

Chapter 13

Addressing Disinformation Vulnerabilities in International Students and Paths to Resilience

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Abstract: International students face particular vulnerabilities to disinformation due to unique social and digital factors associated with adjusting to a new country. They often rely on social media to obtain information about their host country and maintain connections with loved ones back home, which can increase their susceptibility to false narratives and disinformation. Furthermore, a lack of familiarity with local information ecosystems, language barriers, and a strong need for social acceptance make them potential targets for disinformation campaigns. This heightened susceptibility underscores the need for tailored media literacy programs. By fostering critical thinking skills and enhancing awareness of disinformation tactics, educational institutions can play a crucial role in equipping international students with the resilience required to safely navigate today's complex information landscape.

Keywords: Social media, language barriers, political context, media literacy, social inclusion

Introduction

Disinformation represents a deliberate effort to manipulate public opinions and behaviors by disseminating misleading or false information, often crafted to spread rapidly within social networks. Its effectiveness lies in a combination of psychological vulnerabilities, societal dynamics, and information eco-

systems. Disinformation targets human emotions and exploits our need for social connection and validation. Narratives are designed to evoke intense emotional reactions—such as anger, fear, or outrage—and prompt individuals to share them within their networks. This sharing creates echo chambers, where individuals reinforce one another’s existing beliefs and over time, create closed information loops which amplify biases and diminish exposure to diverse perspectives. Furthermore, algorithms on digital platforms are designed to prioritize engagement, often promoting content similar to what users have previously interacted with, regardless of its accuracy and credibility.¹ This cycle perpetuates the spread of disinformation, embedding falsehoods into public discourse and personal belief systems.

Disinformation operates in such a way that virtually no one is entirely immune to its influence. By exploiting human psychology and the dynamics of information ecosystems, it ensures the rapid spread of false narratives. However, resilience to disinformation can be built through media literacy, critical thinking, and a solid understanding of current events. Media literacy empowers individuals to critically assess information and engage thoughtfully with content. In the realm of political disinformation, awareness of the political landscape is essential for recognizing the motivations behind manipulative campaigns, allowing individuals to evaluate who benefits from specific narratives and why. This awareness also enhances the ability to detect bias and manipulation, making individuals less susceptible to emotionally charged content designed to sway public opinion.

Despite these protective factors, certain groups remain more vulnerable to disinformation. For instance, research indicates that while older generations often perceive themselves as more susceptible to misinformation, younger people are generally more adept at identifying disinformation, thanks to practices such as “lateral reading” and fact-checking.² However, other stu-

¹ Donghee Shin, Michael Hameleers, Yong Jin Park, Jeong Nam Kim, Daniel Trielli, Nicholas Diakopoulos, Natali Helberger, Seth C. Lewis, Oscar Westlund and Sabine Baumann, “Countering Algorithmic Bias and Disinformation and Effectively Harnessing the Power of AI in Media,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 99, no. 4 (2022): 887–907.

² “A Global Study on Information Literacy,” Poynter Institute, August 2022, <https://www.poynter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/A-Global-Study-on-Information-Literacy-1.pdf>.

dies, such as the one conducted by the University of Cambridge, suggest that younger adults may actually be worse at recognizing false political headlines than older adults.³ This particular study showed that younger participants struggled more to identify misleading political content. These findings suggest that resilience against disinformation is not necessarily linked to age or familiarity with the internet but rather to media literacy and an understanding of the political context. Hence, even young individuals who might be familiar with technology, but lack exposure to media literacy education and are unfamiliar with the political landscape, are at a disadvantage. Additionally, social dynamics play a significant role in the spread of disinformation. Studies have shown a positive correlation between socialization and the sharing of misleading information.⁴ In other words, people often share disinformation in pursuit of social validation.⁵ As a result, those who are socially isolated may be more prone to disseminating disinformation, or in this case misinformation as they might not be aware that it is false, in hope of social inclusion.

The factors outlined above represent just a few of the challenges international students face when encountering disinformation in their host countries. Their potential social isolation and desire for social inclusion heighten their vulnerability to misleading narratives. Furthermore, unfamiliarity with the political context of their host country complicates their ability to identify politically charged disinformation. Students from countries with limited media freedom or low levels of media literacy may also struggle to discern credible news sources, leaving them more susceptible to manipulation. The language barrier further exacerbates these risks, as it may prevent them from fully understanding or critically engaging with the information they encounter. The following section will delve deeper into these factors, before offering recommendations for fostering resilience against disinformation.

³ Fred Lewsey, "Misinformation Susceptibility Test," *University of Cambridge*, June 29, 2023, <https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/misinformation-susceptibility-test>.

⁴ Yanqing Sun and Juan Xie, "Who shares misinformation on social media? A meta-analysis of individual traits related to misinformation sharing," *Computers in Human Behavior* 158 (2024): 108–271.

