



## Original Article

# University Students' Responses to Fake News on Social Media

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**Abstract:** This study examines how university students receive and respond to unverified information on social media, focusing on behaviors such as acceptance, verification, sharing, and passive reception. Applying the Dual-Process Theory, the findings suggest that students often rely on heuristic processing, meaning they tend to believe or ignore information based on its familiarity, popularity, or emotional appeal. The results also indicate that while many students believe they can detect fake news, their actual fact-checking behaviors are inconsistent. A significant portion of respondents admitted to having shared unverified information, while others simply received it passively without any response. This reveals a notable gap between skepticism and active verification. Therefore, there is a need for media literacy education programs and accuracy-focused interventions to encourage systematic information processing and reduce the risk of fake news dissemination among students.

**Keywords:** Fake news response, fake news sharing behavior, fake news verification, social media.

## 1. Introduction

In the context of a rapidly developing digital media landscape, the explosion of information on social media platforms has created an ideal environment for the rapid emergence and spread of fake news. Numerous empirical studies have highlighted that most users' exposure to misinformation comes predominantly from social media (Brennen et al., 2020) [1], where the high volume of fake content and limited fact-checking efforts increase the risk of encountering and being

influenced by inaccurate or false information. Research by Kirchner & Reuter (2020) [2] shows that fake news does not affect all users equally but is concentrated within a specific group, often accounting for about one-third of participants. Specifically, their findings reveal that 28% of users admit to not reading an article before interacting with a post, 35% say they won't check the information's credibility, and about 20% believe the author has already verified the claims. This breaks down to one in ten people (approximately 10%) not reading an article before engaging, 10% not checking credibility, and 12% not seeking more information when they feel suspicious. However, the researchers also emphasize that these results should be interpreted cautiously

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due to the potential for social desirability bias, where participants might adjust their answers to align with social norms.

The development of information on social media not only poses a challenge to information authenticity and reliability but also has the potential to profoundly influence user perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. Students, in particular, who have a high frequency of social media use and frequently participate in online interactive activities, are considered one of the groups most susceptible to the spread of fake news. A study by Chen et al., (2015) [3] showed that university students are also easily influenced by misinformation. Based on the Dual-Process Theory of information processing, an individual's response to fake news can be classified into two main cognitive mechanisms. First, heuristic processing, where information is primarily accepted based on superficial cues such as sentiment, the familiarity of the source, or immediate emotional reactions. This process requires little cognitive effort, but it also makes individuals more vulnerable to the sensationalist and emotional characteristics often found in fake news. Second, systematic processing, where an individual actively analyzes, verifies, and cross-references information with reliable sources. This mechanism requires more cognitive effort but has the potential to prevent or mitigate the influence of fake news. The difference between these two mechanisms shows that human responses to fake news are not uniform but depend on the level of cognitive investment, social context, and individual characteristics. This suggests that interventions aimed at limiting the impact of fake news need to encourage and facilitate systematic processing, rather than just relying on superficial signals.

## **2. Literature Review and Analytical Framework**

### *2.1. Literature Review*

Students' responses to fake news on social media manifest in various forms, from

immediate acceptance and sharing to skepticism, verification, or passive reception. The process of receiving fake news is influenced by cognitive biases such as confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998) [4] and the illusory truth effect (Hasher et al., 1977) [5]. Moreover, the characteristics of the social media environment, where information spreads quickly and is reinforced by "echo chambers", increase the likelihood that fake news will be accepted without verification (Flaxman, Goel, & Rao, 2016) [6]. Simultaneously, sharing behavior is heavily influenced by emotional factors and social norms (Cialdini, 2001) [7], while the response to verify information is closely linked to critical thinking skills and new media literacy (Orhan et al., 2023) [8]. Notably, some studies indicate that fake news spreads faster than real news, especially on Twitter, highlighting the risk of widespread dissemination when students receive and share information without consideration (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018) [9]. The behavior of accepting and spreading fake news on social media shows a tendency toward passive trust, where students easily accept information without verification. This is partly explained by confirmation bias, which highlights the tendency to believe what aligns with pre-existing beliefs (Nickerson, 1998) [4]. In addition, psychological and social factors show that humans are often irrational and vulnerable when distinguishing between truth and falsehood during information overload. Rubin's (2010) [10] research shows that human ability to detect deception is only slightly better than chance; that is, the typical accuracy rate is between 55% and 58%, with an average accuracy of 54% across 1,000 participants in over 100 experiments. Furthermore, individuals often tend to believe fake news when they are exposed to it repeatedly (Boehm, 1994) [11], when it confirms existing beliefs (Nickerson, 1998) [4], or when it makes them feel good (desirability bias) (Fisher, 1993) [12]; or due to peer pressure and the bandwagon effect (Leibenstein, 1950) [13]. This emphasizes that when users automatically assume that widely

