
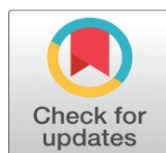


# SOCIAL MEDIA LITERACY AND FAKE NEWS ACUMEN: A STUDY ON THE LOCUS OF YOUTH IN COIMBATORE CITY

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## ABSTRACT

Many studies have questioned to what degree of higher media literacy can help fight the flow of misinformation in social media. How can social media literacy help to fight against misinformation and maintain digital hygiene? Conventional media literacy is the ability to distinguish fact from opinion, and to comprehend how media can be used to influence people. Facts are truthful reports of when, where, why and how the event has happened or what exists, and opinions are the interpretations of the meaning or impact, usually from an individual's point of view [Kerry Gallagher & Magid \(2017\)](#). The study analyzed the contents and competencies, required for an individual to become a social media literate and thereby distinguish fake and fact news in social media using a conceptual framework developed by [Cho et. al. \(2022\)](#). Results reveals that there is no “One size fits all” solution to develop media literacy among youth, but more initiatives and awareness programmes can be conducted and included in curriculum to educate and make aware on the pros and cons of using social media and also various tools available for fact checking in the internet.

**Keywords:** Media Literacy, Fake News, Misinformation, Youth and Media, Social Media Literacy

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*“Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts.”*

– Daniel Patrick Moynihan

Media literacy is a trending concept in recent times after digital revolution in communication started to boom, and it's in demand for active participation of citizens in the society like a democratic country like India. Empowered in a world where the people are bombarded with lots of digital information in daily life, media

literacy can help one individual to recognize and differentiate what to consume and what to not. The ability to analyze and produce media information or messages is considered to be one of the important essence of media literacy [Aufderheide \(1993\)](#). In this digital age, we understand on how we are assuming control over what we know about the world beyond our direct experience and how we become our own gatekeepers and editors [Kovach and Rosenstiel \(2010\)](#). In educational system, media literacy could—and should—be addressed at different echelon (European Commission 2009). The young minds are triggered by the various types of media messages and hence it plays an increasingly significant role in their lives, which makes it important to teach them about the media [Buckingham \(2017\)](#).

In the past two years especially after covid-19 outbreak, social media has redefined the formation, dimensions, dissemination, and convolution of the information flow. In addition to providing information, another main purpose of SM is to enable people to actively take part in social interaction, communication, and entertainment [Hwang et al. \(2011\)](#), [Kwon et al. \(2017\)](#). People are now able to access unlimited amount of information available in the internet without any restrictions and also the freedom of expression helps to share and post any information they want. In fact, it's a cultural exchange of different values and beliefs [Kim & Lyon \(2014\)](#), [Rubin \(2019\)](#). But majority of the population are still aware about the risks that are part of this information exploitation. One of such risks is the Fake News (FN). Fake news has become a major part of social media since its inception.

The line between the mainstream media and social media platforms are very unclear. The mainstream media often strictly normalize political messaging and advertising yet gives credible information on the other hand social media platforms have no or only have reasonable restrictions. That's why people are most exposed and are vulnerable to social media messages than mainstream media. They act and believe on messages they are knowledgeable but actually they aren't.

## 2. SOCIAL MEDIA, FAKE NEWS AND THE USER

Social media is variety of online platforms available on the internet like blogs, forums, photo and video sharing platforms, business and professional network platforms etc. It was initially developed to facilitate socialization with intra, group and mass communication and connects between users and the outside world [Aichner & Jacob \(2015\)](#). These are sometimes also referred to as online communities or virtual communities which connects the users virtually and create a group of likeminded individuals [Lazakidou et al. \(2012\)](#).

