Emotional Vs Rational Responses to Polarizing News: A Study of Fact-Checking Behaviour in Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

The rapid dissemination of misinformation online, especially through Instagram, acts upon and undermines the digital literacy of young adults that search for and share information on the internet. This study explores the psychological processes influencing fact-checking propensities of young adults aged 18 to 25, focusing on how emotional reactivity and rational cognitive processes mediate their responses to controversial news. Using a quantitative descriptive-correlational research design, a structured questionnaire comprising four sections was applied: an emotional reactivity scale, a cognitive reflection test, a news evaluation task, and a self-report measure of fact-checking behavior. Through purposive and convenience sampling, 39 participants were recruited online through various platforms, including Instagram and WhatsApp. The study was built under the premise to investigate whether fact-checking behavior has more grounds to be related to emotional impulses or to reflective rational processes within the realms of online media consumption.

Keywords: *emotional reactivity, fact-checking, misinformation, rational thinking, young adults, instagram news.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The illustrious Walter Cronkite, popularly referred to as the "most trusted man in America," instructed

that "the ethic of a journalist is to recognize one's prejudices and biases and avoid getting them into print." Each student who embarks on a journalism career is driven by a desire and commitment to pen stories that alter history and reveal injustices at the onset of his or her academic career. Essentially, journalism was intended to be a reflection of society, carrying news objectively, with integrity, and honesty. The classic practice of reporting "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth" was once regarded as inviolable. Nevertheless, the practice of journalism has dramatically evolved over time (Swart, 2021). The new-age media has transgressed the traditional zone of just delivering news; it also helps shape public perception, political discourse, and legal proceedings. The deaths of Jiah Khan and Sushant Singh Rajput demonstrate how sensationalism and speculation often get in the way of actual reporting. Similarly, a juicy controversy involving Kannada actor Darshan shows how underhanded PR can mold public discourse and impede any gains for justice.

The whole media environment remains manipulated by influencer culture and targeted advertising. Influencers who are perceived as a "relatable" voice have paid content masquerading as their personal views. The individualization of media feeds through highly sophisticated algorithms manipulates users into acting according to their profiling on a psychological basis; it is a matter raising profound questions in ethics regarding manipulation, consent, and privacy. Such manipulation becomes crucially powerful for emerging adulthood-years 18 to 25-because they are digital natives-as well as being consumers and soon-to-be voters. The media that shape them: Instagram, YouTube, Twitter-firstly mostly constitute online media. When these platforms facilitate the spreading of misinformation, so-called "fake news," it births a global crisis threatening health, democracy, and social harmony.

A research study was carried out with purposive and convenience sampling to understand how young people deal with misinformation. The study consisted of 39 young adults completing an online questionnaire with four parts: Emotional Reactivity Scale, Cognitive Reflection Test, News Evaluation Task, and Fact-Checking Attitudes Scale. These measures evaluated the participants' emotional reactivity, willingness to reason, ability to recognize false news, and motivation to fact-check information. In essence, the study aims to shed some light on the psychological variables that influence fact-checking behavior. The results of this study would be used to design education programs as well as campaigns for media literacy and social media policy that promote critical thinking and responsible media consumption in an era where it is ever so difficult to separate truth from fiction.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the biggest generation gaps in the world today lies between India and its youth, who constitute about half of all of India's population. The youth seem engulfed within their respective spheres with only dilute civic consciousness. If people are watching and absorbing news, then generally it is with the thought that it will not affect them. The increasing scandal of news on social media must press youth media literacy; yet, this should not be seen as a mere individual endeavor but as a collective social norm forged by platform contexts like Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. News literacy behavior can be as dynamic as the waxing trends and platform-specific interactions themselves. Sikorski (2021) systematically reviewed 121 studies, highlighting that social media generate political polarization by pushing emotionally charged contents, which confirm an ideology through engagement-oriented algorithms. This sort of pro-attitudinal mediacon-ithesis strengthens users in their already existing beliefs.