⁵ Barui K. Waruwu, Edson C. Tandoc, Jr, Andrew Duffy, Nuri Kim and Rich Ling, "Telling lies together? Sharing news as a form of social authentication," *New Media & Society* 23, no. 9 (2021): 2516–2533.

Disinformation Vulnerabilities in International Students

Social media has become a prominent platform for the dissemination of disinformation. Studies have shown that we pay more attention to news which create intense emotions⁶ and are more likely to believe news which evoke fear and outrage.⁷ Since disinformation exploits societal vulnerabilities and ongoing controversial debates while utilizing strong emotions of fear and anger, it is not surprising that these narratives appear in our social media.⁸ This poses a problem for international students because social media is a crucial tool for them to maintain contact with their families and friends back home. Therefore, the likelihood that they will be exposed to disinformation increases significantly, given the amount of time they will likely spend on social media. Furthermore, studies have shown that we are more likely to believe a message to which we have been frequently exposed.⁹ Therefore, the frequent engagement of international students with disinformation ridden social media heightens their exposure and vulnerability to disinformation.

Moreover, the new and maybe unfamiliar political setting and language, only heightens these individuals' susceptibility to disinformation narratives. When arriving in a new country, these students can often lack a deep understanding of the political landscape, the current debates, and public opinions. Without this background knowledge, it might be difficult to critically analyze politically charged information. Furthermore, the unfamiliarity with the information ecosystem, can also make it harder to distinguish between credible and biased news sources, as they can be unfamiliar with the local news. Additionally, some students may come from countries where there is little to no freedom of media and therefore might be unfamiliar with independent

⁶ Megan McBride, Heather Wolters, Kaia Haney, William Rosenau, Neil Carey and Kasey Stricklin, *The Psychology of (Dis) information: Case Studies and Implications*, (Center for Naval Analyses, 2021), <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/trecms/pdf/AD1181768.pdf>.

⁷ "Journalism and Facts: Misinformation, Belief, and Action," *American Psychological Association*, November 29, 2023, <https://www.apa.org/topics/journalism-facts/misinformation-belief-action>.

⁸ Massimo Flore, "Understanding Citizens' Vulnerabilities (II): From Disinformation to Hostile Narratives," *European Commission*, (2020).

⁹ Madeline Jalbert, Eryn Newman and Norbert Schwarz, "Only Half of What I'll Tell You Is True: Expecting to Encounter Falsehoods Reduces Illusory Truth," *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* 9, no. 4 (2020): 602–613.

media as they have been taught to rely on only government messaging. This can create a significant problem in navigating a new information ecosystem, where information and news are spread by both governments and independent media. Moreover, due to the language barrier, students might rely on their home news for information. In the case that their country's government does control the media, it means that their access to multidimensional media is limited, and they might be exposed to information about their host country, which they cannot verify locally. Although not every international student will come from countries where the media is state controlled, nevertheless, a new information ecosystem, unfamiliarity with news sources, and the language barrier might pose significant obstacles to finding credible information.

Social dynamics play another key role in international students' vulnerability to disinformation. Due to cultural or language barriers, international students might have a harder time making friends. Hence, if a student feels isolated in their new environment, they might reach for online connections. While this practice is not inherently harmful, there exists a correlation between social inclusion and the spread of false information online.¹⁰ In order to bond with their peers, they might share similar content in hope of strengthening the bond. Afterall, we are more likely to engage with individuals who share similar interests.¹¹ However, due to the previously mentioned factors, such as unfamiliarity with the information ecosystem and the language barrier, they might be unable to critically engage with the information in order to verify its credibility and unknowingly spread false information. Furthermore, as people are more likely to share disinformation if it comes from a trusted source, or someone with whom they feel a sense of common identity, it is likely that they might engage with disinformation if it comes from peers with whom they have just bonded or are hoping to get

¹⁰ Jingwen Zhang, Wen Wang and Jason A. Martin, "The Role of Social Media Literacy in Reducing Belief in COVID-19 Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories," *Computers in Human Behavior* 150 (2024).

¹¹ Gustavo Mesch and Ilan Talmud, "The Quality of Online and Offline Relationships: The Role of Multiplexity and Duration of Social Relationship," *The information society* 22, no. 3 (2006): 137–148.

to know.¹² Therefore, in the pursuit of that social inclusion, international students might become more likely to spread misinformation.

The aforementioned factors are only a fraction of the vulnerabilities which make international students more susceptible to disinformation. Their trust or mistrust towards media influenced by their home countries, the targeting of specific disinformation actors, and the many other challenges which come along with adapting to a new culture, can have a strong influence on their resilience to disinformation. Understanding these factors, however, is key to developing strategies to mitigate the spread of disinformation and enhancing collective resilience.

