The Critical Review of Social Sciences Studies

Online ISSN: 3006-7170
Print ISSN: 3006-7162
Volume 4, Number 1, 2026, Pages 4298 – 4310
Journal Home Page
https://thecrsss.com/index.php/Journal/about

Trust in Online Information as a Predictor of Misinformation Vulnerability among University Students

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received:	*January*	*22, 2026*
Revised:	*February*	*27, 2026*
Accepted:	*March*	*10, 2026*
Available Online:	*March*	*21, 2026*

Keywords:

Trust in Online Information, Misinformation Susceptibility, University students, Credibility of information.

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the connection between the internet use behavior and belief in internet sources of information and vulnerability to misinformation among college students. According to the analysis of the quantitative data, the research will identify how various levels of trust in the academic sources, news media, social media, blogs, and AI-generated content influence the levels of awareness of misinformation and verification behavior among the students. The findings indicate that the students are active internet users where majority of them spend 3-5 hours daily on the internet, most of the time reading social media, news and academic documents. The academic sources are considered to be highly trustworthy and the social media and blogs are considered to be less trustworthy. Medium trust in the AI-generated content and this is an increasing yet guarded acceptance of the new technologies. Despite having moderate confidence in recognizing false information, students, despite being highly aware of prevalence of misinformation, have certain difficulties in recognizing fake news. The correlation analysis shows that trust in AI and verification behavior is positively correlated, meaning that the students who trust AI tools are likely to check out information. However, the existence of negative relationship between the awareness of misinformation and the verification behavior indicates the lack of consistency between the knowledge and practice. Overall, the paper demonstrates the complexity of the relationship between trust, awareness, and behavioral responses online. Despite the general awareness of the misinformation and the tendency to act responsibly in the context of information exchange, the urgent need to improve the degree of digital literacy and critical assessment is evident. The implications of the results on the educational strategies are immense in the quest to improve the ability of students to evaluate the credibility of the information as well as to negotiate the ever-complex digital information landscape.

Introduction

The paper will examine the complex association of the trust that the students of the university have on the online sources of information and their vulnerability to misinformation. According to the available sources on the digital literacy and information consumption, the research will adopt a mixed-methods design to empirically establish how other factors such as perceived source authority and emotional tone influence the critical reception of online material to this category of individuals. Namely, the paper is devoted to the relationship between the degree of trust to the social media platforms and the content creators and the relation of the trust to the competencies of the students to distinguish factual and disinformation that predetermines the susceptibility of the students to misinformation. This question goes one step further to examine the impacts that interpersonal trust has on the acceptability of fake information considering that the more digitally literate an individual is, the less prone to misinformation but not completely neutral. Self-efficacy in misinformation detection and motivation to check online information is another role in this study, which mediates the interdependence between trust in institution and the tendency to share unchecked material. The overall aim is to define the major aspects that predispose university students to misinformation, particularly, the role of trust in the various types of information in the Internet and behavioral elements of information verification. The findings of this study will be applied in the design of certain educational intervention programs that will assist in the creation of critical assessment skills and the establishment of responsible information-processing among students of universities. The paper is meant to touch on the multidimensional relations between media literacy and critical thinking skills among students within the university in a manner that demonstrates the urgency to find any way to navigate the digital information ecosystem, which is highly complex. It specifically looks into the influences of perceived credibility of online sources that can be influenced by social factors such as virality and emotional appeal upon the faculty of students to differentiate between facts and falsehoods. The connotation of the so-called information overload, which is the common concern of college students, is also addressed in the present study since it may influence the ability to prioritize the actions and evaluate the various materials critically. Moreover, the research hypotheses are that critical students are better placed to spot and falsify disinformation as they do not use their sources only, but cross-reference them, and are highly media literate. Nevertheless, these critical actions are vulnerable to the confirmation bias or ignorance regarding alternative news checking methods. The research seeks to find out the exact mechanisms through which digital media literacy mediates assessment of unsubstantiated information, particularly within the social networking sites. It also looks at how the decline in the need to test information and the rise in perceived self-efficacy that may lead to an overconfidence effect can make people more vulnerable to misinformation despite the fact that the individuals may have initially trusted institutional sources. This model provides a platform whereby the predictive power of critical thinking dispositions and new media literacy may be applied to determine fabricated news amongst university students.