shared information is trustworthy, it reflects the principle of social proof (Cialdini, 2001) [7]. Additionally, emotion-based sharing, where engaging, shocking, or entertaining content leads users to share immediately without considering its authenticity, is seen as a result of the emotional contagion mechanism in the digital environment (Berger & Milkman, 2012) [14].

In addition, student responses to fake news are also reflected in how they receive and verify information. Studies highlight that critical thinking skills and new media literacy are important predictors of the ability to detect and verify fake news (Orhan et al., 2023) [8]. Strategies like pausing to evaluate the source, cross-checking, and using fact-checking tools contribute to greater accuracy in information reception (Lewandowsky et al., 2012) [15]. However, the pressure of speed and the sensational nature of information often cause verification to be delayed or ignored. On the other hand, the experience of accidentally sharing fake news and discovering the mistake can become a "critical learning moment," helping users increase their capacity for information evaluation. According to Lewandowsky et al., (2012) [15], being aware of the existence of fake news and experiencing the social consequences of sharing false information can encourage the development of information assessment skills. Another common response among students when facing fake news on social media is passive reception, or "receive and leave it." Unlike sharing or verifying, this response is passive, reflecting a state of "scrolling past" information without investing time or effort to verify it. According to Information Overload Theory, the dense volume of information on social media can easily cause users to become overwhelmed, leading to them ignoring or delaying processing (Mengis & Eppler, 2004) [16]. At the same time, low personal motivation and a lack of confidence in their ability to self-verify also contribute to this passive behavior. Recent studies indicate that "receive and leave it" often occurs when the information doesn't directly affect the individual or when users feel they

lack the skills to verify it (Orhan et al., 2023) [8]. The "receive and leave it" response also shows that attention is needed not only for sharing behavior but also for how students process information silently. Media literacy education interventions should encourage learners to develop active verification habits instead of ignoring information by providing simple tools and quick source evaluation skills. Furthermore, future research should clarify psychological factors (e.g., cognitive laziness, low motivation) and platform-related factors (e.g., interface design that makes verification difficult) to more fully understand the mechanism of the "leave it" response in students' reception of fake news.

## 2.2. Related Concepts

- **Responses:** In the context of social media, responses may include behaviors such as sharing, commenting, verifying, seeking additional information, or ignoring the content. According to Fickers and Piotrowski (2020) [17] define responses to media content as "the cognitive, emotional, and arousal states of the media user that occur during media use". In this study, reaction is understood as students' behavioral and cognitive responses when receiving information, specifically, receiving and immediately sharing; receiving with skepticism and verifying; or receiving without responding, particularly in relation to fake or unverified news on social media.

- **Fake News:** Fake news refers to information that is intentionally or unintentionally created to mislead or deceive and is often presented as credible news. According to Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) [18], fake news consists of articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers. Similarly, Lazer et al., (2018) [19] describe fake news as fabricated information that imitates the form of legitimate news media content but not its production process or organizational intent. In this study, fake news is understood as false or distorted information presented as real or verified news that has the potential to influence recipients' perceptions.

