

How students identify and evaluate fake news: a case study of a management college

Laxmi Sahu¹, Sourav Mazumder² and Sourav Deb³

¹Librarian, Inspiria Knowledge Campus, India, E-mail: laxmi.s@inspiria.edu.in

²Graduate, Department of Library and Information Science, University of North Bengal, India, E-mail: smazumderlis91@gmail.com, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0956-661X>

³Librarian, Pragati College of Education, India, E-mail: souravdeb.1990@gmail.com

Abstract

A worrying trend in modern days is the rapid spread of false information. The usage of social media platforms is one of the most significant factors in the spread of fake news. Nowadays, mainly young individuals acquire information via the internet and social media. The primary purpose of this study was to investigate how students at the Inspiria Knowledge Campus (West Bengal, India) identify and evaluate fake news. A total of 271 students responded to the online survey, which was conducted using Google forms. Results showed that the majority of respondents acquire news through the internet and social media. They employ a variety of techniques to examine and validate information and news stories. Furthermore, it was observed that they were well aware of fake news.

Although this study is limited to a single college, it yields valuable findings that could be used for future research.

Keywords: Media information literacy; Social media; Manipulated contents; Fake news detection; Critical thinking

1. Introduction

We are experiencing staggering growth of information in different forms like texts and multimedia. The advancement of information communication technologies (ICTs) has driven us to produce a large amount of data on the web. We also can sense the rise of “fake news” (Albright, 2017; Burkhardt, 2017; Pennycook & Rand, 2021) which started emerging in the 19th century (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Misleading information is printed and transmitted as news, and it is spreading so quickly. Though, it “has existed throughout different eras: pre-printing press, post-printing press, mass media, and internet” (Burkhardt, 2017:5-6). The more the information gets generated, the scope of fake news will continue to scatter. The spread of fake news does not only affect youths but also older adults (El Rayess et al., 2018). Carolyn Wilson (2019:11) pointed out that “for some people, the term fake news has become part of the everyday vocabulary when talking about media.” Social media creates prolific room for misinformation and disinformation (Hilary & Dumebi, 2021), which boost fake news to be more dominant. It can swiftly spread over social media and go viral. Furthermore, it gets more strenuous to distinguish between the real and the fake ones. Some factors that lead people to fall for fake news are “less analytical thinking,” “over-claiming knowledge,” “political motivation,” “truth judgement,” and “reasoning inability” (McPhetres, Rand & Pennycook, 2021; Pennycook & Rand, 2021). We obtain information in the palm of our hands using the internet in the digital era. We often do not understand which is authentic and which is false. Consequently, we share them with others without verifying them. Information literacy (IL) is considered one of the most effective methods that enhance the skills in evaluating information and detecting fake news (Batchelor, 2017). On the other hand, media information literacy (MIL)

aids in assessing information sources, understanding ethical issues, engaging with media and technologies and promoting information (UNESCO, 2016). S. Mo Jones-Jang, Tara Mortensen, and Jingjing Liu (2021) stated that “media literacy, IL, news literacy, and digital literacy” are essential competencies to combat fake news.

Libraries and library information science (LIS) professionals have crucial roles in instructing user communities to find and evaluate accurate information. They also can teach to avert fake news (Agosto, 2018; De Paor & Heravi, 2020). In the 21st century, more or less everyone uses smartphones, tabs, and computers to access the internet or social media to keep up to date with the flow of current information generation. It is important to assay their potential to identify fake news (El Rayess et al., 2018). D.E. Agosto (2018) highlighted the essential roles of library and information professionals in educating and mentioned that educating users is a “special contribution to bettering society.”

This paper investigates how students at the Inspiria Knowledge Campus, India identify and evaluate fake news. It also analyses their source of information and participatory activities on social networking sites. The remaining parts of the paper proceed as follows: problem statement and research objectives; literature review; methodology; results; discussion; limitations and further research directions; and conclusion.

