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EXAMINING THE AWARENESS AND USE OF FACT-CHECKING PLATFORMS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN PAKISTAN

Dr. Syeda Afsheen Sohail[*1], Saad Majeed[2], Usama Hassan Soomro[3]

[*1] *Assistant Professor, Department of Media Studies and Design, Indus University*
[2] *Lecturer, Department of Media Studies and Design, Indus University*
[3] *Lecturer, Department of Media Studies and Design, Indus University*

[*1]afsheen.sohail@indus.edu.pk, [2]saad.majeed@indus.du.pk, [3]usama.soomro@indus.edu.pk

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Corresponding Author: *
Dr. Syeda Afsheen Sohail

Abstract

This research paper aims to examine the level of awareness and self-reported use of dedicated fact-checking platforms among the university going students in Pakistan. The research explores the everyday information encountering practices of students and the perceived usefulness of fact checking platforms, concerns about misinformation, and students' interest in getting training about the usage of such platforms. The study employs a quantitative research approach and an online survey among 200 students belonging to different public and provide universities has been conducted through Google Forms. The collected data has been analyzed using frequencies and percentages. 66.7% of the respondents reported that they had not heard of any of the listed fact-checking platforms, while just 16.7% said they had used a dedicated fact-checking platform. Instagram and WhatsApp are the most frequently named places to encounter current-affairs information. It is also found from the data that 72.2% of the participant were either very or extremely concerned about misinformation. Lack of knowledge about fact-checking platforms was the most frequently selected barrier (72.2%) that hinders the popularity and usage of fact checking platform among the university students. The students expressed their interest in learning more fact checking platforms through training and workshops. The results show a gap between concern about misinformation and familiarity with specialist verification services among the university level students. The findings provide a small-scale preliminary indication further guide the data collection and media and information literacy activities among the Pakistani university students.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth and popularity of digital platforms over the last few decades have increased the speed, reach and accessibility of information all over the globe. However, this development has also enabled inaccurate, misleading and manipulated claims to spread widely. Digital media users are widely exposed to entertainment,

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news and current-affairs content through social networks, messaging apps, video platforms, online news outlets and interpersonal networks. Frequent consumption of digital content does not however mean, that the users also know how to assess accuracy or that they use specialist fact-checking services to evaluate the authenticity and credibility of the content.

Media and information literacy (MIL) is the ability to access, evaluate, interpret, use and communicate information in a critical and responsible way. Fact-checking and related tools are part of a wider set of competencies to respond to misinformation and disinformation in UNESCO's MIL curriculum (UNESCO, 2021, 2024). MIL is critically important in current media landscape because verification is more than simply finding a website; rather it means identifying a claim that can be tested, finding trustworthy evidence, contrasting sources and knowing the limitations of what information exists. Fact-checking platforms review checkable claims and publish evidence-based evaluations to help readers assess statements circulating in public discourse.

In Pakistan, these are some fact verification platforms like Soch Fact Check and iVerify Pakistan. They publish methodologies detailing how they verify claims against multiple sources, how they review evidence and how they document their findings. But the mere availability of such services does not mean the the digital media users know about them, understand how they work, or use them when confronted with questionable content.

Research on the awareness and usage of verification platforms by the youth specifically university students is a relevant context. A 2023 survey of 1,043 university students by the Coalition Against Disinformation found that while many believe fact-checking to be an effective response to disinformation, fewer than four in ten respondents reported fact-checking information they encountered online (Butt, 2023). Most recently, a survey experiment in Pakistan found that fact-checks reduced misperceptions, while trust in information sources was important to the effectiveness of corrections and engagement with fact-checks (Ejaz et al., 2025). These results highlight the need to study not only attitudes toward misinformation but also awareness and engagement with verification resources. The current study offers a preliminary, small-scale snapshot of fact-checking awareness and use among a group of university students who completed an online questionnaire. It's about the difference between knowing that fact-checking services exist and using them to check a claim.

