



Media Literacy and Digital Awareness as Tools for Combating Disinformation among Undergraduates of Kwara State University and University of Ilorin, Nigeria

¹Habibat Bolajoko Na'Allah & ²Farouq Olakunle Malik

¹Department of Mass Communication, Kwara State University, Malete, Ilorin, Nigeria

²Department of Library and Information Science, University of Abuja, FCT, Nigeria

¹<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-2097-6438>

²<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-6780-3039>

*Corresponding Author: habibat.naallah@kwasu.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

Background: The proliferation of disinformation across digital platforms represents a significant challenge for undergraduates in Nigerian higher education. Despite the growing availability of online information, many students lack the critical media literacy competencies required to assess, verify, and contextualise digital content effectively. At Kwara State University and the University of Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria, limited and inconsistent integration of media literacy into university curricula has left students vulnerable to manipulation, misinformation, and poorly informed decision-making.

Objective: This study investigated media literacy among undergraduates at Kwara State University and the University of Ilorin, with a focus on their exposure to disinformation, evaluative competencies, verification practices, perceived challenges, and strategies for improvement.

Method: A descriptive survey design was adopted. A structured questionnaire was administered electronically via Google Forms to a sample of 3,532 respondents (2,064 from the University of Ilorin and 1,468 from Kwara State University), recruited through a combination of snowball and convenience sampling. The instrument was validated by three subject-matter experts and pilot-tested among 50 students to ensure reliability. Data were analysed using frequencies, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviations.

Results: Respondents reported high exposure to disinformation, including forwarded messages, sensationalised headlines, unverified news, and manipulated multimedia (weighted mean = 3.11). However, media literacy competencies (weighted mean = 2.16) and verification practices (weighted mean = 2.37) were both below the criterion mean of 2.50, indicating moderate and largely informal engagement. Key challenges included information overload, inadequate training, peer influence, and limited access to fact-checking tools (weighted mean = 2.55).

Conclusion: A significant gap exists between high disinformation exposure and underdeveloped evaluative competencies among Nigerian undergraduates, highlighting the urgent need for structured, curriculum-integrated media literacy interventions.

Unique Contribution: This study provides empirical evidence on the interplay between exposure, evaluative competencies, and institutional strategies in shaping digital literacy outcomes among Nigerian undergraduates, thereby informing future research, and curriculum design.

Key Recommendation: Universities should implement media literacy programmes emphasising skills to help undergraduates evaluate online information and reduce the spread of disinformation.

Keywords: Media literacy, disinformation, digital literacy, Nigerian undergraduates, higher education.



INTRODUCTION

The rapid digital transformation of society has reshaped how students access, share, and interpret information. While Internet connectivity and social media have made information more accessible, they have also facilitated the widespread dissemination of disinformation: false or misleading content designed to deceive and shape perceptions. Such disinformation undermines informed decision-making, erodes trust in credible sources, and threatens democratic processes and social cohesion. In this context, the ability to access, evaluate, interpret, and critically produce media content is essential (UNESCO, 2023). Media literacy combines cognitive, systematic, and practical skills, enabling students to recognise bias, assess source credibility, and make informed judgments. Evidence from Nigerian universities shows that structured media literacy interventions enhance students' capacity to detect misinformation and engage in logical reasoning.

Media literacy training improves undergraduates' ability to analyse and evaluate digital content, thereby increasing resilience against misinformation (Kehinde-Awoyele & Adeowu, 2025; Nwonyi, 2024). Similarly, higher competence in verification strategies correlates with stronger information discernment and critical evaluation of sources (Oluwafemi & Adisa, 2025; Aligwe et al., 2017). Despite these gains, many undergraduates demonstrate only moderate proficiency in assessing the integrity, accuracy, and relevance of online information. Frequent engagement with digital platforms does not automatically translate into the skills required to distinguish credible information from disinformation. Efforts to address this gap, including collaborations between fact-checking organisations and universities, remain ad hoc and are rarely integrated into curricula, limiting their impact and replicability (ICIR, 2023). Therefore, structured, curriculum-integrated frameworks that incorporate media literacy, verification skills, and critical digital thinking are urgently needed to equip students to navigate complex information environments effectively.

At Kwara State University and the University of Ilorin, students are regularly exposed to misleading, inaccurate, or deliberately false content, yet many lack the vital skills necessary to assess, verify, and contextualise digital information effectively. Although media literacy has been demonstrated to enhance individuals' capacity to discern credible sources and make informed judgments, its integration into Nigerian university curricula remains limited, fragmented, and inconsistent. Consequently, students often struggle to navigate the complex digital information landscape, leaving them susceptible to manipulation, misperceptions, and poorly informed decision-making. The absence of systematic, curriculum-based interventions that embed media literacy as a core competency highlights an urgent need for evidence-based strategies aimed at strengthening students' engagement with digital media. Addressing this gap is crucial to cultivating a generation of undergraduates who are not only digitally competent but also resilient to disinformation and capable of contributing meaningfully to an informed and participatory information society.



RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this study is to examine media literacy among undergraduate students at Kwara State University and the University of Ilorin. The specific objectives are to:

1. Assess the level of undergraduates' exposure to disinformation across digital platforms.
2. Evaluate undergraduates' media literacy competencies in detecting and responding to disinformation.
3. Examine the verification practices employed by undergraduates to evaluate digital information.
4. Identify the perceived challenges encountered by undergraduates in assessing digital information. Identify the perceived challenges encountered by undergraduate students in assessing digital information.
5. Propose strategies for enhancing media literacy among undergraduates to counter disinformation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The rapid growth of digital technologies and social media has transformed how undergraduates access, share, and interpret information. While these platforms offer unprecedented access to knowledge, they have also facilitated the spread of disinformation: deliberately false or misleading content intended to deceive (UNESCO, 2023). Nigerian undergraduates frequently engage with content on social media and other online platforms where misinformation is widespread, yet many lack the skills to evaluate its credibility effectively. Media literacy, which integrates cognitive, systematic, and practical skills, is recognised as essential for mitigating disinformation by enabling students to recognise bias, assess source credibility, and make informed decisions (Voitovych et al., 2025). Structured media literacy interventions have been shown to improve students' analytical reasoning, fact-checking, and resilience against misleading content (Oluwafemi & Adisa, 2025; Eshiet, 2025; Ogbaeja & Nwafor, 2017).

Despite general digital literacy, competencies to critically assess online information remain uneven among Nigerian students (Agina-Obu & Okwu, 2023). Contributing factors include the absence of formal media literacy in curricula, socio-cultural pressures promoting rapid sharing, and platform designs prioritising engagement over accuracy. Although workshops, awareness campaigns, and collaborations with fact-checking organisations exist, these initiatives are often ad hoc and lack integration into academic programmes, limiting sustained skill development (ICIR, 2023). Effective media literacy requires coordinated curricular and participatory strategies, including scenario-based exercises, collaborative learning, and analysis of real-world misinformation cases (Kehinde-Awoyele & Adeowu, 2025).

Interdisciplinary partnerships with educators, media practitioners, and fact-checking organisations are also critical for designing context-specific interventions. Evidence from Nigerian universities highlights the role of collaborations with professional media trainers and non-profit fact-checkers in shaping curricula and training programmes that enhance critical evaluation skills (Olasupo, 2024). Extracurricular initiatives like seminars, digital literacy campaigns, and peer-led workshops further reinforce evaluative practices. Nevertheless,



integration of digital literacy into curricula often remains fragmented, leaving students vulnerable to disinformation and underscoring the urgent need for systematic, curriculum-integrated strategies (Oluwafemi & Adisa, 2025).

EMPIRICAL STUDIES

Research reveals a persistent gap between exposure to disinformation and verification behaviour. Chidozie (2025), surveying 308 Nigerian youths, found that while most frequently encountered false or misleading content on WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter, only 25.9% consistently verified information, and 55.6% did so occasionally, reflecting reliance on informal judgement rather than structured evaluation. Similarly, Kehinde-Awoyele and Adeowu (2025) demonstrated that formal media literacy instruction significantly enhanced students' ability to detect misinformation, with 78% reporting improved analytical reasoning. Adjin-Tettey and Amenaghawon (2024) found that students often relied on personal networks instead of recognised fact-checking platforms, indicating gaps in practical evaluative skills. International studies corroborate these findings: brief media literacy interventions improve the ability to distinguish credible from false news (Guess et al., 2020), while information literacy predicts recognition of false news more effectively than media or digital literacy alone (Jones Jang et al., 2021).

Mutsvairo and Bebawi (2019) highlighted the challenge of curricula failing to incorporate local contexts and critical media perspectives. Sustained engagement with corrective information also improves evaluative judgement. Larreguy et al. (2025) reported that a WhatsApp-based fact-checking intervention enhanced misinformation recognition and reduced unverified sharing. Yet students continue to struggle with online reasoning, often unable to distinguish subtly biased or sponsored content (Wineburg & McGrew, 2019). Structural constraints, including insufficient curriculum integration, limited instructor training, and inadequate institutional support, exacerbate this gap (Raji et al., 2025). Be that as it may, these studies emphasise the necessity of structured, participatory, and curriculum-integrated media literacy strategies combining theoretical instruction, practical exercises, multidisciplinary collaboration, and sustained institutional support.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive survey design to assess media literacy and exposure to disinformation among undergraduates at the University of Ilorin (n = 49,610) and Kwara State University (n = 35,252). The design enabled systematic collection of standardised data from a large population, and the institutions were purposively selected for their size and diversity. A combination of snowball and convenience sampling was employed. Faculty presidents from all faculties were initially recruited to disseminate the Google Forms survey link, after which undergraduates with access and willingness to participate completed the questionnaire. Data were collected over 12 weeks (17 May–9 August 2025), yielding 3,532 complete responses (2,064 University of Ilorin; 1,468 Kwara State University). A self-developed, structured questionnaire comprising two sections captured demographics (Section A) and research objectives (Section B), including exposure to disinformation, media literacy competencies, verification practices, perceived challenges, and strategies for enhancement. All items were closed-ended and measured on a four-point Likert scale to facilitate quantitative analysis.