2. Problem statement and research objectives

Presently, those who use the internet, and social media, are called “netizens” (e.g., Yang, 2021). Due to the advancement of ICT, people can easily access and use digital materials. Social media makes it possible to connect and share information super speedily. It also has become the platform for spreading fake news, especially regarding COVID-19. Nonetheless, there are no such obligations that social media is the only responsible for spreading misinformation, disinformation, and fake news. There can be a variety of

mediums (e.g., rumours by humans). An individual can spot fake news and the trustworthiness of the information. Earlier studies explored undergraduate students' skills of evaluation and critical thinking (Igbinovia, Okuonghae & Adebayo, 2020). Studies on fake news identification by students in the context of the college or university libraries in India are lesser.

The present study analyses the following specific objectives to close the gap:

- To identify the students' information sources.
- To examine their engagement in social networking.
- To assess their awareness of fake news.
- To know how they perform critical thinking.

In addition, this paper explores how students shared information and how fake news affected their lives.

3. Literature review

To date, several studies on IL and MIL investigated the competencies for preventing misinformation, disinformation, and possibly, the biggest threat- "fake news" (Al-Zaman, 2021; Bond & Buck, 2020; De Paor & Heravi, 2020; Haigh, Haigh & Matychak, 2019; Hilary & Dumebi, 2021; Singh & Brinster, 2021). In a study, Rebecca Van de Vord (2010) surveyed 2281 distance learners of a public university in the northwest U.S. to measure the relationship between the critical evaluation of e-resources and media literacy. The study reported a positive relationship, and diverse approaches could be employed to develop IL skills for adapting to the modern information society. By highlighting the youth's engagement in the digital environment, Lisa Tripp (2011) stated that libraries needed to introduce dynamic learning contexts and new media literacy expertise. For instance, the author presented "YouMedia," an innovative program that facilitates digital media learning space for users. IL is equally indispensable for regular-mode learners and distance education learners. A. Grizzle et al. (2014:17-18) discussed the advantages (for citizens and governments) of MIL: active participation and decision making; ethical responsibility; more consciousness regarding education, health, economics, and

governance. Eamon C. Tewell (2018) examined the methods and benefits of “critical information literacy” that were assimilated by the librarians. The findings identified the contents (e.g., “classification”) and methods of teaching (e.g., “discussion and dialogue”), advantages, and challenges (e.g., “time”) associated with “critical information literacy.” Saoirse De Paor and Bahareh Heravi (2020) reviewed the literature related to IL to identify different approaches initiated in the librarianship for reducing the spread of fake news. They also recommended library and information professionals needed to carry out “advocacy, re-evaluation of library values, collaborative strategies, reframing the IL.” These will aid LIS professionals in their role enhancement. Singh and Brinster (2021) addressed political information literacy as a vital method in the present time. They explored that “cognitive factors” and “information overload” affect the prosperity of recognising genuine information.

Joanna M. Burkhardt (2017) stated that the internet had created a wide-open door for propagating fake news. Citing social media as one of the most powerful drivers for spreading fake news, Oliver Batchelor (2017) recommended: “resources” (e.g., websites) for helping users to evaluate and identify fake news. Peter Fernandez (2017) depicted a significant discussion on how technology encourages fake news through web-based publishing platforms. The author discussed the role of social media and technology companies in the information society and libraries’ role in digitally literate users. Some librarians designed modules for skill development in the context of IL and fake news detection in a learning management system. They presumed that users would improve their capacity to discover accurate information (Auberry, 2018). Matthew Sullivan (2019) investigated the responses of LIS professionals based on extensive challenges produced by fake news (on “US presidential election, 2016-2018”). The findings revealed: IL tools adapted by the professionals to support the community and research plans to fight against fake news. The world has witnessed the devastating COVID-19 pandemic, which has wreaked havoc on human life. Moreover, fake news about the pandemic has scattered across social

media, posing a serious threat to public health, Md. Sayeed Al-Zaman (2021) analysed 125 fake news in India and found seven major topics (top topic: “health”) of fake news in the form of text and multimedia.

