

Assessment of the Ability to Identify Fake News Among Out-of-School Youth and Adults

Penilaian Kemampuan Mengidentifikasi Berita Palsu pada Pemuda Putus Sekolah dan Orang Dewasa

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Keywords

fake news; out-of-school youth and adults; literacy; education.

Abstract

Literacy skills to detect disinformation. With the proliferation of fake news in various media platforms, it is relevant to recognize the ability of individuals to comprehend various instances of manipulated information. This study encompasses skills on distinguishing fact from opinion, recognizing bias, analyzing visuals, and evaluating sources. The respondents were 100 randomly chosen out-of-school youth and adults enrolled in the Alternative Learning System of the City of Mati. Measuring this competence in ALS learners is essential considering the unequal access to formal education and the lack of exposure to structured digital literacy curricula, which potentially places them at a higher risk of disinformation. By utilizing a descriptive quantitative method, the respondents answered the Fake News Identification Ability Test which consists of a 40-item text and visual-based scenario contextualized in the Philippine setting. It was revealed that these indicators attained a high level of competence, with the exception for evaluating sources which was found to be on a low level. Although the over-all results are affirmative, it is advisable to have further learning and development on detecting fake news. Strengthening these skills will benefit the out-of-school youth and adults and would create a positive contribution to the community.

Kata kunci

berita palsu; remaja dan orang dewasa putus sekolah; literasi; pendidikan.

Abstrak

Seiring dengan maraknya penyebaran berita bohong (*fake news*) di berbagai platform media, kemampuan individu dalam mengidentifikasi manipulasi informasi menjadi krusial untuk diteliti. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengukur kompetensi literasi media yang mencakup keterampilan membedakan fakta dari opini, mengenali bias, menganalisis elemen visual, serta mengevaluasi kredibilitas sumber. Responden penelitian terdiri dari 100 pemuda putus sekolah dan orang dewasa yang dipilih secara acak dari program sistem pembelajaran alternatif *Alternative Learning System* (ALS) di City of Mati. Pengukuran kompetensi pada peserta didik ALS menjadi relevan mengingat adanya ketimpangan akses pendidikan formal dan keterbatasan paparan terhadap kurikulum literasi digital terstruktur, yang berpotensi meningkatkan risiko keterpaparan disinformasi. Melalui pendekatan kuantitatif deskriptif, data dikumpulkan menggunakan *Fake News Identification Ability Test* yang terdiri atas 40 butir skenario berbasis teks dan visual dalam konteks lokal Filipina. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa sebagian besar indikator kompetensi berada pada tingkat yang tinggi, kecuali pada aspek mengevaluasi sumber yang tergolong rendah. Meskipun hasil secara keseluruhan menunjukkan tren positif, penelitian ini merekomendasikan perlunya pengembangan program pembelajaran khusus mengenai deteksi berita bohong. Penguatan keterampilan tersebut diharapkan dapat memberdayakan pemuda dan orang dewasa dalam menghadapi tantangan informasi di masyarakat.

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A. Introduction

The expansion of digitalization in modern times has created an avenue for the masses to obtain information such as news conveniently. However, at the same time, there is also the rise of false data, erroneous advertisements and other types of deception. It poses a threat to democracy (Huber et al., 2022) and may lead to the growth of cybercrime (Ajayi, 2016). Students and uninformed individuals are at risk in this societal challenge since this may lead to uninformed, and mindless consumption and unwarranted distribution.

In recent years, people became aware of the widespread spread of fake news and the methods used to effectively implement it. Their previous fear of the internet as a threat from unknown people and inaccurate Wikipedia quotes has suddenly become a global reality. It has been discovered that various governments and organizations around the world are spending huge amounts of money to promote misinformation using fake accounts, advertisements, bots to unsuspecting citizens. A widely proposed solution to this issue is the strengthening of information and media literacy, which can equip individuals with the ability to recognize and avoid fake news. Fortunately, the solution is relatively simple in concept: teaching people to identify fake news using information literacy skills. However, the reality is that schools have failed to teach these skills adequately. As a result, students are unprepared for the challenges of misinformation (Mulroy, 2019).

The Commission on Fake News and Critical Literacy in Schools reported that a mere two percent of young people in the United Kingdom possess the essential critical literacy skills required to discern the authenticity of a news story. The pervasive nature of false information introduces feelings of anxiety and uncertainty among children. Specifically, nearly half of all young individuals (49.9%) express worry regarding their inability to properly identify fake news. Furthermore, the majority of educators (60.9%) are convinced that fake news negatively impacts students by elevating anxiety levels, reducing self-esteem, and ultimately skewing their understanding of the world (National Literacy Trust, 2018).

