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Algorithm Awareness and Apathy: An Exploratory Study of Generation Z's Media Literacy

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Abstract

With the convergence of social and news media in recent years and the rapidly changing digital world, the nature of truth has been frequently contested and challenged on social media platforms. This exploratory study investigates the media literacy of Generation Z and their conceptions and practices in relation to the "post-truth" information environment. Drawing on six semi-structured focus groups conducted with a total of 24 undergraduate students enrolled at a university in Ireland, the findings highlight a concerning apathy among participants. First, although participants demonstrated basic awareness of algorithmic manipulation on social media, they seemed to be indifferent to the deeper societal consequences of potentially harmful information. Second, participants rarely engaged in fact-checking and flagging mis-/disinformation despite recognizing their importance, especially when social media has become their main information source. Our study sheds light on some potential gaps in media literacy education for Gen Z and offers three recommendations: Enhance understanding of platform mechanisms and AI, encourage positive uses of social media, and advocate for a healthy and sustainable information environment. These recommendations are crucial for fostering responsible engagement in the digital age.

Keywords: Media literacy; Post-truth; Platform mechanisms; Gen Z

Introduction

In a generation where social media platforms are integral to most facets of life, undergraduate students are faced with navigating dizzying information overload, often punctuated with dangerous mis-/disinformation exposure. In the "post-truth" era, when opinion and emotion are held above fact (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016), Gen Z individuals engage with diverse numbers of digital platforms more often and more intensely than other generations (Giarla, 2019; Yadav & Rai, 2017). Digital platforms can amplify mis-/disinformation with algorithms and platform mechanisms (Kalpokas, 2019), especially when relying on confirmation bias to increase engagement for commercial purposes (Noble, 2018). Despite these challenges, existing media literacy education often focuses on basic skills like fact-checking, which falls short in preparing students to critically assess the functioning of algorithms, the implications of platform mechanisms, and the ethical use of emerging technologies like Generative AI. A recent deepfake crisis in South Korea exemplifies the dangerous consequences of this limitation in media literacy education, where Generative AI was used unethically to create explicit, non-consensual videos of students and staff in universities and schools. This scandal reveals how young people, without fully grasping the ethical and societal repercussions, are vulnerable to both misusing and being victimized by such technologies. Through focus groups with Generation Z students, this study aims to address this gap by exploring Generation Z's awareness of the underlying mechanisms, their interactions with mis-/disinformation, and how they engage with information they deem unreliable. Based on our findings, we offer some insights for improving media literacy education and provide practical recommendations. We argue that media literacy education provided to Generation Z and younger generations must be updated to navigate the post-truth digital information landscape with greater critical awareness and ethical engagement.

The phenomenon of fake news and the rapid spread of mis-/disinformation on social media have brought new challenges to media literacy. In the so-called "post-truth" era, characterised by the circumstances in which emotional appeals and personal beliefs influence public opinion more than objective facts the definition of media literacy has further evolved to emphasise the critical evaluation of information sources and the importance of fact-checking and verification (Adjin-Tettey, 2022). As part of the response to the challenges of fake news, the concept of news literacy emerged and gained interest. According to Tully et al. (2022), news literacy involves understanding the process of news production, recognizing bias and propaganda, and evaluating the credibility of news sources. Yet, some scholars (e.g., McDougall et al., 2018; Tebaldi & Nygreen, 2022) argue that teaching media literacy must go further to include the socio-political contexts of information production and dissemination. Barton (2019) and Frechette (2019) advocate for critical media literacy, which goes beyond basic media literacy education on teaching how to interrogate, verify and evaluate media content. Critical media literacy emphasises the role of institutional power, political ideologies, and media technologies in shaping the media landscape.

In contrast to these calls for a transformation in media literacy education, curricula and initiatives focused on media literacy for young people/undergraduates are lacking. In general, most organisations offer online resources and hybrid training options for both individuals and teachers (e.g., Media and Information Literacy Alliance in the UK and MediaWell in the U.S.). Most curricula, however, are focused either on educating primary/secondary school students in basic media literacy skills (e.g., Media Literacy Ireland) or teaching digital literacy professional development skills to adults (e.g., National Adult Literacy Agency in Ireland). Some organisations offer specific courses on different types of literacy (digital, health, media, information) but there is little explanation on how these literacies can overlap. There is also high involvement from the private sector in these initiatives, especially in the U.S., and most notably Meta's involvement in The U.S. National Media Literacy Week.

