



Original article







Middle school students' perceptions of fake news

Percepción de estudiantes de nivel medio ante las noticias falsas

Percepção dos alunos do ensino fundamental sobre notícias falsas

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ABSTRACT

The dissemination of news in digital media poses a new challenge for society, given the threat posed by *fake news*. *news* (Fake news) distorts the truth; it serves various purposes, but especially misinforms and influences public opinion. This phenomenon has increased with users' easy access to digital media, particularly young people, who must be provided with tools that allow them to identify fake news to avoid falling into a spiral of misinformation. This study aimed to diagnose the impact of fake news on secondary school students by administering a questionnaire to students from five institutions in the department of Pasco, Peru. The results obtained with the data collection instrument show that participants have a strong preference for digital media such as the internet

and social networks, considering them the most reliable sources of information; however, they are aware that fake news circulates on these platforms. Furthermore, they stated that they could distinguish a fake news story, so they carried out the analysis of two news stories, demonstrating that a large part of them can distinguish between a true and a false news story, but it is of interest that a considerable proportion of these participants stated that in their institution or home they do not have the necessary tools to make such a distinction.

Keywords: disinformation; student; social media; fake news; perception.

RESUMEN

La difusión de noticias en medios de comunicación digital supone un nuevo desafío para la sociedad, ante la amenaza que representan las *fake news* (noticias falsas) como distorsionadoras de la verdad; estas responden a distintos fines, pero especialmente desinforman e influyen en la opinión pública. Este fenómeno se ha acrecentado con el fácil acceso de los usuarios a medios digitales; particularmente de los más jóvenes, que deben ser provistos de herramientas que les permitan identificar una noticia falsa para evitar caer en una espiral de desinformación. El estudio se orientó a diagnosticar el impacto que generan las noticias falsas en estudiantes de educación media, considerando la aplicación de un cuestionario a estudiantes de cinco instituciones en el departamento de Pasco, Perú. Los resultados obtenidos con el instrumento de recolección de información muestran que los participantes poseen una gran inclinación por los medios de comunicación digital como el internet y las redes sociales, al considerarlos las fuentes de información más confiable; no obstante, son conscientes que en estos circulan noticias falsas. Además, manifestaron poder distinguir una noticia falsa, por lo que realizaron el análisis de dos noticias, demostrando que gran parte de ellos pueden distinguir entre una noticia verdadera y una falsa, pero siendo de interés que una proporción considerable de estos participantes manifiesta que en su institución u hogar no cuentan con las herramientas necesarias para realizar tal distinción.

Palabras clave: desinformación; estudiante; medios sociales; noticias falsas; percepción.

RESUMO

A disseminação de notícias por meio de mídias digitais apresenta um novo desafio para a sociedade, dada a ameaça representada pelas notícias falsas, que distorcem a verdade. As notícias falsas servem a diversos propósitos, mas visam principalmente desinformar e influenciar a opinião pública. Esse fenômeno se intensificou com o fácil acesso dos usuários às mídias digitais, particularmente entre as gerações mais jovens, que precisam estar munidas de ferramentas para identificar notícias falsas e evitar cair em uma espiral de desinformação. Este estudo teve como objetivo diagnosticar o impacto das notícias falsas em estudantes do ensino médio, aplicando um questionário a alunos de cinco instituições da região de Pasco, no Peru. Os resultados obtidos com o instrumento de coleta de dados mostram que os participantes têm uma forte preferência por mídias digitais, como a internet e as redes sociais, considerando-as as fontes de informação mais confiáveis; no entanto, eles estão cientes de que notícias falsas circulam nessas plataformas. Além disso, afirmaram ser capazes de distinguir uma notícia falsa, realizando, portanto, a análise de duas notícias. Isso demonstrou que grande parte deles consegue diferenciar entre uma notícia verdadeira e uma falsa, mas é interessante notar que uma parcela considerável desses participantes declarou não possuir, em suas instituições ou residências, as ferramentas necessárias para realizar tal distinção.

Palavras-chave: desinformação; estudante; redes sociais; notícias falsas; percepção.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of mass media can be linked to the origins of humanity, given humankind's need to communicate in order to express feelings and ideas. This involved using signs, signals, sounds, and gestures as part of the communication process, which evolved until effective communication became possible. For a long time, oral communication was the most common form of communication, serving as the primary tool for interacting with others. Later, with the development of language, a new type of communication emerged: written communication. Written communication flourished during the Middle Ages, and the invention of the printing press led to the production of books of various genres, contributing to the democratization of knowledge among the masses (UTEL Editorial, 2019).

Over the years, communications have undergone changes due to societal challenges, bringing with them the evolution of language and the transition from oral and written communication to audiovisual media. The media constitute a powerful tool for societal evolution, demonstrating its capacity to

respond to communication needs with inventions that have transcended to the present era, giving rise to the information society in which geographical barriers are no longer limiting the flow of communication. This is all thanks to the benefits associated with globalization and digitalization, which keep the world in constant evolution. This evolution in communications has been associated with changes in its processes and phases, providing greater flexibility to traditional media and paving the way for new media where user interaction is considered essential. This has led to the user/receiver evolving to be more active and demanding of content according to their needs (Jódar, 2010).

However, digitization has also promoted the development of a phenomenon that detracts from the quality of communications: fake news. News, although not a new phenomenon, has been present in important events around the world, especially during crises, generating a distortion of reality (Losada, 2020). The influence of fake news in the digital age has been extensively studied, particularly due to the magnitude that such news can reach in digital media, where the mass dissemination of information is commonplace, contributing to media users becoming trapped in a vicious cycle of misinformation (Mendiguren *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, the continuous use of digital media by young people makes them more vulnerable to consuming false information than other population groups, even though they are digital natives and possess greater digital skills and competencies (Gómez-Calderón *et al.*, 2021). For example, the study by Palau- Sampio *et al.* (2022), on fake news, carried out in Argentina, Chile and Spain, detected that there is a problem among Journalism students in identifying the quality of information.