Wasike (2023) shows that fact-checking on social media suggests typical interventions such as content labeling or content removal rarely succeed in deterring users from sharing misinformation. In contrast, it was the more potent deterrent: Fear of social ostracization. Unmoderated sharing of polarizing content was most prevalent among emotionally reactive members unless they feared loss of esteem from their reference community. This implies a greater impetus toward emotional and social incentives rather than formal inhibition. Cassidy (2007) considered journalist views on online news credibility, finding that role perceptions, more than demographic variables, affect the ways in which journalists evaluate online content. Those with a populist orientation were more positive about online news, with the dichotomous adversarial journalists, that is, those who seek to hold power to account less so. These same divides may resonate concerning how young news consumers, perhaps especially in India, view content credibility and the fact-checking of content on platforms such as Twitter. Neyazi's (2021) work, in contrast, focused on misinformation in India, with one of the world's most engaged online populations. Neyazi's results showed that WhatsApp usage, political affiliation, and trust in news sources strongly influenced concern about misinformation. Interestingly, unlike Facebook or Twitter, WhatsApp usage did not strongly correlate with news dissemination, suggesting that platform dynamics and political identity shape how users interface with content.

Rajadurai (2023) tries to put forth the alarming political disengagement of the young generation in India, stating how half of them declare to have no interest in politics, despite the fact that youths

constitute a considerable chunk of the population. With politics of stagnation, corruption, and, to an extent, a generation gap in leadership, young voters have slowly been alienated. Thus, the Aam Aadmi Party seemed to be for a while the shining ray of hope in the midst of other established political parties but then contradicted the very idea of secularism that was alleged to have been at its core, further accentuating the cynicism surrounding politics in general. With older-generation politicians enjoying a commanding position in leadership, these systemic impediments, such as the candidate for parliamentary elections having to be at least 25 years old, hold back young voices from being heard in governance. Political culture fostered in India has exposed these very youth, who have now become uninterested in leadership as well as in the process, albeit indifferently. An initiative like youth councils seems promising in giving political engagement more inclusive spaces but, in the immediate term, finds itself blocked by institutional resistance and a lack of political will.

2.1 Research Gap

The Indian youth, with the country's future in their hands, however, have been less engaged civically and less interested in verifying news. Though global research focuses on media literacy and fact-checking, there is little India-specific study into the theory behind how young adults engage with news services like Instagram. Emotional and social aspects of fact-checking behavior remain unexplored in this context. An implication that some studies give is that social consequences such as the fear of social exclusion might take precedence over rational choices in checking misinformation. Further, the specific mixture of political polarization, media fragmentation, and low political integration of Indian youth forces one to understand how emotion and cognition operate together to build fact-checking behaviors. This gap will attempt to be filled by looking into young Indian adults sheltering in the midst of fast-paced and visual media sites where emotionally charged and ideologically manipulative content is supreme.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Objectives:

1. To assess the level of fact-checking behaviour among young adults.
2. To examine the relationship between emotional reasoning and fact-checking

behaviour.

3. To examine the relationship between rational thinking and fact-checking behaviour.

3.2 Research questions:

1. What is the level of fact-checking behaviour among young adults on Instagram? • What is the relationship between emotional reactivity, rational thinking, and fact-checking behaviour in response to controversial news on Instagram?
2. Do rational thinking abilities better predict fact-checking behaviour and fake news detection accuracy than emotional reactivity among young adults?

3.3 Hypotheses:

H_1: There is no significant relationship between emotional reactivity and fact-checking behaviour.

H_2: There is no significant relationship between rational thinking (as measured by the Cognitive Reflection Test) and fact-checking behaviour.

H_3: There is no significant difference in fake news detection accuracy between individuals with high and low rational thinking scores.

3.4 Research Design:

A descriptive and correlational research design has been adopted to examine how rational and emotional faculties impact the fact-checking traits among young adults on Instagram.The descriptive part, in essence, accounts for levels of emotional sensitivity, levels of logical reasoning, and levels of fact-checking behavior. The correlational side of the field looks at the relationships that exist between these variables, never stepping into the realm of causative interpretation.This mixed design links standardized tests with real-world news evaluation tasks to mimic Instagram news consumption and probe the cognitive and emotional processes involved. For the analyses of the proposed hypotheses, the correlations between the variables of emotional reactivity, rational thinking (Cognitive Reflection Test), news discernment ability, and fact-checking behavior were calculated using the Pearson correlation coefficient (r). Acceptance or rejection of each null hypothesis was based on whether its p-value was less than 0.05 2-tailed. Pearson's r was used because the data were continuous, and the

study was correlational in nature, meaning it aimed to examine the strength and direction of a linear relationship among variables without inferring causation.