Literature Review

Metzger et al. (2003) investigated college students' use of web-based information, their perceptions of credibility, and their verification practices through two studies. Their findings indicated that students relied heavily on the internet for both academic and general information. However, despite this reliance, students tended to regard information as credible and verified online information less frequently than a general adult comparison group. The study is particularly relevant because it established an early distinction between frequent internet use and the ability or willingness to verify online information. Although the digital environment has changed considerably since the study was conducted, its central question remains pertinent: does frequent exposure to online information lead users to develop more systematic verification habits? The present study builds on this concern by examining whether university students know about dedicated fact-checking services and report using them when encountering questionable claims.

Wineburg and McGrew (2017) compared how professional fact-checkers, historians, and university students evaluated the credibility of online information. Their working paper, Lateral Reading: Reading Less and Learning More When Evaluating Digital Information, identified an important difference in how these groups approached unfamiliar websites. Professional fact-

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checkers were more likely to leave the original website and consult other sources to investigate the publisher, trace claims, and establish context. Students and historians were more inclined to examine the original website itself, including its appearance and internal information. The research introduced lateral reading as a practical approach to online verification: rather than relying on the claims made by a website about itself, users investigate what independent sources say about it. This distinction is relevant to the research related to MIL because a respondent may believe that they use to check information without using the external verification practices employed by professional fact-checkers.

McGrew et al. (2018) examined students' judgments of digital information credibility at different levels of education. In their study of civic online reasoning, they found that many students struggled to assess the reliability of online sources and often made their judgment based on superficial features of the websites rather than investigating where the information came from or checking other sources to see if the claims were true. The work is of importance as it used performance-based evaluation tasks, and did not rely solely on respondents' perceptions of their own skills. This distinction is important, as students may say they are confident in spotting false information, but do worse when asked to evaluate a real website or claim. The implication of this research study to the current one is based on the fact that self-reported awareness and use of fact-checking platforms should be interpreted as measures of reported behaviour, not as direct evidence of verification competence.

Jones-Jang et al. (2021) studied how different media-related literacies relate to the ability to identify misinformation. Their work is helpful in differentiating media literacy from other skills such as information literacy and online literacy, rather than assuming all technology-related skills are the same. The broader finding is that literacy labels don't equally explain misinformation detection; it matters what specific competencies people have and use when evaluating information. This offers a useful conceptual basis for exploring students' awareness of verification services, regardless of their actual verification practices. It implies that having the awareness about the usage of social media or search the internet is not necessarily equivalent to knowing how to evaluate the credibility of a claim or locate independent fact-checking evidence.

Brodsky et al. (2021) examined whether university students could learn to use lateral reading to fact-check digital information through online instruction. The participants were 221 students in an online general education civics course. Students worked through asynchronous assignments that introduced strategies for checking sources, finding better coverage and tracing claims to their original context. Students' lateral reading improved between the pre and post-tests, and the number of assignments completed was associated with stronger use of these strategies. Students also reported higher levels of confidence in fact-checking COVID-19 news, but confidence was only weakly related to actual lateral-reading behavior. The researchers concluded that targeted instruction can improve verification practices, but it also shows why confidence and behaviour should be measured separately. This directly informs the present study's distinction between familiarity with fact-checking platforms and reported use of those services.

In a related study, Brodsky et al. (2021) evaluated the curriculum of the Digital Polarization Initiative in a general education civics course . Researchers compared students receiving instruction in lateral reading to students receiving regular course instruction. Students who received the intervention were more likely to engage in lateral reading and to correctly evaluate the trustworthiness of information at post-test. However, the study also found that students did not consistently use the strategy across all evaluation tasks. The results indicate that students can benefit from structured instruction, but may need repeated practice to use verification strategies

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consistently. This research study is particularly relevant to university-level MIL initiatives: simply informing students that fact-checking exists may be less effective than showing them how to investigate a source, compare coverage, and trace a claim.

In particular, Şencan and Soydal (2023) investigated the fact-checking behavior of university students after a news literacy training module. The researchers used a quasi-experimental design with two groups of university students over two years and examined the performance of students in verification after training. The results indicated that students used more search queries, often used news headlines as search terms, and often clicked on news platforms during the fact-checking process. However, many students did not reach a high level of performance, although the training seemed to increase the awareness of verification platforms and tools. This research is closely relevant to current present research because it focuses on both awareness and the actions students take when verifying information. It also hints that awareness is a decent first step, but should not be considered a sign that students have effective and habitual fact-checking habits.