Currently, the phenomenon of fake news raises the debate about whether we live in a true information society or, on the contrary, in an era of disinformation. Human inventions in various fields have had a remarkable influence on society, enabling the development of new forms of communication as part of the so-called technological revolution, which emerged with the democratization of the internet, offering society a wide range of possibilities thanks to its advantages. This allowed for the renewal of traditional media for the development of virtual communities that can interact despite geographical limitations. This new era in communications has been accompanied by changes in society's needs for products and services, motivating the commercialization of various production processes, as well as communications, to diversify them (Jódar, 2010).

Although mass media dominated much of the communication of contemporary societies for a large part of the 20th century, the 21st century represents an advance in the field of communications. Digitization has contributed to a shift towards a new communication paradigm, transforming different

aspects of society and democratizing content that in previous eras was only consumed by a segment of society (Cardozo, 2011). This is why the so-called mediamorphosis signified a transformation of mass media; it is part of a broad and varied set of communication media that have adapted to new technologies and social needs (Jódar, 2010).

However, these important advances in the field of communications have also allowed the emergence of different practices that seek to mask the truth, whose causes may be uncertain. But that in any case opens the way to a society of misinformation that consumes pieces of information in which reality is distorted. Therefore, fake news can be considered a matter of great concern today, especially given the prevalence of epistemic bubbles and echo chambers that contribute to the spread of unjustified information far removed from reality (Losada, 2020). Disinformation is thus characterized as fictitious information disseminated with motivation or purpose; erroneous information supported by an organization that presents it as true.

The prevalence of fake news not only affects users who consume this type of information, but also undermines journalistic work and the quality of information disseminated through various media. It creates a vulnerability that leads to the distortion or manipulation of news with false and unjustified information, which can increase sensationalism and alter the dynamics of the communication process by transforming lies into information (Mendiguren *et al.*, 2020). Some users actively participate, creating, sharing, and freely suggesting information; while others are passive, consuming information only for entertainment and interacting with it (Taddeo *et al.*, 2022). This has occurred especially since the democratization of information following the invention of the internet, so that in the various digital networks the exchange of fake news is frequent, giving rise to the phenomenon of infoxication from the overload of information that users can suffer which prevents them from being able to discern between false and true information (Martín-Herrera & Micaletto-Belda, 2021).

Information overload contributes to the prevalence of fake news in digital media, limiting the effectiveness of actions that seek to limit the spread of false information because the speed with which the Internet allows the exchange of information means that an isolated news item generates a snowball effect, making this a matter of public interest due to the effects it generates in society (Martín-Herrera & Micaletto-Belda, 2021).

Attitudes and perceptions toward fake news demonstrate a growing social and academic concern regarding the credibility of digital information. While fake news is not a new issue, digital media have fostered the mass dissemination of unreliable news, meaning that its creation is no longer limited to

journalism professionals. Digital media users actively participate in the production and dissemination of news driven by diverse interests, a fact that is a source of concern for traditional communication spheres that have been overshadowed by the digital phenomenon (Catalina-García *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, fake news is considered a serious threat to journalistic work, as its normalization in digital media plunges users into an era of post-truth that has permeated various sectors of society. Digital media has irreversibly transformed how news is disseminated, without distinguishing between true and false, thus eroding the credibility of digital media (Pérez & Pedrero, 2021). A growing distrust and insecurity has been created by the media, with a significant tendency to point the finger at social networks as the sole culprits.

The intentions behind fake news can be diverse, ranging from news with intentional errors, conspiracy theories, distorted information, false statements, fabrications far removed from reality, satire, and more; these elicit different attitudes toward them but generally lead to media illiteracy. Governments remain vigilant regarding any news that lacks valid justification, as it not only affects societal attitudes but can also generate far-reaching changes that threaten freedom of expression, democracy, and the rule of law (Antunes & Nina, 2020).

Currently, digital media users can access vast amounts of information simultaneously from various sources, breaking down barriers to accessing news that lacks veracity and spreads more rapidly than true news. This blurs the line between truth and falsehood, with implications for those affected and consumers. Particularly in the political sphere, fake news is created to serve a variety of purposes, but it is based on the desired effects on consumers. For example, in the United States presidential elections where Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton vied for the White House, a significant amount of fake news was generated, seeking to shift consumers' attention to aspects unrelated to politics or to influence public opinion (Martín-Herrera & Micaletto-Belda, 2021).

Given society's constant need for up-to-date information, fake news is gaining ground, subtly or conspicuously infiltrating digital media and affecting society in general, but especially Millennials and Generation Z, who prioritize staying connected. This makes them more vulnerable to consuming and spreading fake news, since traditional media takes a backseat to the wide range of possibilities offered by digitalization (Mendiguren *et al.*, 2020). In some cases, fake news generates entertainment among its consumers due to the combination of different elements that significantly influence public opinion, such as scandalous material, accusations and denunciations, dramatic music, and misleading images taken out of context (Magallón-Rosa, 2017, as cited in Martín-Herrera

& Micaletto-Belda, 2021, p. 195). While, on the other hand, post-truth is promoted from a design that is framed in mental schemes (Martín-Herrera & Micaletto-Belda, 2021).

