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Combating Misinformation Through Media and Information Literacy: A Case Study Among University Students

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Abstract

In the context of rising misinformation across digital platforms, Media and Information Literacy (MIL) has become an essential educational tool for fostering critical engagement among university students. This study investigates the role of MIL in combating misinformation within a Pakistani university context. Employing a qualitative case study design, the research involved 30 undergraduate students from a public university in Punjab who participated in a two-hour MIL intervention workshop based on UNESCO's curriculum framework. Data were collected through three semi-structured focus group discussions and analyzed thematically using NVivo. Findings revealed four key themes: increased awareness of misinformation tactics, enhanced confidence in source verification, emotional barriers to critical engagement, and a strong student demand for formal MIL curriculum integration. While students demonstrated improved analytical and verification skills, many continued to struggle with confirmation bias and emotional resonance tied to cultural and religious content. The results underscore the importance of embedding MIL into higher education in culturally responsive ways and suggest the need for sustained interdisciplinary instruction. This study contributes to the limited body of empirical MIL research in South Asia and offers practical recommendations for curriculum developers, policymakers, and educators aiming to counter misinformation through structured pedagogical strategies. It also highlights the value of localized, depth-oriented case studies in developing context-sensitive media education frameworks.

Keywords: media and information literacy, misinformation, critical thinking, digital literacy, curriculum development.

1. Introduction

In the digital age, the prevalence of misinformation has become an increasingly critical concern, particularly within academic settings where knowledge production and dissemination are foundational. University students, despite their high levels of digital engagement, are especially vulnerable to consuming and sharing false or misleading information due to limited critical literacy and verification skills (Molina et al., 2025). The viral nature of content shared via social media has exacerbated the challenge, contributing to misinformed behaviors and distorted perceptions of truth. Media and Information Literacy (MIL) has emerged as a pivotal educational response to this crisis. According to UNESCO, MIL encompasses the competencies that enable individuals to engage critically with content, understand the role of media in society, and make informed decisions (Gálik, 2020; Gáliková Tolnaiová, Gálik, 2020; Hurajová, 2025). Within university environments, fostering MIL is not merely a defensive measure against disinformation; it is a foundational aspect of cultivating responsible citizenship and participatory democracy (Madrid-

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(Morales, Wasserman, 2025). The challenge lies in embedding MIL effectively into curricula across disciplines and ensuring that pedagogical practices evolve to address the dynamic landscape of digital misinformation.

Recent research underscores the efficacy of MIL interventions in equipping students with the skills to evaluate content credibility and resist manipulative narratives. Studies have shown that students who receive structured MIL education demonstrate improved abilities in recognizing biased sources, verifying online information, and contextualizing digital content (Abuhasirah, Salameh, 2025). However, despite these benefits, the integration of MIL in higher education remains inconsistent, with varying degrees of institutional commitment and pedagogical innovation (Verma et al., 2023). This paper explores the role of Media and Information Literacy in combating misinformation among university students. It investigates how MIL frameworks and practices influence students' critical thinking, media engagement, and digital ethics. Through a synthesis of empirical studies, the research identifies effective pedagogical models and proposes pathways for systemic integration of MIL into university education.

The impact of misinformation on university students is both psychological and epistemological. In a Thai study on Gen Z learners, low levels of digital literacy were linked to increased susceptibility to political misinformation, affecting students' civic engagement and trust in institutions (Taneerat, Dongnadeng, 2024). Similarly, Al-Dossary et al. (Al-Dossary et al., 2024) found that students struggled to identify false health claims on platforms like TikTok, highlighting gaps in their ability to scrutinize digital content even on issues directly related to personal well-being. MIL is not merely a skillset, but a framework rooted in constructivist theories of learning. It supports learners in co-constructing knowledge, questioning sources, and engaging with content through a lens of skepticism and analysis (Valchanov et al., 2025). MIL also integrates critical pedagogy, emphasizing the role of education in promoting agency and consciousness-raising in students' digital experiences. These theoretical underpinnings position MIL as a key strategy in resisting manipulative information flows.

