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Published online: 30 Mar 2025.

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Cynical or Critical Media Consumers? Exploring the Misinformation Literacy Needs of South African Youth

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Media and information literacy (MIL) has long been part of academic curricula in many parts of the world, including South Africa. More recently, the rise of misinformation on the continent has emphasised the importance of including misinformation literacy (ML) skills into these programmes. Such skills involve distinguishing different types of inaccurate content, authenticating online information, and using technology to verify images/videos. Drawing on focus group discussions at eight South African universities, and six interviews with educators, this paper explores responses to a new ML curriculum developed by Africa Check, a fact-checking organisation. Findings reveal two distinct reactions to in-class discussions about misinformation and its consequences. After engaging with the material, some students described themselves as more critical media consumers, recognising the media as a contested space where certain sources are more reliable. Others, however, exhibited a high degree of cynicism, unable to identify any trustworthy information source and showing signs of becoming "news avoiders". These findings underscore the need to develop curricula that empower critical media consumption while addressing the risks of fostering cynicism. We offer recommendations for advancing ML and hypothesise why some students may lean towards blank distrust and disengagement with the media.

The integration of media and information literacy (MIL) into educational curricula from primary to tertiary levels of education has been a longstanding practice in many countries, including South Africa (Saleh 2012), which is the focus of this article. In recent years, the increasing prevalence of misinformation has underscored the necessity of equipping young people with specific skills to critically navigate and evaluate a rapidly changing media landscape. Some of these "new" MIL skills, sometimes grouped under the term "misinformation literacy" or ML (Cunliffe-Jones et al. 2021), emphasise the ability to identify different forms of inaccurate media content, verify online information through various methods, and assess the credibility of images and videos using digital tools. The efficacy of ML in preventing the spread of falsehoods and inaccurate information

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has been supported by years of research which suggests that these efforts can mitigate their harmful effects (Cunliffe-Jones et al. 2021). Delivery of ML education has been tested using a diverse range of methods such as classroom-based discussions, online modules, and gamified simulations (Roozenbeek, van der Linden, and Nygren 2020).

However, there is ongoing debate about the effectiveness of certain approaches. Some studies suggest that certain MIL interventions can inadvertently increase scepticism towards all information, leading to cynicism, mistrust and disengagement (Hoes et al. 2024; Mihailidis and Viotty 2017; Vraga Tully, and Bode 2021). This might partly have to do with the emphasis in MIL curricula on media consumption rather than media production, which may put media users in a position of passivity rather than creativity (Madison 2023). This has led to the exploration of strategies to counteract the unintended negative consequences of MIL interventions while recognising the importance of education campaigns. These concerns are particularly relevant in contexts where general trust in institutions is low or declining. In South Africa, trust in various institutions has reached its lowest point since Afrobarometer, a public opinion polling initiative, began measuring it in 2006. A 2021 survey revealed that only 38 per cent of South Africans trust the president, 28 per cent trust Parliament, and 43 per cent trust the courts (Afrobarometer 2021). At the same time, however, trust in mainstream media in the country has been growing, increasing from 49 to 57 per cent between 2019 and 2024 (Newman et al. 2024). The importance of ML in South Africa should also be seen in the context of an upsurge of misinformation on the African continent in general. Africa has been the recipient of an increasing number of coordinated misinformation campaigns led by foreign powers, as well as domestic actors seeking to disrupt political processes with the ultimate goal of undermining African democracies (African Center for Strategic Studies 2022). This environment of selected distrust and increased exposure to misinformation presents a critical challenge: how can we educate and empower people to critically engage with media without exacerbating cynicism or disengagement?

This study explores this question by looking at the effectiveness of ML training materials for young adults in South Africa. It complements existing studies, which have mostly focused on settings in the Global North, by examining contextual factors such as access, socio-economic inequality and curriculum transformation. More specifically, we seek to answer two overarching questions: What do young adults in South Africa think an ML curriculum should look like? (RQ1), and What impact might the teaching of ML have on young adults in South Africa? (RQ2). We address these questions by analysing data from eight focus group discussions with young adult learners, and six interviews with educators, who tested a new ML curriculum developed by Africa Check, a fact-checking organisation. Students attended one lecture that was based on content from this new curriculum, and was delivered by an educator from their institution. We find that in-class discussions about different types of misinformation and the possible consequences of spreading inaccurate information elicit two main types of responses: some students report being more critical media consumers (i.e. they see the media as a contested space, where some sources can be trusted more than others), while others express a high degree of cynicism towards the media in general (i.e. they fail to identify even a single source of information that they consider trustworthy).

By focusing on youth perspectives and experiences, this paper aims to contribute to the development of more nuanced and effective approaches to ML that resonate with

South Africa's unique socio-political and educational landscape. While the focus of this paper is predominantly on English-language media because focus group discussions took place in English, and examples offered by participants were mostly of English-language media, the broader context of South African media informed the discussions, and where participants made references to media in languages other than English, these examples were duly considered. Furthermore, while we focus predominantly on English-language content, this article does not suggest that there is a single narrative when it comes to South African media and aims to acknowledge the diversity and complexity of the South African media landscape. The use of focus group interviews allowed for a diversity of perspectives to be articulated and various narratives of media users' engagement with information online to emerge.