3.5 Participants:

The study targeted 39 young adults aged from 18 to 25, selected on the basis of purposive and convenience sampling. The participants were active users of Instagram who interacted with news in some way or the other on the platform. Although the sample size could be regarded as small, it was something that could be considered for conducting an exploratory study, given the importance of the population to our study and the narrowed-down focus of the study itself. Consenting to participation, assurance of confidentiality, and anonymity were all provided for online, allowing for socially-desirable honest and voluntary participation.

3.6 The tools used for data collection:

Four prime instruments for data collection were used to address the study objectives and research questions, the choice of each instrument dictated by its ability to measure a psychological or behavioral construct speculated to hold relevance in fact-checking behavior on Instagram.

i. Emotional Reactivity Scale (Likert Scale): The Emotional Reactivity Scale is one of the psychological instruments adapted for this study to measure emotional sensitivity and interpersonal reactivity. It comprised seven items rated on a Likert scale of 0 to 4, which described how participants might respond to emotionally laden material. For instance, some of the statements, such as “I get upset easily when reading distressing news online,” helped assess participants' emotional vulnerability. Score calculated by adding up participant's responses range from 0–28, with higher scores indicating increased emotional reactivity. This instrument sought to look into whether participants who are highly emotionally reactive shy away from verifying contentious news or just impulsively share misinformation.

ii. Cognitive Reflection Test (CRT): The CRT developed by Frederick (2005) was the second instrument to measure rational thinking. There are three deceptively simple math problems on the CRT which requires a participant to suppress almost instantaneous intuitive but incorrect answers and use logical reasoning instead. The scoring procedure is simply 1 point for each correct answer with a total

score ranging from 0 to 3. Based on their performance, cases were categorized into intuitive thinkers (score 0), mixed thinkers (score 1), or reflective thinkers (scores 2-3). The CRT was employed to analyze whether rational and analytical thinking can provide a stronger prediction of fact-checking behavior than emotional reactivity.

iii. News Evaluation Task: The News Evaluation Task was the third instrument and was adopted from earlier studies carried out by Evans (2000), Levine (2013), and Pennycook (2017), and was adjusted to mirror contemporary Indian socio-political settings. Participants were exposed to eight news headline cases, some the news only, and others fake, and were required to judge whether they thought the headline was real or fake. Issues covered included elections, economic policies, and viral news events to make it all culturally relevant. Scores ranged from 0 to 8, with higher scores indicating better distinction and critical reading abilities in news. This task is a direct and practical approach in measuring the fluid detection of misinformation by participants, which is equally important in assessing the ability to fact-check in the real world.

iv. Fact-Checking Behavior Inventory (Researcher-Designed): The last instrument involved the Fact-Checking Behavior Inventory, which was written for this study specifically. Drawing from previous literature review (i.e., Friggeri et al., 2014; Pennycook et al., 2020), this 12-item Likert-type scale questionnaire measured participants' awareness, habits, and motivations in respect of news verification. Statements were included regarding trust in headlines, source-checking, and reactions to misinformation, with some items being reverse scored. Scores on this scale could range from 0 to 48, where higher scores signify stronger reflective engagement and more consistent fact-checking behavior. Thus, this scale helped researchers quantify verification behaviors on social media and analyze the correlation of these behaviors with emotional reactivity and rational thinking.

4. RESULTS

The present study investigated the correlation between emotional reactivity, rational thinking, news evaluation capability, and fact-checking behaviors among young adults in the context of controversial news on Instagram. For the analysis of the data, both descriptive and inferential statistics were used, including a correlation analysis that also served to test the hypotheses of the study and accomplish the stated objectives.

Ferreira et al. (2020) developed the Emotional Reactivity Scale to measure the emotional response of

the participants to socio-political news through a Likert-type format consisting of seven items. The participants indicated to what extent they agreed/disagreed with each item using a four-point Likert scale with points ranging from 0 (Strongly Disagree) to 4 (Strongly Agree), where the total score reflected the overall emotional reactivity. Following the instructions of Ferreira et al. (2020), the responses of the participants were then grouped into four categories that ranged from Very Low to Very High Emotional Reactivity. Beyond that, data was presented in a frequency table and visually represented in a bar graph for clarity. Hence, the bar graph shows the participants' distribution in each category of emotional reactivity - providing clarity on participants' emotional tendencies toward news content.