- **Social media fake news** refers to false or fabricated content disseminated on platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, X (Twitter), and Instagram, where users act simultaneously as both recipients and distributors of unverified information. According to Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018) [20], social media fake news consists of false information or fabricated content circulated on social media platforms that imitates the format of mainstream news but contains inaccurate content. In particular, social media echo chambers and network connections are regarded as the primary drivers of its proliferation (Di Domenico, 2021) [21]. Social media echo chambers accelerate the dissemination of fake news by targeting influential users, creating filter bubbles, and forming social groups based on belief orientation. This process establishes a closed feedback environment in which content circulates rapidly. In this study, fake news on social media is understood as false or misleading information spread through social networking platforms. It resembles authentic news in form but contains inaccurate content, thereby influencing users' perception and response behaviors.

### 2.3. Theoretical Approach

This study approaches the research using Dual-Process Theories, such as the Heuristic-Systematic Model (Chaiken, 1989) [22] and the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) [23]. These models explain that students process information in two ways: heuristic processing, based on cognitive shortcuts and emotions, or systematic processing, based on analysis, comparison, and verification. When motivation or ability is low, students tend to use heuristics, such as trusting familiar sources, following the crowd, or being swayed by emotionally charged information. Cognitive biases like confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998) [4] and the illusory truth effect (Hasher et al., 1977) [5] make it even easier for them to accept fake news without questioning it. Research also shows that fake news often spreads faster than real news on

social media, primarily due to its sensational, shocking, and easily shareable nature (Vosoughi, Roy, & Aral, 2018) [9]. This suggests that the heuristic processing mechanism is a "fertile ground" for fake news to be accepted and amplified within the student community. In contrast, systematic processing occurs when users have high motivation and analytical ability, such as a high need for cognition or good critical thinking skills. Studies show that students with new media literacy are often more effective at verifying and distinguishing fake news (Orhan et al., 2023) [8]. Moreover, interventions like accuracy nudges-reminders to consider accuracy before sharing-have been proven to increase systematic processing and reduce the sharing of misinformation (Pennycook et al., 2021) [24]. Therefore, promoting a verification response through skill training and behavioral intervention design is a key factor in limiting the impact of fake news in the student environment.

### 3. Research Organization and Methodology

This study was conducted using a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analysis to explore students' fake news reception behaviors on social media. The survey sample included 2,428 students from four major universities in Hanoi, with a high proportion from the University of Education, VNU (34.8%), followed by the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, VNU (27.1%), the Academy of Journalism and Communication (21.7%), and Hanoi University of Science and Technology (16.4%). Regarding demographics, females were dominant (75.5%), while males accounted for 23.3% and other genders for 1.2%. By academic year, first-year and second-year students made up the majority (38.3% and 34.8%, respectively), reflecting early and frequent exposure to social media. The fields of study were diverse, with educational sciences (27.3%), social and behavioral sciences (20.5%), and journalism and communication (19.5%) being the most prominent groups. In terms of academic

performance, most students achieved a "Good" (44.9%) or "Excellent" (35.3%) grade, showing that the research sample had a relatively strong academic background. Notably, 95.3% of students received information via social media, while 52.3% used word of mouth and 42.9% used online newspapers. Students actively used social media, with Facebook (94.9%), TikTok (85%), and Zalo (83.9%) being the three most popular platforms. The average daily social media usage time was quite high: 66.2% of students spent 3 to 8 hours a day, and an additional 10.8% spent more than 8 hours. These characteristics reflect an information reception context that is rich but also poses many risks of exposure to and dissemination of fake news.

#### 4. Research Findings

##### 4.1. Students' Reception and Sharing of Fake News on Social Media

Students are a demographic group highly exposed and strongly influenced by fake news on social media. This is due to their limited skills in source evaluation and a tendency to rely on superficial cues rather than verifying information (Wineburg & McGrew, 2017) [25]. Specifically, a prominent challenge in the digital media landscape is that many users don't understand how to verify the reliability of news content or are unaware that information can be distorted or biased. Research by Pennycook & Rand (2019) [26] shows that "lazy thinkers" are more susceptible to fake news. Furthermore, the increasing exposure to electronic devices (via smartphones, computers, or TVs) has led to a tendency to consume content that provides immediate gratification, such as entertainment or emotional stimulation (Greenfield, 2015) [27]. This can gradually degrade a person's critical thinking and logical reasoning, leading to inaccurate judgments and problematic behaviors in social life.