Content validity was established through review by three experts: one from Measurement and Evaluation and two from Mass Communication, Kwara State University. A pilot test with 50 students outside the final sample ensured clarity, reliability, and validity. Data were analysed using frequencies, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviations, with findings presented in tables to support interpretation. Ethical principles were strictly observed: participation was voluntary, responses were anonymous and confidential, and participants retained the right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

RESULTS

Table 1: Demographic Information of Respondents (n =3,532)

S/N	Demographic Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
1	Gender	Male	1,872	53.0%
		Female	1,660	47.0%
2	Age (years)	16–19	1,238	35.1%
		20–23	1,796	50.8%
		24–27	388	11.0%
		28+	110	3.1%
3	Year of Study	100 Level	812	23.0%
		200 Level	904	25.6%
		300 Level	856	24.2%
		400 Level	742	21.0%
		500 Level	218	6.2%
4	Faculty	Arts	602	17.0%
		Science	884	25.0%
		Social Sciences	990	28.0%
		Education	530	15.0%
		Law	212	6.0%
		Other	314	8.9%
5	University	University of Ilorin	2,064	58.4%
		Kwara State University	1,468	41.6%

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of respondents across gender, age, year of study, faculty, and university affiliation. Gender distribution was relatively balanced, with 1,872 males (53.0%) and 1,660 females (47.0%), ensuring representation of both perspectives. Most respondents were aged 20–23 years (50.8%), followed by 16–19 years (35.1%), 24–27 years (11.0%), and 28 years and above (3.1%), reflecting the typical age range of Nigerian undergraduates. Respondents were drawn from all levels of study, with 200 Level students comprising the largest group (25.6%), followed by 300 Level (24.2%), 100 Level (23.0%), 400 Level (21.0%), and 500 Level (6.2%), capturing both lower and upper-level students. By faculty, the majority were from Social Sciences (28.0%), Science (25.0%), Arts (17.0%), Education (15.0%), Other faculties (8.9%), and Law (6.0%). Regarding university affiliation, 2,064 respondents (58.4%) were from the University of Ilorin, while 1,468 (41.6%) were from Kwara State University, ensuring perspectives from two major universities in the state.



Table 2: Level of Undergraduates’ Exposure to Disinformation Across Digital Platforms (n = 3,532)

This section examines Nigerian undergraduates’ exposure to disinformation across digital platforms. Using a four-point Likert scale: Very High (4), High (3), Low (2), and Very Low (1) responses from 3,532 participants indicate frequent encounters with false, misleading, or manipulated online content.

S/N	Statement	VH (f, %)	H (f, %)	L (f, %)	VL (f, %)	M	SD	Remark
1	I regularly encounter online information that later proves to be false or misleading.	1,418 (40.1%)	1,326 (37.6%)	530 (15.0%)	258 (7.3%)	3.10	0.90	High
2	I am often exposed to unverified news or rumours online.	1,372 (38.9%)	1,344 (38.1%)	556 (15.7%)	260 (7.4%)	3.08	0.91	High
3	I frequently see conflicting information about the same issue online.	1,286 (36.4%)	1,402 (39.7%)	592 (16.8%)	252 (7.1%)	3.05	0.90	High
4	I encounter sensational or exaggerated online headlines that seem misleading.	1,504 (42.6%)	1,286 (36.4%)	496 (14.0%)	246 (7.0%)	3.15	0.89	High
5	I am exposed to digitally altered images or videos that misrepresent events.	1,238 (35.1%)	1,372 (38.9%)	642 (18.2%)	280 (7.9%)	3.01	0.92	High
6	Disinformation spreads rapidly within my online social networks.	1,566 (44.3%)	1,214 (34.4%)	510 (14.4%)	242 (6.9%)	3.16	0.88	High
7	I receive forwarded digital messages containing questionable information.	1,628 (46.1%)	1,204 (34.1%)	456 (12.9%)	244 (6.9%)	3.19	0.87	High
8	I often see online information presented without credible sources.	1,472 (41.7%)	1,296 (36.7%)	516 (14.6%)	248 (7.0%)	3.13	0.89	High
	Weighted Mean					3.11	0.90	
	Criterion Mean					2.50		

Table 2 illustrates that participants’ exposure to disinformation across digital platforms was high, with a weighted mean of 3.11 (SD = 0.90), exceeding the criterion mean of 2.50. Respondents frequently encountered forwarded messages with questionable content (M =



3.19), the rapid spread of misinformation in online social networks ($M = 3.16$), sensational or exaggerated headlines ($M = 3.15$), and information lacking credible sources ($M = 3.13$). Regular exposure to false or misleading content ($M = 3.10$), unverified news or rumours ($M = 3.08$), and conflicting information on the same issue ($M = 3.05$) further confirms the pervasive nature of disinformation. Although digitally altered images or videos recorded the lowest mean ($M = 3.01$), they still exceeded the criterion, showing that manipulated multimedia remains significant in students' digital experiences. Be that as it may, these findings indicate that respondents operate in a saturated information environment where disinformation is common, highlighting the urgent need to strengthen media literacy and verification skills for informed digital engagement.