Research has shown that few people are able to effectively navigate the digital world. For example, the Pew Research Center found that 17 percent of adults in the United States are skilled and confident in learning new information online. However, more people are getting news and information from social media without adequate editing, allowing politicians and others to freely spread misinformation using algorithms. Without adequate media literacy skills, people often fall victim to questionable contexts (Guess et al., 2020).

The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) conducted a study which highlighted that Filipino youth are highly susceptible to false news and misinformation. PISA stressed that these deficiencies in knowledge can result in significant outcomes, including heightened political polarization, decreased trust in public institutions, and the deterioration of democratic processes. The PISA 2018 assessment data revealed that the average score of Filipino students in the reading comprehension test was 340 points, notably falling below the OECD average of 487 points. Furthermore, the Philippines was positioned last out of 79 participating countries in the OECD's reading literacy assessment in 2019 (Baron, 2021).

Though existing studies like PISA and other national assessments for the formal education sector have exposed the deficiencies in critical thinking and media literacy, there is still a lack of research that concern those in the Alternative Learning System specifically the Out-of-School Youth and Adults. This marginalized group, which is branded with the 3 L's – the least, last, and lost, experience limited privilege on proper education especially on digital learning. This makes them to susceptible to believing any misinformation posted on social media. The vast contrast between the formal education and OSYA in classroom learning and literacy shows a gap that needs to be understood. This present study on analyzing fake remains significant especially in exploring their abilities in distinguishing fact from opinion, recognizing bias, analyzing visuals, and evaluating sources.

It is concerning that many Filipinos believe stories from websites containing fake news, as well as questionable social media posts. Equally troubling is the active promotion and dissemination of these stories. When individuals rely more on false information than on legitimate sources, their decisions are likely to be based on unreliable data. The spread of misinformation online presents a challenge for media scholars and practitioners to collaborate in promoting media literacy and

responsible journalism. It also highlights the crucial role of media in societies like the Philippines, which continue to navigate nation-building and representative democracy (Quilinguing, 2019).

In academic literature, the concept of fake news is frequently linked to a variety of related terms, including misleading news, satire news, disinformation, misinformation, cherry-picking, clickbait, and gossip. Distinguishing between these concepts largely depends on how they are defined, but they can generally be differentiated using three key characteristics (Zhou & Zafarani, 2020): authenticity (if the content involves a factual statement), intent (whether the purpose is to educate or merely entertain the audience), and the extent to which the content can actually be classified as news.

Recently, the term fake news or fake news began to appear frequently in the media. Although the terms deception, hoax, clickbait, and determining the credibility of articles have been the focus of researchers, due to the constant use of the term “fake news”, a new definition and a more precise way of identifying it are needed. Although the term may seem new, there are newspapers that want to grab the attention of readers by exaggerating headlines and articles containing false information. In the era of the internet, where every individual could be exposed and seen by the majority, it is not surprising that the generation of fake news has expanded. It has also been stated that another common reason for the creation of fake news is trying to create a deception and/or a political bias of users to gain supporters. On the other hand, the knowledge of where the difference between fake news and the expression of opinions is important (Ozgobek & Gulla, 2017).

The dissemination of fabricated information, commonly referred to as fake news, which is demonstrably false, has emerged as a prominent issue within the current landscape of internet-based media. This concern has drawn considerable scholarly attention across numerous disciplines, prompting researchers to examine the precursors, attributes, and results stemming from its development and wide circulation. One group of academics is primarily devoted to understanding the misleading character of fake news, seeking ways to more effectively identify and distinguish it from credible reporting. In parallel, another focus of research centers on the mechanisms behind its swift adoption by users, investigating why such a large number of individuals accept these untrue narratives and how effective defenses against this susceptibility can be established. Significantly, two main thrusts of effort concentrate on enhancing media literacy as a key strategy to shield users from misinformation (Molina et al., 2019).

Fake news has become a significant phenomenon in the context of internet-based media, defined as fabricated information that is clearly and demonstrably false. This issue has attracted serious scholarly attention across various fields, with researchers investigating the antecedents, characteristics, and consequences of its creation and subsequent dissemination. Some scholars are primarily focused on the misinformation aspect of fake news, aiming to better identify and distinguish it from genuine news reports. Conversely, others concentrate on why it is so easily accepted by users, specifically determining why many people believe fake news, and methods for protecting individuals from this vulnerability. Two major areas of focus are the efforts to improve media literacy as a way to safeguard users from misinformation (Molina et al., 2019).

