

Social Networking Sites and Misinformation Challenges in A Post-Truth Era: Moroccan Students in Tertiary Education as A Case Study

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this study is to explore how Moroccan university students approach various social networking sites and to assess their self-perceived capacities to critically analyze and evaluate digital content in general and online news and information more precisely. The paper poses several research questions that all aim to investigate the issue under examination. This empirical endeavour, which used the survey as a research instrument to gather data, closes by presenting several conclusions and recommendations for the Moroccan policymakers, stakeholders, and all concerned parties. The study mainly reported how most respondents advance that they critically evaluate social media content and broadly deploy various efficient verification measures and techniques. Similarly, most respondents highly rated their digital media perceived self-efficacy. Almost two-thirds of the participants postulate that higher educational institutions should incorporate digital literacy skills in their curricula and syllabi.

Keywords: Moroccan; social; media; digital; literacy; university

Introduction

Among the most valuable merits of social media that have almost entirely revolutionized contemporary lifestyles and moulded our daily practices is their ability to usher in novel communication patterns, reinvigorate interpersonal and intimate spaces, and allow unrestricted modes of social, economic, and civic expressions. According to [1], the public sphere is conquering more terrain, becoming less confined and dynamic. Nonetheless, this presumably alluring and tantalizing landscape is often lamented by many sceptics who vehemently contend that the deluge of information flow on social networking sites (SNS) poses genuine ethical, intellectual, sociocultural, educational, and political challenges. Several scholars have shown that the abundance of online information has made it even harder for users -including the more talented and skilled ones- to discern genuine content from fake and deceptive news and information [2]. Indeed, many studies have demonstrated that this complexity stems from multiple sources, notably the difficulty in accessing reliable and credible sources, the lack of solid-state media outlets, and the deployment of sophisticated technological procedures and advanced

techniques by false news producers [3]. According to [4], about two-thirds of news seekers feed on social media sites and channels to get informed about the latest events and current issues. Hence, fake reports, news stories and reviews seem to have permeated almost all domains, ranging from political, social, and economic spheres to environmental and health. Disinformation generates confusion and instability, weakening popular faith in mainstream media outlets and all social media platforms. As of 2017, the traffic of fake news on social media had reached a high rate of 42% (Gallup; Edelman; Alexa, 2017, as cited in [5]), which makes the issue of misinformation and disinformation a thorny multidisciplinary sociological phenomenon that should invite thorough reflections to gauge its multi-levelled dimensions and far-reaching implications. The main objective of this study is to explore how Moroccan students with tertiary education level approach various social networking sites and assess their self-perceived capacities to critically analyze and evaluate digital content in general and online news and information more precisely. The paper equally seeks to reflect and share insights on an increasingly complex

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socio-technical problem of disinformation generation, propagation, and management.

Rationale and Significance

At the outset, it is essential to note that disinformation and misinformation are sometimes used interchangeably. Though they are so closely related, they are conceptually different constructs. According to [6], disinformation subsumes all “knowingly” false or incorrect information, such as fake news and rumours. In contrast, misinformation refers to the sharing and propagating of false news and information “either knowing it to be false or unknowingly”. Fake news, however, drawing on the definition proposed by [7], includes “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers.” As stated earlier, social media platforms are the primary source for the trafficking of fake and misleading information. According to [8], the rate of fabricated news, rumours, and unverified content on those sites has reached alarming rates. This phenomenon has triggered tremendous worries for media scholars and government stakeholders to probe the far-reaching causes and effects of this hitherto global ethical ‘epidemic’. Indeed [9], advance that in today’s networked societies, “the people, and no longer the media, are the message.” Following the eruption of mobile devices and information superhighways, a euphoric optimism prevailed amongst political analysts and academics of an imminent global democratization and a free flow of and access to information. However, as [6] posits, “There is now widespread concern in many segments of society -including the media, scholars, the philanthropic community, civil society, and even politicians themselves- that social media may instead undermine democracy”. Like most countries, Morocco has been a fertile soil for spreading and propagating fake stories and erroneous news that have had devastating repercussions at various levels ranging from social, economic, political, and technological spheres. The dissemination of some pictures and rigged footage on social media that primarily aim to disrupt social and political serenity are reminiscent of old propagandistic tactics whose sole aim is to destabilize Moroccan institutions and spur public unrest and riots. One such infamous case was the spread of a fake video a few years ago of a dog ‘breastfeeding’ a little baby in chilly and snowy weather in one of the regions of the Atlas Mountains. Countless ‘gullible’ Moroccan social media users had also widely shared pictures of presumably Moroccan police forces torturing protestors, illegal immigrants taking deadly ferry boats or fabricated dubbed footages ascribed to top Moroccan officials.

