

College Students' Fake News Discernment: The Ability to Discern Fact from Opinion, Critical Thinking, Need for Cognition and Locus of Control

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate variables that may be related to college students' fake news discernment, inspired by Potter's cognitive media literacy model (2004). The investigated variables included college students' ability to discern fact from opinion, critical thinking skills, beliefs in their control over situations or experiences (locus of control), and the degree to which they engage in and enjoy thinking (need for cognition). The study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods research design.

The survey quantitatively measured 296 college students' fact and opinion discernment, critical thinking skills, need for cognition, and locus of control. Critical thinking was a variable positively correlated with the fact and opinion discernment, as well as the need for cognition respectively. The follow-up interview data with 19 college students further explained the survey results and their media literacy practices. They described how they discern fact from opinion and evaluate information when reading news online. They stated that polarized media environments and their prior knowledge made information evaluation difficult when reading news online. The participants also described the importance and motivation of discerning fact and opinion and evaluating information in news reports.

The study findings inform considerations for media literacy education which strengthens students' skills regarding fake news discernment. This study suggests future work that further investigates the studied variables, such as developing the fact and opinion discernment instrument with borderline statements and developing a media literacy model in the context of news reading.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Information literacy; education; specific populations.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Media literacy; information literacy; news literacy; critical thinking; fake news; college students.