Paths to Resilience

There is no single way to combat disinformation. However, most literature and recommendations focus on media literacy. Media literacy is crucial in the fight against disinformation and must remain an important tool. While it should start during the early stages of education, it should also be a lifelong effort. Evolving technology, such as AI, continuously makes disinformation harder to recognize. Hence, media literacy must evolve with it and include new methods of recognizing disinformation. This is especially important for international students, as access to media literacy education may not be available in every country and can therefore vary significantly among individuals in this group. Universities should create workshops, if not lectures, on media literacy which are open to both local and international students. Higher education requires students to critically engage with information on a daily basis and therefore, offering assistance with media literacy skills will not only help students strengthen their resilience against disinformation, but will also benefit them during their academic journey.

One of the factors which make international students more susceptible to disinformation, is the lack of political and social context of the country. While it

¹² Tom Buchanan and Vladlena Benson, "Spreading Disinformation on Facebook: Do Trust in Message Source, Risk Propensity, or Personality Affect the Organic Reach of 'Fake News'?" *Social media+ society* 5, no. 4 (2019); Karen Hao, "Gen Z Is the Most Vulnerable Generation to Online Misinformation," *MIT Technology Review*, June 30, 2021, <https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/06/30/1026338/gen-z-online-misinformation/>.

might be too unrealistic to expect universities to educate all their international students on the entire history of the host country, it would be beneficial to bring students closer to the culture. By creating social events which allow international students to mingle with local students, the university is providing students with an opportunity to learn about the country from individuals who actually live there. Local students will have a chance to share the political, social, and cultural context of the host country which can help international students get more familiar with their environment. This can help students critically engage with information, as they will have a better understanding and background of the current situation. In fact, these interactions can help international students overcome multiple challenges which might be negatively affecting their resilience.

Social events can provide international students with the opportunity to form new friendships and bonds, and create a sense of belonging and social inclusion. These connections can help reduce students' anxiety about feeling socially excluded and discourage them from sharing content they're unsure about just to gain social validation from their peers. Friendships and regular interaction with local students can also help with the language barrier, as it provides them with someone who can help them navigate through the foreign language.

It is important to acknowledge the hardships which can make international students more susceptible to local disinformation. Social inclusivity and media literacy education are just two pathways which universities can utilize to help international students strengthen their resilience to disinformation. It is vital that universities take a multidimensional approach to this challenge by combining education, support, and social integration that can decrease the risks disinformation poses to this vulnerable group. By fostering a supportive and informed environment, universities can empower international students to critically engage with the information they encounter, ultimately reducing the spread and impact of disinformation.

Policy Recommendations

International students face a unique challenge in the fight against disinformation. Their frequent usage of social media platforms increases their exposure

to disinformation narratives, while unfamiliarity with the host country's information ecosystem, and political context decreases their ability to critically analyze information. Unfamiliarity with the local language further exacerbates the issue, as it limits the number of news sources they have available for fact-checking and lateral reading. Furthermore, social isolation may prompt them to seek online connections, increasing their vulnerability to disinformation and the likelihood of inadvertently sharing misinformation. Universities should play a key role in creating an informed and supportive environment which can help increase international students' resilience to disinformation.

Recommendations

1. Universities should offer workshops or lectures on the fundamentals of media literacy, accessible to all students, as disinformation poses a universal threat. Some students may come from countries with low media literacy rates, and since critically engaging with information is a regular part of a student's curriculum, universities should offer courses which help students improve these skills.
2. Universities should supply information about credible news sources and where to find them. In today's digital age, there are so many news sources available online, it can be hard to distinguish between the credible and non-credible ones. This can be especially difficult for international students, who may not be familiar with the local information ecosystem. Providing a list of credible sources, in various languages, can help students navigate the information landscape. Furthermore, universities should ensure their students have access to these reliable news sources.
3. Universities should also provide a list of fact-checking resources, including websites of NGOs and organizations dedicated to this work. Collaboration between higher education institutions and fact-checking organizations offers mutual benefits: students and faculty gain access to valuable training and expertise, while fact-checking organizations enhance their visibility and reach within academic communities.
4. In collaboration with fact-checking organizations, universities can also monitor the media landscape to keep the student body informed abo-

ut the current disinformation trends and narratives likely targeting students and the community. Such information can be placed in a separate tab on the university's website or sent through the university's newsletter. By creating such initiatives, the university can invite students to become fact-checkers and provide training on fact-checking tools.

5. Extracurricular courses which provide an introduction to the politics, culture, and history of the host country should be arranged. By providing students with a deeper understanding of the country's political systems, media landscape, cultural norms, and historical events, they have a higher chance of recognizing when a piece of information or narrative is false.
6. Universities should organize social events which give an opportunity for international students to meet local students. These events can be in the form of cultural nights, collaborative projects, or community service initiatives. Helping international students integrate into the local community and form friendships can reduce social isolation, which might otherwise lead them to seek online connections and increase their exposure to disinformation. These friendships can also become reliable sources of information, which makes it less likely that individuals will seek information from less reliable sources online. Furthermore, local students can provide international individuals with insights into their information ecosystem as well as cultural, political, and historical contexts. Interactions with the local community can also break down stereotypes which disinformation campaigns often exploit.

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