Disinformation is the deliberate creation and sharing of false and/or manipulated information that are intended to swindle and hoodwink audiences, for the purposes of defaming and individual or a group or organization or even a country and causing harm politically or personally to get financial gain (House of Commons **Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee**, 2018). "Misinformation," on the other hand is where individuals share false information in the mistaken belief that is actually true. Fake news is a collective term that is widely used by common man to address the dis or misinformation, false news, or even sometimes malinformation. An erroneous or misleading piece of information may be either disinformation or misinformation [Wardle & Derakhshan \(2017\)](#). Social media and the internet have helped many of the layman to become a quick time publisher. Regardless of time, place and platforms and beyond the sphere of mainstream media and politics, one can post and publish their thoughts right away in a click. It can be in the form of text, audio, video or even comic animation. As a result, the credibility

of information has been faded away in recent times. People became choosy on what to consume and reject, even though the public is enjoying freedom of expression at its true sense to a certain extent. But as the result the citizens struggle to discern which one is true and false. Social media at its best will allows people to express themselves and take action and at its worst, it allows them to spread mis/disinformation and corrode democracy [Chakrabarti et al. \(n.d.\)](#). The users using social media are not aware about whether they are consuming and sharing the correct news or not. This mostly happens because the person might be predisposed to trust that source. Now a days, with the help of AI social media, including tech giants like Facebook, Twitter and Google collect the information about their users on which sites they visit, what all post they like and share, how frequent they are visiting such websites and for what purpose etc. This actually allows the media to be more targeted to bombard the information or news they are likely to agree and share. A complex environment composed of several levels of information dissemination including the self, group, and the society, well-conceived by an individual makes them more susceptible to believe in fake news [Scheufele & Krause \(2019\)](#). The individuals are more likely to accept any piece of information that confirms with their ideologies and overall view of society they were grown up rather than that challenges their identity [Kahan \(2016\)](#).

Social media platforms can also play a vital role in educating its users about mis/disinformation through advertisements, videos, pictures etc. Instead of making their users aware, if the social media networks starts removing incorrect information, punishing or banning users posting/spreading such information and become more aggressive in rules and regulations, there is the potential for mass migrations of users from those platforms. So, development of an internal locus of control among the users of various social media platforms of their news consumption habits by enhancing their social media literacy should be the need of the hour.

### **3. MEDIA LITERACY: TODAY AND TOMORROW**

Media literacy enables users to be critical thinkers and makers of media messages, and an effective communicators and active citizens' [NAMLE. \(n.d.\)](#). An individual cannot concentrate on a single media message in this current era, since we all are flooded with messages from the media across different channels. In order to screen the fact and dig best out of them, one must be literate enough to process those information/messages. UNESCO supports the development of media and information literacy for all to enable people's ability to think critically and click wisely. Every year from October 24<sup>th</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup> UNESCO commemorates Global Media and Information Literacy week around the world to promote media and information literacy connections across various disciplines, professions and borders [UNESCO, \(2022\)](#). To date media literacy has enabled the mass to become competent enough to access, analyze and produce information. According to [Potter \(2013\)](#) media literacy is not only the skills, but also the personal locus and knowledge structure of an individual. The knowledge structure refers to information that an individual already has from his previous experience which they can be used to interpret and analyze the media messages. Personal locus is a term which governs the information-processing tasks of an individual. It also shapes meaning matching and meaning construction. It consists of mainly five elements namely self, real world, Media content, Industries and effects. Stronger the loci more effortful the process of information seeking and processing [Potter \(2004\)](#). The development of technology in the field of media and communication has entirely changed the way of people who

consume and produce messages. Now the media landscapes have focused on the skills of producing messages and sharing it. [Hobbs \(2010\)](#) in addition to the skills and knowledge proposed two more competencies to Media literacy, that is reflection and action.

In recent times the scholars have started to think beyond the media literacy (mainstream mass media) and started to concentrate on the influence, impacts and effects of social media. Social media literacy model [Schreurs & Vandenbosch \(2021\)](#) is one of the recent additions to that. According to that model there are two main domains for social media literacy, i.e., Development and empowerment. [Mihailidis \(2018\)](#) extended new constructs that position media literacy initiatives to 'produce and reproduce the sense of being in the world with others toward common good'. These constructs can reframe media literacy as relevant to the social, political, and technological realities of contemporary life. Today social media is used daily by the youth and it can put forth a significant persuasion on its users' well-beings. So, moving beyond digital and news media literacy academicians, researchers and scholars have also recently began to search new ways conceptualizing social media literacy.