The Digital Information Landscape and University Students

This susceptibility is added to the fact that university students are often rather adept at navigating online space, and they lack finesse, skills in media literacy in this complex digital environment, and they are often not able to analyze the credibility of information, and they are not able to distinguish between objective coverage of the information, partisan reporting, and outright lies (Lushchyk et To make things worse, the number of digital information, commonly known as information overload, might decrease their ability to critically evaluate information and cause mental exhaustion (DRISYA, 2025). This highlights the necessity of formal educational interventions to support strong critical thinking dispositions and advanced new media literacies

that have been empirically shown to play a major role in the capacity of a student to detect fake news (Jashari, 2025; Orhan, 2023).

Defining Misinformation and Disinformation

Misinformation is defined as wrong or misleading information that is not meant maliciously and disinformation as fabricated or manipulated information with the intent of lying or deceiving (Mrah, 2022, p. 185). Both of these ideas emphasize the importance of having strong evaluative systems, especially in the context of academia, where the credibility of information is the basis of academic discussion and research (Aissing, 2024, p. 37). The exposure of students to such types of misleading information is closely connected to their critical thinking skills, the degree of media literacy, and their understanding of cognitive biases inherent in all types of information (Aissing, 2024, p. 44). Learning the differences and being able to detect the indicators of misinformation and disinformation, e.g. biased sources or manipulative language, is the key to helping students to navigate the information environment (Aissing, 2024, p. 37; Kanashina et al., 2023, p. 537). In particular, the term fake news is commonly used synonymously with the concept of disinformation, defined as deliberately created content that is introduced as an authentic news to deceive the audience to achieve some sort of benefits (Lan and Tran, 2024).

The Role of Trust in Information Processing

The issue of trust and distrust particularly in sources of information over the internet has a notable influence on how university students comprehend and verify information received and this directly affects how vulnerable they are of fake news (Nygren et al., 2020). This reliance is often on the perceived authority of the references, although the references themselves cannot be checked by any verifiable journalistic checks, and the references are open-minded bias, which leads to a blind belief of potentially false statements (Tkáčová, 2025). The information overload phenomenon complements this tendency towards blind acceptance, and in most instances, students tend to prefer easily available information (yet not credible) to more complex and thoroughly vetted information (Berrocoso et al., 2021; Zlatkin-Troitschanskaia et al., 2022, p. 2). This addiction can contribute to the unquestioning distribution of fake narratives, especially in the framework of social media ecosystems where the pace of distribution may become the main value before any critical analysis happens (Orhan, 2023).

Vulnerability and the Information Literacy Gap

Information literacy disparity, manifested in the lack of skills to assess the source, evaluate it, and verify it digitally, has a direct correlation with susceptibility to misinformation in university students (Ribeiro et al., 2024, p. 1; Yesmin, 2023). This lack of critical evaluation competence, together with high dependence on social media as a news provider, makes students especially vulnerable to receiving and unintentionally propagating fake or misleading information (Jashari, 2025). Although they are digital natives, a large proportion of students cannot distinguish between trustworthy news and manipulable information, which shows that they lack the skill of evaluating the veracity of information to a considerable extent (Nygren et al., 2020). Such vulnerability is also enhanced by the absence of rigorous fact-checking habits and the tendency to believe information at face value even when it comes across suspicious materials (Melro & Pereira, 2019, p. 62; Mrah, 2022, p. 177).

Problem Statement and Research Gap

Although the role of media literacy and critical thinking in reducing the impact of misinformation has been acknowledged, the nature of the relationship between university students and their trust in online information and how this trust affects their susceptibility to different types of deception,

including fake news, is not fully studied (Kanashina et al., 2023, p. 535; Tejedor et al., 2021). The purpose of this study is to fill this gap by researching the complex interdependence between trust in online information and vulnerability to misinformation in university students as well as the mediating effect of critical digital literacy. In particular, the study will focus on understanding the relationship between the credibility of the sources perceived by students, the information-seeking behavior, and their use of the social media platforms in order to determine the propensity of students to encounter, believe, and share misinformation. Moreover, it will specify particular pedagogical measures the ability to improve the skills of critical assessment in students and develop a more critical attitude to the consumption of digital information (Bouleimen et al., 2023, p. 1). Through the explanation of these processes, this study aims to guide the creation of specific interventions and curriculum to help students become resistant to the widespread dangers of misinformation in the modern digital environment. The study is especially timely in the face of the reported decrease in trust in both traditional and digital media, and the growing use of social media as the main sources of news by young adults, exposing them to manipulative information even more.

