

## Abstract

The rapid increase of misleading information on social networking sites increasingly undermines individuals' ability to assess information critically, particularly among college students who devote significant time to these platforms. This study investigates the ability of college students in Birbhum District, West Bengal, to identify and reject misleading content on social media platforms. The study examines how students manage false information and the strategies they employ to verify facts, utilizing both survey data and comprehensive interviews.

The data has been collected from sixteen government-aided colleges in Birbhum District, with 1,178 undergraduate students participating in surveys. There were a few more women (52%) than men (48%) in the sample, and most of them (66%) were between the ages of 19 and 21. Most students said they had seen false information, and 82% said they had fallen for deceptive posts at least once a month. The results show that students have some serious problems dealing with problematic content. WhatsApp was the most popular platform among students (everyone used it), followed by YouTube (96%) and Facebook (87%). However, Facebook was where about 52% of students most often saw fake news. Seventy-four percent of students said they would rather acquire news from social media than newspapers or TV, yet none of them visited any fact-checking websites which shows a big gap in how they check facts. Students demonstrated alarming overconfidence about recognizing real from fake content—71% felt sure of their abilities even though they failed when actually tested. False political posts were what students ran into most (47%), with health-related fake news coming second (15%). Male students shared inaccurate information more often than female students did. When performing assignments, students relied primarily on Google (82%) instead of proper academic databases, suggesting a tendency for quick and surface-level searches. The study indicated a clear mismatch between students identifying incorrect information as a problem for society yet not taking personal responsibility for countering it. Despite recognizing the harmful nature of fake

news, the majority of students responded passively as almost 77% ignored fake posts when encountered and about 35% admitted to sharing unverified information. Perhaps most concerning was that none of the 1,178 respondents has any idea regarding information literacy, indicating a complete absence of systematic training in evaluating information sources.

The data makes clear that colleges need to step up and teach students how to evaluate information properly. This means creating actual training programs that show students how to verify content on different platforms—especially apps like WhatsApp where false information spreads behind closed doors. Schools should weave information literacy into every subject they teach, not just treat it as an add on skill. Students need to learn more than how to check if a source looks credible; they need to understand how today's disinformation campaigns actually work and why they're designed to be convincing. This research helps explain how incorrect information affects students in rural college settings, offering solid facts to encourage better strategies for teaching information skills in colleges. The study reveals that fake news has become a constant presence on social media rather than an isolated issue, requiring substantial changes in how we educate students to critically assess and verify online content.

**Keywords: Information literacy, fake news, social media, misinformation, disinformation, fact checking**