

Social Intelligence and Susceptibility to Online Misinformation of Generation Z Learners

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between social intelligence and Generation Z students' ability to identify and evaluate misleading online information. Anchored on Social Cognitive Theory, Emotional Intelligence Theory, and Sociocultural Theory, the research investigated whether social intelligence serves as a protective factor against misinformation susceptibility among Junior High School and Senior High School students at Lyceo de Pasacao Inc. A quantitative descriptive-correlational research design was employed involving 102 purposively selected students. Data were collected using adapted versions of the Tromsø Social Intelligence Scale (TSIS) and the Misinformation Susceptibility Test (MIST), which underwent content validation and reliability testing prior to administration. Descriptive and inferential statistical techniques, including correlation analysis, were used to analyze the data. The findings revealed that respondents demonstrated a high level of social intelligence in terms of social information processing, social skills, and social awareness. However, they exhibited mixed susceptibility to online misinformation and manipulation. Students performed best in recognizing credible and institutional sources but showed greater vulnerability to emotional manipulation, sensationalism, conspiracy-related content, health misinformation, and repeated unsupported claims. Correlation analysis indicated weak negative and statistically insignificant relationships between all dimensions of social intelligence and misinformation susceptibility, leading to the retention of the null hypothesis. The results suggest that social intelligence alone is insufficient to predict students' ability to identify and evaluate misleading online information. Consequently, the study recommends the implementation of a Digital Social Intelligence and Media Literacy Program that integrates media literacy, critical thinking, fact-checking, emotional regulation, and digital resilience. The study aligns with SDG 4 (Quality Education) by promoting media literacy, critical thinking, and informed decision-making, and with SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) by supporting responsible information consumption and resistance to misinformation. Its sustainability contribution lies in strengthening educational, community, and digital resilience through the development of informed, responsible, and critically engaged digital citizens.

Keywords: Digital Resilience; Generation Z; Media Literacy; Misinformation Susceptibility; Online Information Evaluation; Social Awareness; Social Information Processing; Social Intelligence; Social Skills

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has transformed how Generation Z accesses, interprets, and shares information. As digital natives, Generation Z relies heavily on social media and online platforms for communication, learning, and social interaction. However, the prevalence of misinformation, manipulative content, and algorithm-driven information environments presents significant challenges to their ability to critically evaluate online information. While digital fluency enables efficient platform navigation, it does not necessarily ensure strong media literacy or critical evaluation skills. This study examines the role of social intelligence in influencing Generation Z's ability to identify and evaluate misleading online information, particularly among Junior High School and Senior High School students at Lyceo de Pasacao Inc. By integrating cognitive, emotional, and sociocultural perspectives, the study seeks to contribute to the development of media literacy and digital resilience interventions that strengthen critical engagement in digital environments.

1.1 Social Intelligence and Online Misinformation Evaluation Among Generation Z Students

Generation Z comprises individuals who have grown up immersed in digital technologies, social media, and internet-based communication. At Lyceo de Pasacao Inc., students navigate online environments characterized by varying levels of internet access and exposure to localized misinformation through social media networks. Although media literacy initiatives exist, their limited scope leaves many students vulnerable to misleading and manipulative content. Existing literature describes Generation Z as technologically adept and highly engaged in digital spaces. However, scholars emphasize that digital fluency differs from media literacy, which requires the ability to evaluate credibility, bias, intent, and accuracy. Algorithm-driven feeds, persuasive digital design, and emotionally charged content further complicate

information evaluation. Research on cognitive processing suggests that reliance on heuristics and social validation may reduce careful scrutiny of information sources. While emotional intelligence has been associated with improved judgment and self-regulation, the influence of social intelligence on misinformation detection remains underexplored. This study addresses that gap by investigating how social intelligence influences Generation Z's capacity to critically evaluate misleading online information.