Róisín Kieman (2017) conducted a study to explore the evaluation skills of the students of the Dublin Business School. The findings showed that half of the students were unfamiliar with the phrase “information literacy” but mostly knew how to utilise skills involved in IL literacy. It revealed they rarely verify the truth of what they read on social media. Maroun El Rayess et al. (2018) collected data from students of Notre Dame University- Louaize (NDU, Lebanon) to examine the “fake news judgement” ability and the significance of MIL. The results showed the students were not up to the mark when assessing the “authoritativeness of information and information sources” and their ability to discern it depended on their faculty. It indicated that the students needed to improve their IL skills. Chris Leeder (2019) analysed 63 undergraduate students’ skills in evaluating fake news stories and sharing behaviour. The results showed that students failed to evaluate the fake news stories accurately. Therefore, the study established a correlation between students’ skills and “willingness to share these stories on social media.” Wei Zakharov, Haiyan Li and Michael Fosmire (2019) surveyed 108 students at Purdue to assess the “news literacy program.” They discovered that students generally used mobile devices to get news from sources such as CNN. Based on the students’ responses, fake news grabbed their attention to deceive them. Magnus Osahon Igbinovia, Omorodion Okuonghae, and John Oluwaseye Adebayo (2020) conducted a survey of 138 LIS undergraduate students in Nigeria to observe their “information literacy competency (ILC)” in diminishing the fake news related to the COVID-19. They found that undergraduates found “reliable sources” as part of their task, which appraised their high level of ILC. Khairunissa (2020) reported how the students at Gadjah Mada University evaluated the fake news on social media. The author stated that the students correctly identified the fake news stories. Hamdani M. Syam and Febri

Nurrahmi (2020) examined social media literacy among students of two renowned universities in Aceh, Indonesia. They found that the students were unaware of fake news. The students were proficient at finding news on social media, but they lacked the competence to distinguish between fake news and authentic news. The study recommended that universities need to include social media literacy as a mandatory subject for the students. Collecting data from 21 students at the European University of Lisbon, Portugal, Patrícia Silveira and Sara Gancho (2021) investigated “social media and news consumption practices.” Besides, in terms of information dependability, they preferred newspapers and television. Elif Sesen, Yasin Sesen, and Harum Sesen (2021) stated that librarians can play a significant role in developing social communication. Deniz Cit and Yavuzdemir Merve (2021) mentioned UNESCO GMIL (Global Media and Information Literacy) and observed the fast spread of Covid fake news. Therefore, they pointed to various awareness programmes and events for overcoming information distortion and false information.

In all the studies reviewed here, IL and MIL are recognised as the most effective methods to fight against fake news. The need for social media literacy and political news literacy has also been fascinated in some studies. However, there is a lack of research in the context of colleges and university students in India. The study investigates how students of a management college respond to fake news.

4. Methodology

This study was based on an online survey conducted in 2021. Students of Inspiria Knowledge Campus, a management college in Siliguri, West Bengal, India (<https://inspiria.edu.in/>), were recruited as survey participants. For this survey, a questionnaire with a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions was designed. The questions in the questionnaire featured five different sections: 1) basic information (includes name and gender); 2) information source and social media; 3) identification of fake news; 4) critical

thinking and evaluation of information and 5) sharing of information. An awareness poster aided in preparing questions about critical thinking (IFLA, 2017). The questionnaire consisted of 12 questions. However, 10 questions (Q) focused on the present study's objectives.

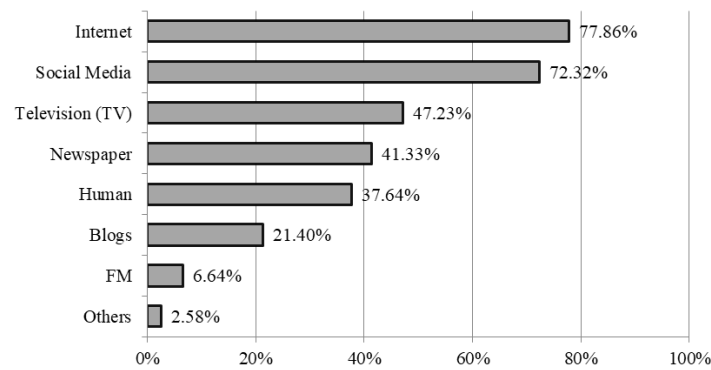
The survey data was collected using Google Forms, a free cloud-based survey tool. The form was sent to the students' departmental email groups through the college librarian's institutional email address. The students were requested to fill out the questionnaire, but participation was not mandatory. Those who wished to participate in this survey had filled out the questionnaire. We assumed that those who checked their email accounts frequently would reply.