Recent educational interventions have demonstrated that MIL is most effective when embedded into disciplinary content rather than treated as a standalone module. Cooper (Cooper, 2019) describes how the University of Canberra's Counter Misinformation Month engaged students in active media analysis and verification exercises, resulting in measurable improvements in content discernment. Similarly, Yasseri et al. (Yasseri et al., 2022) implemented MIL within a history education framework, using social media examples to promote critical reflection on national narratives and digital memory. Experiential and participatory learning has also proven beneficial. Álvarez-García et al. (Álvarez-García et al., 2025) introduced serious games and simulations into classrooms to build student resilience against fake news. These activities helped learners experience the mechanics of misinformation first-hand and reflect on cognitive biases influencing digital decision-making.

Trust in media is a key variable affecting how students engage with content. Serengga et al. (Serengga et al., 2025) found that students' understanding of health-related misinformation was closely tied to their perceived reliability of the source. In Nigeria, Omoko and Okhueleigbe (Omoko, Okhueleigbe, 2025) identified a paradox: although Generation Z students relied heavily on mediated communication, they simultaneously expressed deep mistrust in the accuracy of online content. MIL interventions must therefore address not only skills but also the emotional and psychological factors underpinning media trust. Empirical data consistently support the benefits of structured MIL education. In Malaysia, Al Zou'bi (Al Zou'bi, 2022) found that students with higher MIL proficiency demonstrated greater accuracy in detecting manipulated news and exhibited lower susceptibility to viral disinformation. In Sweden, a qualitative study by Puleo (Puleo, 2025) revealed that students who engaged in MIL-focused focus groups reported a heightened sense of responsibility in correcting misinformation in their peer networks. Furthermore, MIL initiatives that incorporate ethical reflection, peer collaboration, and scenario-based learning contribute to more sustainable behavioral change among students. These approaches move beyond cognitive processing and into the realm of media ethics and civic responsibility.

2. Materials and methods

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore how Media and Information Literacy (MIL) interventions influence the ability of university students in Pakistan to critically engage with online misinformation. The case study method was chosen for its capacity to

offer a rich, contextualized understanding of complex educational phenomena within real-life learning environments (Yin, 2017). The research was conducted at a public sector university in Punjab, Pakistan, where English is used as a medium of instruction. A total of 30 undergraduate students from the departments of Education, Mass Communication, and Islamic Studies voluntarily participated in the study. These students were enrolled in courses that included components of digital media, civic engagement, or media ethics. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, aimed at including students who had experienced both formal and informal exposure to digital content. The selection ensured variation in gender, academic standing, and digital media usage frequency to reflect a diverse cross-section of the student body. Before data collection, participants attended a two-hour workshop on Media and Information Literacy. The workshop was adapted from UNESCO's MIL Curriculum for Teachers (2021) and covered:

- Identifying misinformation and fake news
- Evaluating the credibility of sources
- Understanding media bias and propaganda
- Ethical online behavior

The session included short videos, guided analysis of social media posts, and small-group discussions. Data were collected through three semi-structured focus group discussions (FGDs), each consisting of 8–10 participants. Discussions were guided by a flexible interview protocol, focusing on:

- Students' personal experiences with online misinformation
- Perceived ability to evaluate content critically after the intervention
- Views on the usefulness and relevance of MIL education

Each session lasted between 45–60 minutes, was conducted in English and Urdu, and was audio-recorded with participant consent. Recordings were later transcribed and translated into English for analysis. A thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (Braun, Clarke, 2006) six-step framework. After familiarization with the data, initial codes were generated, and themes were identified and refined. Codes were both inductive (emerging from the data) and deductive (based on the intervention goals). NVivo 12 software was used to assist in organizing and categorizing the data. To ensure trustworthiness, peer debriefing and member checking were employed. Participants were allowed to review preliminary findings and clarify or expand their viewpoints.

