

FROM CLICKS TO CONSEQUENCES

THE PREVALENCE OF
DISINFORMATION AMONGST
TEENAGERS ONLINE





Media InnoTech Africa (MIT Africa)

MIT Africa is a social enterprise advancing inclusive and accessible media through technology. It addresses misinformation and information gaps that hinder civic participation, especially in vulnerable communities. By innovating tools and resources, it empowers local media, supports independent journalism, and promotes democratic engagement.



News Verifier Africa (NVA)

NVA is a fact-checking and media literacy platform combating misinformation across Africa. It verifies viral claims, debunks fake news, and educates the public to promote truth, accountability, and a well-informed society.

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Executive Summary

Teenagers are particularly susceptible to misinformation due to their reliance on peer-shared content, underdeveloped media literacy, and ongoing cognitive development. Multiple studies confirm that a high percentage of teenagers unknowingly engage in spreading misinformation or struggle to identify it.

This is dangerous. The spread of misinformation among teens can have serious consequences across health, education, personal relationships, and beyond. It also erodes their trust in institutions, science, and reliable information sources which in turn weakens their critical thinking, growth and civic engagement.

This policy brief aims to explore the role teenagers play in the spread of misinformation and how it affects their general well being, and offers actionable recommendations to address this growing challenge. Addressing misinformation among teenagers is not only a matter of education, it is a public health and societal priority. Equipping young people with the tools to think critically and use the internet responsibly is an essential investment in our collective future.

Introduction

Teenagers are especially vulnerable to misinformation, as their high engagement with social media platforms exposes them to both verified and unverified content.¹ The critical thinking skills of these youngsters are still developing and accounts for their lack of experience in distinguishing between reliable and unreliable sources. Studies have shown that a good amount of teenagers encounter and share false information online, often unknowingly.²

They [teenagers] spread false or inaccurate information without malicious intent,³ or simply put, misinformation. This contrasts with disinformation but they are both spread through similar channels, including social media, traditional media, or word of mouth. It takes the form of doctored images or videos, rumours, fake news, and inaccurate claims on trending topics, social issues, or politics.

As constant users of social media platforms, teenagers encounter various forms of information—whether true or false.¹ This is because social media algorithms amplify emotionally engaging or sensational content⁴ to users.

Hence, understanding the extent of the damage is crucial to reducing the risk of teenagers' exposure to harmful online contents and equipping them with the skills to identify misinformation and disinformation.



Factors Contributing to Teenagers' Spreading Misinformation



Peer pressure

Teenagers are highly and easily influenced either by their peers or online influencers. This can lead them into a situation where they try things that are harmless or lead to grave consequences.⁵ Teenagers, surrounded by constant sharing and reactions from their peers, often pass along information

without verifying it, seeking to belong and gain approval within their social circles. A study at the Duke's Fuqua School of Business found that a leading factor in why misinformation easily goes around is because people, especially teens, are always trying to fit in or avoid social judgement and are trying to find their own places in the social world.⁶

Underdeveloped critical thinking skills

A lot of teenagers may not have developed strong critical thinking skills due to their growing brain and limited life experience. A 2010 study published in *Journal of Adolescent Health* found that adolescents are still developing the ability to think abstractly, to plan for the future, and to understand the consequences of their behaviour, which may limit their ability to make informed decisions.⁷ This simply shows that teenagers lack the ability to evaluate and objectively view the credibility of information they come across online.

Meanwhile, social media has a culture of being very fast paced⁸ and contributes to teenagers' poor judgment regarding how they act towards information. Due to their developing critical thinking skills,⁹ they are susceptible to the fast-paced culture, digital contents and misinformation with every swipe across their phones or devices.

Social media ecosystem

Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, Facebook and others provide a space where misinformation can spread rapidly. To worsen the case, most of these platforms do not have fact checking features or means through which misinformation can be swiftly

debunked while those that have fact-checking features on their platforms have put out plans to discontinue these features. Earlier this year, Meta, the company that operates Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp, Threads and other social media products made the decision¹¹ to stop using their third-party fact-checkers and instead resort to user-based community notes, a similar

approach that X¹¹ has been using to dispel misinformation or give more context to viral posts. Even with fact-checking features being available on these platforms, misinformation spreads very fast, with recent developments, it will become harder for platforms to organize and contain the spread of misinformation. Most social media platforms also prioritize and reward the spread of engaging or viral content, that may sometimes be misinformation. These platforms reward creators¹² that spreads misinformation with likes, comments and a very attentive audience (from their impressions) and inevitably makes it easier for misinformation to reach more unassuming people.