1.2 Themes and Insights on Social Intelligence, Media Literacy, and Misinformation Among Generation Z

1.2.1 Generation Z Digital Nativity and Online Information Behavior

Research consistently characterizes Generation Z as highly connected digital natives who rely extensively on social media and mobile technologies for communication, information acquisition, and learning (Pew Research Center, 2022; McKinsey & Company, 2024). The widespread adoption of social media has transformed information sharing from one-way communication into interactive and user-generated participation (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The concept of "digital natives" was originally introduced by Prensky (2001) to describe individuals who have grown up immersed in digital technologies and digital communication environments. Studies indicate that digital platforms facilitate rapid information discovery and peer-based validation processes (Common Sense Media, 2021, 2023; Ofcom, 2023). However, constant connectivity, media multitasking, and algorithmic content curation may contribute to fragmented attention, reliance on heuristic judgments, and increased susceptibility to misinformation (Ofcom, 2023; Digital Future Society, 2024). Recent findings suggest that Generation Z and Millennials may be particularly vulnerable to misinformation despite their familiarity with digital technologies (Kelly, 2024). Evidence further shows that technological proficiency does not automatically translate into effective credibility assessment skills. Philippine studies revealed difficulties among students in identifying fake news and critically evaluating online content despite exposure to media literacy instruction (Pazon, 2018; Nicolas, 2025). These findings suggest that digital resilience requires competencies beyond technical skills.

1.2.2 Social Intelligence in Digital Interaction and Information Evaluation

Social intelligence is increasingly recognized as an important factor in navigating digitally mediated environments. Recent reviews of digital social cognition suggest that understanding intentions, trust, and social cues remains essential in digitally mediated environments (Deckker & Sumanasekara, 2025). It enables individuals to interpret social cues, demonstrate empathy, adapt behavior, and maintain trust in online interactions (Ipsos, 2016; Doheny & Lighthall, 2023; Yıldız & Nur, 2024). Empathy and effective interpretation of social cues have been associated with healthier participation and relationship-building in online communities (Choudhury & De, 2017). Research also suggests that empathy promotes prosocial behavior and constructive engagement within digital environments (Khan & Ali, 2018). Higher levels of social intelligence have been associated with improved collaboration, communication, and digital competence in educational settings (European Journal of Education Studies, 2017; Marin & Cañas, 2019; Alonso & Romero, 2020). Nevertheless, existing studies primarily focus on cooperative interactions and provide limited evidence regarding the role of social intelligence in resisting misinformation, deception, and manipulative online content. This highlights the need to examine whether social intelligence functions as a protective factor against misinformation among Generation Z learners.

1.2.3 Emotional Intelligence, Cognitive Biases, and Susceptibility to Misinformation

Studies suggest that reflective thinking, emotional regulation, and awareness of cognitive biases reduce susceptibility to misinformation (Bago et al., 2020; Van der Linden et al., 2020). Emotional intelligence supports critical evaluation by enabling individuals to regulate affective responses and recognize emotional manipulation. Emerging research suggests that empathy, perspective-taking, and ethical reasoning may encourage more responsible participation and information-sharing behaviors in digital spaces (Livingstone & Helsper, 2017). Conversely, emotionally driven processing, confirmation bias, motivated reasoning, and heuristic thinking increase vulnerability to misinformation (Kahneman, 2011; Greene & Murphy, 2021; Martel et al., 2020). Research has shown that false memories and memory distortions can increase acceptance of misinformation, particularly when individuals repeatedly encounter inaccurate information in digital environments (Frenda et al., 2017). Memory-related cognitive vulnerabilities may further contribute to the persistence and acceptance of misinformation even when corrective information is available (Brashier & Schacter, 2020). Despite substantial evidence on emotional and cognitive influences, limited research has examined how emotional and social competencies collectively affect Generation Z's evaluation of online information.