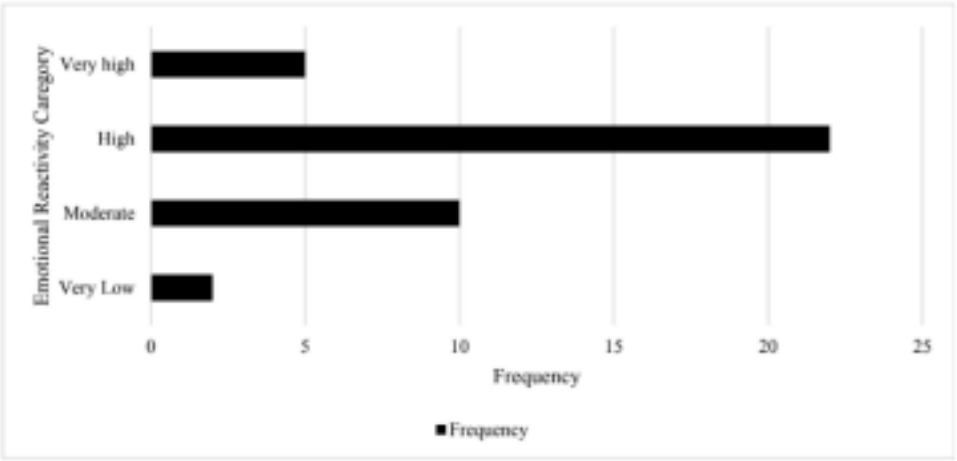
Table 1

Emotional Reactivity: Frequency Distribution

Score Range	Interpretation	Frequency
0 – 7	Very Low Emotional Reactivity	2
8 – 14	Moderate Emotional Reactivity	10
15 – 21	High Emotional Reactivity	22
22 - 28	Very High Emotional Reactivity	5

Figure1

Emotional Reactivity Frequency Distribution



To assess the rational thinking ability of the participants, the researchers used the Cognitive Reflection Test (CRT). The CRT consists of three trick questions that result in an intuitive but incorrect response.

A correct answer scored one point, allowing a score between 0 and 3. Based on participants' total score, participants were categorized into three different groups, which indicated the dominance of reflective and deliberate thinking over intuitive and impulsive. Each group's frequency was organized in table form, and a bar graph was created to visualize how participants were distributed across rational thinking levels.

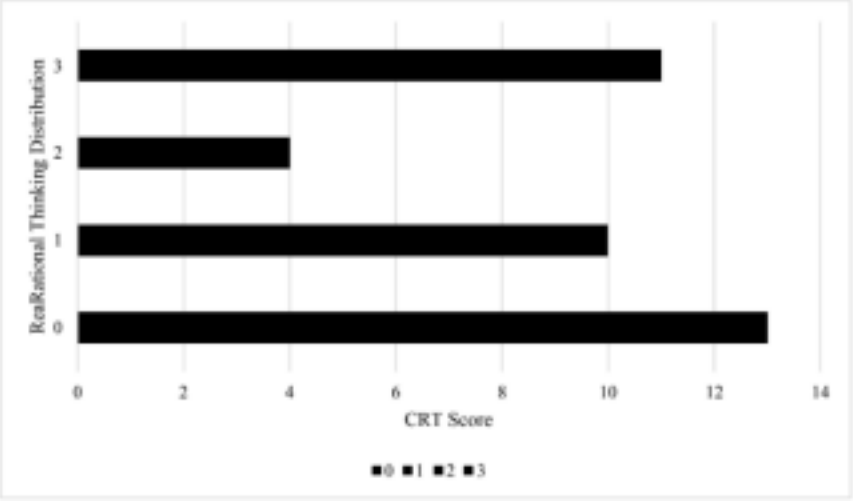
Table 2

Cognitive Reflection Test: Frequency Distribution

Score Range	Interpretation	Frequency
0	Fully intuitive (emotionally driven)	12
1	Mixed thinking	10
2	Reflective/rational thinking	4
3	Reflective/rational thinking	11