Several studies have focused on analyzing the influence of fake news on societal perceptions. In this regard, Martín-Herrera and Micaletto-Belda (2021) state that young people generally possess a high level of digital literacy, enabling them to be more independent in their assessment of information circulating in the media, particularly digital media. Meanwhile, the rest of the population may be more inclined to accept news lacking legitimacy, prioritizing the news itself over its sources and supporting evidence (Catalina-García *et al.*, 2019).

The aim of this article is to diagnose the impact of fake news on high school students.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research was conducted using a qualitative approach within a multidisciplinary framework. This approach brings together different areas of knowledge, allowing for a deep understanding of the meanings and concepts of a given reality. It characterizes the reality under study as an immaterial space with a continuous flow of information that influences society's perception.

Furthermore, the study aimed to explore and diagnose the impact of fake news on secondary school students, as the prevalence of this type of news in the media can generate misinformation among the population and shape public opinion far removed from reality, especially among young people who are more vulnerable due to their frequent consumption of information in digital media. To this end, a questionnaire was administered to a sample of the study population as part of the research process, providing an objective understanding of the situation under investigation.

Participants

A n=802 students from five secondary educational institutions in the department of Pasco, Peru, were considered after the directors of these institutions were asked to apply the questionnaire entitled "Impact of fake news in the perception of students from public secondary schools." The schools that were part of the sample were: San Juan Bautista, César Vallejo, General Córdova, Antenor Rizo and Daniel A. Carrión.

The students participating in the research answered the questionnaire anonymously. The participants had a mean age of 14.40 (approximately 14 years). These participants were in secondary school, from first to fifth year, and the gender distribution was 38.40% female and 61.60% male.

For the purposes of this research, a questionnaire was designed and administered to all participants. This questionnaire underwent validation through expert review to assess the content and wording of the questions and was administered virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to the demographic variables included in the instrument, the study explored students' media consumption habits and their exposure to information overload in digital media.

The study also includes an assessment of participants' perceptions of fake news, their involvement in the production and dissemination of such news, and their level of digital literacy. In accordance with the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this instrument was administered digitally and distributed to participants via email using Google Forms.

Data analysis procedure: The administration of each of the selected educational institutions was contacted and informed of the research objectives, student participation, and the confidentiality of the responses provided in the data collection instrument. After the institutions agreed to participate, the students were notified and their informed consent was obtained.

With the receipt of all the forms, an initial diagnosis was made to give way to the analysis and interpretation of the data obtained, for which the SPSS software was used.

RESULTS

The data collection instrument was designed to explore various aspects inherent to the use of different media and the participants' perceptions of them, including fake news, the channels through which it circulates, and their ability to distinguish between fake and real news, among others. This allows for a comprehensive view of the impact of fake news on the perceptions of secondary school students, as it delves into a set of variables whose analysis is presented below.

Participants were asked about the type of media they use most regularly, with social media (42.96%) and the internet (37.49%) showing significant use, while traditional media such as radio, television, and print media were used less frequently. Furthermore, 65.24% of participants reported owning smartphones, demonstrating the widespread use of digital media among younger populations.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of media use among participants, with 56.48% using them to stay informed, 30.42% to communicate, and 10.78% for entertainment; a smaller proportion used them for studying and attending online classes. Correspondingly, participants consider media beneficial for society (97.01%).

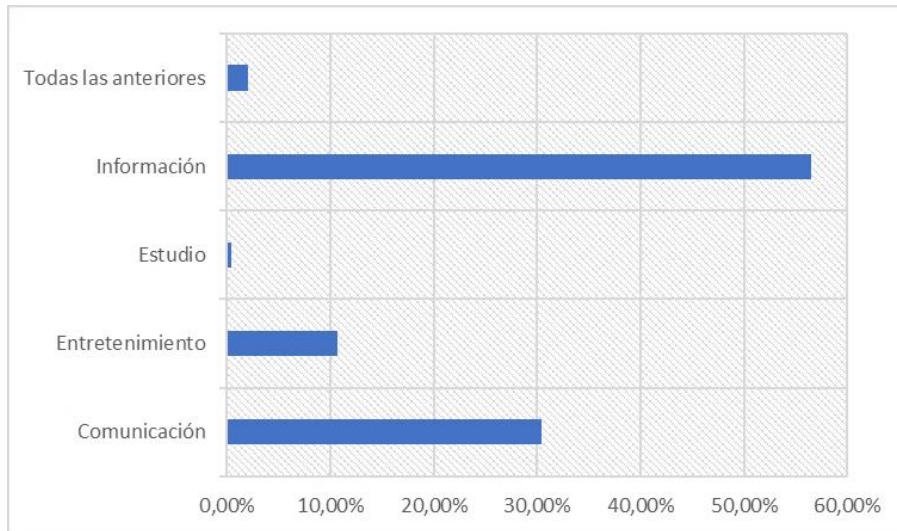


Figure 1. Main use of the media

On the other hand, figure 2 shows the participants' responses regarding the media they consider the most reliable source of information. Television (29.93%) and the internet (28.68%) are the most trusted media, followed by social media (20.95%), and to a lesser extent, radio, newspapers, and books and magazines. These results demonstrate that digital and traditional media are considered reliable sources of information in similar proportions.