"Gen Z" Media Literacy

Anyone born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s is considered a member of Generation Z (Dimock, 2019). Having grown up with the Internet as an integral part of their daily life, members of Gen Z are characterised as digital natives and technically innate (Frechette, 2019; Shariman et al., 2012). This generation uses social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, and TikTok not only for socialising but also as accessible and immediate sources of news and information (Devi et al., 2024). Studies indicate that Gen Z engages with digital platforms more intensively and diversely than previous generations (Giarla, 2019; Yadav & Rai, 2017). Their ability to navigate multiple platforms and engage in text, image and video formats demonstrate their proficient skills in content creation, curation and dissemination (Serbanescu, 2022).

Despite this digital fluency, Gen Z does not necessarily engage with online content in a consistently reflective way. Much of the media literacy education provided to them still relies on traditional models that emphasise fact-checking and identifying reliable sources (Adjin-Tettey, 2022; Tebaldi & Nygreen, 2022). Educational campaigns, whether in schools or through online resources, typically promote critical thinking aimed at distinguishing between credible and non-credible information (Eden et al., 2024). However, these campaigns often presume a baseline of trust in media, whereas many young people begin from a position of scepticism. Studies show that Gen Z inherently distrusts information encountered online as they understand digital platforms are rife with misinformation and biassed narratives (Feijoo et al., 2023). Such intrinsic scepticism, while valuable, may sometimes lead to disengagement or cynicism rather than discernment (Liu et al., 2021), raising questions about whether current media literacy education adequately equips students to assess what they encounter online. While they often acknowledge the importance of verifying information, it does not always translate into practices. It is clear that there is a gap between the skills taught in media literacy campaigns and the actual practices of Gen Z: media literacy education often reiterates strategies Gen Z already knows without addressing the underlying reasons they choose not to apply them. To develop responsive media literacy education, it is essential to understand what current

generation already know, assume, or ignore about how information is distributed and shaped by platform mechanisms, and how they actually navigate digital spaces in the "post-truth era".

Platform Mechanisms and "Post-Truth"

Although Generation Z is familiar with digital technologies, the extent and depth of their understanding of underlying platform mechanisms and algorithms is not yet known. The term "platform mechanisms" have been used to describe datafication, commodification, and algorithmic selection that underlies the working of social media platforms (van Dijck et al., 2018). These mechanisms, however, are unknown to their users as to what extent their contents are presented and prioritised, meaning that the majority of users are unaware of how their data is collected, processed, and analysed in order to curate their information environment (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Duffy & Meisner, 2023). In this context, curation refers both to the user's own behaviours – such as liking, sharing, scrolling past, or avoiding content – and to the algorithmic processes that track these actions and shape the content shown to them (van Dijck et al., 2018). Further, Aslett et al. (2024) report that the search process itself can reinforce mis-/disinformation and make it appear more credible when users attempt to verify information by utilising popular search engines, because search engine algorithms prioritise popular over credible content which can lead to increasing the visibility and veracity of mis-/disinformation.

In the book Algorithms of Oppression, Noble (2018) illustrates how search engine algorithms reinforce and perpetuate racial and gender biases rooted in the socio-economic contexts in which they were developed. By analysing search queries that are seemingly neutral, Nobel (2018) demonstrates that algorithmic search results are anything but and are instead influenced by the prejudices of algorithm creators. The inherent biases embedded in algorithmic decision-making is another critical issue. Gillespie (2014) emphasises that algorithms are not just technical tools but cultural artefacts that represent specific human values. These artefacts can then shape how information is perceived and acted upon by users.

While the intricacies of platform mechanism and algorithms are extensively discussed in scholarly discourse, critical elements are often inadequately incorporated into media literacy education. This oversight is particularly problematic in the context of the "post-truth" era where platform mechanisms and algorithms can amplify mis-/disinformation and systemic bias (Kalpokas, 2019). As Gen Z continues to engage with this complex digital environment, there is a need to investigate if and how they are aware of the power structures that create these technologies. Only then can media literacy education equip them with the skills to navigate their digital worlds more effectively. Drawing from the above, the aim of this study is to investigate Gen Z's media literacy, especially when it comes to mis-/disinformation on social media platforms. The research design is guided by two main questions:

(1) How do undergraduate students navigate the information environment on social media platforms?