Social media literacy is the subset of media literacy and it becomes "social" when the functions, implications and characteristics of digital platforms are connected to internet. These are then linked into the knowledge structures of media ecology (technical competencies), cognitive competencies like analyzing, interpreting, producing media messages and also the media locus on 'the self'. Since the social media is a place people interact and exchange messages the development of socio-emotional competencies stands out separately [Polanco-Levicán & Salvo-Garrido \(2022\)](#).

#### 4. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Where should one individual start the media education? Does it help an individual differentiate between the true news and fake news? Is media education still an underrated subject in our educational system? Media literacy is defined as "the ability to sensitize, analyze and produce information for specific results" (Aspen institute, 1993) and digital literacy refers to the set of competencies required for an individual using the digital platforms for the exchange of information via, computers, ICTs and the internet (Marcus Leaning, 2019). In traditional and digital media, the literacy level weighs differently according to its implications by the users and how they handle the messages. Traditional media where there is only one way form of communication happens, whereas digital media actually helps to communicate across globes virtually. Therefore, its necessary to make awareness and promote the development of skills and competencies among the people especially the teens and youth since they don't have better developed the skills in the digital literacy [Kirschner et al. \(2017\)](#). Children are now more exposed to these social media since smart phone revolution was introduced and became easily accessible. The development in internet technology has also acted as a catalyst for that to some extent. Children are more expert than their parents and sometimes this can lead to positive biased knowledge within themselves. Such process is often referred in literature as child-effect [Bulck et al. \(2016\)](#). Research shows that children sometimes instruct their parents on the appropriateness of social media posts [Fant et al. \(2019\)](#). News media literacy needs to be introduced and revamped in current schools in their curriculum to make the children more responsible users of media contents. The study results shows that the teens having media education in schools are more media literate and perceive media messages more responsibly

than those who were not having any media education in schools [Vlaanderen et al. \(2020\)](#). Academicians, researchers and educators over these years has included the ability to produce the media messages as an important component of literacy [Hobbs \(2010\)](#). Media literacy revolves around the concept of representation of reality in media are often incomplete or inaccurate [Thoman & Jolls \(2004\)](#), [Kellner & Share \(2005\)](#). Previous research studies suggests that uplifting media literacy campaigns had become successful and had positive effects on increase in media knowledge system, media analyzing, criticism, realism, influence, beliefs, attitudes and self-efficacy [Jeong et al. \(2012\)](#). Another study by [Nagel \(2021\)](#) results shows that news media literacy scale is correlated with an existing fake-news attitudes and behaviours, providing a method of evaluating the success of fake news education efforts. A 2016 Pew study found that nearly a quarter of adults admit to sharing fake news in the past. Most didn't know it was fake when they shared it. A parent and educator guide “Media literacy & Fake news” authored by [Kerry Gallagher & Magid \(2017\)](#) suggests many practices and points to parents and the teachers who are responsible for mounding true citizens. In that the major suggestion put forth by the authors is to help the children to “hone their critical thinking skills so they can analyze information effectively and come to their own conclusions.” Also, children should be able to distinguish between healthy skepticism and unhealthy cynicism. Finally, they conclude that the parents and educators should only teach the children “how to think” and not “what to think”. Now social media is a platform that helps anyone to become a “citizen journalist.” While this has created a vibrant and dynamic array of information sources and has it more difficult to know which sources can be trusted. So, regardless of whether you're a media consumer, media creator or both — the need for media literacy is greater now than ever [Kerry Gallagher & Magid \(2017\)](#). Media consumers are differentiating between fake news and true news based on their societal values. The study suggests that societal acceptance is a powerful tool that can persuade the society to focus on achieving common goal. The people adopt and accept positive cultural change that can welcome fact - checking and verification of any form of news [Femi Olan et. al. \(2022\)](#). Individual will construct his reality regarding social media on his own values that influence them or influenced by someone in their past. The evolving characteristics of social media platforms sets the boundaries of one’s reality construction on social media. Researchers also opine that education and intervention efforts focusing only on skills may not be fruitful without integrating these socio-cultural contexts in which people use media [Cho et al. \(2022\)](#).