3. Discussion

This study explored how a brief, but structured Media and Information Literacy (MIL) intervention influenced Pakistani university students' awareness, critical thinking, and emotional engagement with misinformation. The results, drawn from three focus groups, align with and extend contemporary global literature on MIL pedagogy and digital resilience in higher education. One of the most notable outcomes was students' improvement in source evaluation and verification behavior. Participants mentioned using fact-checking platforms, verifying dates, and cross-referencing images, practices that reflect the "conceptual verification layer" proposed by Scheibenzuber et al. (Scheibenzuber et al., 2021), who emphasized the value of scaffolded problem-based MIL curricula for digital environments. Similarly, McGrew and Chinoy (McGrew, Chinoy, 2022) observed that undergraduate students benefited most from MIL courses when verification was combined with reflection on why misinformation spreads, not just how to detect it. These findings reinforce the importance of embedding practical verification exercises into university pedagogy, particularly in contexts like Pakistan, where misinformation often circulates through informal networks (like WhatsApp, TikTok), and institutional responses remain underdeveloped (Head et al., 2020).

Despite technical improvements, students frequently admitted emotional resistance to debunking content that resonated with their cultural, political, or religious beliefs. This mirrors what Boler et al. (Boler et al., 2025) term the "emotional override effect," where even high MIL awareness fails to translate into changed behaviors due to identity-affiliated content. Trixa and Kaspar (Trixa, Kaspar, 2024) similarly observed that emotions play a decisive role in how students in teacher education programs assess media truthfulness. This insight affirms earlier claims by Kiernan (Kiernan, 2017) and Balan (Balan, 2024) that MIL cannot be restricted to analytical tools; it must also foster emotional awareness, social empathy, and reflective bias training. This is particularly critical in societies like Pakistan, where misinformation often exploits religious sentiment or nationalist narratives, making objective analysis socially or emotionally costly.

A particularly powerful outcome of this study was the student-led demand for integrating MIL into core academic programs. Participants expressed that they were not only receptive to the training but felt it should be required. Similar findings are reported by Zarzosa and Ruvalcaba (Zarzosa, Ruvalcaba, 2025), who found that media literacy inoculation training had the highest impact when delivered as part of mandatory coursework. Maxmudova et al. (Maxmudova et al., 2024) highlighted the role of “vitagenic” content, truth-preserving MIL instruction rooted in local epistemologies, which aligns with the calls from Pakistani students in this study. Students articulated that misinformation related to local history, faith, and politics cannot be tackled with generic MIL resources. Instead, there is a strong case for developing context-aware, linguistically adaptable MIL curricula, a point echoed by Mrah (Mrah, 2022) in a Moroccan case study that addressed similar sociocultural challenges. The data from this study contribute to the evolving theory of “cognitive-emotional dual literacy” in MIL education. While earlier models of MIL emphasized factual accuracy and analytical reasoning, current literature points to a dual responsibility: building digital reasoning and emotional literacy (Aljalabneh, 2024; Orhan, 2023). From a pedagogical standpoint, this means institutions should not only teach students how to identify fake news but also how to regulate emotional responses, identify personal bias, and engage with dissenting information in constructive ways.

This study fills a vital gap in the underrepresented Global South context. While nations like Finland and Singapore have developed MIL-rich curricula, countries like Pakistan are still in the early conceptual phase, often relying on NGOs or ad-hoc workshops. This research contributes much-needed empirical evidence from Pakistan and supports Balan (Balan, 2024), who argues for regional MIL frameworks rooted in cultural literacy, linguistic fluency, and institutional policy change.