Clearly enough, for several months after the outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic, the proliferation of fake news had seen an unprecedented surge. During the lockdown period mandated by the Moroccan government, Moroccan social media users were shelled with relentless, continuous, and often conflicting narratives about various issues revolving mainly around the Coronavirus genesis and origin. Others promulgated messages about supposedly efficient healing treatments and magical recipes to avert contracting the virus. To curb offenders, the Moroccan government initially drafted the controversial 22.20 law that criminalizes the propagation of false information with sentences of up to five years of imprisonment. In parallel, the state-owned television channels had repeatedly called on users to exercise vigilance and caution to resist manipulating misleading messages. They also regularly provided official accounts and invited experts and specialists to dispel misconceptions and myths about, amongst others, health and education issues, as well as national market provisions and subsidies.

Back in 2018, the kingdom witnessed an unprecedented digital boycotting campaign that was launched in a bid to counter the hegemonic monopoly of three giant companies. Two of these firms specialized in producing specific dairies and mineral water brands, while the third was a significant fuel-distributing business. Though the extent to which this campaign was efficient remains largely controversial, most analysts agree that the financial damage incurred on the boycotted companies was felt in the sharp drop in their stock market index values. One more significant observation is that the campaign had demonstrated in tangible terms that digital platforms could inflict substantial financial losses on apparently mighty corporations. It also demonstrated that vast portions of the population are heavy consumers of SNS and are, hence, readily prepared to believe and spread words from potentially unverified and anonymous sources.

In addition to consumer boycotts, SNS has also proven instrumental in mobilizing both popular and mainstream support for the tragic case of the late Moroccan five-year-old kid Rayan who, in February 2022, fell into a deep and narrow well in one of the rural villages near Chefchaouen, a small town in the North of Morocco. To compete with local digital media outlets, giant Arab television networks, such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, had forsaken their usual coverage of global events and almost entirely focused on the non-stop live coverage of the Ryan rescue efforts. This rivalry was so intense and incomprehensible that it eventually brought about incessant and hysterical ‘breaking news’ that far outweighed the scale of the newsworthiness. As many would argue, in many parts of

Morocco and the Arab world, kids and children are subjected to daily subservience, labour, sexual exploitation, and trafficking. Similar stories of children trapped or killed in wells are commonplace in the Moroccan press. The Ryan 'effect' has generated misinformation that many avid SNS users indiscriminately consume.

Within this framework, and given the significant concerns voiced by researchers, educational and social psychologists, parents, and policymakers over the potentially hazardous effects of digital platforms on the younger population, it seems legitimate to insightfully examine such worries from an empirical perspective. As [10], "The biggest challenge for students in this age of information overload is to evaluate the vast wealth of information available." [3], have also demonstrated that "both trained and casual readers get fooled into believing false information when it is well written, long, and is well-referenced." Scholarship on social media platforms' personal gratifications and social dynamics is abundant. Nonetheless, unravelling the manifold impacts and implications of misinformation and disinformation on students remains woefully under-researched. With reference to Moroccan university students, this study is therefore significant because it attempts to shed light on a poorly investigated phenomenon [11].

Research Questions

An extensive review of the existing literature on the broad theme of the usage of social media outlets by youth in general, and students in particular has allowed us to revisit and further refine our initial assumptions and conjectures about the research problem. This has led us to propose the six research questions intended to direct this research endeavour. The questions run as follows.

- 1- What are the Moroccan university students' overall media usage patterns and main motives for using social media outlets?
- 2- What are the students' perceptions about the generation, causes, mechanisms, and propagation of misinformation on SNS?
- 3- What are the salient SNS that respondents feed on the most to get news and information about current issues and topics of interest?
- 4- What are the most dominant techniques that Moroccan university students generally employ to verify the veracity of news and information on SNS?
- 5- How do the respondents' rate their perceived digital media self-efficacy in relation to SNS consumption and usage?

6- How do students conceive of the role of higher educational institutions in incorporating and cultivating digital literacy skills in their curricula and syllabi?