The research results indicate that only a small proportion of students receive and immediately share unverified information 11.8% (288) ( $M = 2.42$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ). The study also reveals

differences in the behavior of receiving and immediately sharing unverified information on social networks according to certain characteristics, such as academic performance and time spent on social media, but not gender or field of study. Specifically, the ANOVA results show a statistically significant difference among student groups based on academic performance and their behavior of receiving and immediately sharing unverified information ( $F = 2.563$ ,  $p = 0.037$ ). This finding suggests that students with higher academic performance tend to be more cautious, whereas those with lower academic performance are more likely to share unverified information quickly. Similarly, the analysis shows a statistically significant difference between social media usage groups in terms of time spent on social media ( $F = 5.803$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), indicating that the frequency of social media use influences the tendency to share fake news, as frequent users may share information more impulsively than those who use social media less often.

The research findings show that the majority of students do not easily accept everything they read on social media. A significant 90.4% chose a "strongly disagree" to "neutral" rating, with a relatively low average score ( $M = 2.41$ ;  $SD = 0.93$ ). This reflects a widespread skeptical attitude, though a small group still tends to accept unverified information. However, despite most students' stated skepticism, 13.55% (659) of students reported that they had shared information on social media at least once, only to later discover it was false ( $M = 2.49$ ;  $SD = 1.32$ ). This finding highlights a gap between cautious awareness and actual behavior, where users, despite being aware of the risks of fake news, still find it difficult to avoid unintentionally spreading it. Although fake news cannot be considered "news" in the traditional sense because its content is entirely or partially false (Gelfert, 2018) [28] and is created to deceive, manipulate, or misinform (Tandoc, 2019) [29], it often carries the value of "news" in the sense of "new information", even if it is incorrect. Therefore, if users share fake news because they believe it is true, their motivation for sharing is the same as when they share true news.

Table 4. Acceptance and sharing of unverified information on social media

Level of Agreement with Statements on Receiving Unverified Information on Social Media	1	2	3	4	5	M/SD
1. I often accept what I read on social media.	432	861	900	188	47	2.41
	17.8	35.5	37.1	7.7	1.9	0.93
2. I often trust and share news that many people post/share.	499	721	723	402	83	2.53
	20.6	29.7	29.8	16.6	3.4	1.09
3. I often immediately share any news on social media that is good or attractive.	837	606	484	367	134	2.32
	34.5	25.0	19.9	15.1	5.5	1.24
4. I have shared information on social media at least once that I later discovered was false.	783	511	475	471	188	2.49
	32.2	21.0	19.6	19.4	7.7	1.32
5. I often feel anxious, angry, or surprised by the information I receive.	305	655	918	451	99	2.75
	12.6	27.0	37.8	18.6	4.1	1.02
6. I have shared information at least once without reading the entire article.	696	559	424	565	184	2.58
	28.7	23.0	17.5	23.3	7.6	1.31

Note. (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Neutral; (4) Agree; (5) Strongly agree. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation.

In the social media environment, both real and fake news can use likes, comments, and shares to create a standard of authenticity for users (Delmazo & Valente, 2018) [30]. These metrics also influence how topics are selected, produced, and distributed by both journalists and fake news creators (Salgado & Bobba, 2019) [31]. The research results show that 20% (485) of students emphasized, "I often trust and share news that many people post/share" ( $M = 2.53$ ;  $SD = 1.09$ ). This indicates the influence of the repetition effect and the illusory truth effect, where the level of dissemination becomes a factor that increases credibility. The repetition effect posits that misinformation appearing multiple times becomes familiar and easier to accept, creating an illusion of trustworthiness (Galeotti, 2019) [32]; even when the information is debunked, users may still maintain that false belief (Pennycook et al., 2018) [33]. This is partly explained by the research of Kai & Huan (2019) [34], which highlights that consumers believe fake news based on three factors: consensus (if many others believe it, the consumer will too),

consistency (if the information fits with their existing belief system), and popularity (when information is repeated in many places). Notably, fake news often spreads widely with the help of social bots, which causes it to appear repeatedly on social media with a sensational flair.