Leeder (2020) tested college students' skills at separating fake from real news stories and tested the connection between their content evaluation skills, information searching skills and intention to share the stories. Out of a total of 63 stories rated (12 per student) the students correctly identified 64.29% of fake and 60.58% of real stories. Students who performed better demonstrated stronger critical evaluation and greater use of verification strategies. However, participants did not accurately assess their own ability to evaluate fake news, and willingness to share a story was not significantly explained by their trustworthiness judgements or identification accuracy. The study is especially relevant because it shows that misinformation-related behaviour includes several distinct dimensions: detecting false content, knowing how well one can detect it, and deciding whether to share it. The present study similarly considers awareness, use, and responses to suspicious claims as related but separate dimensions.

Ziv and Bene (2022) have shown how we can use university websites' advice to help students see online for what it is. They analyzed a random sampling of 50 university websites, where they found most of the advice to students was for them to look carefully at the content and features of a source. They argued that this sometimes provides insufficient focus on external verification such as browsing off the page to research the source in a search engine. It shows what is missing from a lot of university advice, which is guidance from an experienced fact-checker for students on where to go to check for a claim if it raises suspicion. This is relevant to MIL as students need those guidelines on how to verify, not "think critically about" or "look after the source." The study can be used to support looking at whether students know where the dedicated checking services are, and what they do when they find something that stands out.

Guess et al. (2020) evaluated a digital media literacy intervention to see if it could increase the ability of people in the US and India to tell the difference between mainstream news and false news. They published their results in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, and tested whether a simple media literacy intervention could improve discernment of true from false news. The authors found that while the media literacy intervention did increase discernment between true and false news, the effects differed by context and this did not prove that the short intervention would enable people to avoid the problems associated with false news. Nonetheless, this study is useful to other regions by including a non-Western context - India - which has a large, complex digital information environment. It demonstrates the potential utility of a media literacy intervention, but emphasises that the effects of implementation will differ across contexts. In Pakistan, this research offers a

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useful comparison for examining whether knowledge of verification services is correlated to reported use of checking.

Badrinathan (2021) tested a media literacy intervention to challenge misinformation with a 1,224 person field experiment in India during the 2019 elections. The media literacy intervention was an hour long media literacy lesson on misinformation, correction, and verification. Because training on these topics should help participants better identify true or false information, many predicted that the intervention would improve participants' ability to do so, but in fact there was little average effect of the intervention and no overall improvement among those who completed the intervention on their ability to identify false and true content. And this was not the case for all people: effects were moderated by prior political attitude, demonstrating the importance of motivated reasoning in evaluating claims. This study offers an important counterbalance to research that finds a positive effect of media literacy training and implies that information about misinformation is not enough to improve judgement, although with verification tools available to counter misinformation, people may not use them if they already feel concerned about misinformation.

Ali & Qazi (2023) explored whether an educational message increased individuals' accuracy to separate false from real news. The researchers tested interventions among populations described as having low digital literacy in urban Pakistan. Their results found no statistically significant effect from general video-based educational messages alone. However, combining a video message with personalised feedback improved accuracy. This finding is particularly important for the Pakistani context because it suggests that a general awareness message may not be sufficient to change information-evaluation behaviour. More active feedback and engagement may be required. The study complements the present research by highlighting a distinction between exposure to information about misinformation and developing practical verification skills.

Nygren and Efimova (2025) investigated the longer-term effects of educational interventions among 459 upper-secondary students. The study evaluated the Bad News game, a fact-checking skills workshop called News Evaluator, and disciplinary literacy approaches. Neither the game nor the workshop, led in 90-minute sessions, made much difference in the students' overall ability to evaluate trustworthy and less trustworthy news, and the participants didn't use digital tools for verification three months after the intervention. While the workshop made a small significant difference on a particularly hard-to-check item, the overall findings demonstrate that one-off interventions don't produce sustained behavioural change. This is important to note because it's a caution against conflating simply being aware or trained with the ability to sustain verification behaviours, and it calls for institutions to look at self-reported practices and barriers rather than simply whether they've heard of fact-checking.