Defining misinformation literacy

Media and information literacy (MIL) refers to the ability to understand media functions, critically engage with media, and evaluate and use information ethically (Livingstone 2004; Wilson et al. 2011). It encompasses various literacies, such as news literacy, digital literacy, and information literacy, which together form an "ecology" of literacies (Wilson et al. 2011). In the context of rising misinformation and disruptions in media platforms and audiences, some authors have pointed out that there is a growing need for targeted misinformation literacy (ML) as part of MIL (Cunliffe-Jones et al. 2021; Tully 2021). ML focuses on skills to identify and reject false information, particularly when it is presented as news (Tully 2021). It involves understanding the context of information production, identifying the motivations behind misinformation, recognizing different types of misleading content, and understanding how misinformation spreads and its consequences (Cunliffe-Jones et al. 2021). Such efforts aim to help users differentiate between credible and false information while promoting behaviours like fact-checking and verification (Tully 2021).

Training media users in ML has shown promise in mitigating the harmful effects of misinformation. Strategies such as "inoculation", which involves exposing audiences to simulated misinformation scenarios (e.g. gamification), have been shown to build psychological resilience against future misinformation (Roozenbeek, van der Linden, and Nygren 2020). However, evidence on the effectiveness of MIL interventions is mixed. For instance, Jones-Jang, Mortensen, and Liu (2021) found that US audiences benefit more from information literacy (e.g. navigating and locating information) than news or media literacy (e.g. critically analysing media systems) when identifying misinformation. Similarly, Vraga Tully, and Bode 2021) noted that while correcting misinformation reduces its credibility, incorporating news literacy messages does not always enhance these corrections' effectiveness. In addition, some general MIL interventions can have unintended consequences. Exposure to news literacy messages may increase scepticism not only towards misinformation but also towards accurate information, fostering general cynicism (Vraga Tully, and Bode 2021). This aligns with Mihailidis and Viotty's (2017) observation that overly critical media literacy campaigns can lead young people to disengage from media and institutions, resulting in apathy and news avoidance.

It can be argued that the range of possible outcomes in MIL interventions that have been described in the literature highlights the need for MIL/ML curricula to be

constructed in a way that empowers media users to understand how news is produced and how political economic factors can influence media framing and introduce bias, so that they can develop a healthy critical attitude without breeding a blunt, blanket cynicism towards all kinds of news media. Several scholars have pointed out that discussion about misinformation should be done in a way that doesn't add to a sense of overwhelm and disempowerment among media users but instead provides them with the tools to critically assess and discern what information is accurate and truthful, even if it provides a particular perspective on society—as opposed to misinformation which is aimed at misleading (Altay, De Angelis, and Hoes 2024). Research has also shown that educators believe that the objective of such a broader MIL curriculum, which includes ML, would be to enable media users to develop a healthy, critical stance towards media without dismissing all information out of hand because they feel overwhelmed, cynical or depressed (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2022). Equipped with such critical skills, media users would be able to make more informed choices about which media outlets to trust, or which alternative media and information channels—including those produced outside of the mainstream news platforms—provide them with accurate, truthful and trustworthy information relevant to their lives (Hoes et al. 2024).

Although young people have high exposure to digital technologies, and are sometimes described as "digital natives", this does not guarantee that they use these technologies efficiently or safely (Tilleul 2023). Yee and Shyh (2024) argue that journalism education should incorporate MIL to equip future journalists with skills to raise public awareness about misinformation. However, these efforts must be carefully designed to avoid reinforcing scepticism towards legitimate news (Altay, De Angelis, and Hoes 2024). For example, promoting only critical skills without emphasizing trust in reliable information can lead to unintended "spillover effects", such as reduced trust in media or disengagement from news consumption (Altay, De Angelis, and Hoes 2024; Vissenberg et al. 2023). To counter these effects, scholars propose reframing MIL campaigns positively, focusing not just on debunking misinformation but also on encouraging the consumption of credible information (Hoes et al. 2024). As pointed out above, an argument for ML curricula that are embedded in broader critical MIL frameworks does not imply taking all news production on face value, nor that it would be uncritical of news frames, approaches and content. Part of the overwhelm and fatigue that media audiences experience has to do with the nature of news (episodic, fragmented, removed from media users' everyday lived realties). Ultimately, however, MIL courses are not meant to replace media studies curricula where a more substantial engagement with critical approaches to media could take place. MIL courses are distinct from broader media studies curricula in that they focus on a particular aspect of media literacy and tend to be more practical than theoretical (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2022).

African contexts present unique challenges for MIL campaigns, as factors like educational disparities and limited access to resources influence media literacy outcomes. Gondwe (2022) notes that media users with formal education are better positioned to discern between factual and false information, but widespread resource constraints limit the scalability of such interventions. For example, many South African schools lack the necessary infrastructure, teacher training, and support to implement MIL programmes effectively (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2022). Designing effective MIL interventions requires understanding the socio-cultural and economic conditions in which they are

applied. While universal strategies remain elusive due to contextual differences, incorporating tailored approaches that consider local access, media habits, and educational systems can improve their success (Africa Check, Chequeado, and Full Fact 2020). However, achieving this goal demands significant investment in teacher training and the provision of adequate resources—efforts that remain out of reach for many schools and educators in South Africa.