In addition, some researchers consider the reception of fake news to be a primarily emotional and cognitively "lazy" response, characterized by a lack of analytical thinking, limited deliberation, and increased emotions when processing information (Martel et al., 2020) [35]. This tendency is partly reflected in the present findings, as approximately 20.6% (501); ( $M = 2.32$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ) of students admitted to sharing attractive news without verifying it, suggesting that emotional and entertainment factors can override rational consideration among certain students. Notably, a substantial portion of respondents reported having shared information at least once without reading the entire article 30.9% (749) ( $M = 7.60$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ), while 22.7% (550) ( $M = 2.75$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) stated that they felt fear, anger, or

surprise when encountering such information. Although accuracy is a central factor in users' decisions to share information (Pennycook et al., 2021), false or misleading content has been shown to spread far more widely than its truthful counterparts (Vosoughi et al., 2018) [9].

Specifically, the theory of processing fluency emphasizes that the ease or difficulty a person experiences in understanding a topic influences how they evaluate and judge the causes, effects, and accuracy of new information (Schwarz et al., 2007) [36]. Consequently, fake news is often crafted to exploit how users tend to process and accept information—even when that information is false. Pennycook et al., (2018) [33] found that prior exposure to fake news increased individuals' belief in false content, even when social media platforms displayed a “disputed information” warning label on the post. The underlying mechanism of this effect is that repeated exposure enhances cognitive fluency, which in turn leads individuals to infer accuracy. However, this warning strategy appears to be ineffective in the long term, as users may still believe the same fake news when encountering it again without the label (Grady et al., 2021) [37]. Conversely, Roozenbeek and Van der Linden (2019) [38] found that corrective attempts can unintentionally accelerate the spread of misinformation. Thus, the impact of repeated exposure seems to be amplified by users' trust in the source, particularly when the source is perceived as scientific or credible, highlighting the necessity for such sources to ensure the accuracy of the information they provide (Nadarevic et al., 2020) [39].

#### 4.2. *Students' Reception and Verification of Fake News on Social Media*

A key feature of social media is the blurring of boundaries between information consumers and creators. Users are no longer just passive recipients of one-way information, as in traditional mass media; they can also directly produce, edit, and disseminate information to the community. In this context, new media

literacy, understood as the ability to receive, analyze, and critically respond to messages across various digital media channels, including social media, has been identified by recent studies as a crucial factor influencing fake news reception and dissemination behaviors. In other words, a higher level of new media literacy correlates with a greater likelihood of an individual approaching information with a skeptical, critical, and evidence-based attitude. This, in turn, reduces the risk of trusting and sharing false content. Conversely, individuals who lack these skills are more vulnerable to manipulation in the digital media environment, where speed of dissemination, emotional appeal, and social proof often override the process of information verification.

Empirical evidence, in particular, shows that cognitive ability plays a significant role in determining an individual's response to fake news. People with high analytic thinking skills tend to believe in both the headlines and full content of fake news less than those who lean towards intuitive thinking (Pennycook & Rand, 2020) [40]. Additionally, critical thinking has been proven to be an effective protective mechanism against the persuasion of misinformation (Machete & Turpin, 2020) [41]. Similarly, aspects of crystallized intelligence, such as vocabulary, general knowledge, and cultural understanding, also help individuals better analyze and cross-reference information, thereby reducing their belief in fake news (Sindermann et al., 2021) [42]. Research by Bago et al., (2020) [43] further shows that encouraging deliberation can help reduce the level of trust in fake news.

The research results show that a large proportion of students receive fake news while also expressing skepticism and verifying information (46.1%,  $n = 1120$ ;  $M = 3.46$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ). The ANOVA analysis indicates that gender ( $F = 4.621$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) and field of study ( $F = 2.352$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ) have statistically significant effects on the level of receiving, questioning, and verifying information on social media. In contrast, academic performance ( $F = 0.588$ ,  $p = 0.671$ ) and time

spent on social media ( $F = 1.487$ ,  $p = .204$ ) do not produce significant differences. Therefore, gender and field of study are considered

influential factors affecting students' behavior in receiving and verifying information on social media.