(2) To what extent undergraduate students are aware of platform mechanisms that can influence their social media usage?

Method

We conducted six focus groups with a total of 24 undergraduate students at a university in Ireland from October 2023 to September 2024. Focus groups were used so that participants could engage with each other's ideas to prompt spontaneous responses and reveal underlying attitudes and beliefs (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Study participants were recruited through flyers posted around campus. Interested students were asked to complete a short online questionnaire which included questions on demographics, discipline, year of study, and times of convenience. Focus group participants were offered a €15 shop voucher as an incentive.

An information sheet on the project was provided to all focus group participants upon entry and all were asked to sign the consent form before we began. Participants were informed that all data would be confidential and that they could withdraw at any time. The study received ethics approval from the university's Human Research Ethics Committee.

A total of 24 undergraduates were assigned to six focus groups. There were seven men and seventeen women. All were between 17 and 21 years old. 12 participants were in their first year of study, 10 in second year, and one each in third and fourth year. In terms of disciplinary backgrounds, 11 were enrolled in the College of Social Sciences and Law, 8 in College of Arts and Humanities, 3 in the Collage of Health and Agricultural Sciences, and 2 in the Collage of Science.

Focus groups were conducted until data saturation was reached (Deliens et al., 2014). An empirical study found that three focus groups were sufficient to identify prevalent themes (Guest et al., 2017) but to ensure no information was missed three additional focus groups were held, with two focus groups conducted in the new academic year after the initial data analysis. Three focus groups were held in October 2023, the fourth in January 2024, and the rest two in September 2024. These time periods marked the start of the semesters when students are more active and willing to participate in group activities (Bosch & Spinath, 2023; Darby et al., 2013) and when there is lower academic pressure (Pitt et al., 2018).

These focus groups were moderated by two research assistants alternatively and an observer recorded and took notes in each focus group. The discussions lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and all were held face-to-face in university buildings. The group discussions were designed to explore student use and understanding of social media platforms and their perceptions of the knowledge required to critically assess information

on social media. Posts from TikTok, X (formerly Twitter), and Facebook were incorporated to generate discussion and stimulate interaction among participants.

The audio recordings of each focus group were transcribed automatically using Otter and then checked for errors by a research assistant. One researcher conducted an initial several readings of all transcripts to understand the essence of the material and create preliminary categories using inductive thematic analysis. The content and definitions of each category were collaboratively discussed between two researchers and adjustments of the categories were made accordingly. Each transcript was then coded independently by two researchers. Any inconsistencies were discussed and resolved by reviewing the transcripts (and audio recordings if necessary) until a consensus was reached.

Findings

A key theme emerged from the focus groups is that information consumption on social media is characterised by a high degree of scepticism and pragmatism. Participants did not trust any information fully and expressed senses of uncertainty, distrust, and apathy that pervade their interactions with social media information. In the following, we present findings that describe how Gen Z understands and navigates the "post-truth" environment and their loss of trust.

Living in the Post-Truth Era

The participants primarily viewed social media platforms as avenues of entertainment and socialisation rather than sources for reliable information. Nevertheless, participants revealed that social media has become a main source of news and that they rarely engaged with traditional media. At the same time, they also expressed scepticism towards the reliability of news information on social media. One participant remarked:

> "There's a lot of hard news that go around on Instagram with the searching feed. So, I can definitely see some news on there, but I don't really count that as a reliable source." (Focus Group 1)

The participants also expressed tiredness of mis-/disinformation on social media in general, noting that difficulty can lead to both confusion and apathy. Participants candidly admitted:

> "I don't know what to believe" (Focus Group 2)

> "It comes to a point that you're unable to believe what's right and what's wrong." (Focus Group 6)

These comments unveil the uncertainty and scepticism that characterise the "post-truth" era when people do not trust any information they encounter. At the same time, participants also noted that they seldom fact-check or report misleading posts and prefer

to bypass them as fast as possible in order to continue curating their own information environment. For example, participants mentioned:

