detecting false news comes from their belief in being capable thinkers; however, how effective they evaluate the credibility of digital content may be affected by sociocultural issues such as digital communication, social networks, and the algorithms used by various online platforms or services. There is a clear need for improved media literacy curriculum, greater digital awareness of digital platforms, and revised

policies that support youth in developing stronger analytical skills for determining online credibility.

INTRODUCTION

Digital media has revolutionized the ways in which information is created, disseminated and received in modern societies. Youth today are using social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, and X as the main ways to communicate and share information. These digital platforms deliver real-time access to news, entertainment, education, and social interactions, enabling users to interact with content and play an active role in its creation and dissemination (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Digital media has enhanced connectivity and access to information, but it has also played a role in the swift dissemination of fake news, misinformation and digitally manipulated information (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

Fake news is, as a general rule, news created or manipulated with the purpose of misleading the public or of driving traffic (Lazer et al., 2018). The digital media environment is populated with fake news, which is quickly disseminated due to the social media algorithms that promote engagement, emotional reaction and viral content over factual accuracy (Bakir & McStay, 2018). Thus, users are subjected to a great amount of unverifiable information that can influence opinions, attitudes and behaviours before they are verified. The new phenomenon of AI-generated content, deepfakes and synthetic media have also made it harder to differentiate between genuine and manipulated information, raising increasing worries at both the level of trust and credibility in digital spaces (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020).

Young people in university are a highly active population in the digital society. The Generation Z has been brought up in a world characterized by the constant use of smartphones, social networks and constant connection to the Internet (Prensky, 2001). These students are known as the digital natives, they use digital media not only for recreation but also for education, communication, political awareness and news consumption. Youth are using social media as a preferred news source over traditional journalism, according to a study

(Marchi, 2012). Yet, even though they are technologically literate, it is not always the case that they are media-literate or have a strong information evaluation skill (Wineburg & McGrew, 2017).

University students' digital behaviors may include fast scanning, passive information consumption, and engagement with content created in short forms like videos, memes, or headlines. In such dynamic digital contexts, students might interact with information in an emotional rather than an analytical way (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). Factors such as emotional responses, peers, social validation, and personalization by algorithms can strongly affect students' perceptions of credibility and authenticity online. This makes it possible to identify fake news a complex behavioural process with social, cultural, emotional, and technological factors.

Fake news detection behavior describes how people recognize, understand, evaluate and react to information they come across online that appears suspicious, or misleading. Such behavior is characterized as assessing a source's credibility, cross-checking information, evaluating information and determining if information should be trusted, ignored, or shared (Guess et al., 2020). Currently, there has been some existing research that suggests that well-developed media literacy and critical thinking are good predictors of the ability to identify misinformation (Jones-Jang et al., 2021). But as numerous university students make it clear, many digitally active students remain unable to identify advanced fake news and AI-generated misinformation.

The majority of previous research addressing fake news and misinformation has centered on quantitative methods involving level of exposure, social media literacy skills, or statistical correlations of social media use with sharing of misinformation (Tandoc et al., 2018). While these studies add important insights, they tend to miss the lived reality and everyday digital practices in which students encounter fake news in everyday settings. The lack of qualitative knowledge and

understanding about the experience of misinformation by university students in the Generation Z and the construction of meaning of credibility and how they negotiate the truth in the current digital culture.

The focus of this research is to investigate how university students detect fake news from within their digital environments, as a way of better understanding the characteristics of Generation Z. An ethnographic qualitative method has been used to examine the manner in which students understand, experience and interact with their peers and engage with digital (and non-digital) technologies in the detection of fake news.

In contrast, this study proposes an alternative view by looking at the detection of fake news as a cultural and social process that occurs in the online context (i.e., online communities). This includes studying the peer and emotional connections between individuals and between them and their online communities. Additionally, this study will examine the impact of different online cultures and platforms (i.e., Facebook) in how individuals detect and practice detecting fake news. The findings of the study will contribute to the growing literature about digital media culture, misinformation and youth communication practices. Awareness of the interpretations and responses of university students to fake news can assist in designing more effective media literacy strategies and awareness programs to the reality of today's digital life. Additionally, the research adds to the debate about how emerging technologies, such as AI and deepfake media, affect information credibility and digital trust with the younger generation.

Therefore, the purpose of this research is to understand the experience, detection, interpretation and reactions of fake news by generation Z university students in digital media context.