Pennycook et al. (2021) examined whether asking social media users to focus on accuracy would decrease their intention to share misinformation. Across the experiments, authors found that study participants were less accurate in terms of making sharing decisions than giving an accuracy judgment on headlines. The instructions that prompted participants to focus on accuracy made better sharing decisions. Overall, the authors concluded, people may share misleading content because they do not care as much about accuracy at the moment they make the decision to share. This idea is relevant to the question posed in this paper (whether participants check for other's text before they share it). It also highlights why checking for other's text should be understood as a strategic decision, not as a belief in misinformation.

In a related review, Pennycook & Rand (2022) examined this concept in relation to misinformation sharing, considering evidence for

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accuracy nudges on social media. They suggested that people might not take accuracy into account when sharing content, even when they might notice whether content is true or false in other contexts. Accuracy prompts can help people be more discerning when sharing, but Pennycook and Rand noted their concerns about longer term effects, effects of repeated exposure, and when separating internet users by culture. However, their considerations are valuable for this study in terms of moving beyond Internet users' skills to evaluate information: this takes a step further and considers whether they are employing those skills when sharing information. The present article's question about fact checking prior to sharing can therefore be taken as an indicator of information use in reported practice, even though this is limited due to self-report data.

Butt's (2023) report to Pakistan's Coalition Against Disinformation on university students' attitudes to online disinformation studied Pakistani university students, drawing on a sample of 1,043 students and taking into account how young people consume disinformation, respond to it and what they think about fact-checking. Among its findings are a discrepancy between students' acknowledgement of the usefulness of fact-checking and the actual checking of that information, as well as a need for more media literacy and fact-checking education in universities. This is the source that is most directly relevant to the current research, since it studies a Pakistani student sample rather than taking findings from elsewhere. It thus can serve as a local foundation for the current study's investigation of awareness of popular online verification services and platforms, usage frequency and barriers to use. The present research is smaller in scale and cannot claim to analyse nationwide trends, so can provide only a very preliminary and narrow eye-view of named platforms' familiarity and usage patterns.

Ejaz, Altay & Ittefaq (2025) explored how well fact-checks work, and what factors are associated with audiences' engagement with fact-checks, in Pakistan using a preregistered online survey experiment (N=302, 1,208 observations). The authors tackled an important problem for fact-checking organisations: a correction can only be effective if it is seen and consumed by the audience. They found that fact-checks successfully reduced misperceptions, and that trust in information sources affected how audiences interacted with fact-checks and misinformation. The findings instead bring attention to the question of when fact-checking organisations' work is consumed, bringing the discussion away from the availability of fact-checking services to the conditions in which people do or do not notice and trust it. This is highly relevant to our present analysis as these are all different concepts. Students may be aware of a fact-checking platform but never access them, or may be wary of trusting them given a platform's credibility or perceived bias.

The review of the literature reveals that using the internet and knowing how to verify are two distinct things; students can be heavy users of digital media without systematically checking the credibility of what they read. Second, self-assessed confidence and awareness, and actual verification behaviour can differ; knowledge can be a good predictor of performance, but not always; and verification practices can vary. Third, media literacy training improves verification, but not reliably; truth about learner sensitivities tends to benefit university students, but other types of training can have no discernible or marginal effects on average, especially if the training is brief or lacks feedback. And, fourth, verification depends on more than knowing; attention at the point of sharing, lensing through trust or prior beliefs, and constraints of time and access to effective verification tools all can matter.

The present study is therefore aimed at a practical question: how familiar are university students with a small set of fact-checking websites and apps, do they claim to use any of those, and what do they do and perceive as obstacles to their fact-checking? It also gathers data on perceived accuracy of fact-checking, perceived threat of fake news and

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perceived interest in the training. Its value does not lie in asserting that no prior Pakistani research has addressed fact-checking, but in providing a focused preliminary probe of a small number of services and self-reported behaviour. Due to the limited number of responses (n=18) in the present dataset, the results of the study should only be considered as a first step in the collection of further data, not as representative knowledge of university students in Pakistan.

While prior studies in Pakistan have studied youth attitudes towards disinformation more generally and about fact-checking in particular, there is still value in having recorded a handful of students' current responses to information, specifically when asked about named services, whether they report on them, what they do as the first action when it seems to be false, and whether they would like training. This study is not meant to be used to claim national prevalence or that it alone bridges the evidence gap.