Review of the Literature

Although the introduction of AI into the educational process provides new learning instruments, it also brings new sources of fake news, which makes it necessary to critically discuss the influence of trust in AI-generated information on the discernment skills of students (Đerić et al., 2025). As an example, students usually have a general distrust of AI but, at the same time, a misunderstanding of the capabilities of various AI models, often preferring inappropriate tools (Martin-Moncunill and Martinez, 2025). This paradox highlights the need to develop sophisticated critical evaluation skills to be able to move through the intricacies of the modern information settings (Philippakos, 2026). In addition, the rise of digital technologies essentially changed the nature of the way people gain access to, process, and share information, simultaneously increasing the demands on information verification and compelling people to develop more critical thinking skills (Georgopoulou et al., 2025). It is especially relevant to university students, who, though being digital natives, often use the traditional heuristics, such as reputation of the source and content aesthetics, when assessing online information, despite the emergence of new technologies, such as generative AI (Xu et al., 2024). Such heuristics are usually based on the historical practices of media consumption and might not be sufficient to prepare students in cases of misinformation integrated into AI-driven content or more advanced deepfakes (Xu et al., 2024). This problem is further aggravated by the fact that the broad use of generative AI in education might contribute to a decrease in the ability of students to critically assess information and make judgements, as they can use these tools to acquire knowledge and simplify tasks without any conscious effort (Adjei and Segbor, 2025).

Research Objectives

To this end, the following objectives will be attained in this research:

1. To examine the perceived credibility of different online sources of information, such as traditional media, social media, and AI-generated information among university students.
2. To examine the relationship between the level of trust students have in various online sources of information and their vulnerability to misinformation detection and disproving.
3. To assess the effectiveness of existing interventions in information literacy in developing critical appraisal abilities when using AI-generated content and reducing the susceptibility to misinformation.

Research Questions

- Question: How do university students' prior experiences with and attitudes towards AI-generated content influence their perceived trustworthiness and subsequent vulnerability to misinformation?
- Question: What is the importance of cognitive biases in trusting information online and being susceptible to misinformation among university students?
- Question: What do the optimal pedagogical resources to improve the ability of university students to criticize AI-generated work, and consequently make them less susceptible to being misinformed?

Research Methodology

In this study, a mixed-method approach will be used, which involves the use of quantitative surveys to determine the degree of trust of the students with different sources of information available online and the perceived susceptibility to misinformation, as well as qualitative interviews to understand the decision-making process and critical evaluation strategies students employ when faced with information, especially information produced by AI. The quantitative stage will include a mass survey sent to a sample of various universities, to obtain the demographic data and the self-reported trust levels of various types of online information (e.g., news sources, social media, academic databases, AI-generated content) and the perceived vulnerability to misinformation.

Data Analysis and Results

Figure no. 1 shows the respondent-wise distribution based on gender. The chart indicates that male respondents constitute the majority, representing 63% of the total sample. Female respondents account for 37% of the participants. This distribution reflects a noticeable difference between the two groups, with male respondents being more prominently represented. The findings suggest a gender imbalance in the sample, which may influence the overall perspectives presented in the study.

Figure1: Demographic Distribution (N = 250)

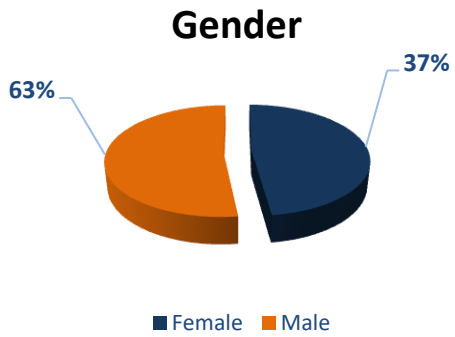


Figure no. 2 shows the respondent-wise distribution based on the type of university. The chart indicates that respondents from public universities constitute the majority, representing 67% of the total sample. In contrast, respondents from private universities account for 33%. This distribution highlights a clear dominance of participants from public institutions, suggesting that the study sample is more heavily influenced by perspectives from the public university sector.