Media Trust in South Africa

Although the global extent of distrust in the media is debated, news media trust is widely recognised as "fragile" (Strömbäck et al. 2020). Distrust in media and political institutions is not new, but it has deepened significantly in today's political and media environment (Dahlgren 2018, 20). Several factors contribute to this: competition for audience attention in an age of information abundance; attacks by partisan competitors on traditional media; social media bypassing news outlets; the rise of disinformation; and a tendency for audiences to seek information that reinforces pre-existing beliefs while rejecting content that challenges them (Strömbäck et al. 2020, 140). Adding to these challenges are highly publicised ethical breaches, such as phone hacking scandals, plagiarism and inaccuracies, which have eroded trust in media authority (Fischer 2016, 453). The profound digital disruption to the advertising-based business model of the news media is by now well documented. This disruption has had a severe negative impact on the sustainability of media and has made it difficult for newsrooms to conduct in-depth investigative journalism or invest time and effort into slow reporting (Hansen 2020).

The erosion of trust has significant democratic implications. Contested political knowledge and competing realities reduce the common ground for public debate, fostering cynicism towards media and democratic institutions (Dahlgren 2018, 22). This is not in the first instance due to misinformation, but due to a growing disconnect between journalism and their audiences. Globally, only 40 per cent of people trust the news, with many avoiding it due to information overload (Coster 2022; Newman et al. 2024). In response, alternative approaches like "solutions journalism" and "constructive journalism" have emerged to counteract negativity and empower audiences, though South African journalists remain cautious about these trends (Fölscher-Kingwell and Wasserman 2024).

While South Africa has relatively high trust levels compared to global averages, this trust has been gradually declining. Interest in politics among South African audiences has also dropped significantly, from 81 per cent to 70 per cent over the past three years (Roper 2024). Trust issues manifest differently across social contexts. For instance, international research shows that privileged communities distrust media for sensationalism, while disadvantaged groups fear media harm through misrepresentation (Arguedas et al. 2022, 4). Similarly, South African tabloids enjoy high trust due to their focus on the "politics of the everyday", resonating with readers more than formal governmental coverage (Wasserman 2010). This disconnection between South African news media perspectives and citizens' lived experiences has been described as the "view from the suburbs", highlighting elitism in journalism that alienates the poor majority (Friedman 2011). In a highly unequal society like South Africa, trust cannot be measured solely by accuracy or authority; it must also encompass identity, social relevance, and participatory

citizenship. Trust partly derives from whether audiences feel represented and connected to media narratives.

Measuring trust in media is complex due to conceptual vagueness and methodological inconsistencies. Strömbäck et al. (2020, 40) critique the reliance on single indicators and lack of consensus on definitions, while Engelke, Hase, and Wintterlin (2019, 66) highlight issues with research design, measurement items, and dimensions. The term "trust" is often conflated with "credibility" and may refer to trust in content, sources, or channels (Fischer 2016, 454). Survey respondents are often asked about trust in media without clear definitions, complicating interpretations (Fischer 2016, 456). Beyond definitional issues, Fischer (2016, 451) argues there is a growing disconnect between the normative ideal of informed citizenry and the influences shaping perceptions of credibility in the digital age. Some scholars question whether trust in media is even desirable, given the need for vigilance against misinformation (Fischer 2016, 451). Trust may not always drive media use; other factors such as interactivity and personal gratification often play a larger role (Fischer 2016, 453). Blöbaum (2014, 51) proposes breaking trust into components: trust in journalism as a system, in individual journalists, and in journalistic methods.

These complexities suggest that media trust should be analysed contextually, recognizing its various dimensions, forms of pressure and demographic influences. For instance, another challenge in many sub-Saharan African countries is the pressure on independent media. Many countries face democratic regression, with governments often repressing media through hostility and attacks on journalists, eroding public trust further (Wasserman 2020, 50). In these environments, political weaponisation of media distrust exacerbates the problem, undermining confidence in journalism. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that trust varies by race, gender, class, and age, and these differences shape how media users perceive disinformation and credibility. For example, educated audiences in Kenya, South Africa, and Nigeria report higher perceived exposure to disinformation than their US counterparts and associate this exposure with lower trust in media (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2019, 120).