Table 4. Reception and verification of unverified information on social media

Level of agreement with statements on receiving unverified information on social media	1	2	3	4	5	M/SD
1. I can detect fake news on social media.	84	241	883	957	263	3.44
	3.5	9.9	36.4	39.4	10.8	0.93
2. I often check the source and verify information when I receive any news on social media.	119	305	935	796	273	3.33
	4.9	12.6	38.5	32.8	11.2	0.99
3. I often pay attention to unusual signs such as a lack of sources, sensational headlines, and emotional language.	129	312	723	904	360	3.24
	5.3	12.9	29.8	37.2	14.8	1.05

Note. (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Neutral; (4) Agree; (5) Strongly agree. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation.

The research findings show that a majority of students (50.2%, or 1,220) express confidence in their ability to identify fake news, with a relatively high average score on the statement "I can detect fake news on social media" ( $M = 3.44$ ;  $SD = 0.93$ ). This rate reflects a high level of subjective self-confidence among students in their ability to identify fake news. However, when compared to other indicators, such as the habit of checking sources and verifying information or paying attention to unusual signs, the average scores are lower. This reveals a gap between belief and actual behavior. This finding is consistent with previous research arguing that confidence in detecting fake news does not necessarily correlate with accurate identification skills (Pennycook & Rand, 2019) [26] and may reflect the overconfidence effect in online information processing. A study by Halpern et al., (2019) [44] also emphasizes that using social media does not equate to accepting misinformation, as highly connected individuals often possess better information literacy, enabling them to filter and prioritize reliable content. Nonetheless, a significant portion of students 49.8% (1208) were neutral or disagreed with the statement, showing hesitation or uncertainty. This reflects a disconnect between subjective

confidence and actual competence, which is often observed in studies on the overconfidence effect in information processing.

Although students show a relatively high level of confidence in their ability to detect fake news, their specific verification behaviors (checking sources, analyzing signs) are not as robust. Specifically, the data on information verification shows a discrepancy between the ability to detect and the behavior of verifying. The statement, "I often check the source and verify information when I receive any news on social media", received a lower average score ( $M = 3.33$ ;  $SD = 0.99$ ). The results show that a large portion of students 44% (1069) often confirm they check information sources, yet the neutral rate remains high 38.5% (935), and nearly 17.5% (424) scored very low, indicating they do not frequently check and verify sources. This suggests that not all users verify the information they receive on social media. The spread of fake news by humans can only be limited when users' critical thinking skills are enhanced. The research by Pennycook et al. (2021) [24] also evaluated the importance of information accuracy before deciding to share content on social media and emphasized that accuracy is a key factor in sharing behavior.



Furthermore, the evaluation of the statement, "I often pay attention to unusual signs such as a lack of sources, sensational headlines, and emotional language", ( $M = 3.24$ ;  $SD = 1.05$ ) shows that 52% (1264) of surveyed students affirmed they pay attention. However, the disagreement rate was also higher compared to verification behavior 18.2% (441). This gap indicates that although awareness of the risks of fake news is increasing, the ability to process information skeptically, critically, and systematically remains limited. This reflects the reality of students' critical thinking skills; specifically, the skills to analyze the language and structure of fake news are not yet widespread. As a result, students are not sensitive or skeptical enough to recognize the characteristic indicators of fake news. Therefore, it is necessary to promote digital media education programs to enhance critical thinking skills, focusing on building habits of verification and the ability to identify signs of fake news, rather than solely relying on users' subjective confidence.

#### 4.3. Students' Reception and Passive Response to Fake News

In addition to sharing immediately or actively verifying the authenticity of information on social media, students also exhibit a passive response to unverified information. This state involves reading and scrolling past content without any reaction, or becoming suspicious but not taking steps to

verify. This shows that students don't fully trust the information they receive, but most remain passive instead of actively evaluating it. This is a clear example of the gap between awareness and behavior, highlighting the need to promote critical thinking skills and information verification habits among students in the digital environment.