> "Just reading and moving on. Some stuff, when you just read the head title, it looks fake. So it's might as well just move past and read something else as that's wasting your time." (Focus Group 1)

> "Realistically, I'm not going to log into some domain and look up the sources. I'm just going to skip right past" (Focus Group 5)

> "I think if I wasn't particularly interested in the topic, I wouldn't check." (Focus Group 6)

These examples describe a passive and pragmatic approach to information consumption and an emphasis on feed curation. Rather than actively engaging in content moderation or fact-checking, participants often avoided interacting with questionable content altogether, because they know that any form of engagement, even brief viewing time, could influence the algorithm to display more of the same type of content in their feeds. This, combined with social media's quick and entertaining format, also creates this feeling of apathy when it comes to mis-/disinformation reporting and fact-checking. This is further explained by one participant:

> "because with TikTok, a lot of the times you're just scrolling, scrolling, scrolling. You'll see that but you're not going to follow up. ... I think it's good to link sources, but then a lot of people aren't going to take the time unless they're really interested in it. So all you're showing is grounding is good, big pharm is bad, and that's it. The only thing that person can take away is that. They're not gonna be very open-minded. They're not going to go look at the research, and not going to see what thing is from that stuff. So I think for shorten[ed] media, like TikTok, it's quick things. It's like, boom, hit it, done, move to next thing." (Focus Group 3)

This participant points out how platform design can play a large role in this apathy towards mis-/disinformation where the fast-paced nature of scrolling discourages deeper engagement with content. They also emphasise that fact-checking is usually only carried out when prompted by immediate interest as opposed to a consistent and systemic approach to verifying information.

Algorithmic Know-how

The participants were aware of algorithmic influence on their social media platforms. They have even developed various strategies to navigate and control their social media feeds, demonstrating a basic understanding of how their engagement with social media contents affects the information to which they are exposed. For example, one participant noted:

> "I wouldn't engage with it, because engaging with it once will kind of alter your For You Page, and you will see a lot more of it. So I would probably just watch

> part of it, get the information that he's trying to convey, and just scroll away." (Focus Group 1)

This comment illustrates a deliberate approach to manage the participant's algorithmic content recommendations on TikTok by consuming only necessary information without engaging further so as to avoid their feed being altered. This selective engagement and knowledge of how time spent on content can affect content exposure demonstrates an awareness of how social media algorithms track user engagement and use it to tailor future recommendations.

Similarly, another participant emphasised the importance of managing scroll time to control content exposure:

> "You could also narrow your feed by reducing your scroll time because the more you scroll, "the more information you're reading. So that on TikTok, instead of going on For You Page, you could just choose your followings and then scroll on that. So you know what you're going to be seeing rather than being open to literally any information." (Focus Group 4)

By choosing to scroll only through following content, the participants curate their experience to be more predictable and aligned with their interests. This avoids the random and potentially un-interesting content served by the algorithm that does not align with the user's existing interests. These strategies (non-engagement, fast scrolling, and For You Page avoidance) were referenced by focus group participants as a way to manage their digital environments. As later comments suggest, however, the same filtering behaviours may also reinforce pre-existing beliefs, raising concerns about information bubbles and confirmation bias. Participants displayed an understanding of how filter bubbles or echo chambers are formed based on their engagement and preferences, which might lead to potential mis-/disinformation. Two participants observed:

> "I kind of think it depends on what the person thought before. If a person was inclining towards what he said about, like believing that, and then they would believe him more. But if they oppose what he said already, I think that they would believe him less." (Focus Group 1)

> "They are constantly fed this through the algorithm, and people are more prone to believe the things that they want to hear or see." (Focus Group 6)

By acknowledging that individuals are more likely to believe information that aligns with their existing beliefs, the participant understands how filter bubbles can be created and how mis-/disinformation can be perpetuated within these bubbles.

Another participant commented on how confirmation bias and filter bubbles intensify the polarisation on social media:

> "I think that's one thing with social media, on polarisation in general. Regardless of where you stand on anything, you'll always find something that fits your opinions." (Focus group 3)

This insight into polarisation suggests an awareness that social media platforms tend to serve content that reinforces confirmation bias and strengthens filter bubbles which can lead to increased social division. Despite this awareness, participants did not discuss how their data is used and sold, the lack of transparency in algorithmic mechanisms, or the potential for these mechanisms to be oppressive, indicating that their knowledge about platform mechanisms may be lacking. Although participants, as digital natives, are adept at using social media platforms and demonstrate basic awareness of algorithmic influence, their understanding of the broader societal consequences of algorithmic control remains limited.