1.2.4 Online Misinformation, Scams, and Manipulative Digital Content

Digital platforms provide opportunities for learning and collaboration while simultaneously exposing users to misinformation and manipulation. Social intelligence and emotional regulation may strengthen resilience against deceptive content (Ipsos, 2016; Yıldız & Nur, 2024; European Journal of Education Studies, 2017; Marin & Cañas, 2019; Alonso & Romero, 2020). However, misinformation often spreads rapidly because it appeals to emotions and social validation mechanisms (Vosoughi et al., 2018; Lazer et al., 2018). Emotional triggers, cognitive biases, and algorithmic amplification increase the likelihood of misinformation acceptance (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Pennycook & Rand, 2019; Buchanan & Benson, 2019; Shu et al., 2017; Guess et al., 2019). These findings indicate that digital resilience depends not only on technological competence but also on social and emotional capacities.

1.2.5 Media Literacy and Digital Resilience Interventions for Generation Z

Media literacy interventions increasingly emphasize critical thinking, emotional regulation, ethical participation, and resilience rather than solely technical skills (Bulger & Davison, 2018; Hobbs, 2017; Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017). Programs that integrate reflective discussion, critical analysis, and creative engagement have shown positive outcomes in strengthening evaluative skills among young learners (McDougall & Potter, 2019; Frau-Meigs & Hibbard, 2016). Nevertheless, many interventions remain short-term and often overlook social-emotional dimensions that influence online judgment (Jones-Jang et al., 2021). Existing literature therefore supports the need for holistic approaches that combine media literacy, social intelligence, and emotional regulation to enhance digital resilience.

1.3 Local, National, and Global Context of Generation Z's Exposure to Online Misinformation

Globally, Generation Z operates within increasingly complex digital ecosystems characterized by algorithmic personalization, social media influence, and widespread misinformation. Digital news consumption trends further indicate that social media platforms have become major gateways to information for younger audiences, increasing exposure to both credible information and misinformation (Newman et al., 2018). International studies report high levels of digital engagement alongside growing concerns regarding misinformation exposure and critical evaluation skills (Pew Research Center, 2022; McKinsey & Company, 2024; Ofcom, 2023). Nationally, research in the Philippines indicates persistent challenges in identifying fake news and evaluating online information despite educational efforts promoting media literacy (Pazon, 2018; Nicolas, 2025). In the Philippine context, increasing incidents of online scams and cyber-related offenses further highlight the importance of strengthening digital literacy and critical evaluation skills among young people (Cross, 2020). Locally, students at Lyceo de Pasacao Inc. experience these challenges within a semi-urban environment where uneven internet access and community-based information networks may influence information exposure and interpretation. These contextual realities underscore the importance of investigating social intelligence as a potential factor in strengthening digital resilience among students.

1.4 Theoretical and Conceptual Foundations of Social Intelligence and Misinformation Susceptibility

This study is anchored on Social Cognitive Theory, Emotional Intelligence Theory, and Sociocultural Theory. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986, 2001) explains how behavior, cognition, and environmental influences interact through observational learning. In digital environments, Generation Z is influenced by peers, influencers, and algorithmically amplified content. Social intelligence may support reflective evaluation rather than imitation of socially endorsed information (Schneider et al., 2022; Davlembayeva et al., 2024). Emotional Intelligence Theory proposed by Goleman (1995, 1998) emphasizes self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, motivation, and social skills. Goleman later expanded these concepts by emphasizing the importance of social intelligence in understanding interpersonal relationships and social behavior (Goleman, 2006). According to Craig (2019), these dimensions form the core components of emotional intelligence and support effective emotional awareness and interpersonal functioning. These competencies enable individuals to recognize emotional manipulation and regulate affective responses when evaluating online content (Cherry, 2024). Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) highlights the role of social interaction and cultural tools in cognitive development. Social media platforms function as sociocultural spaces where information is constructed, shared, and evaluated. Computer-mediated communication environments shape interpersonal perceptions and social influence processes differently from face-to-face interactions (Walther, 1992). These environments may either strengthen critical thinking or reinforce misinformation depending on the quality of social interactions and collective verification practices (Freeman, 2010). Together, these theories suggest that susceptibility to misinformation emerges from the interaction of behavioral modeling, emotional regulation, and sociocultural learning processes. Social intelligence operates across these dimensions, influencing how individuals interpret social cues, regulate emotions, and evaluate online information.