South African youth and media consumption

ML has received limited formal attention in South African schools, despite the inclusion of several MIL competencies in national curricula. Life orientation, a compulsory subject for grades 7–12 (students aged 12–18), includes topics such as media formats, media freedom and online bullying (Department of Basic Education 2011). However, there is minimal focus on misinformation or accuracy (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2022). The National Curriculum Statement (NCS) for life orientation in grades 7–9 emphasises safety-related issues, such as the media's impact on self-concept, sexuality and substance abuse, while the curriculum for grades 10–12 covers broader topics like the media's role in democracy. These gaps in media literacy education reflect trends across sub-Saharan Africa, where media literacy is barely taught in six of the seven countries studied (Cunliffe-Jones et al. 2021). One exception in South Africa is the Western Cape, where a proposal was made to include in the provincial curriculum a digital safety and "cyber wellness" component, developed in partnership with Google South Africa. This programme uses context-specific teaching strategies, such as offline videos, scenario-based discussions,

and low-connectivity solutions, highlighting the importance of adapting literacy programmes to local contexts (Western Cape Education Department & Google 2020).

The importance of tailoring media literacy programmes extends beyond access to technology, encompassing the needs of different demographic groups. Research has shown that exposure to misinformation and its effects on media trust vary across gender and age. In three African countries, men who reported greater perceived exposure to disinformation also showed lower levels of trust in media (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2019). Similarly, young people in Africa increasingly consume news via social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok, while still regarding legacy outlets such as Al Jazeera, BBC, and CNN as the most trustworthy sources (African Youth Survey 2024). However, there is growing concern about misinformation campaigns, with 62 per cent of African youth worried about their potential impact on elections. This highlights the dual role of social media: as a vital source of news for young audiences and a significant conduit for misinformation (African Youth Survey 2024; Ahmed, Madrid-Morales, and Tully 2023).

While South African youth value trusted information sources, they often feel disconnected from the civic empowerment promised by legacy media. Young people report using news media for reliable information but criticise its failure to inspire political participation or resonate with their lived experiences (Wasserman and Garman 2014). This disconnect contributes to declining political engagement and news consumption, trends observed among South African youth during the democratic era (Bosch 2013). At the same time, social media has provided new avenues for "political sub-activism", allowing young people to engage with politics outside the constraints of traditional public spheres (Bosch 2013, 2016). For instance, platforms like Twitter (now called X) played a central role in mobilizing youth during the #RhodesMustFall protests, with online discussions influencing mainstream news agendas (Bosch 2017). This integration of social media and legacy media illustrates how young people are crafting new forms of networked citizenship that reflect personal experiences while fostering political dialogue (Bosch 2017, 2022).

Young South Africans' media habits and trust dynamics, as outlined above, pose challenges for addressing misinformation through media literacy interventions. Of particular interest is the delicate balance between encouraging critical engagement with media and avoiding the unintended consequences of cynicism and disengagement. While the literature highlights the importance of ML in equipping individuals to navigate complex media environments, research on how these interventions are perceived and implemented in South Africa remains limited. Against this backdrop, this study seeks to explore two central research questions: What do young adults in South Africa think an ML curriculum should look like? (RQ1) and What impact might the teaching of ML have on young adults in South Africa? (RQ2). These questions aim to address the need for context-specific insights that can inform more effective and locally relevant approaches to fostering critical media engagement among South African youth.

Methods

This study was conducted in partnership with Africa Check, a fact-checking organisation based in South Africa, as part of a two-year project to design and evaluate new ML

materials for South African students. The materials were designed to provide students with the knowledge and critical-thinking skills necessary to recognise and address misinformation, predominantly online. To assess the suitability and effectiveness of these materials and answer the research questions above, we employed two qualitative research methods: focus group discussions with students, and interviews with some of the educators who delivered the training to students. We opted for qualitative approaches as they tend to be more suitable to capture rich, in-depth perspectives and insights into complex social phenomena (Krueger and Casey 2014; Seidman 2006). The data collected through these approaches were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006).

Sampling and participants

Eight focus groups were conducted with 77 participants drawn from eight universities across five South African provinces: Rhodes University (RU), University of Fort Hare (UFH), Cape Peninsula University of Technology, University (CPUT) of the Free State (UFS), Central University of Technology (CUT), University of Johannesburg (UJ), University of Cape Town (UCT), and University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). These institutions were selected to ensure representation from historically disadvantaged universities, well-established urban institutions and universities in non-urban settings. Students were recruited purposively through university lecturers in each institution. Each focus group included 6–12 participants, ensuring a manageable and interactive discussion environment. The participants were predominantly female (70%), and included individuals from various academic years, disciplinary backgrounds and demographic profiles.

Research design and procedures

To evaluate the impact of ML training and to gather insights into what students and educators believe should be included in ML training, we asked one educator at each participating university to deliver one lecture on media literacy as part of their regular coursework based on materials provided by us. The materials were designed by Africa Check and included a comprehensive lesson plan, a training presentation with detailed lecture notes, a worksheet summarizing key content, and a video illustrating the spread of false information. Educators did not receive specific training to deliver the lecture. These materials aimed to equip students with the knowledge to differentiate between misinformation and disinformation, recognise various forms of false information, and understand how these phenomena spread through society. Educators were encouraged to adapt the materials to suit their teaching styles and the specific needs of their students. A copy of the materials can be obtained from the authors upon request.