One of the vital aspects of reading comprehension is the ability to effectively differentiate facts from opinions. The reading materials people engage with (whether books, journals, newspapers, or magazines) contain a mixture of objective facts and the author's subjective opinions. Facts are defined as things that have happened, are objectively true, and can be verified as existing. Conversely, opinions are considered things believed to have occurred, deemed true, or expected to exist in the future. Essentially, facts relate to what is known with certainty, while opinions refer to what is subjectively believed.

The ability to distinguish between fact and opinion is instrumental in helping students develop their critical and analytical skills in both reading and listening. Because facts and opinions are frequently intertwined within texts and speeches, students must learn to separate what is true from mere belief if they are to successfully navigate the volume of media they encounter throughout life. Whether in news articles, advertisements, or history books, recognizing truth within opinion is crucial for developing into a person with independent thinking and the critical skills necessary to avoid easy manipulation (Donnchaidh, 2021).

Today, more people are relying on the internet as their primary source of news and information. However, this trend presents a serious problem: the internet, contrary to what some believe, often

lacks inherent credibility. Due to its vast and open nature, it is filled with biased and misleading content from dubious sources, which facilitates the widespread circulation of misinformation and disinformation. According to Quijote et al. (2019), bias occurs when observations are consistently influenced away from the truth and toward a different direction. This situation poses a potential problem not only in clinical research but also in the political sphere. Since the public depends on news articles to deliver informative and accurate reports about current events, honesty and objectivity are absolutely essential in news reporting.

In a study of Devaney (2013), it was realized that individuals perceive bias in a news story if they deliberately seek it out and when they perceive that the overall media is biased, even other stations are affected. There are still times when the media tries not to be biased in reporting and reporting objectively, but it is still visible to individuals' bias even if it is without political bias. Images and video-audio sequences are considered as traditional standards of truth, because the process of modifying or creating fake content is only from researchers and skilled users. With the development of tools and editing software that make the process of fraud almost automatic and easy, even for non-professionals, this is no longer true. Not only the process of modifying digital content has become easier in recent years, but also the process of creating and sharing it (Lago et al., 2019).

From a theoretical viewpoint, the detection of hoaxes can also be understood through linguistic and semiotic frameworks. Hoaxes often rely on emotive and persuasive language, sensationalized rhetoric, and biased lexical choices that appeal to readers' emotions rather than logic. Similarly, paratextual and visual cues, such as misleading images, manipulated layouts, or questionable source attributions, serve to legitimize falsehoods and enhance credibility. Understanding these linguistic and visual markers is essential to analyzing how fake news operates and how individuals, such as ALS learners, can critically decode and evaluate such materials.

Although there has been a significant increase in scholarly activity dedicated to tackling the circulation and effects of misinformation, comparatively few efforts have focused on determining the specific design and presentation characteristics within fabricated news stories that users employ to make preliminary assessments about an article's authenticity. Fake news frequently incorporates stylistic components observed in genuine online news links, such as page structuring, font signals, titles, associated visuals, and cross-references to other material. However, the degree to which these aesthetic features shape a user's decision to categorize an article as either truthful or false has not been subjected to thorough investigation (Keib & Wojdyski, 2018). The continued advancement of technology has led to the ease of obtaining information. However, the ease and free access to information comes with a complex data selection process that can lead to confusion or misinformation. Thus, this situation requires a revision of the methods used to produce information (Ahmad, 2019).

In the Alternative Learning System (ALS) of Mati City, it was noticed that the students demonstrate strong willingness and openness to reading the news to get timely information by using various platforms. Hence, it is timely to know if the students possess skills in recognizing fake news are sufficient. Therefore, the researcher aimed to determine the level of ability in analyzing fake news by out-of-school youth and adults in the areas of distinguishing fact from opinion; recognizing bias; analyzing visuals; and evaluating sources.

B. Method

The research employed a descriptive quantitative design. This design is a purposive process of gathering, analyzing, classifying, and tabulating data about prevailing conditions, and then making adequate and accurate interpretation about such data with or without or sometimes minimal aid of statistical methods (Calderon, 2006). This design was deemed appropriate since it aimed to determine the level of ability of out-of-school youth and adults in identifying fake news.

The respondents of the study consisted of out-of-school youth and adults from two of the three districts of the Alternative Learning System of the City of Mati, specifically, these are Mati North District and Mati Central District. These districts encompass approximately twenty (20) barangays and community learning centers (CLCs) attended by both teachers and students. With over 500

enrolled learners, a simple random sample consisted of 100 OSY and adults from various ages starting from 18 years old and above. They were chosen based from a computer-generated list which each district having equal number of representatives. This sample size is considered sufficient for obtaining valid and reliable data within the context of the study and ensures that every individual in the population has an equal probability of being included.