However, participants noted that targeted ads and other commercial activities are major reasons for algorithmic ordering of content. The financial incentives for creating viral and sensationalised news were noted by a participant:

> "I think people do it as a source of income." (Focus Group 4)

There is a recognition that a drive for monetary gain fuels production of false contents designed to attract views and shares. One participant connected this financial drive to their scepticism regarding the news cycle, both on and off social media:

> "I think we need to understand a lot of the news sources for getting information from them, they don't even care about the truth. What they care about is selling the 24 hour news cycle, keeping us continuing to read and watch, and continuously consume their media." (Focus Group 2)

This cynicism reflects an awareness of the profit-driven nature of media production that can spread mis-/disinformation. Similarly, another participant explained:

> "If you in this day and age don't think that the news has been put in a way to make you reactionary, then you're not in 2023. Because before, it was like, everyone would watch the news, come and talk about it. Now, it's like reactionary. They just want us to be reactionary. Because when you react, you need to consume. This is crazy." (Focus Group 3)

These comments point to the strategic manipulation of algorithmic content so as to provoke reactions and drive continuous engagement. These conversations among participants indicate that they are aware they live in the so-called 'post-truth' era where appeals to emotion and personal belief shape public opinion rather than objective facts. Most news media, especially news media on social media, is now designed to elicit strong emotional response. This awareness of profit-driven mis-/disinformation and enforcement of confirmation bias on social media has driven the participants to employ algorithmic strategies to attempt to manage their exposure to this reactive content.

Credibility: Blue-Checks and Influencers

A recurring topic of focus group discussions was on the erosion of trust in traditionally credible sources. Participants expressed scepticism towards sources that have previously been deemed reliable, such as TV news, verified users, and individuals with official/professional titles. Two participants remarked:

> "Just because he's a doctor and has a blue check mark, I don't think it gives him any validity" (Focus Group 1)

> "Verified checkmark doesn't prove that they have any particular credibility or any credentials in the given fields. In some cases, like Twitter, they just pay for a checkmark on their name. It's completely arbitrary." (Focus Group 5)

These comments highlight a significant shift in how credibility is perceived on social media platforms and suggest that markers of authority no longer provide sufficient verification in the digital age. This scepticism is reinforced by social media's consistent verification of controversial figures. For example:

> "It was like making Trump verified. There are a lot of really questionable people who are verified." (Focus Group 2).

This distrust was not limited to political figures but also extended to people claiming to be professionals on social media, particularly in the health and wellness sector:

> "If you put on an outfit, OMG, this is a doctor. But even then what was he saying? He's an intern, he's not a doctor. He's like, actively still learning. So he's not actually technically an expert in his field, especially- he's not even studying dermatology. So he's not even an expert in this field but he has scrubs on him, like, I'm a doctor, everyone just trust it." (Focus Group 3)

> "You see mostly all these health influencers, all these you know, nothing to show under given health advice. Why is everyone a nutritionist? Everyone on TikTok is nutritionist." (Focus Group 3)

These observations reflect broader concerns regarding expertise online where individuals without formal qualifications can gain significant followings and influence public opinion. Under this guise of professional expertise, these individuals can therefore disseminate questionable and/or harmful advice that could be more-readily believed.

The issue of commercial interest was brought up again in relation to determining credible endorsement:

> "Doctors can be wrong. In other words, there's a doctor promoting some products. They were paid by the company and a lot of these doctors are influencer medics. That's what they are. So they're being paid by these companies to promote this" (Focus Group 3)

In contrast, some participants gave more weight to influencers because of their physical appearance and online persona. One participant noted in relation to a health misinformation example video on TikTok:

> "From how he looks currently, he does look pretty healthy. So I think that might add something to it … We can read chiselled, his beard, and everything. So this is kind of giving us a picture of health, so that would maybe sway what people think." (Focus Group 1)

In another example, one participant discussed online persona and follower count as a way of adding credibility to a claim:

> "That's so interesting, because a lot of people look at someone have 3, 5, or 6 million followers, and they think, oh it must be true. Because if what he said is false, he'll be called out and be cancelled, he would lose everything. So why would he do that?" (Focus Group 3)

These comments highlight misplaced trust and perceived credibility in popular influencers driven by their physical appearance and large follower count rather than their accuracy of information. This dynamic can lead to widespread dissemination of misinformation as the perceived proof of social responsibility provided by follower count and engagement metrics often outweighs the necessity to fact-check information.