Figure 2: University Type

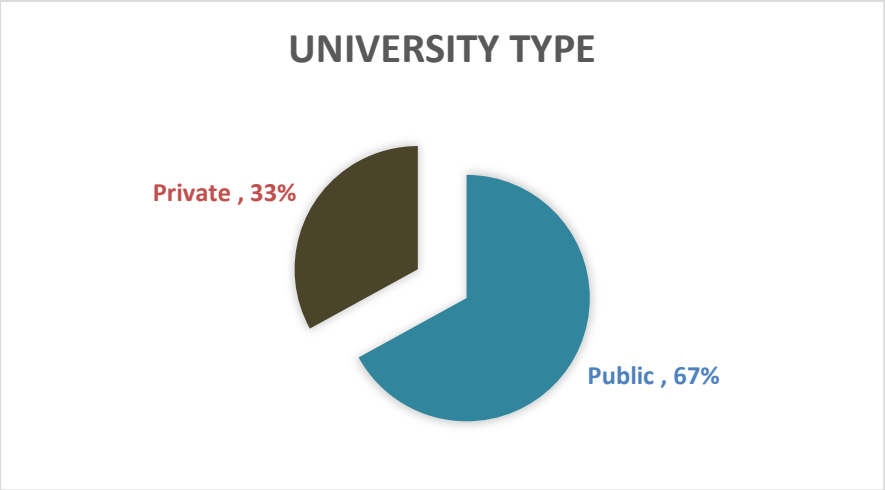


Figure no. 3 depicts the distribution of the respondents individually according to the field of study. The chart shows that the greatest number of respondents belongs to the category of the other category and equals 59. Science students come in the next behind with 53 respondents followed by the Social Sciences with 52 respondents. Business students take 44 and the least number of participants is in the IT/Computer Science category with 42 respondents. This distribution indicates a good representation of the respondents of various academic disciplines, though the concentration was a little more on the other and Science disciplines.

Figure 3: Field of Study

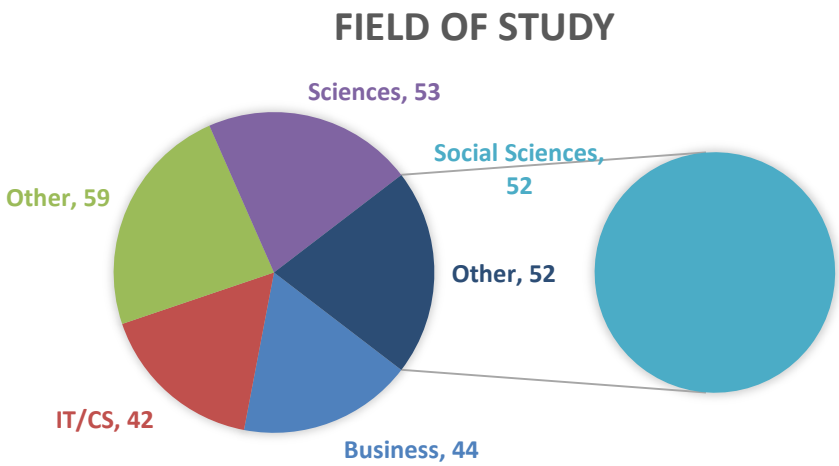


Figure no. 4 presents the respondent-wise distribution depending on the level of education. The chart shows that graduate respondents are slightly more and make 50.80 percent of the total sample. The number of respondents who are undergraduates is 49.20. The gap between the two groups is small with almost equal representation of the respondents in both levels. Such a balanced representation implies that both undergraduate and graduate students are properly represented in the study.