To measure the level of ability in identifying fake news, a structured test questionnaire named as Fake News Identification Ability Test was developed. The instrument consists of 40 items, with 10 items corresponding to each indicator. Prior to administration, the instrument underwent expert validation and pilot testing to ensure content validity, reliability and clarity. This instrument was contextualized in the fake news, images and information prevalent in the Philippines. The data gathered were quantitatively analyzed using descriptive statistics, particularly the mean to determine the respondents' level of ability in identifying fake news across the four indicators. The interpretation of results followed a standardized descriptive scale to classify the levels as high, moderate, or low.

C. Results and Discussion

In this widely emerging digital reform, assessing the out-of-school youth and adults on their vulnerability to misinformation offers significant insight to their media literacy. The succeeding sections present their performance in identifying fake news, highlighting the specific areas where they demonstrate strength and where challenges remain. Table 1 summarizes the results of the level of ability in identifying fake news of OSYA in the areas of distinguishing truth in opinion, recognizing bias, analyzing visuals, and evaluating resources, which addresses the problem or objective.

Table 1. Level of Ability in Identifying Fake News of Out-of-School Youth and Adults

Indicator	Mean	Descriptive Interpretation
Distinguishing fact from opinion	2.90	High
Recognizing bias	2.70	High
Analyzing visuals	2.57	High
Evaluating sources	2.47	Low
Overall Mean	2.66	High

Out of the four indicators, three scored high while one scored low. Distinguishing fact from opinion had the highest level with a mean of 2.90. This means that OSYAs can distinguish statements that are related to reality or real experiences against imaginative ideas or an individual's own perspective. In a study by Mitchell et al., (2018), it was discovered that factors such as political awareness, technology knowledge, and trust in the media are important in determining fact from opinion.

A recent study conducted by Nygren & Guath (2019) revealed that Swedish youth face challenges in differentiating between factual, biased, and outright false information found online. This difficulty in assessing credibility is partially attributed to a mindset characterized by both overconfidence and ignorance, a combination that contributes to an increase in confirmation bias (Kalsnes et al., 2021). The PISA 2018 reading assessment found that countries with education systems that teach students how to identify biased information are more likely to be able to distinguish truth from falsehood (Alvarez, 2021). In the Philippines, teaching fact-checking and opinion-checking is part of the curriculum in English and Filipino, making it one of the ways to achieve high scores.

Moreover, the high performance of OSYA in ALS in this area may also be attributed to their exposure to social media discourse and political commentary, where the use of loaded and emotional language is frequent. Their everyday engagement with such content may have sharpened their awareness of linguistic cues that reveal opinion or exaggeration. Even with limited formal schooling, they may have developed practical critical-linguistic sensitivity which is a form of media literacy derived from experience rather than structured instruction. Thus, while they may not have undergone advanced academic training, their familiarity with rhetorical and affective language common in Philippine social and political contexts enhances their ability to distinguish factual claims from opinionated statements.

Following this, which is also high, is the recognition of bias with a mean of 2.70. This means that respondents have an idea whether a news headline shows bias or leans towards bias. In the study of Devaney (2013), that individuals can detect bias in news content when they actively seek it. The perception of bias in one media outlet can influence how audiences view other news sources, as it shapes their overall understanding of media credibility. Although some media organizations strive to report objectively and avoid political bias, audience interpretations may still reflect perceived biases, influenced by individual perspectives and expectations.

Furthermore, cognitive biases, including confirmation bias, the bandwagon effect, and choice-supportive bias, are proposed by Kim (2021) as being among the most crucial elements that drive irrational decision-making when both creating and consuming false information. These inherent biases significantly contribute to the formation and strengthening of echo chambers, a phenomenon where news consumers primarily share and utilize information that aligns with and reinforces their existing beliefs. One problem here may be not knowing how to verify the content of the news or not knowing whether the information may be distorted or biased. As a result, there are times when out-of-school youth and adults do not perceive whether a news headline is biased but still give a high score to the high mean. This may be due to the instruction or warning tag with statements that indicate bias, so they use critical thinking (Grady et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the ability of OSYA to recognize bias can also be linked to their frequent exposure to partisan discourse in Philippine media and politics, where bias is often explicit in tone and word choice. Being accustomed to identifying loaded or politically charged language, they become more sensitive to bias indicators in news content. However, such awareness may remain at a surface level, since it focuses on linguistic signals rather than structural or institutional bias.