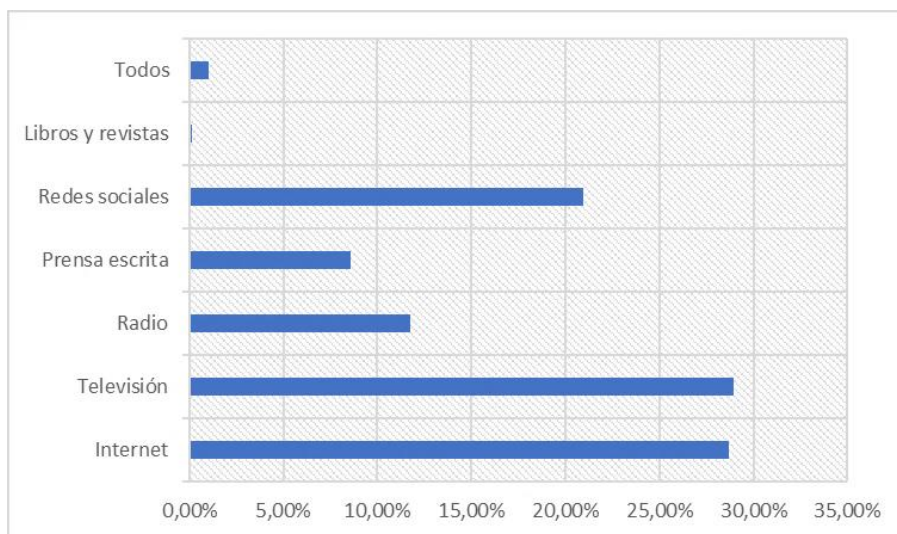


Figure 2. Media outlet considered most reliable

Regarding the information overload that users of different media may experience, 38.03 % of participants stated that they have experienced this information overload with a viral event; hence, the ability of participants to distinguish when information is true or false is considered when it circulates in the media they use most.

To assess the informants' ability to distinguish between true and false information, they were presented with two news items and asked to categorize them, based on their experience, as misleading, false, or true. The first of these news items (Figure 3) refers to WhatsApp billing for users with fewer than 10 contacts. 50.37% of participants considered this information false, 44.14% misleading, and 5.49% true.



El sábado WhatsApp será facturado. Si tienes al menos 10 contactos envíales este mensaje. Así verán que eres un asiduo utilizador y tu logo se volverá azul y quedará gratuito. Se ha hablado de ello hoy en la prensa WhatsApp costará 0,01 euro por mensaje. Envía este mensaje a 10 personas. Cuando lo hagas la luz se volverá azul de lo contrario WhatsApp activará la facturación. 20:20

Figure 3. News analysis 1

Regarding the reasons behind this opinion, the informants stated that the medium disseminating this news is unreliable and that it was spread through a WhatsApp chain message, suggesting it is simply an attempt to go viral, since the application is free and the report's claim of charging for the service is unclear. Furthermore, 82.67% of participants consider the medium disseminating this information unreliable, which aligns with the large proportion of participants who believe the news is false.

The second news item (Figure 4), concerning the spraying of disinfectant by five helicopters to eradicate the coronavirus, was considered false by 58.73% of participants, misleading by 24.81%, and true by 16.46%. Regarding the reasons for this response, participants stated that the news was disseminated by an unreliable source (77.43%), lacked credibility, made no sense, and was not disseminated by official channels, thus suggesting it was fake news. Those participants who considered it true stated that it was credible given the global context of the coronavirus pandemic.



Figure 4. News analysis 2

Given the proliferation of fake news in the media, 76.56% of participants believe that not all news circulating in the media is true; while 23.44% believe that it is (Figure 5).

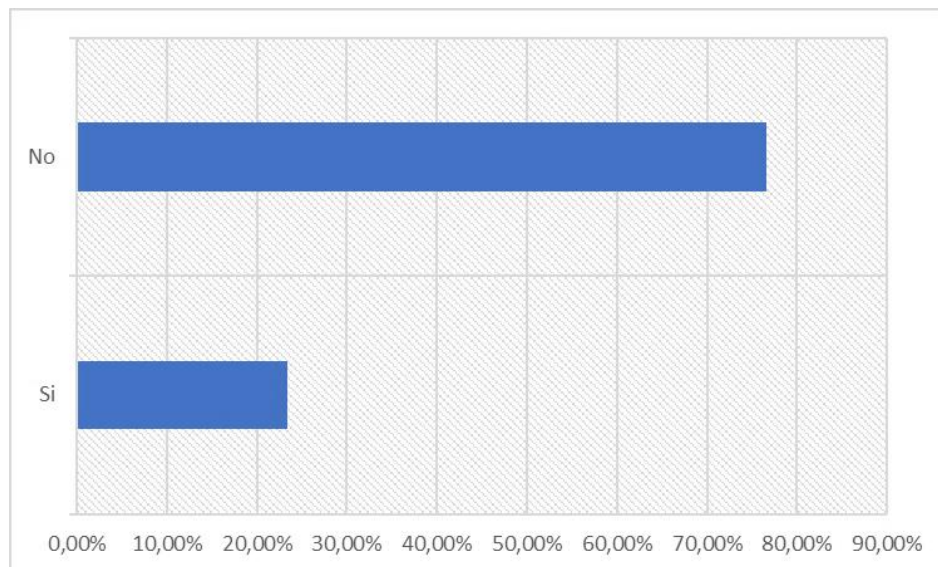


Figure 5. Dissemination of fake news in the media

While 56.73% of participants believe they have consumed fake news in the media, 43.27% believe they have not (Figure 6). These statements show that participants are aware that fake news circulates in the media and that they have consumed it at some point.