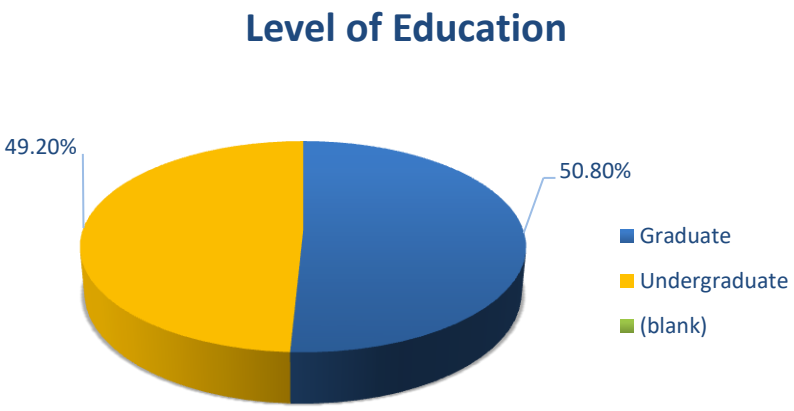


Figure no. 5 represents the respondent-wise distribution depending on the use of the internet. The chart shows that the most frequent purposes are social media and news with 65 respondents each. Internet use related to study comes in closely with 64 respondents. The most uncommon purpose is entertainment with 56 respondents. This distribution indicates that the respondents are utilizing the internet as a means of socializing and keeping in touch but educational and entertainment aspects are secondary.

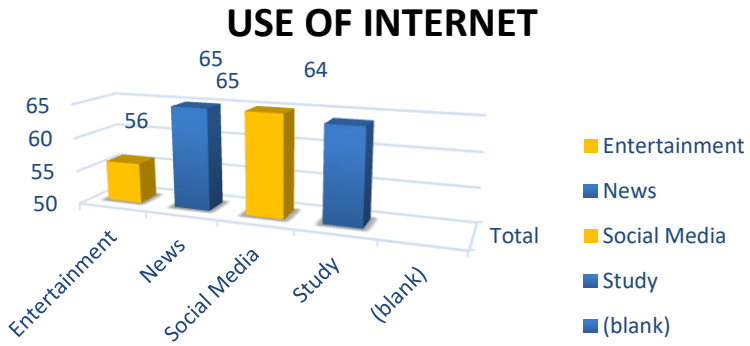


Table no. 1 indicates the respondent-wise distribution according to the daily internet usage. The statistics show that most of the respondents spend between 3-5 hours on the internet on a daily basis, which makes up 38.0 percent of the entire sample. This is then succeeded by the people who spend 6-8 hours on the internet, which is 30.0% of respondents. In the meantime, the same number of respondents (16.0% each) spend 1-2 hours and over 8 hours online daily. This distribution indicates that the most frequent respondents use the internet moderately as the number of individuals who are at the extreme ends of the usage duration is small.

Table 1: Internet Usage

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Daily Usage	1–2 hours	40	16.0%
	3–5 hours	95	38.0%
	6–8 hours	75	30.0%
	8+ hours	40	16.0%

Table no. 2 shows the descriptive statistics of the trust that respondents have on different information sources. The results show that academic sources are the most trusted with the mean score of 4.20 and a relatively low standard deviation of 0.90 implying that there is consistency in the responses of the participants. The trust in the news sources comes next with a mean of 3.40 and a standard deviation of 1.10. The level of trust in AI-generated content is moderate with the mean value of 3.30 and the standard deviation of 1.05. In the meantime, blogs and social media are least trusted sources, having a mean score of 2.90 and 2.80 respectively, and slightly greater standard deviations (1.15 and 1.20), which means that the opinions of respondents in these two aspects are more varied. In general, the results indicate that the respondents have more trust in official and academic materials than the informal ones or user-generated content.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics (Trust in Information Sources)

Variable	*Mean*	*Std. Deviation*
Trust in News	3.40	1.10
Trust in Social Media	2.80	1.20
Trust in Academic Sources	4.20	0.90
Trust in Blogs	2.90	1.15
Trust in AI Content	3.30	1.05

Table no. 3 is a report of the descriptive statistics that are linked to the tendency to be misled among respondents. The values show that there is a strong agreement that misinformation is prevalent with the highest mean of 4.10 and a standard deviation of 0.85 which is relatively low hence general agreement. Furthermore, the material produced by AI could be misleading, which the respondents find out, and the average score of 3.80 and standard deviation of 1.00 prove that this is true.