1.5 Research Gaps on Social Intelligence and Critical Evaluation of Online Information Among Generation Z

The literature demonstrates extensive research on digital literacy, emotional intelligence, misinformation, and online behavior. However, several gaps remain. First, limited studies explicitly examine social intelligence as a predictor of misinformation susceptibility and critical evaluation skills. Second, much of the existing evidence is derived from Western, adult, or university-based populations, leaving adolescent and school-based contexts underrepresented. Third, research often treats digital literacy, emotional regulation, and social competencies as separate constructs rather than examining their interaction within digital environments. The present study addresses these gaps by investigating the relationship between social intelligence and Generation Z students' ability to identify and evaluate misleading online information. By focusing on Junior High School and Senior High School students at Lyceo de Pasacao Inc., the study contributes context-specific evidence and supports the development of media literacy and digital resilience programs grounded in students' social and emotional realities.

1.6 Alignment of the Study on Social Intelligence and Digital Resilience with Relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

This study aligns with:

SDG 4 – Quality Education, by promoting critical thinking, media literacy, digital competence, and informed decision-making necessary for lifelong learning and responsible citizenship.

SDG 16 – Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions, by supporting informed information consumption, resistance to misinformation, and responsible participation in digital public discourse.

SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals, through its potential contribution to collaborative efforts among educational institutions, educators, media literacy advocates, and community stakeholders in strengthening digital resilience.

1.7 Importance of the Study on Social Intelligence and Digital Resilience to Multidisciplinary Sustainability

The study contributes to educational sustainability by supporting the development of competencies that enable learners to critically evaluate information and adapt to evolving digital environments. It advances socio-economic sustainability by helping individuals make informed decisions and reducing vulnerability to misinformation, scams, and manipulative content. The study also supports community sustainability by fostering responsible digital citizenship, ethical online participation, and informed engagement within communities. Furthermore, it contributes to innovation and digital sustainability by emphasizing the integration of social intelligence, emotional regulation, and media literacy as essential competencies for navigating contemporary information ecosystems. Through these contributions, the study promotes resilient, informed, and socially responsible digital participation among Generation Z learners.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

This study utilized a quantitative descriptive-correlational research design to investigate the relationship between social intelligence and Generation Z's ability to evaluate misleading online information. The descriptive component assessed students' levels of social intelligence and susceptibility to online misinformation using validated survey instruments. Mean and standard deviation were used to summarize these variables. The correlational component examined the association between social intelligence and the ability to assess the credibility of online information. This design enabled the determination of the strength and direction of relationships between naturally occurring variables without manipulation, consistent with descriptive-correlational research (Salkind, 2017). Prior to correlation analysis, the Shapiro-Wilk test was conducted to assess data normality. Pearson's r was used when normality assumptions were satisfied; otherwise, Spearman's ρ was applied. The level of significance was set at 0.05.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted at Lyceo de Pasacao Inc., a semi-urban private school in Camarines Sur, Philippines. The locale was selected because Generation Z students in the institution experience varying levels of internet access and exposure to localized misinformation through social media and digital platforms. These conditions provided an appropriate setting for examining social intelligence, digital engagement, and susceptibility to misleading online content.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The respondents were Generation Z Junior High School and Senior High School students enrolled at Lyceo de Pasacao Inc. They were selected because they regularly engage with social media and online information environments where misinformation and peer influence are prevalent. A total of 102 students participated in the study. This sample size was considered sufficient for descriptive-correlational analysis and aligned with methodological recommendations for medium-sized samples in correlational research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The respondents represented diverse educational levels, demographic backgrounds, and digital experiences, providing a broad perspective on social intelligence and online information evaluation. Faculty members and academic advisers with expertise in media literacy, guidance, and counseling were consulted informally to provide contextual insights and support the development of the intervention program. However, they were not included as formal participants in data collection.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study employed purposive sampling to select Generation Z students who actively use digital and social media platforms. This approach ensured that participants possessed relevant experiences related to online information consumption, digital literacy, and exposure to misinformation. The sample consisted of 102 respondents aged 15 years and above. The selected sample size balanced methodological rigor with practical considerations such as accessibility, time, and available resources. It was deemed adequate to support reliable correlational analysis, reduce random error, and provide stable statistical estimates regarding the relationship between social intelligence and misinformation susceptibility (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