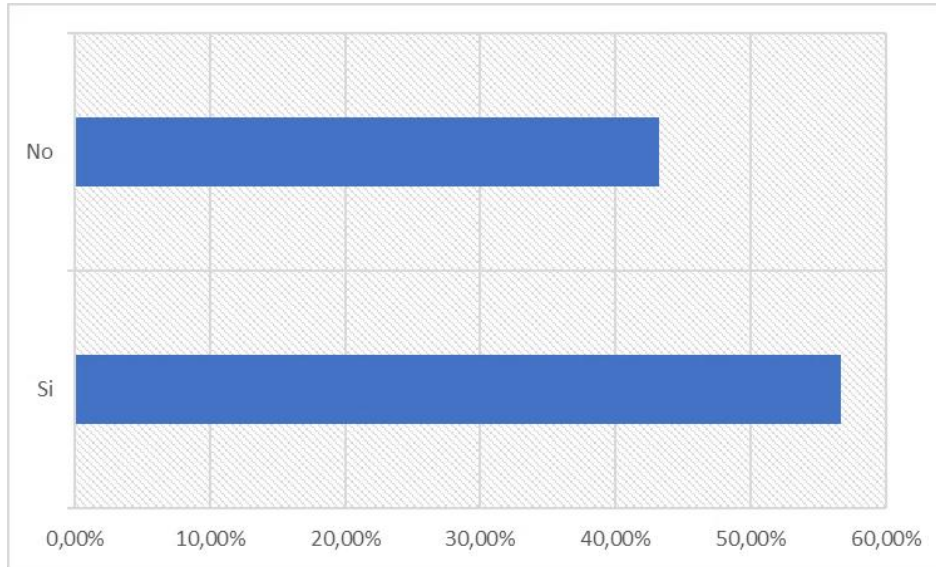


Figure 6. Consumption of fake news

To deepen this aspect, participants were asked about the media outlet where they believe fake news circulates more frequently (Figure 7). 71.82% said it was social media, 20.32% said it was the internet, and less so traditional media like radio and television.

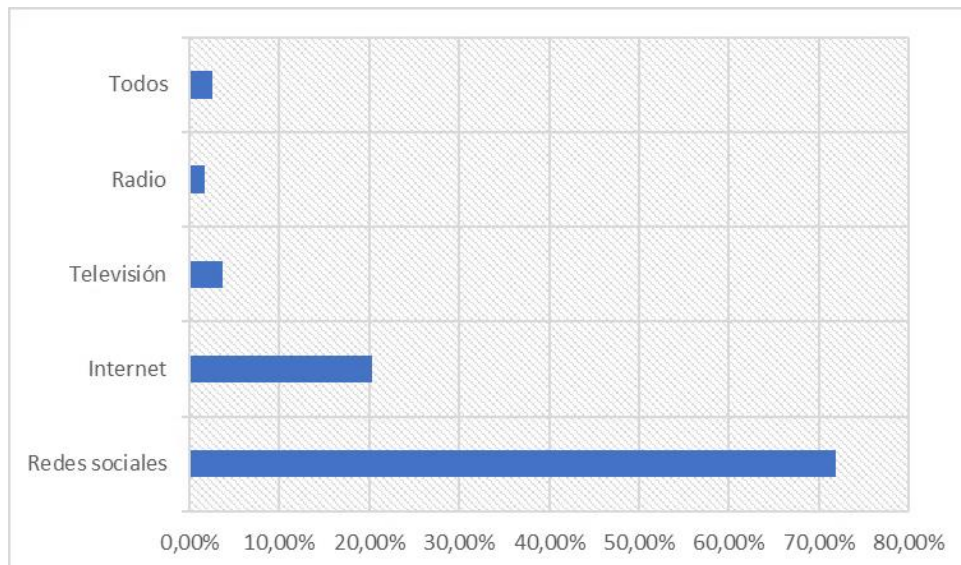


Figure 7. Media outlet where fake news circulates most frequently

Regarding the actions of the participants in the dissemination or creation of fake news, 95.39% of them expressed that they read the full text of a news item before sharing it, even if it catches their attention, while 4.61% stated that they do not (Figure 8).

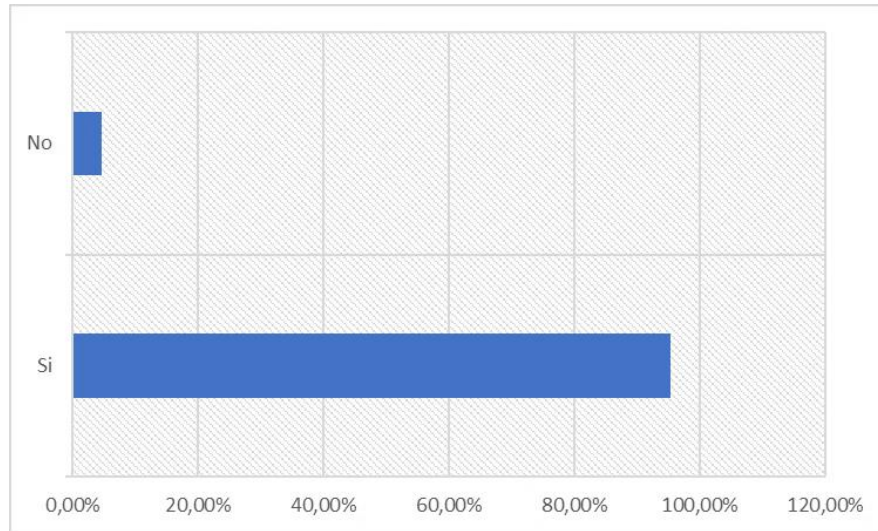


Figure 8. Reading the text of a news article for dissemination

On the other hand, 91.15% of participants stated that they have never created or spread fake news, because it is not good, it is a crime and it negatively affects society; conversely, 8.85% have done so because it was funny, or because they did not know if the news was true or false (Figure 9).