The survey received a total of 271 responses. In all, 46.9% (n=127) of respondents were female and 53.1% (n=144) of respondents were male. Google forms generated a spreadsheet containing the raw data of the responses. The responses were carefully administered (including re-organization and coding) for data analysis and interpretation using Google Sheets. Further, bar charts and pie charts were created using MS Excel (version 14.0.4763.1000). Finally, this paper presents some qualitative findings.

5. Results

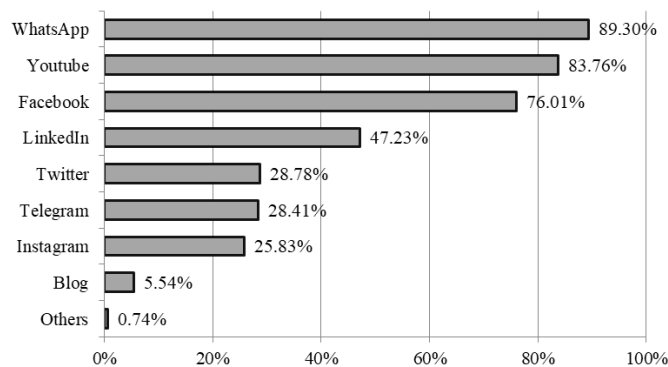
The second section of the questionnaire aimed to identify the respondents' information sources and engagement in social media. Figure 1 shows the respondents mostly preferred the internet (n=211, 77.86%), social networking sites (n=196, 72.32%), and television (n=128, 47.23%) to acquire information or news. 41.33% (n=112) of students read newspapers. "Human" (n=102, 37.64%) was observed as the fifth most popular information or news source, followed by blogs (n=58, 21.40%), FM (n=18, 6.64%) and other sources (n=7, 2.58%), which include "books," and "News Portals."

Figure 1: Responses (n=271) to “Based on your information need, where do you acquire information or news? (Select all that apply) (Q.1)”



It can be seen from Figure 2 that WhatsApp (n=242, 89.30%), YouTube (n=227, 83.76%), and Facebook (n=206, 76.01%) were the most popular social networking sites among students. On the other hand, LinkedIn (47.23%), Twitter (28.78%), and Telegram (n=77, 28.41%), and Instagram (n=70, 25.83%) were also used by the respondents. However, the use of Blog (n=15, 5.54%), and other social networking sites (e.g., Reddit) (n=2, 0.74%) was comparatively less.

Figure 2: Responses (n=271) to “Which of the following social networking sites do you use? (Select all that apply) (Q.2)”



The purpose of the third section's questions is to analyse the students' awareness of fake news. First, Figure 3 illustrates the types of fake news respondents commonly met. It is apparent from the figure that students mostly found fake news in the forms of "Manipulated content" (n=167, 61.62%) and "False headings" (n=152, 56.09%). Some students saw "Satire" (n=45, 16.61%) type of fake news. Only thirteen students (4.80%) replied with other types (e.g., "Opinions stated as facts"). Second, they were asked to answer where they found fake news most. They were given the same categories (alternatives) as they engaged in social media. The findings derived from Figure 4 show that most students found fake news on Facebook (n=198, 73.06%) and WhatsApp (n=144, 53.14%). YouTube was another popular platform where the students (n=93, 34.32%) noticed fake news. The responses to the next six categories were not very high. Considering all of this evidence, it seems that Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube are key drivers for spreading fake news.

Figure 3: Responses (n=271) to "What type of fake news do you often see or meet? (Select all that apply) (Q.3)"