Sample and Instrument

The sample of this study consisted entirely of students enrolled in Moroccan higher educational institutions. Though not broadly representative of the vast population, 102 randomly selected students voluntarily agreed to participate in the survey. The questionnaire was administered to the respondents to gather data and gauge their attitudes about the research problem and questions. Regarding gender, females accounted for 59% of the participants compared to 41% of males. Regarding age, 52.9 % of students aged between 21 and 25. 35.3% ranged from 17 to 20, while only 11.8 % of respondents were over 25 years. The educational level was another variable deemed of significance to our study. Therefore, students were sorted out into two categories. The first cohort (48%) were undergraduate students, whereas the second one (52%) followed their education at the postgraduate level. The questionnaire was made up of three sections. The opening section comprised three sociodemographic questions. The second one elicited the respondents' input about their media usage and viewing patterns. The last section, which contained ten multiple-choice questions, was the primary part in which the students were requested to reveal their perceptions about social media content and misinformation issues. The survey was designed using the Google Forms web-based software to collect and analyze data statistically.

Results and Discussion

In the second section of the survey, respondents were first asked two questions to rate their overall frequency of watching Moroccan public television outlets, such as Al Oula, 2M and Medi I, as well as listening to radio stations aired inside Morocco, such as Idaa Al Wataniyya, Aswat, Med radio, Hit radio and Mars. Such questions were deemed of significant interest as they might provide indicative insights on today's Moroccan youth's media consumption propensity and the significant sources of information they feed on. This is also likely to shed light on one of the possible causes behind the propagation of fake news and unverified messages, given that public television and radio stations are generally recognized for their credibility, truthfulness, and accountability. In fact, since the liberation of the media market in Morocco, the High Authority for Audio-visual Communication (HACA), a legal

and official body, was created and entrusted with monitoring and regulating the national media. About the first item, almost two-thirds of respondents (64.7%) admitted that they occasionally watch those television channels compared to a low rate of 19 % who do so frequently or very frequently. Almost identical findings transpired from the students' usage of radio stations as over two-thirds (69%) said that they occasionally listen to the above stations, as opposed to a tiny proportion (16.5%) that revealed that they do so frequently or very frequently.

The next item was introduced to estimate the time spent watching social media on an average weekday. Results showed that almost half of the sample (47.1%) consumed an amount of three to four hours per day, followed by nearly one-third (29.4%) who reported their usage of five to six hours. A smaller portion of students (17.6%) admitted that they roughly spend one to two hours, while a tiny proportion (5.7%) reported a lower consumption of social media sites. Surprisingly, only 0.2 % claimed they spend less than one hour or no time on those sites. When asked about their favourite social networking sites, Instagram topped the ratings with 35.3%, followed by WhatsApp with 29.4%, Facebook with 23.5%, and YouTube with 11.8%. The students were further requested to rate their daily usage of the social networking site they had opted for. Nearly half the sample (43.8%) reported the daily use of three to four hours. 18.8% of university students acknowledged that they consumed five to six hours. The exact figure (18.8) was registered with respondents whose diet varied between one and two hours, whereas only 6.1% stated that they use SNS for more than six hours daily.

The last item in the second section was designed to ascertain the participants' primary motives for using SNS. About half of

the students (44.4%) used them for entertainment and relaxation, such as watching movies and playing games, while over one-third (33.3%) used them to get the latest news about current issues and affairs. Only 21.1% use SNS for befriending and socializing compared with the somewhat unexpected low rate of 1.2% of students who utilize SNS for learning and conducting academic research. As mentioned earlier, the aim of the third and central section of the survey was to probe the respondents' perceptions about social media content and related misinformation issues. The first item asked students to indicate the preferred media outlets they seek to get informed about the various topics and issues. The overwhelming majority (83.3%) reported that social media platforms represent their primary source for obtaining information. Television outlets occupy a secondary position with a low rate of 13.1%. While print newspapers were cited as marginal sources (3.6%), radio stations failed to receive any response.

The second question invited the participants to assess the most credible and trustworthy source for getting news and information about current issues. As expected, results showed that television channels and SNS enjoy the leading position as the most reliable and veracious input forms, with an identical percentage of 35.3%. On the other hand, print newspapers came second with a rate of 11.8%. Surprisingly, a relatively significant portion of the sample (17.6%) think that all the suggested media outlets are, a priori at least, lacking in credibility and not worthy of their trust. To narrow down the scope of the inquiry, the next item probed the respondents' views on the usage of social media platforms. More specifically, they were asked to specify, out of six options, the social media platform they use the most to get news and information [Figure 1]. Below displays the details.