Research Objectives and Research Questions

The study is guided by the motive to attain the following objectives

- To describe Pakistani university students' awareness of selected fact-checking platforms.
- To document self-reported use of dedicated fact-checking platforms and alternative responses to suspicious claims.
- To examine respondents perceived usefulness of fact-checking platforms and concern about misinformation.
- To identify reported barriers to regular use and interest in fact-checking training.

The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the level of awareness of selected fact-checking platforms among the university students in Pakistan?

RQ2: How frequently do respondents report using dedicated fact-checking platforms, and what do they do first when they suspect a claim may be false?

RQ3: How useful do university students consider fact-checking platforms, and how concerned are they about misinformation on social media?

RQ4: What common barriers university students in Pakistan face in to regular usage of fact checking platforms?

Research Methodology

The study used a quantitative survey design. Data were collected through a self-administered Google Forms questionnaire. The questionnaire covered respondent characteristics, daily social-media use, sources of current-affairs information, sharing practices, awareness of fact-checking platforms, self-reported use, perceived usefulness, responses to suspicious claims, barriers to use, concern about misinformation, and interest in training. The data has been collected from 200 respondents. The survey link was circulated online and the available sample is treated as a non-probability convenience sample. The responses were exported from Google Forms to CSV and analyzed descriptively. Counts and percentages were calculated for each response category. For multi-select questions, each selected option was counted separately; percentages in those tables may therefore sum to more than 100%.

Findings

All results below describe the 200 responses collected through the survey questionnaire. Percentages are rounded to one decimal place.

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Table 1. Respondent profile

Characteristic / category	N	%
Media and Communication Studies	31	15.5
Social Science	62	31
Health Sciences	24	12
Computer Science/IT	39	19.5
Management Sciences	44	22
Public Sector	126	63
Private Sector	74	37
Female	116	58
Male	84	42
Age 18–24	97	48.5
Age 25–30	59	29.5
Age 31 and above	44	22

Table 2. Daily social-media use

Daily time	N	%
1–2 hours	25	12.5
3–4 hours	66	33
5–6 hours	78	39
7 or more hours	31	15.5

Table 3.Most frequent sources of current-affairs information

Reported response	N	%
Instagram only	54	27
X (Twitter) only	9	4.5
Instagram and WhatsApp	68	34
Facebook only	18	9
Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp	19	9.5
Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, online news websites and TV	11	5.5
Facebook, X, online news websites and television	11	5.5
Facebook, WhatsApp, X and online news websites	10	5

Table 4. Awareness of fact-checking platforms

Platform awareness response	N	%
Had not heard of any listed platform	136	68.7
Geo Fact Check	24	11.1
Fact Checker MoIB	11	5.5
Other fact-checking platform	10	5.0
Soch Fact Check	14	5.6
iVerify Pakistan	15	5.7

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Table 5. Self-reported use and frequency of use

Item / response	N	%
Ever used: Yes	36	18
Ever used: No	157	78.5
Ever used: Maybe	7	3.5
Frequency: Never	157	78.5
Frequency: Less than monthly	42	21
Frequency: Daily	1	0.5

Table 6. Platform reported as used most often

Response	N	%
Never uses any fact-checking platform	157	78.5
Soch Fact Check	13	6.5
Geo Fact Check	11	5.5
Fact Checker MoIB	8	4
iVerify Pakistan	11	5.5

Table 7. Perceived usefulness of fact-checking platforms

Perceived usefulness	N	%
Very useful	32	16
Somewhat useful	117	58.5
Not useful at all	51	25.5

Table 8. First response to a claim suspected to be false

First action	N	%
Search Google or another search engine	52	26
Check another news organization or website	48	29
Check comments or other social-media posts	54	27
Usually ignore it	31	15.5
Share it without checking	15	7.5

Table 9. Reasons for not using fact-checking platforms regularly

Reason selected	N	%
Do not know enough about these platforms	91	45.5
Do not have enough time	31	15.5
Prefer search engines or other news sources	37	18.5
Do not know where to find them	31	15.5
Unsure whether platforms are impartial	9	4.5
Other	0	0
Do not think verification is usually necessary	1	0.5