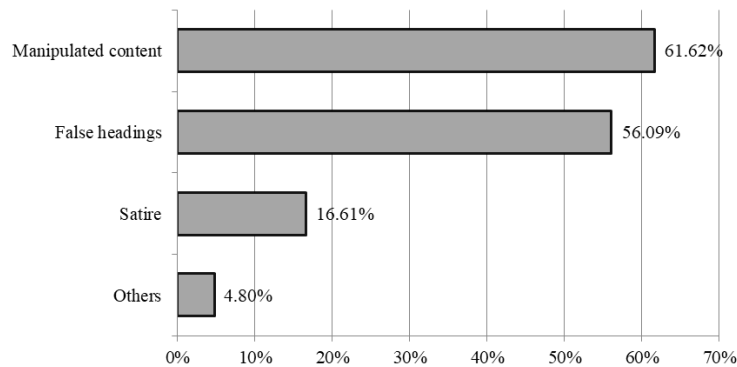
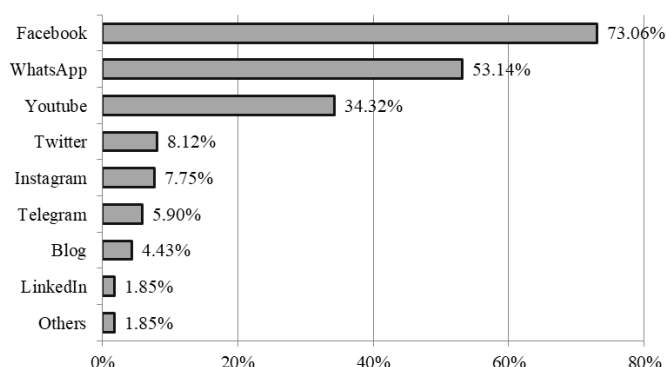


Figure 4: Responses (n=271) to "Which social media platforms do you find fake news? (Select all that apply) (Q.4)"



In the fourth section of the questionnaire, the students responded to 3 important questions about critical thinking and evaluation of information. Figures 5-7 present the results obtained from the responses. When asked whether they verified information transmitted with them, the majority of students ($n=234$, 86%) said: “Yes” (see Figure 5), while 14% ($n=37$) of students indicated: “No.” Figure 6 shows the respondents’ methods of verifying information. They had five major options to reveal it. Most of them ($n=214$, 78.97%) selected “Checking other sources.” For instance, other sources were “direct Google search”, “asking parents”, “asking friends”, etc. In addition, they also inspected “Checking date and time” of information or news stories ($n=106$, 39.11%), followed by “Verifying authorship” ($n=74$, 27.31%), and “Fact-checking tools” ($n=67$, 24.72%). One of the most surprising facts had emerged from this study was that 12.18% ($n=33$) of students approached LIS professionals to verify suspicious information.

The students were given six options to pick when asked how they did evaluate fake news (see Figure 7). In response, 77.12% ($n=209$) of students evaluated fake news, while 22.88% ($n=62$) did not evaluate whatever they received. The majority of those who responded to the question selected “Self-investigation” ($n=139$, 51.29%). Also, they selected “Finding available arguments relating to any claim” ($n=84$, 31%) followed by “Finding evidence” ($n=81$, 29.89%)

“Investigating the meaning” (n=76, 28.04%), and “Evaluating of any claim” (n=38, 14.02%). It is a clear reflection of their concern over the evaluation process.

Figure 5: Responses (n=271) to “Did you verify the information or news stories shared with you? (Q.5)”

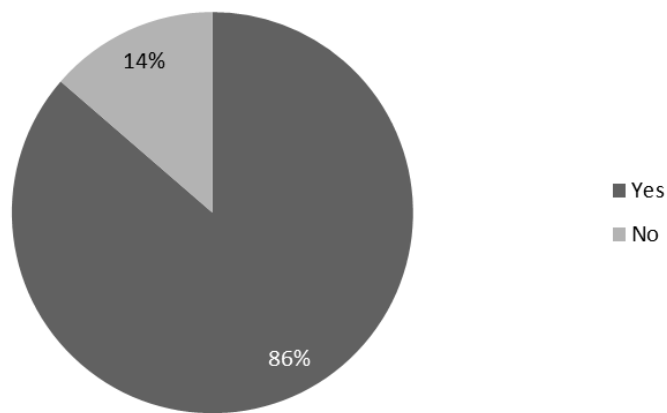


Figure 6: Responses (n=271) to “How did you verify information or news stories? (Select all that apply) (Q.6)”