Influence of online personalities

Teenagers often get their news and entertainment from social media influencers which makes them very vulnerable to the misinformation these influencers and personalities might share.¹³ Many online personalities have established a deep sense of trust with their followers, particularly younger ones, who look up to them as role models or idols. This trust makes it easier for their audiences to absorb and believe the misinformation shared by these influencers, often without taking the time to verify its validity or check for errors in the content. As a result, the spread of misinformation becomes more widespread, as followers are influenced by the authority their idols hold in their eyes.

The Prevalence of Online Misinformation by Teenagers



Misinformation spread amongst teenagers across the world has grown significantly over the years, fueled by the increasing use of social media platforms and online forums. With teenagers being very active users of digital platforms, they play an important role in the consumption and spread of misinformation.

Several factors contribute heavily to the spread of misinformation amongst teenagers, including their online habits and the nature of social media platforms. The ease of how information spreads amongst teenagers has also made it very difficult for teens to understand and discern information objectively.

“ Studies have also shown that a significant percentage of teenagers across various countries struggle to understand and differentiate between credible and false information. ”

Various groups and individuals from different countries performed these studies and assessments to analyse the way misinformation is connected to teens and their findings have shown a dire need to proactively address teenagers' screen time and digital content consumption.^{14 15 16}

A study by the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH), shows that teenagers are more likely to believe in online conspiracy theories than adults.¹⁴ The study shows that 60 percent of 13-17 year olds in the US are

likely to believe any conspiracy statement they see online and 69 percent of teens who use social media more than their counterparts are likely to believe even more conspiracy statements. A more recent research on the United Kingdom, shows that 37 percent of teenagers aged between 12 to 15 years, have come across deliberately untrue or misleading news online or via social media and 35 percent said they have not come across any false news.¹⁵ There are also studies proving that a large percentage of teenagers can't differentiate between fake or real health news.¹⁶

75%
of Young Africans

polled across
16 countries in 2024
revealed that

**Fake News
on Social Media**

hinders them from
staying informed

“most of them said they shared misinformation especially about health, politics, or violence out of a sense of civic duty, often to warn others “just in case” it was true.”

This survey was carried out between 2019 and 2020.¹⁸

Across various social media platforms, there are challenges and trends that have been made very popular through misinformation amongst teenage communities. An example of this is the “Vaccine Magnet Challenge,” this challenge emerged in 2021, in which teens and even adults claimed that the COVID-19 vaccines made their skins magnetised, posting videos where spoons and forks appeared to stick to their arms after getting vaccinated. Many videos were posted on this challenge despite the fact that the claim was debunked by fact checkers and health experts.^{19 20} These viral trends show how easily misinformation captures the attention of teenagers, paving the way for deeper impacts when false narratives continue to spread unchecked.

and a serious problem in their immediate community. Despite the distrust in social media due to the sheer amount of false stories found on the platforms daily, Facebook (56 percent) and WhatsApp (41 percent) still rely on social media for news.¹⁷ In focus groups with 94 university students across six African countries (Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Ghana, Zambia and Zimbabwe),

Impact of Teenagers Spreading Misinformation

When teenagers spread misinformation, the consequences can be both immediate and long-lasting, affecting not only themselves but also their communities. These impacts range from the erosion of trust in reliable sources to the amplification of harmful narratives that can influence public behaviour and decision-making. Below is a curation of impacts that explore some of the most significant ways this issue manifests.

The impact on teenagers themselves

Teenagers are always active on social media platforms, when they share or interact with misinformation it can always turn into something that impacts their personal lives in various ways. Teens who believe and share misinformation online may experience heightened levels of anxiety, distortion of reality, fear of the unknown and other mental health issues. A report from the American Psychology Association (APA)²¹ highlighted the benefits and risks social media brings to teens and that social media usage of teens could affect their psychological and physical well being.