4. Results

This section presents the thematic findings of our qualitative case study examining how a short-term Media and Information Literacy (MIL) intervention influenced university students' engagement with misinformation. The analysis is based on three focus group discussions involving 30 undergraduate students from the Education, Mass Communication, and Islamic Studies departments at a public university in Punjab, Pakistan. Participants represented diverse academic years, gender identities, and media usage habits.

Among the participants, approximately 60 % identified as female, and the majority (around 70 %) were in their second or third year of undergraduate studies. Nearly all students reported daily use of social media platforms such as WhatsApp, TikTok, and YouTube, with over 80 % indicating they had previously shared unverified content at least once. Notably, none of the participants had received prior structured instruction in media or information literacy. These demographic insights provide context for the thematic findings that follow, which emerged from NVivo-assisted thematic analysis. The results are organized around four major themes that reflect changes in students' cognitive awareness, verification behavior, emotional responses, and pedagogical recommendations following the MIL intervention.

Theme 1: Increased Awareness of Misinformation Tactics. A prominent theme that emerged from all three focus groups was the increased cognitive awareness of misinformation strategies following the MIL intervention. Students described how the training changed their perception of seemingly trustworthy digital content and equipped them with basic evaluative strategies. Several participants specifically noted how common tactics, like altered headlines or recycled images, were previously unnoticed. As participants revealed,

“Before this, I thought if a news clip had a logo, it was genuine. Now I know they can just copy logos and make anything look real” (Participant 5, FGD 1).

“One post I saw was shared by ten of my friends. I just believed it. Now, I ask myself, ‘Where’s the source?’” (Participant 3, FGD 2).

“I learned that even screenshots can be faked, not everything that looks official is official” (Participant 7, FGD 3).

This shift reflects what Tursunaliyevich (Tursunaliyevich, 2025) calls the cognitive awakening phase of MIL development. Students begin to view the media not as neutral but as constructed and potentially manipulative. The intervention thus fulfilled a key goal of MIL, raising critical consciousness, as shown in Figure 1 below.



Fig. 1. Word cloud of frequently mentioned terms in focus group discussions

Theme 2: Confidence in Source Evaluation and Verification. Another frequently recurring theme was a marked rise in students' confidence in their ability to cross-check and verify content. Participants demonstrated knowledge of specific tools and techniques introduced during the workshop, including reverse image searches, checking URLs, and using fact-checking platforms such as Snopes and AFP Pakistan.

"I used Google image search for a picture of a collapsed building, and it turned out to be from Syria, not Lahore" (Participant 2, FGD 1).

"Now, if someone sends me something, I don't just reply 'Wow.' I check if it was posted somewhere else" (Participant 4, FGD 2).

"I used to think if it's on a big page, it must be true. But now I learned to look at the author, not just the page name" (Participant 6, FGD 3).

These comments indicate early-stage behavioral shifts, moving from passive consumption to active interrogation of media. This finding resonates with Abuhasirah and Salameh's (Abuhasirah, Salameh, 2025) conclusion that even brief MIL training can instill verification habits in novice users, especially in low-resource academic contexts.

Theme 3: Persistent Trust Issues and Emotional Responses. Despite improvements in critical evaluation skills, students admitted they continued to struggle with emotional content and confirmation bias. Many revealed they were still inclined to believe or share information that aligned with their personal, religious, or political worldviews, even when they suspected it might be false.

"Some posts just make me angry or emotional. Even if I think it might not be real, I want to believe it because it supports what I feel" (Participant 6, FGD 2).

"My father sent a video on our family group about a protest. I knew it was old, but I didn't correct him. I didn't want to argue" (Participant 1, FGD 3).

"It's hard when the post is about religion. I feel bad checking or questioning it, even if something feels off" (Participant 5, FGD 1).

These responses highlight a crucial emotional dimension in misinformation engagement, where identity attachment often outweighs fact-checking. Similar patterns were observed by Serengga et al. (2025), who emphasized the role of affective reasoning in shaping student responses to misinformation. Even after acquiring verification skills, emotional content often bypasses students' critical filters. This underscores the need to embed emotional literacy and bias awareness into MIL pedagogy, not just technical skills.