The curriculum used a popular definition of misinformation, the one found in United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)'s (2018) *Journalism, Fake News & Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training*, which distinguishes between disinformation (i.e. false information that is deliberately made up or manipulated and shared to mislead), and misinformation (i.e. false information shared unintentionally). The curriculum further distinguishes among satire/parody, false context, imposter content, fabricated content, manipulated content and conspiracy

theories as types of misleading content. Although the binary distinction between mis- and disinformation has its limitations insofar as it hinges on the intent of the sender, it is a generally accepted definition and has the advantage of bringing to students' attention the importance of being vigilant over information that might be shared with good intentions but be false, such as messages received from friends and family.

Because students in this study only attended a single lecture based on the curriculum designed by Africa Check, the scope of our discussion was based only on the specific types false information outlined above, and does not include an explicit focus on critical readings of the news media, e.g. hierarchy of influence theory, framing theory, bias in the selection and framing of news stories, the political economy of the news media, etc. Some of these issues form part of the curriculum but were not tested for this study. Although these questions were not out of bounds in the focus group discussions, the formal part of the curriculum had a narrow focus on mis- and disinformation for practical and time constraint reasons.

After the lecture, we convened one focus group with students and interviewed some of the educators as well. During the focus groups ($N = 8$), students were asked to provide feedback on the lecture. Sample questions included: "What did you like or dislike about the lecture?" or "How would you improve the in-class activities?" Students were also encouraged to imagine what an ideal lesson on misinformation might include and to share their experiences with misinformation and media literacy in their academic and personal lives. Focus groups were conducted face-to-face at seven universities and online at one university, and they lasted between 45 and 60 min each. Similarly, the interviews with educators ($N = 6$) followed a semi-structured format and focused on their experiences preparing and delivering the lecture, the suitability of the materials for the target audience, and suggestions for improvement. Questions included: "What parts of the materials worked best or were most challenging to deliver?" and "What additional resources or support would have been helpful?" Educators also reflected on broader issues, such as how misinformation and media literacy fit into the curriculum and the potential challenges of teaching these topics. All participants, both students and educators, provided consent to take part in the project. The research design received approval from the ethical review boards of the eight universities in which data was collected. It was also reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of [the University of Sheffield].

Data and analysis

Both the focus groups and the interviews were audio recorded with consent from the participants. Anonymity was guaranteed and, therefore, no names or personal information are included in the Findings section below. The recordings were transcribed verbatim by a research assistant proficient in English and other languages used during the sessions. These transcriptions formed the basis for the subsequent thematic analysis. Our thematic analysis followed a structured process to uncover patterns and themes within the data. The analysis began with familiarisation with the data, during which transcripts were reviewed multiple times. Following this, initial coding was performed using NVivo software to identify key elements and recurring ideas relevant to the research questions. These codes were then organised into 12 broader themes (e.g. "views on disinformation",

"critical views", "cynical views", "media use") that captured the perspectives of students and educators on the materials' suitability and potential impact.

Findings

We structure the findings around the two overarching research questions presented earlier. We first describe how young South Africans think that ML should be taught in the classroom, including what topics should be covered, where in the curriculum the content should be embedded, and at what age these discussions should take place (RQ1). Then, we analyse how students described the impact that the learning materials had on them, particularly in relation to news consumption and media trust (RQ2).

ML in South African classrooms

Focus group discussions showed that students have diverse understandings of what should be the educational priorities in teaching ML in South Africa. In most cases, these priorities seemed to be shaped by their lived experiences, particularly their own exposure to disinformation. When prompted to think about what should be taught in the classroom, the examples cited by students could be grouped into three categories. First, students highlighted the need to learn more about what could be labelled as "every-day disinformation", such as social media scams, false job advertisements, or celebrity rumours. For example, a participant in the UFS focus group suggested including content on "fake links" that try to "access your personal information" with promises of jobs. Similarly, students in the UFH focus group expressed concern about the prevalence of misinformation on platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook. One participant argued that even though these platforms seem easy to use, "there's a lot that actually happens on social media, the content that's actually been shared, they can actually know how to use and navigate".

Second, some students seemed more interested in the social and political dimensions of the phenomenon and its consequences, both for society and for individuals. In the RU focus group, a participant argued for the importance of understanding "the explicit meaning of a text but also the implicit meaning of the text", as well as "the motivations behind [misinformation]". They also noted that "other times, it's like media organisations […] they have an agenda, and they portray things a certain way for a reason", and therefore students should learn about the phenomenon of misinformation more widely. Similarly, a UCT participant emphasised the importance of learning about "the implications for misinformation", such as "what mistakes have been made when people believe them" and whether "regulations [are] in place" to address the issue. In terms of the consequences for individuals, a CUT participant stressed the need to learn about "the harm that you can experience as a result of misinformation, why misinformation is harmful". And a UFS student elaborated on this by discussing its impact on individuals' self-esteem and mental health, noting that "how harmful it can be for an individual, their self-esteem and all those things, their mental health as well" should be part of the curriculum.