Misinformation spread by teenagers can also have impacts on the relationships they build. This is not only particular to teens, as even relationships between adults can have problems and be defined due to misinformation. Most of the information shared in teenage spaces always include conversations on political views, celebrity news, games or other controversial topics, during these discussions their opinions may become divided depending on the kinds of information they come across.²² This can cause them to get into arguments that cause dents in their re-

lationships, and could snowball into situations where they are unable to build healthy connections where open dialogues and opinions can be shared.

Impact on society

Misinformation significantly impacts society in various ways whether directly or indirectly and its impact cannot be downplayed. Some of the impacts that misinformation have on society include; destroying trust in the media, promoting harmful behaviours, creating confusion about important facts or history, and sometimes even incite violence in some countries.²³ This often leads to negative consequences for communities and individuals, especially regarding sensitive issues like health or politics.

One of the impacts of misinformation on society is that it causes stigmatisation and discrimination of certain groups or persons. Teenagers may amongst themselves spread misleading information or false stereotypes about specific communities which may contribute to discrimination of these communities.²⁴ An example of this is the misinformation that was spread about Asians during the COVID-19 pandemic about the virus being linked to certain Asian ethnic groups spread and this led to hate²⁵ on social media and violent attacks in real life.²⁶

Impact on education

Misinformation's impact on education is multifaceted, it affects not just the development of essential life skills but it also undermines educational integrity. When teenagers are constantly exposed to and sharing

misinformation, it affects their abilities to develop proper critical thinking skills that can help them in evaluating information and they have no problem sharing any kind of information amongst their peers. Being constantly around misinformation can influence students to question the validity of their studies or teachers, creating distrust in the learning environment. The distrust can cause a consistent spread of misinformation and reluctance to critically evaluate information they may come across.

The misinformation spread about educational prospects, requirements and opportunities can also have long term effects on the education of teens. When they are met with certain information regarding education, it may lead them to chase unrealistic goals, become sensitive and even affect their daily activities.



Turning the Tide: Steering teenagers away from misinformation



There are various ways through which misinformation amongst teenagers can be contained, it is a problem that can be curbed with the right solutions and tools. In the US, MediaWise, a non-profit initiative of the Poynter Institute, launched a Teen Fact Checking Newsroom (TFCN) back in 2018.²⁷ They created this to not just involve teenagers in the process of fact-checking but to also teach media literacy to their peers.

The teen fact checkers with MediaWise receive payments like any other adult in the same line of work, their fact-checking and media literacy videos are uploaded across MediaWise's social media platforms.²⁸ The project has gone beyond the US as they have partnered with other initiatives in Brazil²⁹ and Germany³⁰ to expand the process to other parts of the world. The teen fact-checks range across different stories,

from a story³¹ of drug dealers targeting kids on halloween to a claim made by Elon Musk.³² This effort by MediaWise shares a sense of understanding about what needs to be done and how to approach incorporating teenagers into the fight against misinformation.

In Africa, there was a collaboration between The Youth Cafe and Africa Check. Their collaboration the 'Scam Slam' was a comprehensive media literacy campaign. While this campaign primarily focused on equipping young persons with a deep understanding of essential financial literacy concepts and skills, it was created to help young persons avoid online scams and critically evaluate shady financial information.³³ This program didn't focus on general misinformation, but their approach is also an example on how to involve teens in the fight on misinformation.

FactCheck Africa started a gamified fact checking initiative specifically for kids in secondary schools, this initiative helps them to understand and equips them with the tools to navigate the information landscape. The initiative called the Fact-Check Champs,³⁴ was launched in the first quarter of 2025, it has recorded success in schools across Ogun, Oyo, Lagos and Imo state. The initiative incorporated clapping techniques such as typewriter and NEPA, logic puzzles and scenario based discussions to debunk common myths across Nigerian secondary schools and create a culture of healthy scepticism. This kind of initiative creates a space for teenagers to be wary of information they come across, leading them to want to verify before sharing. To further address this issue, the following recommendations can help reduce the spread of misinformation among teenagers.

Collaborations with social media platforms

Collaborations between educational organizations, government, social media platforms and technological companies is a key strategy in curbing misinformation. Social media platforms can partner with educational institutions and other organizations to create tailored digital literacy programs, these programs will educate teens on how to understand information they come across, on how to spot false or doctored content and it would also help them understand the consequences that come with sharing misinformation and disinformation.