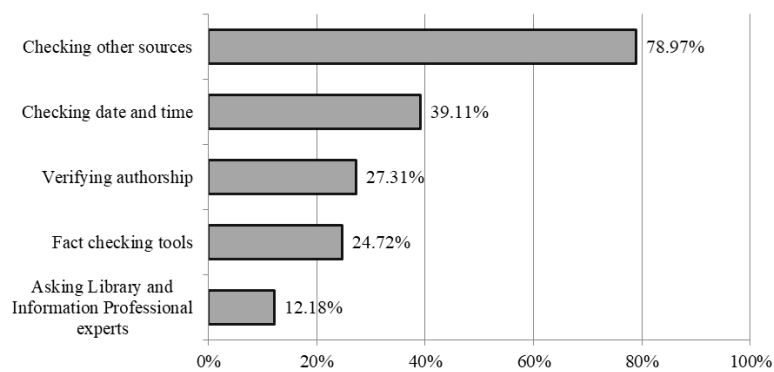
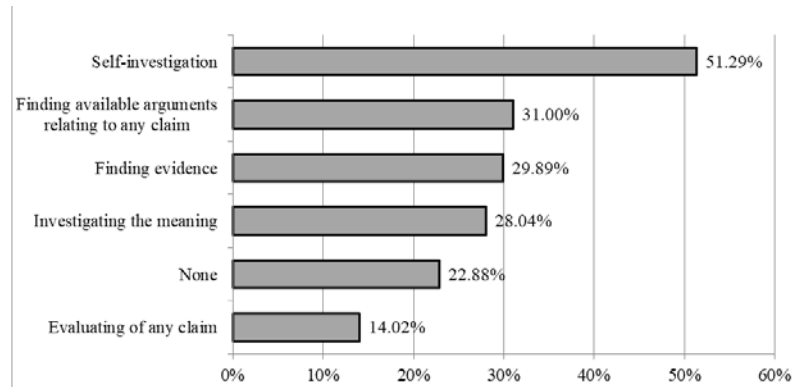


Figure 7: Responses (n=271) to “How did you evaluate fake news? (Select all that apply) (Q.7) ”



Section 5 (see Figure 8-9) examines the information-sharing behaviour of the students and the effects of fake news. As seen in Figure 8, 75% of students (n=202) claimed that they never forwarded any information without verification. However, the remaining students (n=69, 25%) forwarded any news stories without conducting a rigorous examination. This study also investigated (see Q.11) the consequences of fake news on the students. The results (Figure 9) show that fake news had no impact on 65% (n=177) of students. On the contrary, 35% (n=94) of students stated that fake news had an impact.

Figure 8: Responses (n=271) to “Did you ever forward any news stories to your friends without verifying them? (Q.8)”

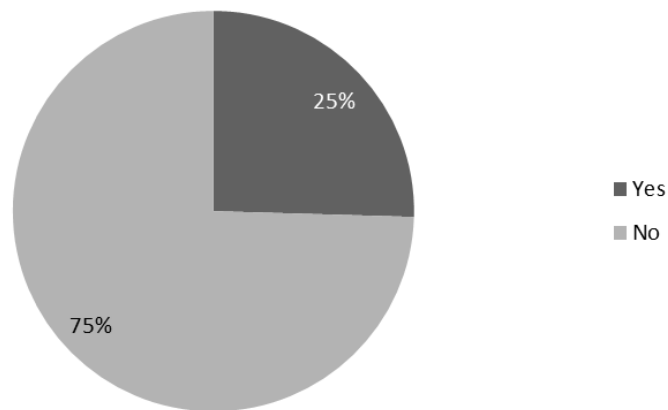
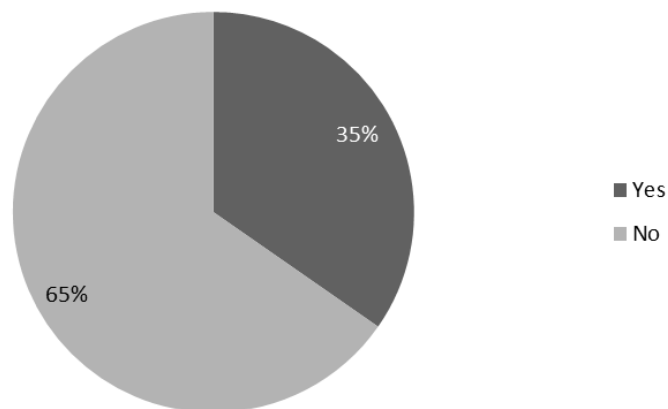


Figure 9: Responses to “Did fake news affect you in any way? (Q.9)”



Lastly, this section of the study reveals qualitative findings. The students answered an open-ended question (“How did the fake news affect you? (Q.10)”), in which they commented on how the fake news affected them. This study identified some key aspects: the possibility of spreading fake news among the students, perception of realising the truth, panic among the students, and

misguiding or misleading approaches. The following four direct quotes present the comments of the students. For example, one student (Male) expressed:

“Fake and over-exaggerated news created confusion in my mind regarding the topic, resulting in me being misinformed and potentially spreading misinformation.”