In light of the above this study focuses on measuring the social media literacy level of youth and how they deal with fake news on social media. To better understand the concept and the competencies required for social media literacy, college students were selected among the colleges in Coimbatore city since the mass use of such platforms and their use are in the hands of youth. A total of 20 students from each college located within the urban limits of the city were selected for the study. This is a pilot study that acts as an eye opener to do further extensive research and by finding out the research gaps and opening new horizons of media literacy and fake news. This research came up with the research question from the above extensive literature reviews:

#### **4.1. THEORETICAL FRAME WORK**

The primary objective of this study is to find out association between the social media literacy level of youth and their sharing behavior of fake news. A conceptual framework developed by Hyunyi cho, 2022 rule out the older conceptions of media

literacy and centers on the user's self which is influenced by the construction of one's reality on social media and boundaries users sets themselves on the selection and values of information in social media. Content, competencies, and the interrelations between these two are the two main components which helps to identify the characteristics and effects of social media literacy. Content refers to the awareness, understanding, and knowledge necessary to attain social media literacy and Competencies are the skills and abilities for demonstrating social media literacy (Hyunyi cho, 2022). So, the study progress through an instrument developed by the researchers to test the media literacy level and the fake news sharing behavior. The researcher has tested with the older concept of media literacy which is mainly upon in mainstream/ traditional media and compared it with the social media literacy framework and sharing of fake news.

## 5. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- 1) To find out the association between social media literacy and sharing of fake news.
- 2) To find out the proficiency level on social media platforms affects sharing of fake news or not.

The measurement of social media literacy level among college students can be useful in two contexts. First, it can help to self-evaluate the competencies and skill levels of the individual. Second it helps to identify the gap between media education and college students.

## 6. METHOD

The current investigation attempts to bring to light the social media literacy level, usage of social media and finds out if there is any relation between these two on sharing of fake news among youth in the colleges in Coimbatore city in Tamil Nadu. Simple random sampling was adopted by the researchers for the investigation. The questionnaire was distributed among the students through Google forms. From 132 filled forms, 100 samples were selected which were complete in all respects were included for the study. The data was then analyzed and chi-square test was applied to know the association between the variables. The above objectives paved way to frame the following research questions:

RQ 1: Is there any association between the time spent on social media and sharing of fake news?

RQ 2: Does the need for cognition of user has any association with sharing of fake news?

RQ 3: Is there is any association between the social media level literacy level and sharing of fake news on social media?

## 7. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

**Table 1**

Table 1 Gender of Respondents * Level of Education Cross Tabulation				
Gender of Respondents	Level of education			Total
	Under Graduation	Post Graduation	Above Post Graduation	
Male	32	15	3	50
Female	34	14	2	50
Total	66	29	5	100

It's interpreted that 50% of the respondents are male and 50% of the respondents are females. Out of which 66% of respondents are studying undergraduate courses, 29% are in post-graduation, and 5% are above post-graduation.

**Table 2**

Table 2 Level of Education		
Education	Frequency	Percent
Under Graduation	66	66.0
Post Graduation	29	29.0
Above Post Graduation	5	5.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Its interpreted that 66% of the respondents are undergraduates, 29% are postgraduates and 5% are above post-graduation.

**Table 3**

Table 3 How Much Time do you Spend on Social Media in a Day?		
Time spent	Frequency	Percent
Less than 1 hour a day	11	11.0
1 - 3 hours a day	51	51.0
3 - 6 hours a day	30	30.0
6 - 9 hours a day	5	5.0
More than 9 hours a day	3	3.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Its interpreted that most of the respondents spend one to three hours (51%) a day, while 30% of the respondents spend three to 6 hours a day. (11%) of the respondents spend only less than an hour a day and, 5% of the respondents spend six to nine hours and (3%) spend more than nine hours a day.