The research results indicate that the majority of students belong to the group that receives fake news but neither shares nor verifies the information, 60.6% (1471) ( $M = 3.56$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ). A comparison of behavioral differences in receiving and not responding, specifically, not sharing or verifying unverified information on social networks, reveals variations across several demographic characteristics, including gender, field of study, academic performance, and time spent on social media. The ANOVA results show statistically significant differences in the level of receiving unverified information on social networks by gender ( $F = 6.159$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ), field of study ( $F = 3.804$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ), and academic performance ( $F = 2.791$ ,  $p = 0.025$ ). In contrast, time spent on social networks did not produce a significant difference ( $F = 1.041$ ,  $p = 0.385$ ). These findings suggest that gender, field of study, and academic performance are important factors influencing the tendency to receive unverified information without subsequent reaction, while time spent on social networks does not have a statistically significant effect.

Table 4. Passive reception and non-engagement with unverified information on social media

Level of agreement with statements on receiving unverified information on social media	1	2	3	4	5	M/SD
1. I often read/view/scroll through news on social media without any response.	109	198	521	909	691	3.77
	4.5	8.2	21.5	37.4	28.5	1.08
2. I may doubt the authenticity of the news I receive but do not verify it.	164	473	836	795	160	3.13
	6.8	19.5	34.4	32.7	6.6	1.02

Note. (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Neutral; (4) Agree; (5) Strongly agree. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation.

The survey results indicate that students tend to passively receive unverified information. The statement, "I often read/view/scroll through news on social media without any response," received a higher-than-average agreement score ( $M=3.77$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ). Specifically, nearly 66% of students agreed, showing that the behavior of "reading but not responding" is quite common. This is a form of silent reception that, while it doesn't spread misinformation, also doesn't debunk it. This poses a potential risk for fake news to remain in memory and have a long-term impact through the illusory truth effect. This finding aligns with the research of Metzger & Flanagin (2013) [45], who emphasize that in the context of social media's "information overload," most users often opt for heuristics (cognitive shortcuts), leading them to consume news without making the effort to evaluate it. This can also be explained by the uses and gratifications theory (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973) [46], which highlights that users often access social media for entertainment and quick updates, so verification is not their primary motivation.

The study by Pennycook & Rand (2018) [33] also emphasizes that even when users have the ability to identify fake news, they may still not take steps to verify it because the cognitive cost is too high compared to the personal benefit. This is partly demonstrated by the research results, where the majority of students rated the statement, "I may doubt the authenticity of the news I receive but do not verify it", with a lower agreement score ( $M=3.13$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ). Although more than half of the participants admitted to having doubts, most did not take action to verify the information. This reflects the gap between awareness and behavior, where students are conscious of the risks of fake news but stop at a state of passive skepticism. This phenomenon is also explained by the theory of cognitive miserliness (Fiske & Taylor, 1991), which shows that humans tend to conserve mental effort, making it easy to stop at a state of doubt without taking action. In comparison with studies in Vietnam (Nguyen &

Le, 2021) [47], these results show a similar trend, where social media users generally do not verify information unless it directly affects their personal interests. Thus, it can be concluded that users in general, and students in particular, fall into this trend of passively receiving fake news. This places an urgent demand on media education and strategies to enhance media literacy, helping users shift from "passive skepticism" to "active verification".

## 5. Discussion

The transmission of unverified information by social media users, including students, is a key factor contributing to the spread of fake news. The advent of the internet has significantly increased the speed and effectiveness with which fake news spreads (Greifeneder et al., 2020) [48], as anyone can easily create and disseminate unverified information. Our research shows a statistically significant correlation between a user's initial reaction and their likelihood of sharing fake news. In many cases, users spread fake news due to carelessness, failing to verify information and unable to identify completely false messages that use real-life events as context. Social media users often share content based on eye-catching headlines rather than checking the accuracy or source of the information (Bondielli & Marcelloni, 2019) [49]. Furthermore, a student's behavior of immediately sharing unverified information is influenced by a combination of personal factors (education, digital skills, habits, experience), psychological factors (confirmation bias, social proof, motivation to share), social factors (peer pressure, trust in a platform, sharing culture), and the nature of the information itself (sensationalism, emotion, urgency, source). The combination of these factors makes users susceptible to receiving and spreading fake news, even unintentionally.