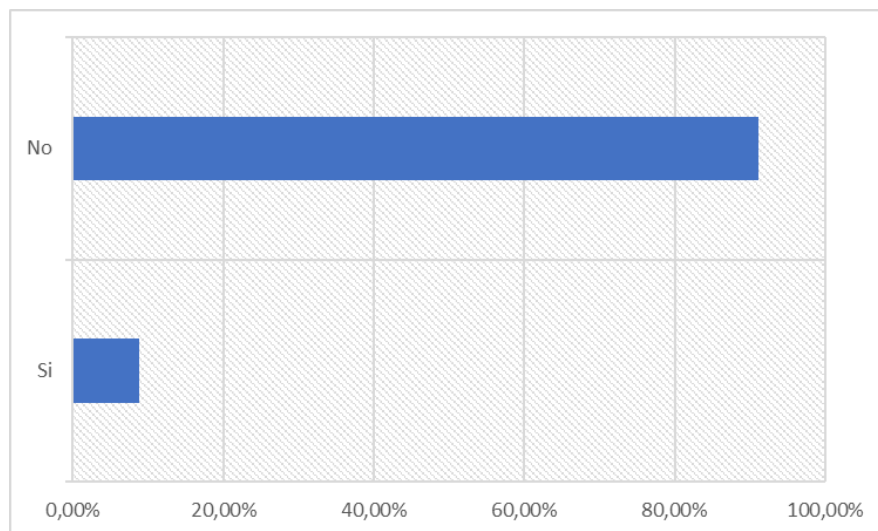


Figure 9. Creation or dissemination of fake news

When asked about their ability to distinguish between true and false news, 92.27% of participants could make this distinction, while 7.73% could not (Figure 10). Accordingly, the spread of false news in the media may be partly due to society's inability to distinguish between true and false news, with 54.61% of participants believing that society is capable of differentiating between true and false news, while 45.39% believe it is not (Figures 10 and 11).

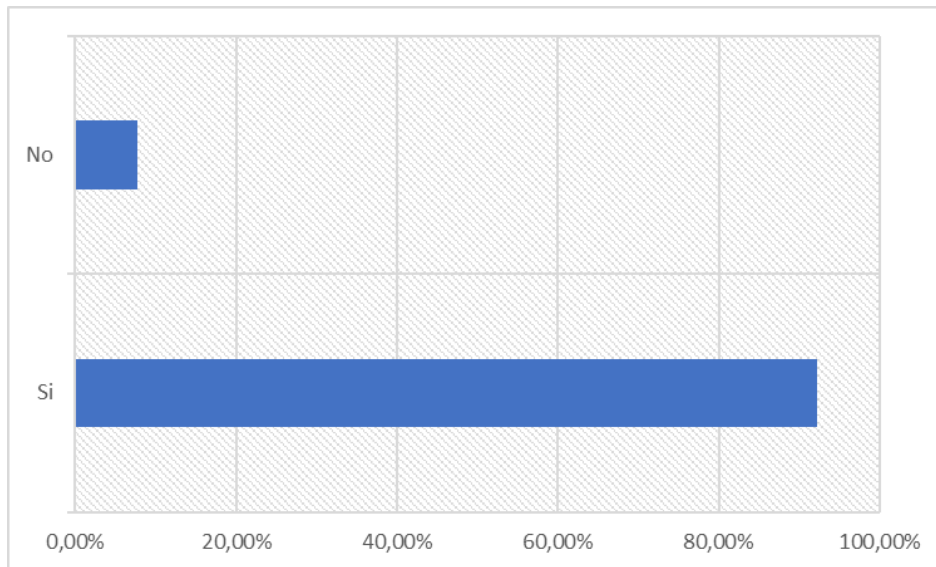


Figure 10. Ability to differentiate between a true or false news story

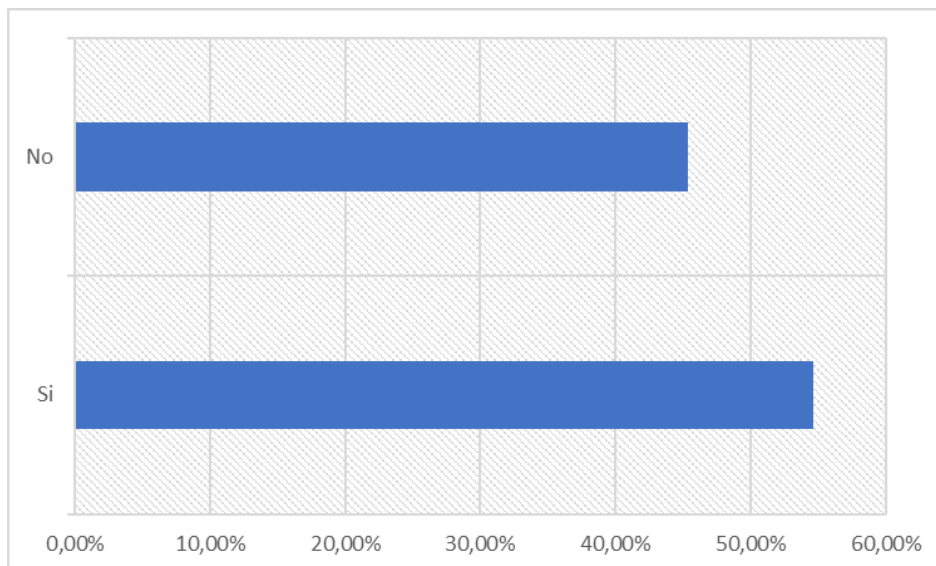


Figure 11. Society's ability to differentiate between true and false news

Regarding the participants' perception of fake news, 78.30% of them consider it harmful, 13.72% consider it a passing fad, and a smaller proportion consider it harmless, funny, deceptive, and silly, as shown in figure 12.