Third, practical competencies also emerged as a cornerstone of what should be taught. Across institutions, students highlighted the utility of fact-checking and source evaluation techniques, and therefore the importance of learning about it at school/university. A UCT

participant thought it essential for younger people, and older adults, to have the appropriate tools to help them verify content social media content, particularly given its potentially harmful consequences:

> [P]eople don't really think about the fact that like, you get news from media, it's like, you just use your social media, and you just see what information is there. So, you're not really thinking about the fact that like, hey, like, trained people didn't make this news. And like, this news that I'm reading, that I'm consuming, it's not like professionally made news all the time. And like, what does that mean for me? And like, how should I interact with it? (UCT)

In addition, students often described the importance of learning to report misinformation. For instance, a UFS student felt that this should be included in the curriculum, while another student in the RU focus group believed that understanding "digital issue[s]" could provide students with "effective and accountable tools" to better utilise media platforms where misinformation might be present.

While students seemed to prioritise the need for ML training that addresses their immediate and direct experiences with disinformation, educators provided a more structural perspective on how this content could be embedded in the classroom. The educators we spoke to highlighted the importance of practical competencies, much like the students, but they also stressed the need to tailor teaching strategies based on access to technology and socio-economic contexts. For instance, at UFH, an educator remarked on the challenges faced by students from disadvantaged communities, noting that "examples that have to deal with their context resonate with them easier than [examples] outside their socio-cultural environment". Similarly, educators at Rhodes University suggested the use of mobile phones over computers for ML lessons, given the widespread availability of mobile devices in many schools.

In terms of what would be the ideal age to start teaching this type of content, there was a quasi-universal consensus among students that teaching of ML should begin at an early age. Students frequently stressed the urgency of introducing these concepts to younger learners to foster critical thinking and media literacy from an early stage. A student at UJ shared:

> I feel like it should be taught very early. In terms of, I know someone who was dating someone for two years straight, who they didn't know and later found out that person wasn't real. I was in grade six and I had this friend. So, I feel like it should be … like a small course subject that students take part in. […] I didn't even know the fact-checking website for misinformation on social media. That's very dangerous. And if people are only starting to learn about that in grade 10, you're gonna get scammed. I got scammed of R4000, because I wanted to start trading. (UJ)

Similarly, a UKZN participant highlighted the "vulnerability" of young learners, saying,

> I think it would have been beneficial if we learned about it in grade 7. I was also on social media platforms, such as Facebook, by the age of 13. […] I would have wanted to know how to interpret information at a younger age. Because I feel like as a child, you're very gullible and very easy to manipulate. And I think that in our day and age, that is a weakness. (UKZN)

At UFH, a participant added to the discussion by pointing to the rising exposure of young people to media:

> I think it should be something that should be introduced at a high school level because we're seeing that more and more people, or like young people, are getting exposed to social media

or like the media as a whole from a younger age. So, for them, they need to be able, you know, to source out what kind of information there is out there because there is an overwhelming amount of information. But to be able to source out what is legit and what is false information is very important for the youngsters. (UFH)

Other participants noted the importance of teaching children about the consequences of their online actions and the risks of falling prey to scams or manipulation. For example, a CUT participant spoke about "the harm that you can experience as a result of misinformation", while another UFS student highlighted how influencers might face online attacks when they make mistakes, observing that "everyone will be on the comments section and speaks bad".

We also found nearly unanimous views around the idea that ML should predominantly be taught as part of the "life orientation" (LO) curriculum. For instance, a participant in the UCT focus group argued that LO is a "useful subject" because it teaches "tools on these skills" that students can apply to real-world issues. Similarly, a participant in the CUT focus group explained that

life orientation is the […] primary subject to learn this, because you're able to engage and then you don't have to study much for life orientation, because you know that the issues that you are discussing there are issues that you are facing in your community. (CUT)

However, there were also some reservations about using LO to teach ML. Some participants felt that LO is often not taken seriously by students and that the teaching is not always engaging or effective. This was linked to the perception that LO is "a simple subject, from which anyone can get even like highest mark" and that "they never really had to, like, sit down in class and actually listen to the teacher teaching life orientation" (CUT). A student in the UCT focus group explained that LO is often treated as a "free period", with teachers simply telling students "not to do this, not to do that" rather than providing them with practical skills. Echoing some of the reservations expressed by students, some educators also expressed scepticism about the efficacy of embedding ML training in LO at South African high schools.

Teaching ML: intended and unintended consequences

At the onset of this study, we did not intend to focus on the impact that the learning materials would have on students, particularly because educators only delivered one lecture, mostly focused on terminology, and because any "effects" would be hard to isolate, given that many other factors could contribute to students' views on disinformation, the news media and related topics. However, while conducting the focus groups, and upon further scrutiny of transcriptions during the analysis, a clear theme emerged in the data: learners often reflected on how exposure to the learning materials combined with wider discussions about misinformation and media literacy appeared to shape their views of the news media, particularly in relation to trust. In general terms, we found that in-class discussions about different types of misinformation and the possible consequences of spreading inaccurate information elicit two types of responses, both of which were often explained in terms of what students had learned in class: some could be described as critical media consumers, while others would be best labelled as cynical. Drawing on examples from the focus group discussions, we elaborate on these two types of responses next.