The government should also fund media literacy and critical thinking skill programs in schools to equip teenagers with the tools to critically evaluate and understand information. It is also very important that technology companies step up their game by developing tools that help people recognize misinformation or shady information on their platforms and also strengthen content moderation policies to limit the spread of misinformation and harmful narratives.

Some collaborative efforts, although not with focus on teenage misinformation, were made back in 2024 by the Digital Cooperation Organization.³⁵ They had a collaborative roundtable with social media platforms and technology companies to combat the spread of misinformation online. These types of collaborations are what will push social media platforms to take adequate measures on information integrity.

Enhanced media literacy in schools

This is one of the most powerful tools in curbing teenage misinformation. Creating a proper media literacy course and adding it to the educational curriculum of teenagers and young adults helps them become equipped early on with critical thinking skills to accurately analyze/evaluate information and arguments effectively. The skills they earn for media literacy is not limited to just how they evaluate information, it is also transferable to other parts of their education and everyday life, this makes them grow into better learners and informed citizens.

Some schools outside of Africa, have been advocating to add media literacy courses to their curriculum and some have successfully added it.³⁶ It is important that African educators look for ways that media literacy can be incorporated into their learning pedagogy.

Community and youth engagements in proffering solutions

Involving teenagers in community and youth efforts can be quite effective, this puts teens directly in the middle of the process and equips them with a sense of duty and responsibility. When young persons are given opportunities to learn, participate and actively contribute in these kinds of activities, they gain valuable skills, develop a sense of belonging and become invested in related communities. A few ways to involve them in these activities include; peer education, youth led literacy workshops and collaborative efforts between media outlets/fact check organizations and the government.

This type of effort has been made by various organizations and institutions, an example of this is the UNICEF Global Volunteer Initiative in Brazil. In 2021, over 3000 young volunteers teamed up with UNICEF to fight misinformation surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. They created a community that taught and allowed young people to be at the forefront of fighting against any digital misinformation.³⁷ During the course of the program, 22 events were organized and an average of 2000 volunteers were in attendance. This kind of responsibility shapes their critical thinking skills and keeps them abreast of the world they live in and how to navigate it when they have verified information at their fingertips.

Community and youth engagements in proffering solutions

In recent times, social media and digital platforms have become a huge part of teenage culture, this has also made it easier for misinformation to travel faster than ever among teenagers. While tech companies or the government have their role to play in addressing teenage misinformation, parental involvement is an often overlooked and underestimated tool that can be used in the fight against the spread of teenage misinformation amongst teenagers.

Parents are undeniably some of the closest individuals to teenagers and are from where they pick up behavioural and attitude patterns. Parents can use model critical thinking to shape their children.³⁸ The attitude parents use in their engagement with information can easily set the foundation of how teenagers engage with information. If they

show and share responsible habits like questioning sources or fact-checking before sharing, it can lead their teens to adopting the same attitude.

Also, when parents encourage open dialogue, it creates a room for their kids to be vulnerable with them and share their thoughts and opinions.³⁹ The goal of open dialogue is to create a room or relationship where kids feel comfortable enough to share information they come across online with their parents. This can help the parents stay abreast of the information their kids are consuming, it also helps them understand how to teach them to identify any form of information they come across.

Platform Accountability

This is an important aspect of fighting against the spread of misinformation among teenagers, any collaborative effort and plan from social and digital platforms must come from taking proper accountability, as it is the backbone of any solution they plan to offer and it also addresses the issue from the root. When platforms take accountability for the kind of information shared across their platforms, it can help to reduce exposure to harmful or false content, can improve the quality of information that gains visibility, protect vulnerable/unassuming audiences and it can even create a culture of credibility.

Conclusion

Addressing teenage misinformation spread is very important for several reasons, especially with how digitalized the world has become, information flows in and out without proper supervision. Teenagers, who are still developing their critical thinking skills and understanding of how information works, are particularly vulnerable to misinformation. Addressing and finding solutions that actively tackle teenage misinformation can help with protecting the mental and overall well being of teenagers, it can help

with increased media literacy and critical thinking skills and most importantly, a proactive society can help in reducing how misinformation spreads.

Government bodies, technology companies, educational institutions and parents all have important roles to play when it comes to fighting the spread of misinformation. The long term health and peace of the present/future generations and the integrity of democratic societies depend on the collaborative efforts of every person.

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