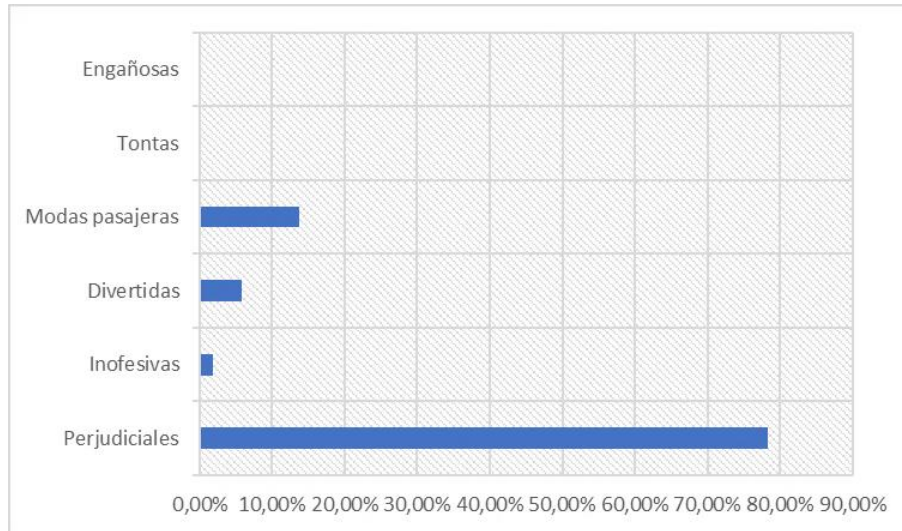


Figure 12. Perception regarding fake news

Regarding the motivation behind the spread of fake news in the media, 38.53% of participants believe it is due to the media itself, 18.45% attribute it to groups that promote cyberterrorism, 18.08% to political interests, followed by economic (13.47%) and ideological (8.48%) interests (Figure 13). This aligns with the perception of 88.03% of participants who believe that fake news manipulates public opinion, since people use the media to stay informed.

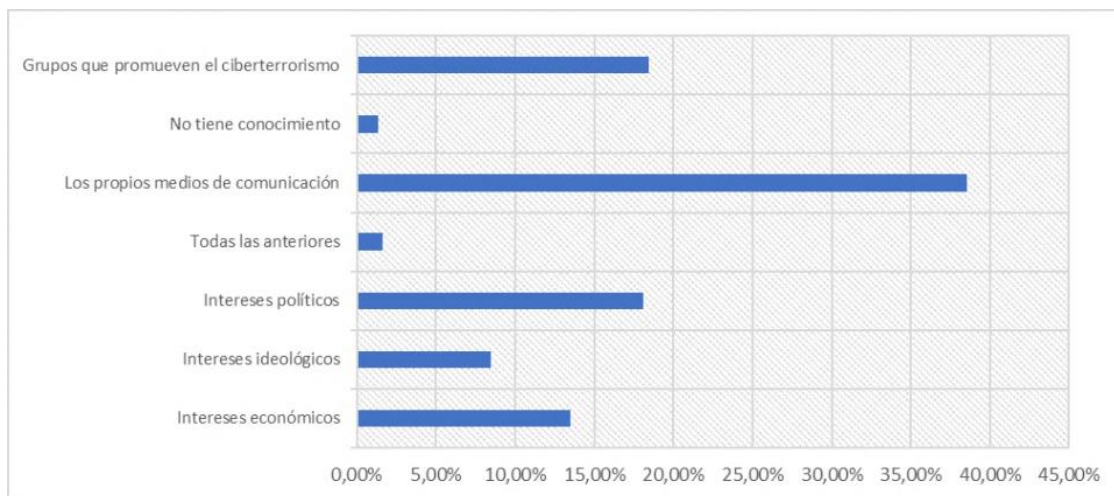


Figure 13. Motivations for spreading fake news

Therefore, students should be provided with the necessary tools to identify fake news; 62.09% of participants stated that they do have these tools in their educational institutions and homes, while 37.91% stated that they do not. This discrepancy, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, could be attributed to various factors, such as the increased use of digital media during periods of confinement, which led to the manipulation of news by anyone.

The study focused on diagnosing the impact of fake news on secondary school students. The results demonstrate the participants' strong affinity for digital media such as the internet and social networks. Although the students are aware of the circulation of fake news and claim to be able to distinguish it, a considerable proportion indicate that they lack the necessary tools at their school or home to make this distinction. This underscores the vulnerability of this population to misinformation and the crucial need to provide literacy strategies to prevent a spiral of false information.

DISCUSSION

The study revealed the vulnerability of society to the spread of fake news in digital media, a fact that poses a challenge given the enormous capacity of these media to inform and communicate with society. However, thanks to users' easy access to social networks and the internet, the spiral of misinformation intensifies, especially when users lack the necessary tools to distinguish between true and false news. The study's results demonstrate the considerable use young people make of digital media in a society immersed in the digital age, with access to all kinds of information in real time. This has led to a decline in traditional media such as radio, television, and print, ushering in an era where anyone with access to an electronic device can become a source of information.

Various nations have implemented measures to halt the spread of fake news, considering it a phenomenon that undermines democracy and national stability. The media plays a crucial role in promoting critical thinking among users, enabling them to identify fake news circulating in the media (Martín-Herrera & Micaletto-Belda, 2021; Losada, 2020). According to Bennett and Livingston (2018, cited by Campos-Domínguez *et al.* (2022)), fake news involves the issuance, dissemination, and creation of information with deceptive and false intent, propagated for political or economic gain to create a manipulative effect.