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Table 10. Concern about misinformation and interest in training

Response	N	%
Extremely concerned about misinformation	82	41
Very concerned	65	32.5
Moderately concerned	39	19.5
Slightly concerned	12	6
Not at all concerned	2	1
Would like training: Yes	143	71.5
Would like training: Maybe	48	24
Would like training: No	9	4.5

Discussion

The survey results reveal a disconnect between concern over misinformation and knowledge and experiencing the utility of fact-checking services. Among this respondents, majority (over 90%) were at least somewhat concerned about misinformation at some level and few of them found at least one service somewhat or very useful. It is really alarming situation that a big majority of university students are not even aware about the existence of any fact verification platforms and hence, they have never used it for verification of any information that they came across online. This pattern aligns with the broader mismatch discussed in Butt (2023): awareness that fact-checking is helpful does not directly translate to habitual verification. The quality of the responses also indicates that most users will go to a general search engine or other news organisation if they encounter a suspicious claim. Searching in these ways may be fine when it is just adding a wider frame of reference through an independent expert source, but it will not necessarily validate a social-media comment.

A good MIL intervention may be able to show a reproducible procedure, like where did the claim originate, who is it from, what are other independent sources saying, what are the dates and context for the claim, examine visual evidence if there is any, and look up the corresponding fact-check. The MIL materials from UNESCO also frame fact checking as part of this wider process of critical evaluation, not a shortcut or one tool (UNESCO, 2021, 2024). The top reported barrier was lack of knowledge about fact-checking sites. This aligns with the problem awareness stage: students should be familiarised with reputable services, with steps to locate the particular articles that they have published and how to interpret ratings and evidence. The expressed interest in workshops is a helpful indicator for the design of a pilot small-group workshop. But the sample does not reveal what form of training would be most effective, and any intervention would need to be assessed separately.

The findings should also be interpreted in the context of current evidence from Pakistan. Ejaz et al. (2025) demonstrates that fact-checks have the potential to correct misperceptions, but the effect they have and the extent to which they are engaged with depend on the trustworthiness of the source. Therefore, awareness alone may not be enough, and students may also need an understanding of how fact-checkers gather evidence, how they disclose sources and correct mistakes, and how to differentiate checkable facts from opinions. The current questionnaire was not designed to address these skills directly, and therefore we cannot infer respondents' ability to fact-check.

Conclusion

This survey, conducted among 200 students at a university who completed an online survey in Pakistan, asked respondents about knowledge of and engagement with specific fact-checking platforms. Among this small sample, however, awareness of the individual platforms was low, use of them was infrequent and the most common

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first response was to search using a search engine or turn to other news organisation websites. At the same time, however, many students were concerned about misinformation, saw the need for fact-checking organisations and training, and identified lack of knowledge as the main barrier to their use.

These results should be regarded as an initial snapshot, not a definitive narrative, of how university students behaved. Their utility at this point is in highlighting any trends to be explored across a larger, more varied sample size and to guide implementation of actual MIL activities. Based on the results, the study recommends the following steps:

1. Teaching Media and Information Literacy (MIL) in university curricula. Universities can work to incorporate relevant MIL activities into their courses in order to have their students identify disinformation, judge the credibility of online content, and share responsibly.
2. Make students aware of fact checking organizations. Hold awareness sessions and distribute information to help acquaint the students with existing and reliable fact checking organizations such as Soch Fact Check, iVerify Pakistan. Sessions should include a step by step presentation of how they work and how to avail them.
3. Offer verification training. Student workshops should include practical work, such as checking claims against sources; finding the original source; fact-checking images and videos; and reading independent fact-checking articles before accepting claims on social media as true.
4. Encourage verification before sharing information. Universities and student organisations can ask students to take a few seconds to verify a questionable claim before they re-appropriate or forward it. National awareness-raising campaigns can highlight that social media and messaging users can reduce the spread of misinformation.
5. Further research Investigate factors of students' fact-checking behaviour. Longitudinal studies with students from a variety of geographical areas and universities in Pakistan are needed to better understand students' level of awareness of fact-checking websites, their use of these websites, their level of trust in fact checking, and the barriers they face to verification.

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