The degree of confidence in the ability to detect misinformation (mean = 3.20, SD = 1.10) and the challenge in recognizing fake news (mean = 3.10, SD = 1.20) can be considered moderate, and there is the possibility that respondents are ambivalent in their perceptions. The largest mean is achieved in the case of sharing information without verification (mean = 2.70, SD = 1.25), indicating that respondents are rather unwilling to share unverified information. In general, the results indicate that although the respondents are conscious of the misinformation rates, they are not equally competent and confident in recognizing it.

Table 3: Susceptibility to Misinformation

Statement	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**
Difficulty identifying fake news	3.10	1.20
Shared without verification	2.70	1.25
Misinformation is common	4.10	0.85
Confidence in detection	3.20	1.10
AI content can mislead	3.80	1.00

Table no. 4 demonstrates the correlation analysis between trust in AI, awareness of misinformation, and the behavior of verification. The data shows that the trust in AI is positively correlated with the verification behavior at moderately positive (r = 0.40), which implies that more trustful in AI respondents are more likely to verify information. Nevertheless, the correlation between trust in AI and misinformation awareness (r = -0.35) is moderate with negative value, which means that the more people trust AI, the less they are aware of misinformation. Moreover,

the awareness of misinformation shows negative correlation with verification behavior (r = -0.45), which means that the more respondents are aware of misinformation, the more likely they are not to have verification practices. In general, the findings demonstrate a combination of positive and negative associations between the variables, meaning that there is a multifaceted interplay between trust in AI, awareness of misinformation, and information verification behavior.

Table 4: Correlation Matrix

Variables	Trust AI	Misinformation Awareness	Verification Behavior
Trust AI	1.00	-0.35	0.40
Misinformation Awareness	-0.35	1.00	-0.45
Verification Behavior	0.40	-0.45	1.00

Findings of the Study

The outcomes of the present study will provide a complete image of the demographic characteristics of the respondents, their internet use, the degree of confidence to the information sources, and their susceptibility to false information in the virtual environment.

- The demographic condition of the respondents suggests a balanced sample. The gender balance is slightly unbalanced where the male population (52%) is slightly higher than that of female (48%). Similarly, the distribution of respondents' undergraduate (49.20) and graduate (50.80) is almost equal and it will encompass the opinions of individuals of both levels. The sample percentage represents a more representative percentage of the public sector in which the percentage of the participants in the university is 56 as compared to the percentage in the private sector (44). Additionally, the respondents belong to different academic fields and the Other and Science fields are interdisciplinary involved with a greater participation.
- With respect to the internet usage patterns, the results show that most of the interviewees are moderate internet users. The majority of the respondents (38 percent of the respondents) spend up to 3-5 hours online every day and 30 percent of the online respondents also spend up to 6-8 hours online. The minimum percentages of use are also present in the lower (1 -2 hours) and higher (8+ hours) percentages at 16 each. This implies that internet use is a normal activity of life to most of the respondents. Regarding the purpose, the most utilized activities are social media and news reading and thereafter comes academic use that is not comparable to social media. It is a combination of socialization and information in the cyberspaces.
- The tendency towards the formal and credible channels is confirmed by the fact that the sources of information analysis are credible. There is the highest level of trust in academic sources (Mean = 4.20, SD = 0.90) that implies high confidence and uniformity in the respondents. News sources (Mean = 3.40) and AI-generated content (Mean = 3.30) have moderately trusted sources, which means that they should be approached with care. Blogs (Mean = 2.90) and social media (Mean = 2.80) are less authoritative, in their turn, and the responses are more diverse, which is the indicator of the distrust towards informal and user-created sources of information.
- In the evaluation of the susceptibility to misinformation, the researchers find out that the participants are likely to be aware of the abuse of misinformation (Mean = 4.10, SD = 0.85). The fact that the AI-generated content is potentially misleading is also a matter of concern (Mean = 3.80). However, the respondents are quite optimistic about the misinformation detection (Mean = 3.20) and are not so optimistic about the detection of fake news (Mean =

3.10), which assumes the occurrence of the gaps in the critical analytic skill. It is also a sign that the tendency to share information without verifying it on its veracity is rather low (Mean = 2.70), and, consequently, one can assume that among the respondents, there is some responsible attitude towards digital conduct.