Furthermore, participants acknowledged the increasing complexity and messiness of the online information environment. They recognized that opinions often outweigh facts and that reactive clickbait can overshadow truth. A feeling of deep distrust in social media platform information was exhibited in all focus groups especially as participants felt social media companies and individuals are motivated to post inflammatory/misleading content for monetary purposes. The proliferation of mis-/disinformation is amplified by the low barrier to entry for content creation which allows virtually anyone to present themselves as an expert.

In sum, the focus group discussions reveal a complex landscape where traditional markers of credibility are increasingly questioned and the mechanisms of social media platforms amplify both the complexities and harmful consequences of information dissemination on social media. Participant experiences also reflected a broader social struggle to navigate this "post-truth" environment and emphasise the urgent need for improved media literacy education to combat mis-/disinformation.

Discussion

The findings of the focus groups indicate that current media literacy education for undergraduates must go beyond strategies such as "stop, think, check" or basic fact-checking. While Gen Z participants demonstrated some awareness of the prevalence of mis-/disinformation online and employed practical strategies to navigate social media environment, these strategies were often inconsistent, superficial, or limited in scope.

Based on the findings, we argue that Gen Z's partial knowledge needs to be further developed through more responsive media literacy education. To this end, we propose three recommendations for improving media literacy education especially for Gen Z and younger generations who are digital natives.

Enhance Understanding of Platform Mechanisms and AI

While the participants have a baseline understanding of algorithms, platform mechanisms, and Generative AI (GenAI), a deeper understanding of how these can affect their beliefs and daily lives is lacking. For instance, while many employed fast scrolling and non-engagement to manage their feeds, there was no discussion on the commodification of personal data and only a surface level understanding of the relationship between algorithms and confirmation bias.

Media literacy education should expand to include comprehensive discussions on platform mechanisms and GenAI to educate people on how their data is collected, used, and sold by platforms. This does not reject the importance of critical thinking, but rather extends its scope beyond verification techniques to include structural and systemic understandings of digital infrastructures. Classroom discussion can, for example, invite students to reflect on the content shown on their own feeds, examine how recommendation systems function on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, compare how different search terms yield different results across platforms, and evaluate how identity-based keywords return different results in search engines. These exercises connect everyday media use to broader structural dynamics and help students understand how platform mechanisms shape not only what they see, but how power circulates in digital spaces.

Furthermore, incorporating ethical AI and data privacy into media literacy curricula can also help students consider the implications of emerging technologies in their everyday online interaction. Rather than framing students solely as passive recipients of algorithmic influence, educators can encourage reflection on how their own digital behaviours – what they click, share, or avoid – both shape and are shaped by platform logic. Encode Justice (2023), a youth-led organisation advocating for ethical AI use, provides a compelling example of the importance of deeper algorithmic understanding that can drive meaningful action in the real world. By drawing on resources and examples from scholarly literature such as Race After Technology (Benjamin, 2019) and Algorithms of Oppression (Noble, 2018), and initiatives like Encode Justice, educators can inspire students to engage with technology in ways that promote fairness, transparency, and accountability. This deeper understanding can empower students to make more informed choices and ethical practices in the platform society.

Encourage Positive Uses of Social Media

The proliferation of conspiracy theories, hate speech, and mis-/disinformation on social media is disturbing, as was expressed by our participants. These phenomena contribute

to a toxic online environment and a growing sense of distrust and confusion among users. These issues starkly contrast with the early techno-utopian vision of cyberspace, as articulated in A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace (Barlow, 1996), which imagined the internet as a realm of equality and empowerment. Instead, we see a landscape where opinions often trump facts, and the loudest voices, regardless of their credibility, dominate the discourse. This dynamic is further complicated by practices such as shadow banning (Savolainen, 2022), cancel culture (Norris, 2021), and doxxing (Lee, 2022), which can silence dissenting voices or unjustly target individuals, exacerbating the toxic atmosphere online.