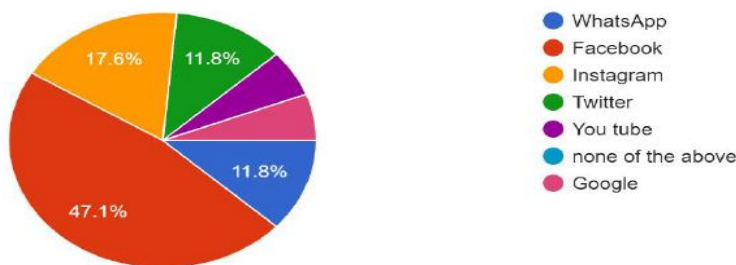


Figure 1: If you use social media platforms, which do you use the most to get news and information?

As the figures above demonstrate, almost half the respondents (47.1%) rely heavily on Facebook to satiate their curiosity about current news and the latest events. Instagram ranked in the second position with 17.6%, followed by Twitter and

WhatsApp, which concurrently reaped 11.8% of all attitudes. Surprisingly, YouTube and Google only earned a relatively meagre rate. These results vividly display that the students have different convictions about choosing media outlets they deem

appropriate and appealing to their tastes regarding news and information. Though accessing the Internet via the Google search engine provides students with ample and unlimited websites that offer rich sources of news and information, most students probably find the Internet a more tedious, cumbersome, and time-consuming means to get instant, viral, and ready-made pieces of news. The next question in the survey asked the participants to cite the most credible and trustworthy source of all the SNS. The figures showed that one-third (33.3%) of the students expressed their belief that none of those suggested sites enjoys the merit of reliability and credibility. Twitter and Facebook ranked second with an equal rate of 22.2% each, followed by Instagram (16.7%) and YouTube as the last medium with a small percentage of 5.6%. To our surprise, in terms of integrity and truthfulness, many respondents are convinced that, despite their frequent usage of SNS, they are firmly well-informed about their lack of credibility. Most plausibly, such students do not fall into the fallacious trap of confounding popularity and convenience with credibility and truthfulness. However, many others are possibly swayed by the appealing design and user-friendly features of social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Thus far, the good news is that WhatsApp was unanimously barred from any rating (00.00%). It most obviously fell into disrepute for infamously propagating dozens of fake and misleading news during the COVID-19 health lockdown in Morocco.

Another item in the survey invited the respondents to express their views vis-à-vis the attitude that social media platforms are rife with false information, rumours, and fake news. Almost two-thirds (64.7%) of the sample agree with the above statement. 17.6% of the students think this is true to a great extent compared with a lower segment (11.8%) that holds that this statement is somewhat valid. The remainder of respondents (5.9%) did display their strong disagreement with the assertion. It should be noted here, however, that these findings run counter

to the commonsense stereotype that the predominant majority of today's youth, irrespective of their educational status, falls as easy prey to manipulative media content hinging on the unproven assumption that they woefully lack basic critical thinking skills. Still, the small portion of respondents who ardently contend that SNS do not disseminate misinformation should send alarming signals to all concerned parties. As an explanation, many analysts might primarily ascribe this attitude to other parameters and sociocultural variables, such as prior personal and socialization experiences, peer-learning culture, younger age, and low intellectual growth.

We then proceeded with a significant inquiry into the students' perceptions of the main motives behind the promulgation of fake news on social media websites. [Figure 2] below illustrates the results. Enough, one-third of the participants (33.3%) ascribe the rise of disinformation and misinformation on SNS to the use of emotional appeals by content generators. In conjunction with covert political agendas, the absence of timely and official government news received a critical rate of 22.2% each. Only 11.1% of the respondents believe that the issue under question is due to the poor digital literacy of the users. Relatively fewer students hold that the lack of censorship and a supervisory body that controls the national media scenery is the main reason behind the dissemination of fake news.

Similarly, few others contend that commercial factors primarily drive such deceitful acts. Put otherwise, this small sample fragment argues that those who create misleading news or merely share it on a massive scale aim to rocket up their viewing ratings. Indeed, this attitude is closely related to the emotional appeal argument proposed above. To design alluring and highly sensational material, the creators use subliminal and sociopsychological hooks, such as reporting celebrity scandals, corruption of officials, and criminal assaults. These stories will most likely go viral given their irresistible seductive power to the younger consumers.