In some instances, we found that having been taught about different types of inaccurate content published or broadcast by the news media, some students expressed a high degree of cynicism towards the media in general. They failed to identify even a single source of information they considered trustworthy and showed signs of becoming "news avoiders". For example, a participant in the UFH focus group shared,

> At some point, I've just lost interest in trusting it, because it's mostly I'm just too busy. So, I'm just not interested in just looking at news headlines, or engaging in things, because I feel like it's gonna be a lot because people are very (inaudible) out there. So, for my mental health, sometimes I just feel like it's okay to not know. (UFH)

Another UFH student echoed similar sentiments, explaining, "I don't trust the media because you can't just believe in something silly". For others, exposure to tools that unpack biases, frames, and agendas within media content prompted them to question the credibility of previously trusted sources. A student at UFH explained, "I don't trust the media, because a lot of gatekeeping … information is being censored. So, someone who controls the media controls what is being published". They further reflected that their distrust grew after studying media literacy, stating, "you learn about the media, and then you started trusting them a bit less? […] I did not always feel this way". Similarly, a participant at UKZN described how their perceptions shifted, sharing that they "always just felt like news from established media organisations should be true until we started learning about it".

The scepticism students expressed towards the media often intersected with broader issues of institutional distrust, particularly regarding politics, but not exclusively. A participant at CUT linked their scepticism to their experience with political disinformation, noting,

> I think because there's African National Congress (ANC) there's Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) there's Democratic Alliance (DA). There's maybe someone who's part of the political party, and then they like, I'm going to start something with the other party, and then they start creating lies and then spreading them around. (CUT)

Another CUT participant reflected on how political promises had eroded their trust, explaining that "after the elections are over, I'm the one who is left with an eggshell on my face" because political parties fail to deliver on their manifestos. Such experiences suggest that, in some circumstances, learning to critically analyse media can lead to a broader questioning of authority and institutions, sometimes resulting in cynicism and disengagement. A student in the RU focus group summarised this sentiment, stating, "I think during COVID there was so much misinformation […] it became so believable". They explained that even after the pandemic, "scepticism has grown" because of the persistent spread of unverified claims.

As noted earlier, one significant consequence of heightened media scepticism is news avoidance. Several students described how their distrust led them to disengage from consuming news altogether. A participant in the RU focus group admitted that they had stopped watching the news entirely, stating, "There is no … anything that I get sent. I just read my books and then I'm cool". This trend of disengagement extended to other students who felt overwhelmed by the negative tone of much of the news. A participant in the Rhodes focus group noted, "I don't follow the news anymore because it depresses

me". They elaborated that "a lot of the news is negative" and that consuming it was "not good". Similarly, a participant in the UKZN focus group explained that they had become "very picky with the type of news" they consumed to avoid "being exposed to too much negativity". While acknowledging the importance of staying informed, they emphasised, "It's important to be informed, but it's also important to protect your mental health".

Scepticism, cynicism and disengagement were not, however, universal. Some students spoke of their media consumption in critical and engaged ways. At this other end of the cynical–critical continuum, we find students who see the media as a contested space, where some sources can be trusted more than others but, overall, agree that it is important to access quality information through the news media. Selective trust was a prominent theme in how some of these students described their media consumption habits. Rather than rejecting all sources outright, some explained how they tailored their trust to specific platforms based on the type of information they sought. For example, a participant in the UFS focus group explained their process: "I try and read maybe a similar article from different news outlets and then just try to find the underlying notion or the agenda and see […] what's this reporter's side of the story and what's this reporter's side of the story".

Other participants highlighted their preference for platforms they perceived as less biased around certain topics or themes. Another UCT student noted,

> Al Jazeera, to me personally, it appears to be unbiased. It will like it's in the way that it is neutral. It doesn't take sides. Like, it doesn't feel that it takes sides. Although, I will say that and say that it leans towards the Middle East and the Arab nations in like, you know, Sudan. And honestly, it feels to us that but when it comes to international news, it's not bias. It's very, you know, objective when BBC I used to, but I stopped because of their delivery of news when it came to Africa in the Middle East. It was just […] it doesn't go in depth. (UCT)

This type of reflection around sources was not limited to mainstream outlets. Several participants emphasised their reliance on independent journalists, particularly on social media. A UFS student shared,

> For me with Twitter, I always follow like freelance journalists, like, maybe a qualified journalist working on his own, you know, without pushing any agenda or being tied to any political party or minister. So, I find that the reporting tends to be quite accurate, and, they, you know, not picking sides. (UFS)

What these three examples show is nuanced understanding that no single platform is universally reliable but that some outlets are better suited to certain contexts, showcasing a pragmatic and discerning approach to assessing media credibility—one that is more in line with the principles of ML.

Students who we could label as "critical" tended to attribute their critical habits to what they had learned in class. For example, a participant in the RU focus group explained,

> One thing I've learned is that you as a person, you don't have to trust what other people say exactly but you should also do your own due diligence to be certain […] it's quite important to do your own research before trusting what other people say. (RU)

Another student in the same group emphasised the importance of understanding the motivations behind how information is presented, saying, "I'm never not thinking, who's published this? Why they phrased it as such? What are their motivations for

portraying information in this way?" Yet, despite recognizing these flaws, some students underscored the essential role of the media, and the importance of not withdrawing completely from consuming media content. As a UCT student explained, "even though the media is not perfect, it's still one of the few ways we can keep informed. It's about knowing what to trust and being able to filter it".