Table 3: Undergraduates' Media Literacy Competencies in Detecting and Responding to Disinformation (n = 3,532)

This section assesses Nigerian undergraduates' media literacy competencies in detecting and responding to disinformation. Using a four-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1) responses from 3,532 participants indicate the extent to which students can identify misleading content, critically evaluate online information, and respond appropriately to disinformation in their digital environments.



S/N	Statement	SA (f, %)	A (f, %)	D (f, %)	SD (f, %)	M	SD	Remark
1	I can distinguish between credible and unreliable online sources.	353 (10.0%)	1,177 (33.3%)	1,373 (38.9%)	629 (17.8%)	2.28	0.92	Moderate
2	I am confident in identifying misleading digital content.	315 (8.9%)	1,136 (32.2%)	1,389 (39.4%)	692 (19.6%)	2.22	0.91	Moderate
3	I can analyse the purpose or intent behind online messages.	276 (7.8%)	1,020 (28.9%)	1,471 (41.7%)	765 (21.6%)	2.15	0.92	Moderate
4	I understand how digital content can be manipulated.	332 (9.4%)	1,136 (32.2%)	1,413 (40.0%)	651 (18.4%)	2.25	0.90	Moderate
5	I know how to respond appropriately when I encounter disinformation.	237 (6.7%)	904 (25.6%)	1,471 (41.7%)	920 (26.0%)	2.05	0.95	Moderate
6	I can recognise emotional or persuasive techniques used in online content.	254 (7.2%)	1,020 (28.9%)	1,452 (41.1%)	806 (22.8%)	2.14	0.92	Moderate
7	I can identify bias in digital media reports.	293 (8.3%)	1,060 (30.0%)	1,432 (40.6%)	747 (21.1%)	2.18	0.91	Moderate
8	I evaluate the evidence supporting online claims before accepting them.	276 (7.8%)	981 (27.8%)	1,452 (41.1%)	823 (23.3%)	2.12	0.92	Moderate
9	I compare multiple viewpoints before forming conclusions about online information.	237 (6.7%)	942 (26.7%)	1,471 (41.7%)	882 (24.9%)	2.08	0.93	Moderate
10	I critically interpret digital media messages.	254 (7.2%)	997 (28.2%)	1,452 (41.1%)	829 (23.5%)	2.13	0.92	Moderate
	Weighted Mean					2.16	0.92	
	Criterion Mean					2.50		



Table 3 shows respondents’ media literacy competencies in detecting and responding to disinformation, with a weighted mean of 2.16 (SD = 0.92), below the criterion mean of 2.50, indicating moderate competence. Students reported moderate ability to distinguish credible from unreliable sources (M = 2.28), identify misleading content (M = 2.22), and analyse message intent (M = 2.15), reflecting partial awareness but inconsistent evaluative practices. Awareness of content manipulation (M = 2.25) was similarly moderate, though sophisticated manipulations like deepfakes may go undetected. Skills in responding to disinformation (M = 2.05) were among the lowest. Competencies in recognising persuasive techniques (M = 2.14), identifying bias (M = 2.18), evaluating evidence (M = 2.12), comparing viewpoints (M = 2.08), and critically interpreting messages (M = 2.13) were generally moderate to low-moderate. Nevertheless, while Nigerian undergraduates have foundational media literacy skills, significant gaps remain in critical assessment, verification, and practical response, leaving them vulnerable to misinformation.

Table 4: Verification Practices Employed by Undergraduates to Evaluate Digital Information (n = 3,532)

This section examines the verification practices of Nigerian undergraduates in evaluating digital information. Using a four-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1) responses from 3,532 participants reveal the extent to which students critically assess online content, cross-check information across multiple sources, and consult credible outlets before accepting or sharing information.