Figure 2

Rational Thinking Score Distribution



This part of the study presented participants with eight news items based on India,which included a mixture of true and false news items that participants were asked to classify as true or false. Each true or false classification earned one point. Therefore, total scores ranged from 0 to 8. Following the scoring, a total score was calculated to categorize participants into three group levels based on their ability to discern true from false news. A frequency table and corresponding bar chart were created to

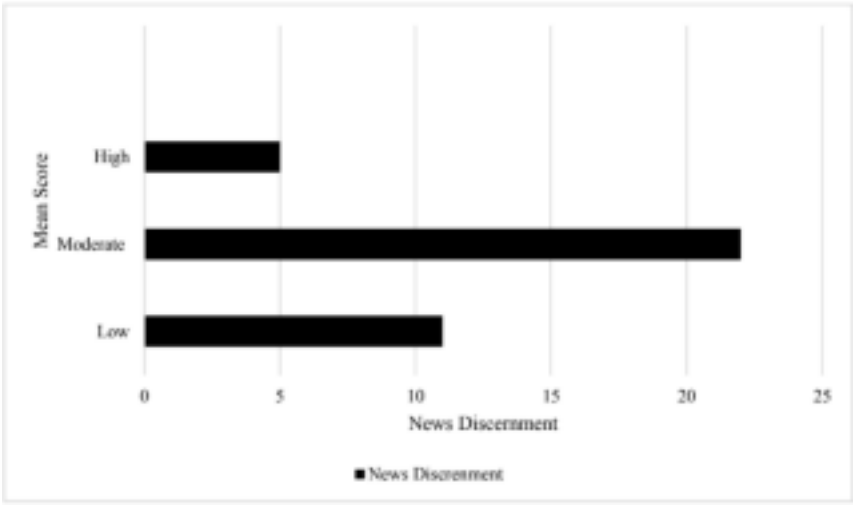
convey the distribution of scores across group levels.

Table 3

News Discernment: Frequency Distribution

Score Range	Interpretation	Frequency
0 -3	Low news discernment – high belief in misinformation	11
3 - 5	Moderate discernment – mixed reasoning	22
6 - 8	High news discernment – critical and reflective reader	5

Figure 3



The fact-checking behavior section, Judged Likert scale items created by one of the researchers, examined trends and recognition of these trends among social media news-goers. Twelve statements measured tendencies of verifying for one, reflecting on personal belief, and recognizing misinformation. Answer options ranged on a 5-point scale, with three items that were reversed-scored to contrast intuitive versus reflective tendencies. A total of 48 scores were possible; the higher the score, the more fact-checking-oriented they were and the more critical engagement they had. On such levels, participants were categorized into three groups.

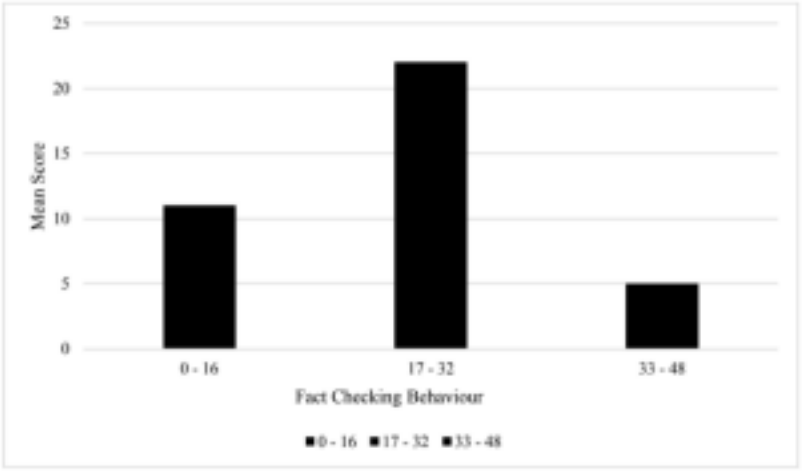
Table 4

Fact-Checking Behaviour: Frequency Distribution

Score Range	Interpretation	Frequency
0 - 16	Low news discernment – high belief in misinformation	11
17 - 32	Moderate discernment – mixed reasoning	22
33 - 48	High news discernment – critical and reflective reader	5