Theme 4: Perceived Relevance and Demand for MIL in Curriculum. One of the strongest and most consistent themes was the students' belief that MIL should be part of the formal university curriculum. They viewed the one-time workshop as helpful but insufficient. Across all three focus groups, students expressed a desire for structured, semester-long instruction in digital verification and media ethics.

"This should not be optional. Every student needs to know how to deal with fake content before it affects their thinking" (Participant 8, FGD 2).

"I think it should be like a subject, not just a lecture. We should have assignments, practice, and grading" (Participant 3, FGD 1).

"I learned more in these two hours than in many of my regular classes. We need this kind of education in our syllabus." (Participant 2, FGD 3).

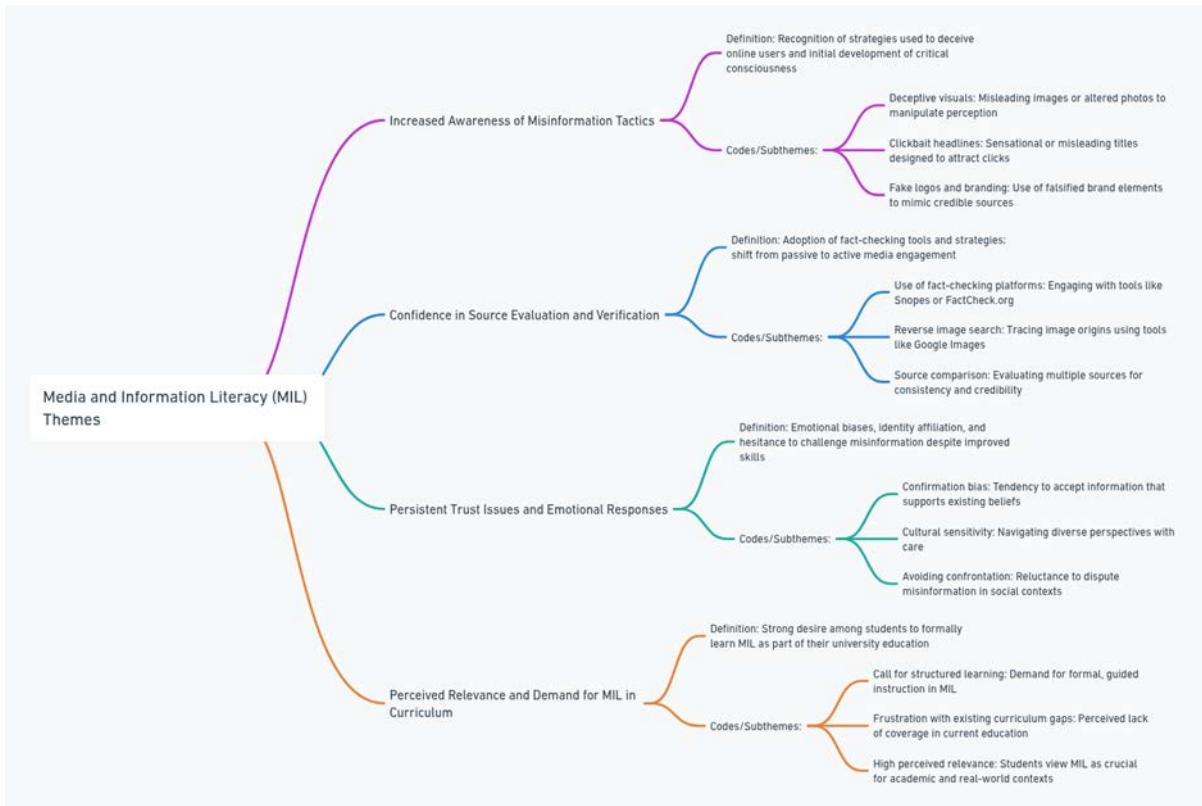


Fig. 2. Thematic node tree of emergent themes

This theme supports the argument by Madrid-Morales and Wasserman (Madrid-Morales, Wasserman, 2025), who advocate for the structural integration of MIL in higher education systems, especially in countries facing complex political and religious misinformation threats. Students' proactive calls for curricular inclusion suggest that MIL is not only useful but urgently needed and contextually demanded in Pakistan's academic environments.]