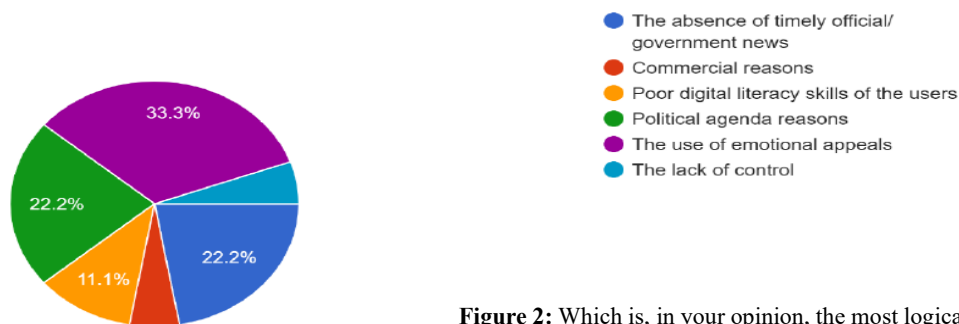


Figure 2: Which is, in your opinion, the most logical reason for the spread of fake news on social media sites?

Consequently, then, such a category of news will reap substantial financial profits as many advertising agencies and companies will fiercely compete to sell their products and services. This vein [12] asserts that social media is deeply ingrained in neoliberal ideologies. These “synthetic media”, he argues, “are based on highly stylized, commoditized notions of language and communication and, instead of generating real interaction or dialogue, foster a kind of “pseudo-sociality”. Nevertheless, as the figures above show, many students are convinced that the government bears a huge responsibility in the area by failing to provide accurate and updated news to fill the information gap. Interestingly, a relatively important part of students is conversant with the power dynamics involved in the media distribution industry in the kingdom and how influential tycoons affiliated with certain political parties leverage their ‘hegemonic’ weight to undermine the political standings of their rivals by launching well-engineered smearing campaigns against them and similarly muzzling antagonistic voices by utilizing trolls, social bots and astroturfing mechanisms. The next item in the questionnaire gave the researcher more insight into the respondents’ evaluative procedures of social

media messages and images. More than one-third of students (38.9%) stated that they constantly carefully evaluate the available information for truthfulness and reliability, compared with 22.2% who often do so. Smaller portions of the sample admitted that they sometimes or only rarely verify the veracity of the SNS content they receive, with a rate of 16.7% each. Unexpectedly, and despite their small number, some students (5.5%) confessed that they never employ verification strategies when accessing SNS. The latter finding might seem in stark contradiction with the respondents’ previously stated attitudes. However, such answers that hinder any hasty overgeneralizations legitimate the incorporation of various cross-questioning techniques and the need to apply mixed methods to account for such deficiencies. This also reveals the complexity of eliciting reliable hard and fast data by administering survey items that might pose potential threats to the respondents’ ‘face’ or self-esteem. To thoroughly probe the above issue, the students were requested to suggest the techniques they most frequently apply to verify the truthfulness of the information accessed on SNS. [Figure 3] below shows the results [Table].

S.No	Techniques applied to verify the truthfulness of the accessed information on SNS	Percentage
1	-I always search the website (Design/editorial standards/email contact, etc.)	11.8%
2	-I always critically consider the date the information was posted.	64.7%
3	-I always use fact-checking websites to verify the truthfulness of the message.	41.2%
4	- I always thoroughly research the author’s expertise and background.	11.8
5	-I always compare the information with other available electronic sources.	64.7
6	-I always take time to critically analyze the news headline (Tone/grammar/punctuation/spelling, etc.).	17.6

As the figures in the graph above vividly demonstrate, about two-thirds of the surveyed students (64.7%) revealed that they always search the website by inquiring about its design, editorial standards, and email contact. With an identical result (64.7%), the respondents reported consistently comparing the information they came across with other available electronic sources. An essential portion of the sample (41.2%) stated that they always use fact-checking websites to verify the truthfulness of the message. To a lesser degree, a smaller portion (17.6%) acknowledged that they always take time to critically analyze the news headline by examining its tone, grammar, punctuation, spelling, etc. However, two significant techniques were unexpectedly underused by most university students. Only 11.8% confirmed that they always critically

consider the date the information was posted and thoroughly research the author’s expertise and background. All these figures point out that most Moroccan university students are acquainted, at least, with rudimentary critical thinking skills, such as seeking information about the website’s formal features and crosschecking different sources to verify for truthfulness. In contrast, many others are unequipped with those skills as they failed to report any suggested techniques. Similarly, as explained above, other vital subskills and techniques still need to be introduced to and honed by students, given their fundamental character for tertiary-level education. Another question was addressed to the respondents to assess the extent to which they think they are digitally well-equipped to use social media platforms effectively. Let us consider the graph below.