Conclusion

This study has explored the range of responses South African youth have towards a newly developed misinformation literacy (ML) curriculum, revealing attitudes that range from critical engagement to cynicism and disengagement. Through focus group discussions and educator interviews, we found that students' reactions to ML materials are deeply influenced by their lived experiences, educational backgrounds, and socio-cultural contexts. While some students became more discerning media consumers who actively evaluate sources for trustworthiness and bias, others developed a heightened cynicism that led them to distrust all media and, in some cases, avoid news entirely. These findings emphasise the importance of creating ML programmes that not only teach technical skills but also encourage balanced and constructive media consumption. Our results echo Mihailidis and Viotty's (2017) concerns that some ML programmes can unintentionally lead to cynicism. Students in our focus groups described instances where learning about misinformation made them distrustful of all news sources. This dynamic supports Altay et al.'s (2024) argument that ML efforts must balance scepticism with fostering trust in reliable media.

The distinction between critical and cynical responses invites further examination of the factors shaping these outcomes. Personal experiences with the media are pivotal. Students at some universities often reported mistrust that could be linked to wider feelings of exclusion and misrepresentation. Addressing these should be a priority of any ML interventions. This distrust reflects broader societal phenomena in South Africa, where institutional inequities and political corruption have eroded confidence in traditional information channels. Additionally, the way ML sessions are delivered might also have an impact on the outcome of these programmes. In our study, educators were not provided with specific training and only delivered one session. More generally, studies on the topic have suggested that educators frequently mentioned that a lack of training and resources limited their ability to adapt materials to students' specific contexts (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2022). For instance, using examples that focus on global issues rather than local experiences did not resonate equally well with all students, especially in rural areas where everyday disinformation—like scams or false job advertisements—felt more relevant. Broader socio-political influences also play a role, as Dahlgren (2018) suggests, with pervasive media distrust often mirroring deeper societal fractures.

To hypothesise why some students become cynical while others become critical, we must consider several interconnected factors. In doing so, it is important to acknowledge that, because of the way this study was designed, we cannot provide any direct causal link between the content of the lesson and the responses students provided. In some case, students who might have had negative encounters with biased or exclusionary media may approach ML training with scepticism that is reinforced rather than alleviated.

Conversely, students with more neutral or positive media experiences might more readily adopt critical engagement without tipping into cynicism.

As we noted above, the delivery of ML materials also has a significant impact. When educators use relatable examples, foster interactive discussions, and draw on culturally relevant narratives, students might be more likely to perceive the curriculum as empowering. Psychological and cognitive factors, such as a student's resilience, openness to new ideas, and analytical skills, likely also influence how they respond. Future research, including longitudinal studies, could help clarify how these variables interact over time. Future studies should also consider direct observation of teaching practices to better understand the learning dynamics and include a wider range of learners (including younger and older groups) to better understand possible cohort effects. Any iterations of this study could include more opportunities for students to create their own media as a way to build their own resilience and foster their creativity.

Based on these findings, we propose several recommendations for designing ML curricula in contexts like South Africa, where distrust in institutions is prevalent. First, trust-building should be a central component of ML efforts. Highlighting examples of ethical journalism and constructive reporting, such as those described by Fölscher-Kingwell and Wasserman (2024), might help counterbalance the scepticism that often accompanies critical analysis. Second, ML curricula should prioritise cultural and contextual relevance. Using local examples of misinformation and drawing on students' lived experiences can make the material more engaging and applicable. For example, addressing common issues like social media scams alongside larger topics like election fraud or public health misinformation ensures the curriculum resonates across diverse audiences. Educators also need adequate training and resources to effectively deliver ML content. As noted by participants, the quality of ML interventions depends not only on the materials but also on educators' ability to adapt them to their students' needs. This includes providing educators with tools for facilitating interactive discussions, addressing student concerns, and contextualizing global examples to local realities. Furthermore, starting ML education early and integrating it into the broader curriculum can enhance its impact. Many participants advocated introducing ML concepts in primary or early secondary education to cultivate critical thinking skills and media awareness before students encounter more complex and polarizing media dynamics. Embedding these lessons into subjects like LO could help position ML as a core aspect of holistic education, rather than an optional add-on. More broadly, we suggest that ML curricula should be located within broader MIL training. In these courses, students could be exposed to critical perspectives (e.g. what factors could influence news framing or introduce bias) which would enable them to evaluate news media without either believing it to be the panacea to mis- and disinformation or merely rejecting it out of hand without understanding the conditions of its production. These aspects, in fact, already form part of many MIL courses (see, for instance, UNESCO's (2021) *Media & Information Literacy Curriculum for Educators and Learners* which includes lessons on "What makes news" and "The news development process"), but might need to be better localised to the South African context.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the US Embassy in South Africa.

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