**Table 4**

Table 4 Which of the following Social Media do you Use More Often?		
Social Media Platforms	Frequency	Percent
Facebook	22	22.0
Instagram	65	65.0
YouTube	9	9.0
Twitter	1	1.0
Others	3	3.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Its Interpreted that most of the respondents (65%) use Instagram while 22% use YouTube, 22% use Facebook, and other platforms (3%).

## 7.1. SOCIAL MEDIA LITERACY LEVEL

A Set of Questionnaire distributed among the respondents measures the outcome variable which is essential for the study. [Table 5](#) shows the frequency of how the respondents are distributed with the social media literacy level with respect to gender.

**Table 5**

Table 5 Social Media Literacy Level					
Crosstab		Social media literacy Levels			Total
		Low Literacy Level	Medium Literacy Level	High Literacy Level	
Gender of Respondents	Male	14	17	19	50
	Female	21	15	14	50
Total		35	32	33	100

(N=19) males and (N=14) females are with (35%) high literacy level. Both numbers are almost the same in the (32%) medium literacy level with (N=17) and (N=15) for males and females respectively and (N=21) females and males (N=14) falls on the low literacy level (33%). So, its interpreted that males (38%) are comparatively more media literate than females (28%) from the above table.

### 7.2. SOCIAL MEDIA LITERACY LEVEL AND SHARING OF FAKE NEWS

A chi-square test was used to find out the association between the social media literacy level of youth and sharing of fake news on social media.

**Table 6**

Table 6 Social Media Literacy Level and Sharing of Fake News			
Social media literacy level Vs. Fake news sharing	N	Chi-square value	Asymp. sig. (2-sided)
Social Media Use		27.458a	.001
Share news		31.317a	.000
Proficiency in tools	100	31.085a	.000
Familiar with features		27.434a	.001
Familiar with SM terms		35.350a	.000

Table 6 reveals that there is significant association between social media literacy level and sharing of fake news. Social Media Use ( $\chi^2= 27.45$ ,  $p < .01$ ), Share news ( $\chi^2= 31.31$ ,  $p < .05$ ), Proficiency in tools ( $\chi^2= 31.08$ ,  $p < .05$ ), Familiar with features ( $\chi^2= 27.43$ ,  $p < .01$ ), Knowledge on phishing and deep fake ( $\chi^2= 35.35$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Hence its concluded that there is statistically significant association between social media literacy and sharing of fake news.

### 7.3. TIME SPENT ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND SHARING OF FAKE NEWS

A chi-square test was used to find out the association between the time spent on social media and sharing of fake news on social media. In Table 7 the results shows the association between time spent and fake news sharing.

**Table 7**

Table 7 Time Spent on Social Media and Sharing of Fake News			
Time spent Vs. Fake news sharing	N	Chi-square value	Asymp. sig. (2-sided)
Time	100	10.024	.075

Table 7 reveals that there is no significant association at 5% between time spent and sharing of fake news in social media. ( $\chi^2= 10.024$ ,  $p > .05$ ).



## 8. NEED FOR COGNITION AND SHARING OF FAKE NEWS

A chi-square test was used to find out the association between the need for cognition and sharing of fake news on social media.

**Table 8**

Table 8 Need for Cognition and Sharing of Fake News			
Need for cognition Vs.	N	Chi-square value	Asymp. sig.
<b>Fake news sharing (2-sided)</b>			
Need for Cognition	100	14.637a	.006

Table 8 reveals that statistically there is no significant association at 5% between need for cognition and sharing of fake news in social media. ( $\chi^2=14.63$ ,  $p > .05$ ).