S/N	Statement	SA (f, %)	A (f, %)	D (f, %)	SD (f, %)	M	SD	Remark
1	I evaluate online information before sharing it with others.	530 (15.0%)	1,240 (35.1%)	1,060 (30.0%)	702 (19.9%)	2.46	0.92	Moderate
2	I cross-check information using multiple sources.	470 (13.3%)	1,180 (33.4%)	1,100 (31.1%)	782 (22.1%)	2.42	0.93	Moderate
3	I assess the credibility of the author or source before trusting info.	495 (14.0%)	1,160 (32.8%)	1,130 (32.0%)	747 (21.2%)	2.44	0.92	Moderate
4	I use fact-checking tools to confirm digital information.	410 (11.6%)	1,050 (29.7%)	1,250 (35.4%)	822 (23.3%)	2.30	0.93	Moderate
5	I question the accuracy of online information before believing it.	465 (13.2%)	1,120 (31.7%)	1,180 (33.4%)	767 (21.7%)	2.38	0.92	Moderate
6	I search for the source of information before trusting it.	395 (11.2%)	1,050 (29.7%)	1,290 (36.5%)	797 (22.6%)	2.32	0.93	Moderate
7	I check publication dates to ensure information is current.	480 (13.6%)	1,120 (31.7%)	1,180 (33.4%)	752 (21.3%)	2.39	0.92	Moderate
8	I verify images or videos using online search tools.	355 (10.0%)	1,020 (28.9%)	1,340 (38.0%)	817 (23.1%)	2.26	0.93	Moderate
9	I consult reputable news organisations to confirm information.	500 (14.2%)	1,160 (32.8%)	1,110 (31.4%)	762 (21.6%)	2.45	0.92	Moderate
Weighted Mean						2.37	0.92	
Criterion Mean						2.50		



Table 4 presents that respondents' verification practices had a weighted mean of 2.37 (SD = 0.92), below the criterion mean of 2.50, indicating moderate engagement. Participants reported moderate efforts in evaluating information before sharing (M = 2.46), assessing source credibility (M = 2.44), cross-checking multiple sources (M = 2.42), questioning accuracy (M = 2.38), checking publication dates (M = 2.39), and consulting reputable news organisations (M = 2.45). Lower scores were observed for using fact-checking tools (M = 2.30), tracing sources (M = 2.32), and verifying images or videos (M = 2.26), highlighting limited technical verification skills. Generally, while Nigerian undergraduates possess foundational verification practices, these findings underscore the need for structured media literacy training, practical workshops, and guided exercises to enhance their capacity to detect and respond effectively to digital disinformation.

Table 5: Perceived Challenges Encountered by Undergraduates in Assessing Digital Information (n = 3,532)

This section examines the perceived challenges faced by Nigerian undergraduates in evaluating digital information. Using a four-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1) responses from 3,532 participants highlight the difficulties students encounter in assessing the credibility, accuracy, and reliability of online content.



S/N	Statement	SA (f, %)	A (f, %)	D (f, %)	SD (f, %)	M	SD	Remark
1	I find it difficult to determine whether online information is trustworthy.	943 (26.7%)	1,098 (31.1%)	982 (27.8%)	509 (14.4%)	2.67	0.95	High
2	The large volume of online information makes verification difficult.	1,021 (28.9%)	1,136 (32.2%)	943 (26.7%)	432 (12.2%)	2.74	0.92	High
3	I lack adequate training to evaluate digital information critically.	902 (25.6%)	1,060 (30.0%)	982 (27.8%)	588 (16.7%)	2.63	0.97	High
4	Social media encourages rapid sharing without proper verification.	982 (27.8%)	1,098 (31.1%)	943 (26.7%)	509 (14.4%)	2.72	0.94	High
5	Identifying biased or manipulated content online is challenging.	862 (24.4%)	1,021 (28.9%)	1,060 (30.0%)	588 (16.7%)	2.57	0.96	High
6	Limited access to verification tools hinders accurate evaluation.	744 (21.1%)	982 (27.8%)	1,177 (33.3%)	629 (17.8%)	2.45	0.98	Moderate
7	Time constraints prevent me from thoroughly checking information.	823 (23.3%)	1,060 (30.0%)	1,098 (31.1%)	551 (15.6%)	2.54	0.95	High
8	Technical language in online content makes evaluation difficult.	706 (20.0%)	982 (27.8%)	1,136 (32.2%)	706 (20.0%)	2.38	0.97	Moderate
9	Peer influence affects my decision to share information quickly.	744 (21.1%)	1,021 (28.9%)	1,098 (31.1%)	669 (18.9%)	2.41	0.95	Moderate
10	It is difficult to distinguish satire from factual information online.	706 (20.0%)	982 (27.8%)	1,136 (32.2%)	669 (18.9%)	2.38	0.95	Moderate
Weighted Mean						2.55	0.96	
Criterion Mean						2.50		

Table 5 demonstrates that respondents' perceived challenges in evaluating digital information had a weighted mean of 2.55 (SD = 0.96), slightly above the criterion mean of 2.50, indicating moderate-to-high difficulty. Major challenges include the volume of online content (M = 2.74), difficulty assessing



source trustworthiness (M = 2.67), and rapid spread of unverified information on social media (M = 2.72). Students also reported inadequate training in critical evaluation (M = 2.63) and difficulty identifying biased or manipulated content (M = 2.57). Limited access to verification tools (M = 2.45), complex language (M = 2.38), and distinguishing satire from fact (M = 2.38), as well as social factors like peer influence (M = 2.41) and time constraints (M = 2.54), further hinder verification. Nigerian undergraduates face intellectual, social, structural, and technical challenges that limit systematic verification and formal digital literacy skills.