Another student (Female) commented:

“Mainly it affected the thoughts of my family because sometimes it's hard to make them realise that everything is not as it seems.”

Fake news creates panic. A student's (Female) statement deduced the reflection of panic:

“It can be very dangerous and misleading. At the same time, we started panicking and messing up the situation more.”

Fake news does not only create panic or scares but also has the potential to mislead or misguide anyone. A student (Male) simply wrote:

“Fake news misguided from truth or reality.”

6. Discussion

This section discusses the results of the present study. Maroun El Rayess et al. (2018:147) stated: “information consumers, especially students, maybe tech, internet or social media savvy.” The present study also has a reflection on this remark. Mostly, students preferred the internet and social networking sites as their prime information resources for daily-life information needs. Expectedly, they use the most popular social networking sites such as Facebook and WhatsApp. The majority of the students were able to recognise fake news. This particular result is similar to the findings of the study by Khairunissa (2020). In a study, Rubal Kanozia et al. (2021) mentioned that fake news is made up of manipulated videos and photographs on social media. The current study also found that fake news identified by the respondents was linked to “manipulated contents.” It is hypothesised that students usually see fake news on the internet and social networking site, based on the usage patterns of these platforms.

Prior studies noted that respondents verify the information for sharing (El Rayess et al., 2018; Igbinoia, Okuonghae & Adebayo, 2020; Kiernan, 2017; Leeder, 2019; Syam & Nurrahmi, 2020). This study also observed that the majority of the respondents verified the information by “Checking other sources” or “Checking date and time.” Contrary to expectations, this study did not find that respondents used to ask LIS professionals to verify information or any news stories. There can be a variety of reasons. Students’ increased self-confidence in fact-checking could be one of the most likely reasons for this. One of the most significant findings was that most respondents evaluated fake news by “Self-investigation”, which is a spiritual exploration of an individual’s inner self (Ryabchenko, Katermina & Malysheva, 2019).

Information is generated in any course of action. Its importance is perceived once it is got disseminated. The responses to Question 10 showed the information-sharing behaviour. People unintentionally forward or share engrossing information or news stories on social media with their friends and co-workers. They might forget to check the credibility of that particular news before forwarding it. Thus, most of the students in this survey verify news stories before forwarding them to others, which addresses their attitudes about transmitting any information or news stories. It displays their concern over information dissemination. Less than half of the respondents had been affected by fake news. It seems that most of them are immensely aware of fake news.

7. Limitations and further research directions

This study has some limitations. It was restricted to only one college. However, it could have been conducted with more than one college in the region. Socio-demographic information on other college students and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic limited the scope of the study. Hence, these have confined the generalisation of overall results. We assume that the responses of other college students would have been different. The questionnaire was not entirely

designed by adhering to any standards or frameworks. The questionnaire was prepared based on earlier literature, initial study, and our perceptions due to the availability of definite standards or frameworks. It may have had an impact on the quality of the key insights. The current study explored students' abilities to identify and evaluate fake news. It depicted a unique contribution. Future studies may cover a wider geographical area, more colleges or even universities, and recruit other types of library users for comparative studies. Additionally, there is an opportunity for progress in appraising library users' critical thinking ability. The results are likely to be illuminating.

8. Conclusion

This study investigated the information sources, social networking activity, awareness of false news, evaluation methods, and information-sharing behaviours of students at the Inspiria Knowledge Campus. According to the results, most students acquire information from the internet and social networking sites. The students mostly use YouTube, WhatsApp, and Facebook. They selected "Checking other sources" to confirm any news stories. Additionally, they choose "Self-investigation" to assess any information. This study discovered that the students always verify news and information. This study had a few limitations; one of the most significant constraints was the selection of a single college, which limited the scope of the study. Despite its limitations, the findings contribute unique results, which may aid future research. Further studies may explore comparative outcomes and gauge how well IL and MIL work to counter fake news.

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