**Table 9**

Table 9 Test Results		
Research questions	Test	Results
RQ 1: Is there any association between the time spent on social media and sharing of fake news?		There is no significant association at between time spent on social media and sharing of fake news.
RQ 2: Does the need for cognition of user has any association with sharing of fake news?	<b>Chi-Square</b>	There is no significant association at between need for cognition and sharing of fake news.
RQ 3: Is there is any association between the social media level literacy level and sharing of fake news on social media?		There is significant association at between social media literacy level and sharing of fake news.

## 9. DISCUSSION

The producers of the content are innumerable on social media. According to the social media literacy conceptual framework (SoMeLit), in its initial form, intends to serve as a generative framework for advancements in theoretical development, empirical investigations, and everyday practice and action (Hyunyi Cho, 2022). The results of the chi-square test shows that statistically there is significant association between social media literacy level (use of social media, sharing news/posts, Proficiency in tools, Familiarity in features and knowledge on phishing and deep fake) and sharing of fake news. More the social media literate less the sharing news behavior. According to (SoMeLit) frame work, social media literacy purely depends on the self and medium (knowledge about self and its relationships with its social media content choices, consumption, engagement, and social media network environment), and the reality. Likewise, there is statistically significant association between need for cognition of the user (awareness about various news, sharing with others, misguiding others, credibility check, level of general knowledge) and sharing of fake news. (SoMeLit) put forward that a social media literate person is aware that the personal and emotional resonance of information on social media may make it real, representative, or a fact. Researchers also explored that the social media and the user has no association between the amount of time (media locus of control) that the user has spent on social media and sharing of fake news.

According to (SoMeLit) frame work, It's the ability to analyze (ability to observe and monitor one's social media content), evaluate (to interrogate and identify the beliefs, values, and life experiences) and contribute (ability to develop, share, and disseminate messages) makes the user more literate. Since social media is a

platform where the users are exposed to tons of information, critical thinking can also be considered as a fundamental tool needed for the social media users along with the competencies. Similarly, user-generated contents also require knowledge about the pros and cons of sharing their personal data and sensitive information in a public domain. And also, in this study researchers found that all the respondents were not aware of any fact checking tools. Even though Google reverse image search, Google news initiative, Factchecks can be used as a tool for checking the facts, the respondents were unaware of that piece of information. Still the majority of the respondents are not sure on what to like, read, comment and share. They feel the piece of information that they go through might be true because of the assumption that they are well media literate. Compared to other mass/traditional media, social media platforms require strict regulations and protocols.

Even though many online courses are offered by universities and Google news initiatives are happening around the world to address these issues, the people who seek out this training or making themselves a part of this trainings are the very people that have a sufficiently developed internal locus of control to recognize the value of such training Nagel (2021). These are likely not the people most in need of instruction.

## 10. CONCLUSION

The conceptualization of social media literacy is attached to its parent domain media literacy and is a sub part digital literacy. From (SoMeLit) framework it was clearly understood that content and competencies have to be tested among the individuals/users on social media to know their literacy level. Does this literacy level help them to identify fake news? Yes, from the study the researchers concluded that statistically there is significant association between the social media literacy and fake news sharing. The more the social media literate the respondent, possibility of sharing a fake news is less. Likewise, the time spent on social media and need for cognition has no effect in sharing of fake news. Because there might be chances, where the users may be using it for just entertainment, or time pass, browsing in free time etc. Responses given to measure the outcome variable reveals that even though the cognition level and amount of time is not associated with the sharing of fake news, there is a visible gap that needs to be bridged to make youth more literate and confident enough to take up and foresee new challenges in future in order to identify the fake news. This study also bears out that higher social media literacy level is associated with a reluctance to share incomplete information and attitudes to verify and authenticate the information in social media contexts. However, the confidence in identifying the fake news is still an ongoing challenge among the youth. 75% of the respondents still feels that making awareness and conducting classes regarding fake news among people and especially students can increase the social media literacy level and decrease the sharing of fake news. The importance of these social media literacy components such as the self, attitude and behavior, digital literacy, digital information analyzing, sharing and production skills, effective deployment of awareness programs together makes people more capable to function as active citizens with responsible views in democratic societies.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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