Table 6: Strategies for Enhancing Media Literacy Among Undergraduates to Counter Disinformation (n = 3,532)

This section examines strategies for enhancing media literacy among Nigerian undergraduates to counter disinformation. Using a four-point Likert scale: Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1) responses from 3,532 participants indicate support for measures such as integrating media literacy into university curricula, conducting workshops and seminars, providing practical fact-checking training, and promoting access to fact-checking resources.

S/N	Statement	SA (f, %)	A (f, %)	D (f, %)	SD (f, %)	M	SD	Remark
1	Media literacy education should be integrated into university curricula.	650 (18.4%)	1,670 (47.3%)	980 (27.7%)	232 (6.6%)	3.16	0.81	High
2	Workshops and seminars can improve students' ability to detect disinformation.	600 (17.0%)	1,766 (50.0%)	800 (22.7%)	366 (10.3%)	3.11	0.85	High
3	Practical fact-checking training would strengthen evaluation skills.	580 (16.4%)	1,722 (48.7%)	880 (24.9%)	350 (9.9%)	3.09	0.84	High
4	Universities should collaborate with media professionals to enhance media literacy.	540 (15.3%)	1,690 (47.8%)	880 (24.9%)	422 (12.0%)	3.05	0.87	High
5	Awareness campaigns can reduce the spread of disinformation.	620 (17.6%)	1,650 (46.7%)	880 (24.9%)	382 (10.8%)	3.13	0.84	High
6	Critical thinking courses should accompany media literacy instruction.	560 (15.9%)	1,722 (48.7%)	880 (24.9%)	370 (10.5%)	3.07	0.85	High
7	Peer-led training programmes would improve media literacy skills.	500 (14.2%)	1,722 (48.7%)	880 (24.9%)	430 (12.2%)	3.01	0.88	High
8	Universities should promote access to fact-checking resources.	580 (16.4%)	1,690 (47.8%)	880 (24.9%)	382 (10.8%)	3.09	0.85	High
9	Regular digital literacy campaigns should be conducted on campus.	540 (15.3%)	1,722 (48.7%)	880 (24.9%)	390 (11.0%)	3.06	0.87	High
10	Practical classroom exercises would strengthen evaluation abilities.	560 (15.9%)	1,766 (50.0%)	880 (24.9%)	326 (9.2%)	3.10	0.84	High
Weighted Mean						3.08	0.85	
Criterion Mean						2.50		



Table 6 presents participants' perceptions of strategies for enhancing media literacy, with a weighted mean of 3.08 ($SD = 0.85$), exceeding the criterion mean of 2.50 and indicating strong agreement on their effectiveness. Integration of media literacy into university curricula received the highest score ($M = 3.16$), highlighting formal instruction as a primary avenue for developing students' ability to identify and respond to disinformation. Awareness campaigns ($M = 3.13$), workshops and seminars ($M = 3.11$), practical classroom exercises ($M = 3.10$), and fact-checking training ($M = 3.09$) were also highly valued, alongside access to fact-checking resources ($M = 3.09$) and regular digital literacy campaigns ($M = 3.06$). Critical thinking courses ($M = 3.07$), collaboration with media professionals ($M = 3.05$), and peer-led training ($M = 3.01$) further emphasise analytical reasoning, expert guidance, and social learning. Therefore, respondents strongly support a multi-faceted approach combining curriculum integration, practical skill-building, awareness initiatives, expert collaboration, peer engagement, and resource access to empower Nigerian undergraduates to critically evaluate and respond to disinformation.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that undergraduates at Kwara State University and the University of Ilorin are frequently exposed to disinformation across digital platforms, including forwarded messages with questionable claims, sensationalised headlines, unverified content, and digitally manipulated images or videos. This suggests that Nigerian undergraduates operate in an online environment saturated with misleading information, supporting Chidozie's (2025) assertion that high digital engagement does not necessarily translate into the ability to critically evaluate credible information. The prominence of peer-to-peer sharing and social media amplification also reflects concerns raised by Adjin-Tettey and Amenaghawon (2024) and Larreguy et al. (2025), who note that the rapid dissemination of unverified information often prioritises speed over accuracy. This pattern may result from high online activity combined with limited formal media literacy training, creating a gap between exposure and evaluative skills.

Despite high exposure, students demonstrated only moderate competence in detecting and responding to disinformation. While many could partially identify credible sources and recognise misleading or manipulated content, they were less effective in analysing message intent, evaluating multiple perspectives, or responding appropriately to false information. Similar patterns were reported by Agina-Obu and Okwu (2023) and Oluwafemi and Adisa (2025), who found that although undergraduates are digitally active, they often lack structured critical evaluation skills. This moderate competence likely reflects the absence of systematic, curriculum-integrated media literacy programmes.