However, the behaviors of students receiving and verifying fake news suggest that critical thinking and digital literacy act as a

protective mechanism, helping them better distinguish between real and fake news. That said, correcting misperceptions after fake news has been believed is incredibly difficult. Critical thinking is an active reasoning process that includes conceptualization, analysis, and evaluation (Elder & Paul, 2020) [50]. When users have critical thinking skills, they are less dependent on heuristic methods for evaluation (Kahneman, 2011) [51] and process information more systematically and accurately. A study by Pennycook & Rand (2019) [26] emphasizes that individuals with pre-existing critical thinking skills are better at distinguishing between real and fake news, even when controlling for political ideology.

A challenge in the context of digital information consumption is that users often spend very little time reading and processing news (Cordonier & Brest, 2021) [52], which limits their ability to apply analytical thinking. This highlights the opposition between cognitive ability and actual information reception behavior. This, in turn, emphasizes the importance of media education to nurture a habit of critical reflection and evaluation when engaging with online content. Interventions that promote critical thinking-such as prompts to evaluate information claims-have also proven useful in reducing users' belief in fake news (Lutzke, Drummond, Slovic, & Arvai, 2019) [53]. For example, flagging unverified or fake news can act as a catalyst for critical thinking and prompt media consumers to question the quality of information. It's clear that student responses to fake news are not limited to just receiving, sharing, and not verifying; or receiving and verifying; or receiving and doing nothing (showing no external behavior). Students are not entirely passive in the face of fake news; they still use a systematic processing mechanism, as per the dual-process theory framework of Chaiken (1987) [22] and Petty & Cacioppo (1986) [23]. When exposed to information, in addition to quick, intuitive, visual cues (heuristic cues), students can engage in a deeper analysis, especially when they notice unusual signs in the content. These

unusual signs act as a "warning" that prompts them to pause, be skeptical, and take action to verify the information.

The research findings show that the ability to detect and the behavior of verifying are not yet a sustainable habit but are instead a situational response. This reality is consistent with previous studies that emphasize students have a certain ability to identify fake news, but they often lack the motivation to verify it or become overwhelmed by information in the digital environment, leading them to stop at a surface level of suspicion without proceeding to deeper verification (Lewandowsky et al., 2012 [15]; Pennycook & Rand, 2019) [26]. In other words, student behavior in receiving fake news reflects the coexistence of two cognitive processes: on one hand, they sometimes engage in analytical thinking to detect unusual signs; on the other hand, the majority maintain a certain level of passivity due to limited cognitive resources and motivation. This suggests that media education and critical thinking training programs need to focus not only on enhancing identification skills but also on strengthening the motivation to verify and forming long-term habits of critical reflection.

## 6. Conclusion

When students receive and respond to fake news on social media, they are influenced by biases, emotions, and social factors that lead to heuristic processing (cognitive shortcuts). However, they also have the ability to use critical thinking and systematic processing when they detect unusual signs, though the effectiveness of this identification is limited. Students' reception and dissemination of fake news stem from a combination of individual, psychological, social, and informational factors, leading them to easily share content, even unintentionally. Social media users in general, and students in particular, have diverse reactions to fake news. Some are quick to believe and share due to confirmation bias, repetition, or a desire for entertainment, with little analysis of the information. Another group

is more skeptical, thanks to their critical thinking abilities and information literacy, which helps them identify and debunk fake news more effectively. Additionally, how fact-checking results are presented-for example, with visual warning flags or detailed explanations-also influences users' trust and sharing behavior. Overall, social media users' responses to fake news range from unconscious reception and dissemination to critical analysis and warning others, largely depending on their information skills, cognitive biases, and the context of reception. Our results show that many students stop at a neutral state of suspicion without in-depth verification, while others tend to engage in systematic processing when they detect unusual signs. This reflects the coexistence of both heuristic and systematic processing. The dual-process theory helps explain this mechanism, showing that students' fake news sharing behavior is based on both superficial cues (heuristic/peripheral) and the ability for analytical processing (systematic/central), depending on the context. This highlights the role of critical thinking and digital literacy as a protective mechanism, and it emphasizes the urgent need for media education to cultivate reflective habits and provide strategies for news evaluation to curb the spread of fake news.

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