Table 1. Thematic Analysis

Theme	Definition	Codes/Subthemes
Increased Awareness of Misinformation Tactics	Recognition of strategies used to deceive online users and the initial development of critical consciousness.	Deceptive visuals- Clickbait headlines- Fake logos and branding
Confidence in Source Evaluation and Verification	Adoption of fact-checking tools and strategies; shift from passive to active media engagement.	Use of fact-checking platforms- Reverse image search- Source comparison
Persistent Trust Issues and Emotional Responses	Emotional biases, identity affiliation, and hesitance to challenge misinformation despite improved skills.	Confirmation bias- Cultural sensitivity- Avoiding confrontation
Perceived Relevance and Demand for MIL in the Curriculum	Strong desire among students to formally learn MIL as part of their university education.	Call for structured learning- Frustration with existing curriculum gaps- High perceived relevance

Table 1 highlights four key themes related to students' experiences with Media and Information Literacy (MIL) in the context of online misinformation. Students demonstrated an increased awareness of deceptive tactics such as fake visuals, clickbait headlines, and misleading branding. They also reported gaining confidence in evaluating sources by using fact-checking tools

and verification strategies like reverse image searches. However, emotional responses and biases, including confirmation bias and cultural sensitivities, continued to influence their willingness to confront misinformation. Finally, there was a strong perceived need for MIL to be included in the university curriculum, as students expressed frustration with current gaps and emphasized its relevance in today's digital world, as shown in [Figure 2](#) above.

5. Conclusion

This study contributes important insights into how a structured, short-term Media and Information Literacy (MIL) intervention can shape students' critical engagement with misinformation in a university setting in Pakistan. Through qualitative inquiry, it was demonstrated that students not only became more aware of misinformation tactics but also began adopting concrete verification behaviors. These findings support a growing body of global evidence advocating for MIL's role in strengthening students' critical digital competencies ([Tursunaliyevich, 2025](#)). At the same time, the research highlights persistent challenges, particularly the emotional and cultural filters through which students process online content. Despite improved analytical awareness, many participants reported difficulty resisting emotionally charged or identity-aligned misinformation. This underlines the importance of integrating emotional reasoning and sociocultural reflection into MIL frameworks, a direction advocated by scholars like Bowhay ([Bowhay, 2024](#)), who argues that media literacy efforts must be contextually rooted and psychologically informed.

Moreover, the strong student-driven demand for formal MIL education suggests a significant opportunity for educational institutions in Pakistan to lead proactive reform. As Tursunaliyevich ([Tursunaliyevich, 2025](#)) recommends, curricular integration of MIL, beyond voluntary workshops, is essential to counter the systemic nature of digital disinformation. Embedding MIL across disciplines would help normalize critical thinking, media accountability, and ethical discourse as academic standards. This study also offers a methodological contribution: a case-based, context-aware model of MIL implementation that can be adapted across similar socio-educational environments in the Global South. By focusing on localized digital behavior, linguistic nuance, and emotional realism, the approach fosters deeper and more durable forms of media awareness.

Looking ahead, the expansion of MIL in Pakistan's higher education landscape requires multi-stakeholder collaboration. Universities, policymakers, and civil society must align to create inclusive, sustained, and critically grounded MIL programs. As disinformation becomes increasingly sophisticated, too, the pedagogical responses aimed at empowering young digital citizens to think clearly, verify responsibly, and engage ethically in the digital public sphere.

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