Literature Review

Digital Media Environment and Information Consumption

The advent of digital media has had a dramatic impact on information access, creation and dissemination in today's society. Social media like

TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, and X have emerged as primary hubs for communication, entertainment, education, and news. The digital media is different from traditional media in that it allows for instant interaction, user-generated content and quick dissemination of information through networks (Castells, 2010). This shift has had a significant impact on the younger generations, particularly on the younger generation of university students, whose daily life is spent in a digitally connected environment.

The digital media landscape is fast, accessible, interactive and personalized by algorithms. Information is continually fed to users, pushed to them through various notifications, reels, short videos, and recommended content, enabling them to eat huge amounts of information in a short time (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). These advances have made things more connected and more accessible to share information, but they also present problems of information quality and credibility. Without editorial oversight, false, misleading, or manipulated information can spread like wildfire on many digital platforms, without being verified (Lazer et al., 2018).

Knowing about fake news and misinformation.

Fake news is one of the most talked about subjects in studies on digital communication. Tandon, et al., (2018) define fake news as "fabricated information that appears to be news but is missing in fact and lacks journalistic standards". Misinformation and disinformation are closely linked with fake news. Misinformation refers to information that is inaccurate, but not intentionally harmful, while disinformation is deliberately deceptive information with the goal of influencing public opinion (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

This fast dissemination of fake news has been correlated to polarization, confusion, mistrust in institutions, and social division. Vosoughi et al. (2018) discovered that false news is more likely to reach more people and spread further than true information online, due to the tendency for false information to trigger more emotional reactions such as surprise, fear, and anger. Emotional engagement invites users to post content without

verification, and helps to perpetrate viral misinformation cycles.

With the advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and deepfake technology, the fake news landscape has become even more complex. Synthetic video, images and audio can now realistically represent real people and events with high fidelity (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020). This technological progress brings into question the ways in which fake content can be detected, and raises questions about the authenticity of digital content. This means that consumers are increasingly challenged by the ability to differentiate authentic information from manipulated information.

Generation Z and Digital Culture

The generation of 1990s and 2000s is arguably the most technologically engaged generation in history. The term “digital native” was coined by Prensky (2001) for people who have lived their entire lives with digital technologies. Generation Z college students are pretty much au fait with smartphones, social networking websites, streaming platforms and online communications. Social media is an integral component of their learning, social and personal development.

The study indicates that Generation Z users are turning to social media outlets as key sources for information and news (Marchi, 2012). While the older generations read news mainly through television or newspapers, Gen Z may find news reports in their digital feeds. This transition has not only impacted where information is accessed, but also how it is interpreted and evaluated.

Although, technologically speaking, scholars claim that Generation Z students are not necessarily going to be technologically literate or have critical evaluation skills (Wineburg & McGrew, 2017). While students are adept at using digital platforms, they can often have trouble determining credibility of sources, spotting misinformation, or verifying sources online. The digital literacy/ digital critical literacy is a tension that creates digital media vulnerabilities.

The culture of digital engagement was created by frequent scrolling, the necessity for ‘quick eyes’ and the reliance on visuals such as memes, reels, and short-form video content among Gen Z. These

media tendencies tend to foster passive instead of critical consumption of information. It is often associated with a lack of analytical thinking and with using intuitive, rather than critical, responses, according to Pennycook and Rand (2019).

Fake News Detection Behavior

Fake News Detection Behavior: Refers to the activities of individuals for detecting, evaluating, verifying and responding to potentially misleading news they see on the internet. There is a cognitive, emotional and social aspect to this behavior. Detection may include information fact checking, comparison of information across platforms and/or sources and peer discussion.

Research has demonstrated that many users prefer to get surface rather than depth information. Users' information is often processed quickly, relying on headlines, visual content, and/or emotional content without verifying the information (Guess et al., 2020). Exposure to such rapid ads is especially common on the University campus: students are constantly surrounded by information through their smartphone and social media.

There are several studies which highlight the importance of critical thinking in the detection of fake news. Among the most significant skills of critical thinking is the questioning of sources, a critical assessment of evidence and the detection of bias or manipulation (Jones-Jang et al., 2021). But the systematic verification strategies that students use in their usual digital engagements are not utilized by many students. Instead, they employ heuristics such as familiarity, popularity and social trust to assess the credibility of the information.

Moreover, social trust is also identified as significant social factor in fake news detection behavior. Not only could it be accurate, but it could also be more trustworthy if it is from someone you know or trust, like a friend, an influencer or group of people you know. This highlights the social aspects to fake news detection, and not merely a cognitive act.

Media Literacy and Digital Literacy concepts.