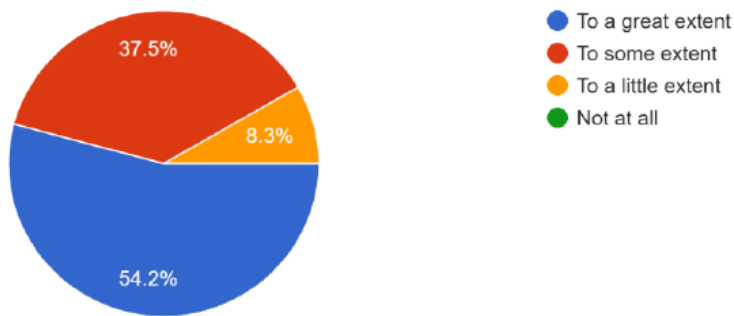


Figure 3: Overall, to what extent do you think you are digitally well-equipped to use SNS effectively?

As the above graph illustrates, more than half of the respondents (54.2%) perceive themselves as digitally well-trained to cope with the numerous risks and challenges inherent in SNS compared with more than one-third (37.5%) who claim that they are equally well-equipped, albeit to some extent. A relatively limited number of participants (8.3%) admitted that they do not possess the requisite numeric skills and competencies to allow them to efficiently manage the potential pitfalls and hazards associated with digital platforms. Surprisingly enough, no student reported lacking essential digital proficiency tools. Understandably, this might be attributed to an underlying and often hardly perceptible desire to sound more ‘mature’ and more alert intellectually. The

absence of such responses also implies that a university student is ‘digitally illiterate’, which insults their intelligence and severely lowers their self-esteem. Above all, the findings to this question vividly highlight, once again, this paradox between the respondents’ largely positive perceptions of themselves and their de facto behaviours and preponderant practices on social media platforms. The last item in the survey, which is thematically linked to the previous one, asked the students to express their opinion about the role of higher educational institutions in promoting the students’ soft and life skills to face the ever-growing challenges posed by the mushrooming of SNS in today’s digital scenery. The graph below summarizes the details [Figure 4].

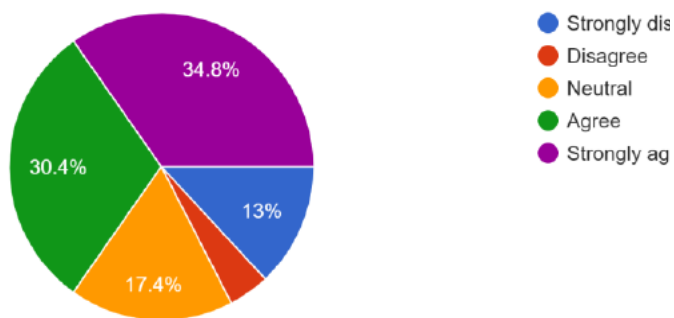


Figure 4: ‘Moroccan higher education curricula and syllabi should teach students the requisite skills to cope with the challenges of misinformation and the spread of fake news’. Do you agree?

As expected, about two-thirds of the sample expressed their approval of the statement, with 34.8% showing strong disagreement and 30.4% expressing mere agreement. However, a small group of participants (13%) and an even smaller portion (4.3%) believe that imparting such knowledge and skills should occur beyond the confines of tertiary academic institutions. What seems worrying is that some university students (17.4%)

are undecided about such a consequential issue. Most obviously, those who agreed to think that misinformation and fake news are on the rise, fabricated by highly specialized technicians and skillfully manoeuvred to manipulate even the most apparently well-educated. Thus, Such skills must be regularly updated and initiated to students regardless of academic level. Unfortunately, very few departments in Moroccan universities incorporate digital media literacy and critical thinking courses as integral components in their curricula. To account for disagreement rates, and as stated earlier, many students may hold the conviction that a higher education institution is the venue of learning knowledge, hard sciences, and doing research experiments and not the home for acquiring soft skills, such as digital literacy skills, communication, leadership, time management, and autonomy. Such skills, the argument goes, need to have been picked up in early school life long before they join higher education.