Figure 5

Fact-Checking Behaviour Frequency Distribution



4.1 Correlation Results

Pearson's correlation analysis was used to examine the relationships among Emotional Reactivity, Rational Thinking, News Evaluation skills, and Fact-Checking Behavior of the participants, with the significance level set to 0.05 (two-tailed). The Emotional Reactivity scale assessed participants' sensitivity and impulsivity toward socio-political news on Instagram, whereas Rational Thinking was measured by Frederick's (2005) CRT, which assesses the ability to override instinctive responses. The News Evaluation Task assessed participant proficiencies in knowing the difference between true and false Indian headlines, while Fact-Checking Behavior Scale assessed attentiveness and reflective practices concerning online news engagement. Results revealed Rational Thinking and Fact-Checking Behavior to exhibit a moderate positive correlation that is statistically significant r = .343, p = .033, thereby indicating that reflective reasoning predicts fact-checking tendencies. There was a weak and non-significant relationship between Emotional Reactivity and Fact-Checking Behavior (r .296; p =

.068). While other relationships that were studied, such as Emotional Reactivity, News Evaluation, and Rational Thinking, were either negligible or not statistically significant. Overall, the findings indicate rational thinking to be a better predictor of fact checking behavior than emotional reactivity and news discernment, while the rest of the variables were more or less functioning independently in this sample's social media context.

Table 5

		ERATOTAL SCORE	RTOTAL SCORE	NETTOTAL SCORE	FCTOTAL SCORE
ERATOTALSCORE	Pearson Correlation	1		-	
	Sig. (2-tailed)			-	
RTOTALSCORE	Pearson Correlation	.141	1		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.391			-
NETTOTALSCORE	Pearson Correlation	-.037	0.22	1	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.824	.896		-
FCTOTALSCORE	Pearson Correlation	.296	.343*	-.072	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.068	.033	.661	
	N	39	39	39	39

ERATOTAL – Emotional Reactivity Score; RTOTAL – Rationality Total; NETTOTALSCORE – News Evaluation Task score; FCTOTALSCORE – Fact-checking score.

The results indicate that rational thinking is a better predictor for fact-checking behavior than emotional reactivity or news evaluation, the other variables seemingly functioning independently in the context of social media in this sample. The studies further support the main argument that reasoning and reflective thinking competencies carry a heavier weight in bringing out fact-checking behavior than merely emotional reactivity. Young adults emotionally connect to polarizing news on Instagram; however, their ability for reflective reasoning, rather than an impulsive emotional reaction, largely determines whether they check the information or not before accepting or sharing it.

Such results importantly strengthen attempts for selective application-based media literacy interventions focused on critical thinking, cognitive reflection, and verification skills in the Indian social media landscape. The standing differences in fact-checking behaviors among differentiating sets of participants with lower discernment skills indicate the need for differentiated digital literacy programs aimed at inculcating systematic and habitual fact-checking behavior.

4.2 Results of Hypothesis Testing

Per correlation analysis:

H_1 (Emotional reactivity and fact-checking behaviors have no significant relationship): This hypothesis was accepted since the relationship was weak and not significant statistically ($r = 0.296$, $p = 0.068$).

H_2 (Rational thinking and fact-checking behavior have no significant association): The hypothesis was rejected, as there was a moderate, statistically significant positive correlation between rational thinking and fact-checking behavior ($r = 0.343$, $p = 0.033$).

H_3 (There is no significant difference in fake news detection accuracy between high and low rational thinkers): While this hypothesis is not tested explicitly in a group comparison format, partial support for rejecting this hypothesis can be drawn from the results of the correlational and classification analyses, since rational thinking correlated positively with fact-checking tendencies, but further group-based analyses are necessary for conclusive testing.