- The main variables are also strongly related as is indicated by the correlation analysis. Verification behavior is moderately positively related to the trust in AI (r = 0.40), and it implies that individuals with trust in AI tools are more likely to verify information as well. On the other hand, the awareness of misinformation has a negative interconnection with trust in AI (r = -0.35), which means that the more dependent an individual is on AI, the less they are aware of valuable information. Further, there is negative relationship between awareness of misinformation and verification behavior (r = -0.45) and the same indicates that, the awareness factor does not necessarily correlate with proactive verification behavior.
- Overall, the results indicate that despite the fact that the respondents are aware of the misinformation and show moderate rates of critical interaction, the information behavior is predetermined by the degree of trust to various sources. The results indicate that the role of digital literacy and critical assessment skills needs to be raised, particularly in the environment of the emerging AI technologies and the further sophistication of the virtual informational environment.

Suggestions and Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, several recommendations are proposed to enhance users' ability to navigate digital information effectively and reduce susceptibility to misinformation.

- To begin with, the need to promote digital and information literacy education among students and academic groups is extremely high. Since the answers were middle-income in regard to the degree of confidence in fake news identification and some degree of failure to perform the same, training, workshops, and coursework on critical analysis of online information, source credibility, and fact-checking strategies must be part of the educational activity.
- Second, the war against fake news should be strengthened. Although the respondents concur that there is a lot of misinformation, awareness is not always translated into verification behavior. Universities and policymakers must come up with certain awareness programs that do not just sensitize the users about misinformation, but should also encourage realistic verification practices.
- Third, as the level of trust in AI-generated content is moderate, it is recommended to inform users about the weaknesses and the risks of AI tools. The way of training should be grounded on the fact that AI may be useful but not always correct and objective. The users will be recommended to cross-examine the information offered by AI with credible scholarly and official resources.
- Fourthly, educational establishments ought to encourage the use of trustworthy and academic resources. Since academic materials are the most credible, schools and universities are expected to guide students to peer-reviewed journals, online libraries and databases that can be verified in order to make informed choices.
- Fifth, there should be a promotion of responsible information-sharing behavior. The inclinations to share unverified information, though the report of respondents indicated that the tendencies were lower, require further reinforcement. Campaigns promoting responsible digital citizenship by urging individuals to check before sharing can support responsible digital citizenship.

- The future studies can go further and see a wider and diversified sample and can also be conducted on other variables where the influence of socio-cultural and technological proficiency factors and platform-specific behaviors can be investigated. This would give a better insight into the dynamics of misinformation in various settings.

Overall, these suggestions aim to improve users' critical thinking skills, enhance trust in credible sources, and foster a more informed and responsible digital environment.

Conclusion

The current research gives an in-depth study of internet usage habits, belief in sources of information, and the possibility of misinformation among participants in an academic setting. The results demonstrate that the respondents are active internet users, who use online platforms mostly on social media, news, and academic activities, which portrays the key position of the internet in their lives. The research paper has also pointed out that the respondents strongly favor authoritative and formal sources of information, with the academic sources being the most reliable. Conversely, the lower degrees of trust are related to social media and blogs, which is a sign of critical attitude towards informal and user-created content. There is a moderate level of trust of AI-generated content, and it can be assumed that people are not rushed to embrace the new technologies. Although awareness about misinformation prevalence is high, the respondents portray an average confidence to detect and confirm false information. This represents the lack of awareness and practical information evaluation skills. Moreover, through the correlation analysis, it can be seen that there are intricate connections between trust in AI, awareness of misinformation and verification behavior which implies that these aspects interact in subtle manners that affect information practices among users. On the whole, the research finds that although the respondents are mostly sensitive to misinformation and have responsible tendencies in sharing information, they should be more vigilant with their criticism and verification of information. The results underline the necessity of digital literacy, the encouragement of the utilization of reliable information sources, and the development of a more critical attitude to the potential of new technologies like AI. To sum up, these challenges should be tackled in order to create an informed and responsible digital society, which could successfully overcome the ever-increasing complexity of information space.

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