2.5 Research Instrument

The study utilized two adapted and validated instruments. The first instrument was the Tromsø Social Intelligence Scale (TSIS), originally developed by Silvera, Martinussen, and Dahl (2001). Fifteen items were selected from the original scale to measure the dimensions of Social Information Processing, Social Skills, and Social Awareness. Minor wording modifications were made to contextualize the instrument within digital environments while maintaining its original intent. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. Previous studies reported acceptable reliability for the TSIS, with Cronbach's alpha values above .70. The second instrument was the Misinformation Susceptibility Test (MIST), developed to measure susceptibility to online misinformation (Maertens & Götz, 2021). The adapted version consisted of 15 items containing examples of authentic and misleading online content. Respondents evaluated the credibility of each item, with higher scores indicating greater resistance to misinformation and lower scores indicating higher susceptibility. Both instruments underwent content validation by a licensed Psychometrician and a Registered Guidance Counselor to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study objectives. The validation process produced a mean validation score of 3.7, indicating acceptable content validity. Reliability testing was conducted using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a coefficient of 0.824, which demonstrated good internal consistency and confirmed the suitability of the instruments for the study.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

Prior to data collection, approval was obtained from school authorities and relevant ethics bodies. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality measures, and their rights as respondents. Appropriate consent and assent procedures were observed. Data were gathered through the administration of structured survey questionnaires. The TSIS measured respondents' levels of social intelligence, while the MIST assessed their susceptibility to misinformation and their ability to evaluate online information. Following data collection, responses were organized, coded, encoded, and subjected to data cleaning procedures to ensure completeness and accuracy. The processed data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The findings were subsequently interpreted and utilized in developing a media literacy and digital resilience program designed to strengthen students' social intelligence and critical evaluation skills.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

Descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were employed to address the research objectives. Mean and standard deviation were used to determine the levels of social intelligence and misinformation susceptibility among respondents (Salkind, 2017). Frequency and percentage distributions were also utilized to describe respondent characteristics and response patterns (Salkind, 2017). To examine the relationship between social intelligence and the ability to assess online information credibility, Pearson's r was used when normality assumptions were met; otherwise, Spearman's ρ was employed (Salkind, 2017). The level of significance was set at 0.05. Linear regression analysis was also conducted to determine whether social intelligence significantly predicted Generation Z students' ability to evaluate online information (Salkind, 2017). All analyses were performed using appropriate statistical software, and the results were interpreted in accordance with the study objectives.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical principles to protect the rights, dignity, and welfare of participants. Ethical approval was obtained from the administration of Lyceo de Pasacao Inc. before data collection commenced. For respondents below 18 years of age, parental consent and participant assent were secured. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. No coercion or undue incentives were used. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of coded responses rather than personal identifiers. Electronic data were password-protected, and physical records were securely stored with researcher-only access. All information was used exclusively for academic purposes and handled in accordance with institutional and data privacy regulations. The analysis and reporting of findings were conducted honestly and transparently. All sources were properly acknowledged, and no data were fabricated, altered, or misrepresented. These measures ensured the credibility, integrity, and trustworthiness of the research process.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Level of Social Intelligence of Generation Z When Engaging with Online Content

This section presents the level of social intelligence of Generation Z senior high school students when engaging with online content. Social intelligence was examined through three dimensions: social information processing, social skills, and social awareness. The findings provide insights into how students interpret online information, regulate their online behavior, and recognize the social impact of digital interactions.