5. DISCUSSION

This study explored how emotional reactivity, rational thinking, news evaluation skills, and fact-checking behavior relate to each other concerning young adult engagement with controversial news on Instagram. Said platform is loaded with emotional stirrings, which makes understanding these dynamics a necessity. Rational thinking was found to have a positive relationship with fact-checking behavior ($r = 0.343$, $p = 0.033$). The participants who rated highly on the Cognitive Reflection Test were also more likely to verify information before accepting it or sharing it. This corresponds well with the research of Frederick (2005) and Wasike (2023), which suggests that reflective reasoning is key to resisting misinformation. Emotional reactivity did reveal a positive trend with fact-checking ($r = 0.296$), yet it was not significant ($p = 0.068$). This seems to mean that emotionally sensitive individuals tend to feel that questionable content may be questionable, but they check the content for accuracy inconsistently and only without engaging in reflective thinking. Swart (2021) saw a similar phenomenon and stressed the importance of cognitive resources such as news literacy to bridge that gap between emotional reactions and verification behaviors.

Turning to hypothesis testing, the results upheld the rejection of H_1, indicating the relevance of rational thinking in predicting fact-checking behavior. The positive correlation implies that those who can override immediate intuitive responses by analytical reflection are more likely to engage in fact-checking of online news. Conversely, H_0 is not rejected, implying that whenever emotionally

reactive individuals are moved by provocative content, this hardly drives them toward fact-checking. As for the third hypothesis, H_2, it appeared not to be tested by inferential means between groups but demonstrated, through correlational evidence, partial support for rejection. In other words, higher cognitive reflection scores were more conducive to accurate fact-checking orientation, thus supporting the idea of reflective cognitive processing as a prerequisite for accurate news assessment.

Interestingly, news evaluation skills had no significant correlation with fact-checking behavior ($r = -0.072$, $p = 0.661$), a result that contradicts earlier findings (Kubin & Von Sikorski, 2021). This suggests that identifying distortion does not necessarily motivate one to verify because social media users share content based on personal relevance even if it is demonstrably false (Wohn & Bowe, 2016). As such, the results applaud rational thinking as a key determinant of fact-checking behavior and point to media literacy programs that focus on reflective reasoning within the digital sphere.

6. CONCLUSION

This particular study looked at emotional response, rational thinking, news evaluation abilities, and fact-checking amongst young adults who consumed controversial news on Instagram. The results indicated a positive and significant association between rational thinking and fact-checking. Thus, people having stronger cognitive reflective abilities would tend to engage more in verifying information prior to sharing it or accepting it. This is consistent with the literature implicating reflective reasoning as one of the best shields against misinformation. While an upward trend between emotional reactivity and fact-checking emerged, it was not attested to be statistically significant at the 0.05 level of significance, implying that people with stronger emotional responses do not necessarily engage in verification behavior, unless or until they reflect on it. Neither was any relationship between news evaluation ability and fact-checking behavior found, revealing that recognizing misinformation does not directly lead to verification. In general, this study furthers the cause for a rational thinking system promoting fact-checking behavior and the application of reflection to any emotional charge of misinformation on social media.

In conclusion, hypothesis testing revealed that rational thinking is significantly related to fact-checking behavior, resulting in the rejection of H_2. However, H_1, which posits the lack of a significant relationship between emotional reactivity and fact-checking behavior, stands, suggesting that

emotional reactions do not constitute adequate predictors of verification tendencies. Partial support toward rejecting H_3 further endorses cognitive reflection's strengthening of fact-checking capabilities. These results underscore the need for interventions against misinformation to stress reflective reasoning instead of being oriented toward emotional cues or the mere exposure of individuals to misleading content.

6.1 Limitations and Implications

Notwithstanding its illuminative arguments, this has some limitations. These included the small sample size (N=39), which possibly limited statistical power and thus reduced the chances of detecting the weaker associations. Reliance on self-report measures might have also begun social desirability bias, with participants probably overstating their fact-checking habits. Additionally, concentrating on Instagram only limited the generalizability of the results from this study to other platforms or demographics. Future research should investigate larger and more diverse samples alongside behavioral measures such as click-tracking or simulation of fact-checking tasks. Furthermore, the impact of peer influence, social norms, and algorithms of a platform in nature in shaping fact-checking behavior would be considered worth researching. In light of these findings, further opportunities arise for digital literacy.Formative feature programs should: concentrate on the reflective thinking of young adults and development of critical evaluation skills rather than just developing their emotional sensitivity. Alongside the specifics of social and situational characteristics of misinformation, media literacy programs should empower users to critique content from an emotional and interactive interface.

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