Verification practices were largely informal. Although some students reported evaluating information before sharing, cross-checking sources, or assessing author credibility, systematic strategies such as using fact-checking tools, tracing sources, and verifying multimedia content were rarely applied. This supports findings by Wineburg and McGrew (2019) and Adjin-Tettey and Amenaghawon (2024), which indicate that perceived verification competence often exceeds actual practice, partly due to limited access to verification tools, time constraints, and insufficient formal guidance. Students also reported several challenges in evaluating online information, including information overload, rapid dissemination of unverified content, difficulty assessing source credibility, limited training in critical evaluation, barriers to detecting bias or manipulated content, restricted access to verification tools, technical language barriers, peer influence, and time constraints. These findings align with prior



studies highlighting structural and socio-educational constraints, particularly limited curricular integration and social pressures encouraging rapid sharing as barriers to effective verification practices in Nigerian universities (ICIR, 2023; Raji et al., 2025).

Participants strongly supported strategies for improving media literacy, including integrating media literacy into university curricula, organising awareness campaigns, conducting workshops and practical exercises, providing fact-checking resources, promoting critical thinking courses, and fostering collaboration with media professionals. Peer-led training was also recognised as valuable, highlighting the role of social learning. These results align with Kehinde-Awoyele and Adeowu (2025), Larreguy et al. (2025), and Voitovych et al. (2025), who emphasise that multi-faceted approaches combining formal instruction, practical training, and collaborative learning are most effective in countering disinformation. Be that as it may, the study highlights the gap between high exposure to disinformation and the practical skills required for critical evaluation, underlining the need for curriculum integration, applied training, and social learning strategies in Nigerian universities.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that undergraduates at Kwara State University and the University of Ilorin operate in digital environments saturated with disinformation, including unverified news, sensationalised headlines, forwarded messages, and manipulated multimedia. Despite high exposure, their abilities to evaluate, verify, and respond to such content remain moderate, indicating gaps in critical reasoning, verification skills, and structured guidance, largely due to limited curricular integration of media literacy. Students support a multi-faceted strategy for strengthening media literacy, including curriculum integration, practical workshops, fact-checking training, awareness campaigns, peer-led initiatives, and collaboration with media professionals. Bridging the gap between high exposure to disinformation and moderate evaluative skills is essential for developing digitally literate undergraduates capable of critical judgment, informed decision-making, and responsible participation in the digital information environment. The study, therefore, stresses the need to strengthen media literacy as both an academic priority and a strategic pathway to fostering an informed citizenry.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are suggested to strengthen Nigerian undergraduates' capacity to become digitally savvy.

1. Universities should implement media literacy programmes emphasising skills to help undergraduates evaluate online information and reduce the spread of disinformation.
2. Students should be trained to fact-check, assess source credibility, detect manipulation, and verify multimedia content before sharing or acting on digital information.
3. Structured workshops and practical exercises should develop students' hands-on verification skills, including cross-referencing sources and using fact-checking tools.
4. Interventions should address technical, structural, and social barriers, such as information overload, limited access to verification tools, and peer-influenced rapid sharing.
5. A multi-faceted media literacy strategy, combining curriculum integration, practical training, access to verification resources, and expert guidance, should systematically strengthen students' ability to verify digital content.



Ethical Clearance

Ethical consent was obtained from all participants in this study. Participants were informed that the study was conducted solely for academic purposes, and their participation was voluntary.

Acknowledgements

The researchers acknowledge the faculty presidents for their assistance with data collection.

Sources of Funding

This study received no funding.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Authors' Contributions

Habibat Bolajoko Na'Allah conceived the study and designed the methodology, while Farouq Olakunle Malik collated the data, performed the analysis, and drafted the manuscript. Both authors carefully reviewed and approved the final version and are responsible for its content.

Data Availability Statement

The datasets supporting the conclusions of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Citation

Na'Allah, H. B., & Malik, F. O. (2026). Media literacy and digital awareness as tools for combating disinformation among undergraduate students in Kwara State University and University of Ilorin. *International Journal of Sub-Saharan African Research*, 4(1), 528-544. doi:10.5281/zenodo.19147768

REFERENCES

- Adjin-Tettey, T. D., & Amenaghawon, F. (2024). Countering the threats of dis/misinformation: Fact-checking practices of students of two universities in West Africa. *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, 14(1), e202409. <https://doi.org/10.30935/ojcm/14134>
- Agina-Obu, R., & Okwu, E. (2023). Impact of digital literacy on university students' use of digital resources in Nigeria. *Asian Journal of Information Science and Technology*, 13(2), 60–65. <https://doi.org/10.51983/ajist-2023.13.2.3587>
- Aligwe, H. N., Nwankwo, S. U. & Nwafor, K.A. (2017). Social Media Use Pattern and the Image Implication among University Undergraduate Students in South East, Nigeria. *IDOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 2(2): 231-249, 2017. Available online at:<https://www.idosr.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/IDOSR-JOURNAL-OF-HUMANITIES-AND-SOCIAL-SCIENCES-22-231-249-2017..pdf>.