3.1.1 Social Information Processing

The respondents demonstrated a high level of social information processing, with an overall mean of 3.74. They showed strong awareness that online information does not always reflect the full truth and were generally capable of identifying exaggeration, bias, emotional manipulation, and the tone of online messages. However, the lowest score was obtained in recognizing misleading intentions behind sensational headlines and viral posts, indicating a comparatively weaker ability to detect hidden motives in online content. The findings suggest that students possess a functional ability to evaluate online information but still experience difficulty identifying subtle forms of manipulation. Although they understand that online content may be incomplete or biased, awareness alone does not always lead to deeper critical analysis. Their performance indicates that digital familiarity does not necessarily translate into advanced evaluative judgment. As a result, students may remain vulnerable to emotionally appealing, sensational, or socially endorsed content despite recognizing that misinformation exists. The findings highlight the need for interventions that strengthen critical thinking, digital discernment, emotional regulation, and media literacy to improve resistance to misinformation and online manipulation.

3.1.2 Social Skills

The respondents obtained a high level of social skills, with an overall mean of 4.01. They reported thinking carefully before reacting to or sharing information, avoiding impulsive online behavior, controlling emotional responses, and refraining from sharing information when unsure of its accuracy. The lowest score, although still interpreted as high, involved maintaining respectful engagement during disagreements and sensitive discussions online. The results indicate that students generally demonstrate responsible online behavior and possess the ability to regulate their actions in digital environments. Their tendency to think before sharing information and avoid impulsive responses reflects a positive level of digital responsibility and self-control. However, the comparatively lower score in respectful engagement suggests that managing disagreement and maintaining civility during emotionally charged discussions remain areas for improvement. These findings emphasize the importance of guidance programs that promote empathy, conflict resolution, respectful communication, and emotional regulation to support healthy online interactions and responsible digital citizenship.

3.1.3 Social Awareness

The respondents demonstrated a high level of social awareness, with an overall mean of 3.95. They recognized that misinformation can negatively affect other people and acknowledged the influence of their online actions on others' beliefs and behaviors. They also reported feeling responsible for the information they share online. However, the lowest score was obtained in recognizing when online group opinions pressure individuals to accept false information. The findings indicate that students generally understand the ethical and social consequences of online behavior and misinformation. Their awareness of the potential harm caused by misleading information reflects a sense of accountability and responsibility in digital spaces. Nevertheless, their lower ability to recognize group pressure suggests vulnerability to conformity and social influence. Students may understand that misinformation is harmful but still find it difficult to resist peer influence, popular opinions, or online communities that reinforce inaccurate information. These results underscore the importance of strengthening independent judgment, critical awareness, and resistance to social pressure through media literacy, values formation, and socio-emotional learning initiatives.

3.1.4 Overall Level of Social Intelligence

The respondents obtained an overall social intelligence mean of 3.90, interpreted as high. Among the three dimensions, social skills recorded the highest mean, followed by social awareness and social information processing. The findings indicate that students generally possess favorable levels of social intelligence in digital environments and demonstrate responsible online behavior, awareness of the effects of misinformation, and the ability to regulate their interactions with online content. The pattern of results suggests that students are stronger in regulating their online behavior than in critically analyzing complex information. While they demonstrate responsible digital participation and awareness of social consequences, they remain susceptible to hidden motives, emotional manipulation, and persuasive online content. The findings further show that being a digital native does not automatically ensure digital maturity. Students may be skilled users of technology while still requiring support in critical evaluation, ethical decision-making, and emotional regulation. Consequently, guidance and counseling programs should integrate digital social intelligence, misinformation resistance, mental health literacy, and responsible digital citizenship to strengthen students' resilience and capacity to navigate increasingly complex online environments.

3.2 Level of Generation Z's Susceptibility to Online Misinformation and Manipulation

This section presents the respondents' susceptibility to online misinformation and manipulation. The findings were organized into four dimensions: Health and Science Misinformation Recognition, Source Credibility and Institutional Verification, Emotional Manipulation, Sensationalism and Conspiracy Recognition, and Evidence Evaluation and Fact-Checking Behavior. These dimensions illustrate the areas where students demonstrated strengths and vulnerabilities in evaluating online information.