The third with a high mean is 2.57 which is analyzing visuals. It means that students have the ability to evaluate whether the poster or picture they see on the internet is real or not. A key finding in the study by Shen et al. (2019) noted that the skills and experience of viewers greatly affect their evaluations of image credibility. The more knowledge and experience people have on the internet, digital imaging and photography, and online media platforms, the better they are at evaluating image credibility.

The findings for this specific indicator align with a study conducted by Wojdyski et al. (2019), which demonstrated that students learned to visually select authentic news based on certain cues. More precisely, the students identified several visual elements as markers of a source's credibility, including typographical mistakes and grammatical errors, the overall quality and suitability of the accompanying visual content on the page, and the nature and standard of the advertising material being displayed.

The indicator that scored the lowest was evaluating analysis, with a mean of 2.47. This low score suggests that students are easily misled by links and stream names that closely resemble or mimic legitimate news sources. Research originating from Stanford University indicated that most students at the Junior High School level lacked the essential ability to differentiate credible news content from paid promotional material (advertisements) while browsing the internet. The study additionally found that adolescents are frequently more swayed by a story's ranking in search results than they are by the identity of its original source, and consequently, they have significant difficulty evaluating the overall trustworthiness of digital information. Separately, other academic observations highlighted that High School students fail to fully recognize the distinction in authoritative value between articles found on Wikipedia and those published in established scholarly sources. In today's digital world, young individuals must possess the capacity to interpret a vast amount of online information, analyze it critically, and accurately identify what is real and what is not. Consequently, it is strongly recommended that digital literacy skills be both acquired and developed (Bates et al., 2017).

This low score in evaluating sources is the most significant finding of the study, as it poses a serious threat to information literacy. While OSYA can analyze linguistic content such as fact, opinion and bias, they struggle with paratextual evaluation which pertains to examining the external indicators of credibility such as URLs, layout, author credentials, and institutional affiliations. This gap aligns with findings in forensic linguistics, where modern hoaxes succeed because they imitate the linguistic style and visual format of legitimate news organizations, a process known as stylistic

deception. Respondents were able to critique the text itself but failed at the source-verification stage, which involves identifying whether the site or link truly represents a credible institution. Such failure at the paratextual level means that even linguistically skilled readers remain vulnerable to stylistic mimicry which is a major feature of sophisticated fake news.

Fake news articles are designed to appear legitimate and credible, primarily by mimicking the format of real news and utilizing similar-looking sources. Consequently, if we assume that most individuals who share fake news genuinely believe it to be true, it logically follows that their motivations for sharing are similar to those involved when disseminating authentic news (Baptista & Gradim, 2020). However, according to Bernal (2018), fake news typically commands a smaller audience within mainstream media, and public trust in sources remains higher for traditional media outlets.

Overall, Table 1 shows that the level of ability in identifying fake news among out-of-school youth and adults is high because it has a mean of 2.66 which signifies that they can determine whether the news they read is fake or real. Research by Veeriah (2021) in Malaysia found that adults are confident in identifying fake news and real news but have difficulty in identifying whether it is verified. However, it is also noteworthy that they are proactive in preventing the spread of fake news and issuing warnings. In addition, one of the reasons that contributed to the students' high skills in identifying fake news, may be having a high EQ or Emotional Intelligence (Preston, et al. 2021).

D. Conclusion

Thes results of the study revealed that the ability in identifying fake news among the out-of-school youth and adults is high with a mean of 2.66. Leading this is distinguishing fact from opinion with a mean of 2.90. However, evaluating sources has a mean of 2.47 with a low descriptive interpretation. Nowadays, individuals have become more thorough in believing and knowing whether a statement is true or not. This has been honed as a result of their life experience or environmental events. For evaluating sources, many internet links are emerging. Sometimes these look legitimate in name and can convince anyone. Therefore, the students' level of ability in distinguishing fact from opinion is high while evaluating sources is low.

Considering these findings, it is recommended that programs be integrated into the curriculum to strengthen skills necessary for recognizing and avoiding fake news. Additionally, seminars, workshops, and community information drives should be conducted to raise awareness among barangay members, benefiting not only out-of-school youth and adults but also other individuals who seek to enhance their media literacy. Further, it is suggested that targeted interventions be implemented in educational settings to facilitate students' understanding of fake news, particularly regarding bias, satire, and fabricated information. Active engagement in practical activities is encouraged to allow learners to apply these skills in everyday and real-life contexts. Teaching should also incorporate timely issues, emphasizing the distinction between truth and misinformation to enhance critical thinking and informed decision-making.

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