Media literacy and digital literacy are considered to be critical skills in today's digital world. Media literacy is the ability to analyse, interpret and evaluate media messages and digital literacy is a focus on using and understanding digital technologies effectively (Hobbs 2017).

There are several studies that indicate that media literacy is positively correlated with the ability to find fake news (Jones-Jang et al., 2021). Media-literate individuals are more likely to look for information, know how messages can be twisted, and to evaluate the acceptability of their source. Educational institutions have a crucial role in the preparation as it is important to educate students to meet the misinformation challenges.

But, there are a number of scholars who believe that current media literacy programs do not provide support to the realities of today's digital culture. Theoretical understanding of concepts of fake news and difficulties in applying verification practices in quick moving social media. The traditional verification signs are no longer effective due to the growing volume of AI-generated content and algorithm-driven personalisation. Media literacy education is becoming increasingly complex as the traditional verification signs are not reliable.

The effects of social media platforms and reputation perceptions. The impact of Social Media Platforms and Reputation Perceptions.

The impact of fake news detection behaviour varies across the different social media platforms. The short-form video culture on TikTok can make it hard to deeply analyse videos. Instagram is all about aesthetics and the culture of influencers, credibility is often tied to popularity and looks, not facts. Private forwarding allows users to send messages via WhatsApp that cannot be easily monitored and publicly argued or disputed.

Platform architecture seems to have a significant impact on the credibility perceptions of users, according to research (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). For instance, people tend to trust visual content more than text-based content, as images and videos tend to be more realistic. But with the advent of deepfake technologies and AI-generated

images, these notions are called into question, as highly realistic manipulated content is created.

Students adopt different approaches when using media, based on context. Content on YouTube could be viewed as more trustworthy than TikTok content, and political debates on X (Twitter) may create confusion because they have opposing viewpoints. These experiences across platforms influence students' understanding of what is authentic and trustworthy in digital environments. The ethnographic perspective on the detection of fake news. Ethnographic approach to the detection of fake news. Ethnographic approaches to fake news don't only see the problem as a technical one, but as a cultural and social practice that happens in everyday digital life. Ethnography is concerned with the lived experiences, interactions and processes of meaning making in a particular community (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Students establish common understandings, norms, behaviors, and interpretations of information credibility in a digital environment by engaging in ongoing interactions.

In this regard, fake news detection behavior is shaped by peer culture, online identity, emotional engagement and platform-specific communication practices. In a digital community, students discuss truth as a group, using the social validation, comments, likes and experiences of others to make sense of information. Ethnographic methods then offer a deeper understanding of what students experience in their own, natural, digital spaces when it comes to misinformation.

The literature available on fake news focuses mainly on quantitative measurement and experimental designs. Very little qualitative work has yet been done to examine students' real-world encounters with misinformation and the ways digital culture affects their own practices of misinformation detection. This disparity undermines the importance of ethnographic research to reflect the complexity of detecting fake news in the current student environment.

Methodology

Research Design

The study uses a qualitative ethnographic approach to gain an understanding of how fake news is detected by the generation Z university students in the digital media environment. This study will use an ethnographic approach because it allows for an intimate understanding of the participant's lived experience, the meaning making processes, and cultural practices in their natural digital context (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). The study does not attempt to quantify variables, but rather investigates the interpretation, negotiation and reactions of students to fake news in their daily social media interactions.

The research is exploratory in nature as it is used to understand the "how" and "why" of students' fake news detection behaviors rather than to test the hypothesis and causal relationships.

The study's target population includes University students who belong to generation Z who are engaged in higher education institutions. The definition of Generation Z is mostly considered to be people born in the mid-1990s to the early 2010s (Prensky, 2001). The inclusion criteria for participants were: People from the age group 18–25 years (approx.) in the university. Having at least one social media app (e.g., TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube) that is used actively.

The participants were selected using purposive sampling technique. A sampling technique that is typically employed in qualitative research to locate individuals who can offer rich, relevant and in-depth information concerning the phenomenon being studied. The total number of participants interviewed ranged from 50 to 60, until there were no more new themes or insights that came out of the interviews, which is known as data saturation.

Data Collection Method

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to obtain data. This approach was chosen to provide flexibility in exploring participants' experiences whilst being able to keep the focus on the research objectives. Semi-structured interviews allow the research to ask questions that allow for an open-ended reply and probe further into answers when needed.