- Chidozie, O. E. (2025). Building resilience against disinformation: Media literacy and digital hygiene interventions for Nigerian youth. *Journal of Media, Journalism & Mass Communication*, 1(1), 9–16. <https://doi.org/10.54536/jmjmc.v1i1.4827>
- Eshiet, G. B. (2025). The role of digital literacy in information discernment and misinformation resilience: A dual-outcome analysis in the Nigerian social media context. *Àgídìgbò: ABUAD Journal of the Humanities*, 13(2), 766–788. <https://doi.org/10.53982/agidigbo.2025.1302.22-j>
- Guess, A. M., Lerner, M., Lyons, B., Montgomery, J. M., Nyhan, B., Reifler, J., & Sircar, N. (2020). A digital media literacy intervention increases discernment between mainstream and false news in the United States and India. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 117(27), 15536–15545. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1920498117>
- International Centre for Investigative Reporting (ICIR). (2023). ICIR partners with tertiary institutions on countering misinformation. Retrieved from <https://www.icirnigeria.org/icir-partners-tertiary-institutions-on-countering-misinformation>
- Jones Jang, S. M., Mortensen, T., & Liu, J. (2021). Does media literacy help identify fake news? Information literacy helps, but other literacies don't. *American Behavioural Scientist*, 65(2), 371–388. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764219869406>
- Kehinde-Awoyele, A. A., & Adeowu, A. W. (2025). Relationship between media literacy education and critical thinking among undergraduate social studies students. *International Journal of Governance and Development Studies*, 12(2). <https://ijogdes.oauife.edu.ng/index.php/ijogdes/article/view/39>
- Larreguy, H., Croke, K., Bowles, J., Liu, S., & Marshall, J. (2025). Sustaining exposure to fact checks: Misinformation discernment, media consumption, and its political implications. *American Political Science Review*, 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055424001394>
- Mutsvairo, B., & Bebawi, S. (2019). Journalism educators, regulatory realities, and pedagogical predicaments of the “fake news” era: A comparative perspective on the Middle East and Africa. *Journalism and Mass Communication Educator*, 74(2), 143–157. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077695819833552>
- Nwonyi, S. K., Oketa, M. C., Nwankwo, B. C., , Nweze, S., Nwafor, K. A., Udude, C. C., & Onwe, E. C. (2024). Impact of Social Media, Gender and Age on Narcissistic Development among Ebonyi State University Undergraduates. *African Journal of Politics and Administrative Studies*, 17(1), 536-559. Available online at: <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ajpas/article/view/271536>



- Ogbaeja, N.I. & Nwafor, K. A. (2017). Social Media and Learning Behaviour of University Undergraduates in South East Nigeria. *EBSU Journal of Mass Communication. Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki*, 4 (1), 188-207. Available online at: https://www.ebsujmc.com/uploads/249437_1527709874.pdf
- Okoro, M. N. & Nwafor, K. A. (2015). *The Role of Research in Development Communication: The Grassroots Orientation*, In Ndolo, I. S & Onwuemehili, C. (Ed.), *Nigeria: Development Communication & Interrogating the field*. Pp. 159-177.
- Olasupo, A. (2024, November 11). FactCheck Africa develops a curriculum to equip Nigerian students against misinformation. *TheCable*. <https://www.thecable.ng/factcheck-africa-develops-curriculum-to-equip-nigerian-students-against-misinformation>
- Oluwafemi Olubori, O., & Adisa, R. M. (2025). Media literacy competencies and online fraud awareness: A study of social media users at Kwara State University. *International Journal of Intellectual Discourse*, 8(4). <https://ijidjournal.org/index.php/ijid/article/view/1007>
- Raji, T. O., Oladimeji, O. A., & Akinyera, M. B. (2025). Media literacy in education: Preparing students for a digital world. *Journal of Educational Studies, Trends and Practice*, 8(8). <https://doi.org/10.70382/sjestp.v8i8.028>
- UNESCO. (2023). UNESCO, the Nigerian government and stakeholders call for the promotion of media and information literacy to mitigate disinformation and misinformation. Retrieved from <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/unesco-nigerian-government-and-stakeholders-call-promotion-media-and-information-literacy-mitigate>
- Voitovych, N., Kitsa, M., & Mudra, I. (2025). Media education and media literacy as a factor in combating disinformation. *Journalism and Media*, 6(4), 188. <https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia6040188>
- Wineburg, S., & McGrew, S. (2019). Lateral reading and the nature of expertise: Reading less and learning more when evaluating digital information. *Teachers College Record*, 121(11), 1–40.