In this context, the relationship between social media and the spread of fake news has become a central aspect of contemporary communication analysis. The transition from analog to digital media has been accompanied by the emergence of a new medium: social media. This new medium involves

users at a higher-level during content production. Social media arose from the consolidation of digitization in various aspects of society and, moreover, incorporates the element of unpredictability as part of its formula for success, keeping users engaged with new content (Jódar, 2010; Pantoja, 2011). Thanks to this latter aspect, social media has experienced constant growth, enabling traditional media outlets to leverage its advantages by incorporating content on these platforms as a strategy to stay at the forefront of new trends in the field of communications (Pantoja, 2011).

A flood of misinformation from the COVID-19 pandemic to the present day is linked to social media and mobile messaging, in a context of social isolation that facilitated and accelerated its spread among all users, leading to disordered consumption (Pérez & Pedrero, 2021).

Aspects such as delocalization, immediacy, unpredictability, and interaction constitute the pillars of social media, aiming to address the weaknesses of traditional media, which have received significant criticism for constructing news stories that favor certain power groups, for news bias, and for presenting predictable, isolated, and outdated information. Therefore, social media seeks to offer an interactive window for society during news production, presenting itself as an open space that responds to the needs of users in the current era, with the expectation that it will maintain a preferred position for them in the future (Pantoja, 2011). A study by Valera-Ordaz *et al.* (2022) on disinformation observes the overabundance of information and links disinformation to decontextualization, coupled with low-quality journalism professionals and the economic and political agendas of various media actors.

Despite their significant potential to foster communication processes, social media has become a channel through which fake news circulates continuously, thanks to its ability to disseminate information from anonymous sources. This opens up a significant space for individuals or groups acting with malicious intent (Catalina-García *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, many users amplify false information based on its perceived interest, without considering its veracity or the sources that justify what they are sharing. This has allowed the spread of fake news to continue its upward trajectory, counteracting the effects of efforts to stop its spread (Catalina-García *et al.*, 2019).

Particularly relevant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic was its analysis, as the increased use of digital media during lockdowns also led to a rise in the proliferation of fake news. This was a point raised among the study participants, most of whom confirmed it as a reality. Therefore, it was of interest to explore the media consumption habits of the participants, revealing, as expected, that a

large proportion were regular users of digital media such as the internet and social networks, and had access to smartphones.

The results of the study also show that participants are able to distinguish a fake news story, supporting their reasons for making this distinction by the type of media in which the news circulates and its content; however, they have participated, although in a smaller proportion, in the creation or dissemination of a fake news story, when they consider it to be a funny news story, or because they did not know how to distinguish whether it was true or false.

Comparing this with the results obtained in other studies on similar topics, the high use of digital media among young people stands out, as reported by Catalina-García *et al.* (2019) and Gómez *et al.* (2021), whose research shows the prevalence of digital media among young people. Furthermore, the results of this research also demonstrate young people's intense exposure to fake news, due to their reliance on digital media, which relegates radio, television, and print media to a secondary role, a finding consistent with the results of the current study.

In the study by Gómez *et al.* (2021), almost the entire sample had been exposed to fake news with high frequency, which the authors attribute to the high use of digital media. Regarding this, Mendiguren *et al.* (2020) state that the occurrence of this phenomenon has also increased young people's awareness of how to differentiate between true and false news; therefore, they must have the necessary tools to make this distinction. For older populations, such as university students in communication-related fields, this differentiation can be easier, as reported in the study by Martín-Herrera & Micaletto-Belda (2021).

According to this, fake news is a phenomenon of easy proliferation in digital media for its ease of access, posing a threat to those users who are unable to distinguish between true and false news. Thus, society must be able to make this distinction by providing it in different settings with the necessary tools to avoid falling into a spiral of disinformation that can satisfy various interests that are contrary to the purpose for which they were created the media, as they are to inform, communicate and entertain.

This phenomenon will continue to prevail as long as society is unaware of the threat posed by the creation and dissemination of fake news; therefore, awareness and sensitization constitute a primary tool for society, because even if a fake news story may be amusing for a small number of users, the rest of the group is exposed to misinformation.

Hence, the contrast between the different news that young people may receive is of interest to society, and efforts should be made to ensure that educational institutions incorporate thematic fields such as, for example, strategies for verifying fake news, and that young people are provided at home with the necessary tools so that they do not become participants in the spread of fake news.

In today's information environment, critical thinking has gone from being a desirable quality to a true survival skill in the face of the increasing sophistication of disinformation. Recent studies indicate that, in the wake of the pandemic, exposure to fake news is not solely related to access to data or sources, but primarily to each person's analytical abilities. Thus, research such as that by List *et al.* (2024), based on experimental evidence, shows that greater development of critical thinking skills is directly linked to a lower tendency to believe and spread misleading information.

In secondary education, the development of critical thinking aims to break the automatic and impulsive consumption of content on social media, a space where adolescents are particularly vulnerable. Media literacy for young people should not focus solely on the technical use of digital tools, but rather on fostering an analytical approach that helps interpret the intention and purpose of messages that go viral. At this stage, critical thinking also acts as a moderator of emotional reactions: when students are trained to verify information, the likelihood of accepting fake news simply due to ideological alignment or its popularity measured in *likes decreases*.

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Conflict of interest

Authors declare no conflict of interests.

Authors' contribution

The authors participated in the design and writing of the article, in the search and analysis of the information contained in the consulted bibliography.



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