The interviewer used the following questions in the interview guide:

- Students' knowledge about fake news.
- Experiences of encountering misinformation on social media
- How information is checked for validity
- The importance of peers, influencers and social media in credibility assessments
- Emotional and cognitive responses to suspicious information.
- How people perceive AI generated or manipulated content

The length of each interview was about 10-15 minutes and was conducted either online (via Zoom, WhatsApp voice call etc) or in person depending on the availability and convenience of the participants. Interviews were audio-taped and then verbatim transcribed with the permission of participants and then analysed. This area will involve research methods, including ethnographic approaches.

Due to its ethnographic approach, the study aims to observe and interpret students' digital culture and daily life practices of information consumption. The study considers participants not as "individuals," but as members of digital communities in which meaning is co-created.

The researcher noticed the following things:

- Student description of their daily usage pattern of social media.
- The ways in which they know how to assess credibility in online contexts
- Relationship between peers and their judgments
- How behaviour is influenced by features of the platform, such as likes and shares, and algorithmic feeds.

This method enables the study to include contextual and cultural aspects of fake news detection behaviour.

Ethical Considerations

All studies have been conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines. Participants were told the purpose of the study and that it was a voluntary participation. Some of the important ethical issues were:

- Informed consent was obtained prior to interviews.
- Confidentiality and anonymity had been maintained with the use of pseudonyms
- The right to withdraw and not be penalized any time during the process.
- Ensure that audio recordings and transcripts are stored securely.
- No personal or sensitive information in the study is made available.

Data Analysis and Findings

This section provides an analysis of the interview data which were gathered from the Generation Z university students about their fake news detection behaviour in the digital media environment. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, enabling the researcher to see the recurring patterns, meanings, and interpretations of participants lived experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The results demonstrate the students' perceptions, interpretations, and responses to fake news in their daily online experiences.

Theme 1: Rapid Consumption and Superficial Processing of Information

The results of the study reveal several interconnected themes that help to understand Gen Z university students' use and perceptions of information in digital environments. A big trend is the quick and superficial intake of information. The participants regularly indicated that they use the Internet to access information in a hasty, superficial way, and that they tend to skim through the information rather than read it. Many students do not read news articles in their entirety, but often skimp on reading longer pieces or watch short videos that they have not verified for authenticity. This is caused by the sheer amount of information on the internet; people tend to scroll through it all and then don't pay attention to what they are looking at. As one participant explained, "We don't really analyze it, if it's interesting we just watch it and move on." This is a digital culture that's more about getting the information quickly rather than imparting a depth of critical information, which can make it easier for people to fall for fake news.

Theme 2: Social Trust as a Shortcut for Credibility

The second theme is the importance of social trust as a "shortcut" to assessment of credibility. When assessing information trustworthiness, students often use their social networks, usually their close friends. Any content that is shared by a known person is usually treated as legitimate content, even content created by influencers is semi-legitimate because it is familiar. When participants were asked about the questioning of content shared in the group, they reported that they don't question content that they share together with the group, "If my friend says it, I think..." said one participant. It shows that credibility is not necessarily based on information but is more of an interpersonal relationship; it is socially constructed.

Theme 3: Emotional Influence Overrides Verification

The study also revealed that students' emotional reactions have a strong impact on their interaction with the content, leading them to process it in a manner that is more emotional than rational. Emotions, especially those that may be shocking, offensive, political or social sensitive, will elicit instant responses and heighten the chances for sharing. Students explained that emotion often takes the place of reason. Students recognized that emotion, anger, fear often come before reason. "If it is emotional you don't think twice, you just react," said one participant. This demonstrates the powerful impact that emotional content can have in decreasing the time users may spend considering their material, increasing their vulnerability to misinformation.

Theme 4: Limited and Inconsistent Fact-Checking Practices

Also important is the fact that students do not always and not frequently check facts. The participants had an understanding of fake news, but their verification processes were informal and non-structured. Typical strategies were to perform quick Google searches, checking with friends for confirmation or simply take a look at several posts. Formal verification measures (such as fact

checking web sites or reverse image search) were not often used, however. One participant said, "Sometimes I don't check, most of the time I take what I see on faith." This means there's a significant discrepancy between awareness of misinformation and verification behavior.

Theme 5: Platform-Dependent Perceptions of Truth

Additionally, the study shows that there is a significant difference between the credibility perceptions of various social media. WhatsApp was seen as very susceptible to being misled as messages could be forwarded on at any time, and Instagram was considered to be pretty good looking but not always 100% accurate. Even though not completely reliable, YouTube was seen as relatively more credible. According to one participant, "On WhatsApp you don't know anything as it keeps forwarding without source." The findings of these perceptions reveal the importance of the design of the platforms and digital culture in the users' evaluation of the reliability of information.