Summary of Results, Recommendations and Conclusion

This paper has investigated how Moroccan university students approach the various SNS and examine their self-perceived

capacities to critically analyze and evaluate digital content in general and online news and information more precisely. Drawing on analytical empirical evidence, this research has demonstrated that young Moroccan university students still view television, radio, and print newspaper sources as the most credible sources of news and information. Surprisingly, using SNS to conduct academic research is not among the participants' top priorities. Entertainment, however, is the leading motive. Paradoxically, most students seek these sites to get their information diet, yet many believe in the veracity of traditional media outlets, mainly TV and print newspapers. The finding substantiates that one-third of participants know that all social media platforms lack credibility and are fraught with rumours and fake news.

Additionally, most respondents advance that they critically evaluate social media content and broadly deploy various efficient verification measures and techniques. The study also found that most respondents highly rated their digital media perceived self-efficacy. Almost two-thirds of the participants postulate that higher educational institutions should incorporate literacy skills in their curricula and syllabi.

In light of the results obtained from this study, several key recommendations can be put forth to empower Moroccan students in higher educational institutions to cope with misinformation challenges and nurture their digital critical thinking skills. In this respect, incorporating higher-order critical Thinking competencies, with particular emphasis on digital literacy skills, in all Moroccan tertiary education curricula is a national priority. The fact that most students 'feed' on electronic media outlets poses pressing challenges to traditional print sources. Therefore, it is projected that in the foreseeable future, print media will find it hard to survive the torrents of instant messages and images generated by infinite electronic sources that are so readily available and easily accessible. An official and structural upgrading of the journalism industry in the country is imperative to fill the 'information gap' and boost healthy democratic practices. Similarly, providing sufficient financial resources to credible and well-established print and digital news producers will yield more accountable quality news agencies and dissuade them from propagating sensational and unverified news stories.

From a legal perspective, the government issued a binding legislative framework in 2016 that sets regulatory guidelines and lays the ground for standard journalistic practices [13]. Despite this bill, massive efforts need to be invested by all stakeholders to counter the generation and trafficking of fake news and unfounded allegations on many SNS that are often driven by hidden political agendas that purport to undermine

the political stability of the country. Seen from a technological standpoint, there seems to be a common consensus amongst analysts and experts in the area that no technical panacea exists to contain the scourge of disinformation. Thus, future research is required to debug the intricacies of this alarming societal behaviour. This is primarily supported by [14], who stipulates, "The problem of disinformation on social media platforms remains very open-a fundamental concern of contemporary society whose answer may lie in data science."

One of the main limitations of this study lies in its unrepresentative sample, given the large population under investigation. Secondly, adopting a mixed-methods research approach that combines quantitative and qualitative data collection procedures would have yielded more reliable findings. Similarly, translating the questionnaire into other languages -mainly French and Arabic- to involve various categories of the targeted population would probably have maximized the response rates.

Overall, the issue of online fake news and misinformation is a multidisciplinary phenomenon whose diverse discourse mechanisms can unimaginably forge public opinion and damage public trust in institutions. Its subtle influences transcend beyond educational and intellectual boundaries to affect nearly all segments of society and hence should be taken more earnestly. In the wake of the 2016 U.S. presidential elections scandal, Mark Zuckerberg -the Facebook CEO- warns that "the question of how to counteract the damage done by "fake news" has become a pressing issue both for technology companies and governments across the globe." [15]. From their part, [16] proposes an integral 'Four Es' model that adeptly combines four essential components deemed vital for sustaining modern democracy and nourishing civic education: empowerment, engagement, education, and encouragement. For them, empowerment entails "raising individual and collective awareness of current misinformation content and sources." While engagement aims to foster "networking and cross-communication between users". Education aims to inform "users of advanced misinformation analysis results and predictions.". In the fourth principle, the authors argue that future technology should encourage "all users to play a role in detecting, in/validating, and combating misinformation".

Declaration:

- I hereby declare that no conflict of interest may affect the paper's results.
- I also declare that I received no funding for this study.

- I also declare that this study did not involve animals but did involve participants who had volunteered to take part in the study, as shown in the questionnaire included in the appendix

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