Despite these challenges, the internet and social media have also brought numerous positive changes and opportunities. Studies have shown that social media can provide social support, particularly during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Bae (2023) examines how social media can help individuals cope with stress. Greene et al. (2022) explore the positive role of social media in body justice communities during the pandemic, while Athey et al. (2023) demonstrate the impact of social media advertising on public health interventions related to COVID-19 vaccines.

To harness these positive aspects, media literacy education should not treat social media and the internet as only a place of fear and mistrust. In advocating for a healthy and sustainable information environment, cases of social connection, civic engagement, and informed activism should be harnessed by media literacy educators. Social media and the internet have become a necessary facet of daily social life for most people, especially young adults. Participants in our study continue to use social media extensively for entertainment, socialisation, and even information-seeking, albeit often with scepticism. Acknowledging this importance and tools for success instead of writing off all content and dark and dangerous is imperative for media literacy education, especially if educators want to actually engage with their students.

Advocate for a Healthy and Sustainable Information Environment

It is clear from our findings that content moderation – whether human or AI-based – is insufficient to ensure the trustworthiness of information shared online. While many participants employed a selective approach to content consumption, scepticism and distrust were still common themes throughout the focus groups leading participants to feel more comfortable in their own filter bubbles. Participants' preference for bypassing rather than reporting questionable content suggest an uncertainty with moderation processes. Media literacy education needs to incorporate discussion on the complex nature and ethical considerations of content moderation. Educators could explore with students how these processes work, their limitations, and what role users might play within them.

While moderation is one tool to filter out mis-/disinformation, there exists a fine line between moderation and censorship. For example, seemingly harmless jokes or "fun" conspiracy theories can be humorous and thought-provoking in some contexts, but

engaging algorithmically could lead to dangerous information and, in extreme cases, push users to fringe platforms that promote dangerous ideals. Media literacy education should use such examples to prompt students' reflection on the questions such as: What should we share? What should we ignore? What are the social consequences of staying silent?

The process and limitations of content moderation should also prompt conversations about the responsibilities of content creators, platforms, online services, and users who comment and share. It is essential to recognize that content creators and platforms have a duty to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information they disseminate and that governments and policy makers must update and enforce regulations. It is also important that media literacy education acknowledges that the government and individuals can have relationships with social media companies both fiscally and politically. Bringing these tensions into the classroom can help students understand their own position within larger media ecosystems and begin to envision a healthier and more sustainable information environment.

Conclusion

This exploratory study provides critical insights into the gaps in media literacy education for Generation Z. The findings from the focus groups illuminate key areas of concern, particularly regarding the indifference and apathy that many Gen Z students express towards information on social media, notwithstanding their awareness of algorithmic manipulation and the prevalence of mis-/disinformation. This sense of apathy is especially concerning given that social media has become the primary information source for this generation. Although they primarily engage with these platforms for entertainment and socialization, they still rely on them for news and information. This highlights the urgency for more comprehensive media literacy education, as current offerings are inadequate in addressing the deeper issues of platform mechanisms, the influence of algorithms, and the growing role of AI technologies.

The more students are educated and encouraged to engage and interact in a positive manner, the more resilient they will become. Most undergraduate media literacy programs, as mentioned in the literature review, are only provided to media and communication majors or as optional, one-off library courses. Formal media literacy education should be required for all undergraduate students and should be ongoing throughout their education. This can be done by requiring first years to take a media literacy course and/or by embedding media literacy education into existing curricula, especially as it applies to specific majors. Additionally, emphasising the meta literacies that encompass digital, media, information, and health literacy can also help undergraduates and educators understand how these areas and their specific fields converge.

In conclusion, this exploratory study can serve as a springboard for deeper inquiry and underscore the need for comprehensive reforms in media literacy education. These

reforms are essential to equip Generation Z with the tools necessary to critically navigate the complexities of the post-truth digital age. Future research can further validate and enrich these preliminary findings, ensuring that the proposed recommendations are robust and adaptable across various educational contexts to better meet the demands of Generation Z and our rapidly evolving media environment.

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