Theme 6: Digital Confidence vs Actual Literacy Gap

A final theme recognizes the lack of confidence in digital and lack of actual media literacy. While the majority of students rate themselves as being 'digital skilled', there is a lack of critical skills in evaluating and verifying information. The majority of respondents were confident in the use of technology, but they showed some hesitation with regard to evaluating content authenticity. One of the respondents said, "Knows how to use social media but not always validate if it's real or not. This indicates a gap in the technical skills and critical information literacy (sultan et al 2025).

In every theme there is a common thread: The ability to detect fake news among Gen Z students is not a structured analytical process, it's a socially and emotionally motivated activity. Students depend on other students' feedback, feeling, and cues rather than on systematic verification processes. The results indicate overall that digital environments foster speed over accuracy, emotion over logic, trust over verification and familiarity

over evidence. This mix places a heightened risk of misinformation being disseminated and hard to critically assess.

Summary of Key Findings

The thematic analysis shows that there are six interconnected dimensions that affect fake news detection behavior among university students in Generation Z:

1. Inadequate attention to quality and detail, and superficial thinking
2. Social trust and peer influence are also included.
3. Emotional responses to material
4. Poor and inadequate verification processes
5. Platform-based credibility differences
6. Perceived and actual media literacy gap

As a whole, the results indicate that the identification of fake news is a culturally rooted and context-specific activity, not simply a cognitive ability.

Discussion

Let's talk about some of the findings in this report. First, when searching out fake information, most young people don't operate under the modus operandi of "fact-checking" very well. They rely on whom they know (through trust), what their peers think about things (for their affiliations), and the kind of things that land in their feeds (through "popping" on their timelines). This reinforces previous research showing that generally, people tend to take shortcuts and do not do a lot of research to confirm the facts presented to them, particularly when consuming information at the speed most people do today on digital platforms. For students, with constant scrolling and an overwhelming amount of information coming at them each day, they often do not have the opportunity to stop, consider and verify content prior to sharing it with their friends and followers. This is not just speculation; previous studies have found that the design of these platforms causes people to continue scrolling through their feeds without much consideration and reflection on what they have just seen. Furthermore, because of how algorithmically generated content appears in

front of users and how much emotionally charged content (also known as "bait") gets posted, it is no surprise that fake information continues to be shared at an unbelievable rate. For young people, finding out if something is good or not is not only learned through the classroom, but is part of the routine in their everyday digital lives.

Theoretical Implication

In addition to expanding knowledge on media literacy/digital communication, this research also shows that merely providing students information about fake news does not equip them with the skills necessary to check facts for themselves. For instance, Media Literacy Theory indicates that while it is critical to understand what the problem is; it is equally important to learn how to independently evaluate information for accuracy. Besides supporting the Elaboration Likelihood Model (which posits that students trust sources that they already know or that have many "likes"), this research supports Social Cognitive Theory i.e., students emulate the behaviour of peers and rely heavily on their observations of what is happening around them. This research also provides an additional dimension by conceptualising fake news detection as an "everyday" experience rather than exclusively existing in an individual's cognitive process; fake news detection is influenced by platform design/algorithms/groupthink.

Practical Implication

Universities and digital literacy organizations must take steps to improve education around these areas. There is more than simply discussing the issue of fake news; students need skills to effectively use fact-checking tools, validate sources, and evaluate AI-generated materials. Awareness and educational programs should demonstrate how emotional appeal and social pressure influence within-network-sharing habits rather than suggest all sharing behavior is driven by rational reasons. School-based educational programs must also provide digital skills training that empowers students to evaluate the content they receive from different algorithms. Social media organizations are not exempt from these responsibilities; they must develop a culture of

transparency in how they recommend content and consistently communicate the differences between misleading versus AI-generated content. Lastly, government officials must support efforts to enhance media literacy among youth, particularly in those regions where misinformation is most prevalent; thus, establishing national youth media literacy programs is crucial (Manzoor et al 2025).

Future Research

There's so much more to look forward to with future research! Some possibilities include: tracking students longitudinally using both quantitative and qualitative data as new technological tools and AI impact how students learn. It would also be beneficial to compare findings across countries and education systems, as different approaches may work in some places but not others. There are also many unknowns involving how students use social media platforms (e.g., TikTok, and WhatsApp) to form opinions about what's true or false. It would also be useful for researchers to explore the value of providing students with skills associated with advanced AI literacy or critical thinking to mitigate the effect of misinformation. Moreover, utilizing a combination of computer modeling methods and in-depth interviews could provide a more holistic view of the transmission of misinformation in today's digital world.

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