3.2.1 Health and Science Misinformation Recognition

The respondents demonstrated mixed susceptibility to health and science misinformation. They accurately identified basic health information, particularly the importance of drinking enough water for maintaining good health. However, many respondents failed to recognize misinformation related to false health cures and vaccine-related conspiracy claims, indicating high susceptibility to these forms of misleading content. The findings suggest that students possess basic health awareness but struggle to critically evaluate health-related misinformation when it is presented as miraculous, scientific-sounding, alarming, or emotionally persuasive. Their vulnerability to false cures and conspiracy claims indicates that familiarity with health information does not necessarily translate into the ability to assess credibility and evidence. This highlights the need to strengthen students' digital health literacy, critical evaluation skills, and resistance to emotionally appealing misinformation. The results may be understood through Media Literacy Theory, Social Influence Theory, and Conformity Theory, which emphasize the role of critical evaluation, peer influence, and social approval in shaping beliefs and behaviors.

3.2.2 Source Credibility and Institutional Verification

The respondents exhibited low susceptibility in the area of source credibility and institutional verification. Most correctly recognized official government announcements, verified websites, recognized institutions, reputable news organizations, and verified social media accounts as credible sources of information. This dimension obtained the highest level of correct responses among all misinformation susceptibility dimensions. The results indicate that students generally understand the importance of source credibility and demonstrate the ability to distinguish official and verified information from questionable sources. Their awareness of institutional legitimacy reflects developing media literacy and responsible information processing. However, the findings also suggest that students may recognize credible sources without fully understanding how information is produced, verified, and validated. Therefore, guidance interventions should strengthen students' understanding of editorial standards, source verification processes, and advanced fact-checking skills. These findings support Media Literacy Theory, Source Credibility Theory, and Social Influence Theory, which emphasize the importance of evaluating information based on authenticity, expertise, reliability, and evidence rather than popularity or social endorsement.

3.2.3 Emotional Manipulation, Sensationalism, and Conspiracy Recognition

The respondents showed high susceptibility to emotional manipulation, sensationalism, and conspiracy-related misinformation. Many had difficulty identifying emotionally charged headlines, claims discouraging verification, conspiracy narratives, and content designed to provoke fear, urgency, or suspicion. The lowest levels of correct responses were found in recognizing conspiracy-related statements and emotionally manipulative content. The findings indicate that students are more vulnerable when misinformation relies on emotional appeal rather than factual persuasion. Fear-based messages, sensational headlines, urgency cues, and conspiracy narratives appear to bypass critical evaluation and increase the likelihood of acceptance or sharing. Research has shown that heightened emotional arousal can impair misinformation recognition and reduce individuals' ability to critically evaluate misleading information (Lühning et al., 2024). This suggests that misinformation susceptibility is influenced not only by knowledge deficits but also by emotional responses and social pressures. Media Literacy Theory, Social Influence Theory, and Conformity Theory help explain why emotionally engaging content spreads rapidly and why students may hesitate to challenge popular or widely shared narratives (Asch, 1955; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). The results emphasize the importance of strengthening emotional regulation, independent judgment, and critical reflection as protective factors against misinformation.

3.2.4 Evidence Evaluation and Fact-Checking Behavior

The respondents generally demonstrated low susceptibility in evaluating evidence and recognizing the importance of fact-checking. Most acknowledged that online information should be verified through multiple reliable sources, that credible news articles provide evidence, and that claims discouraging verification are often signs of misinformation. However, a substantial number of respondents believed that repeated claims may become true even without evidence, indicating high susceptibility to repeated misinformation. The findings suggest that students understand the principles of fact-checking but do not consistently apply them when confronted with repeated information. Their vulnerability to repeated unsupported claims reflects the influence of familiarity and repeated exposure on judgment. This pattern demonstrates that awareness of verification practices alone may not be sufficient to resist misinformation. Repeated claims may gain credibility through social circulation and familiarity rather than evidence, a phenomenon associated with the illusory truth effect (Hasher et al., 1977). These findings support Media Literacy Theory, Social Influence Theory, and Conformity Theory, highlighting the need to develop stronger evaluative habits, independent thinking, and routine fact-checking behavior among students.

3.2.5 Overall Level of Misinformation Susceptibility

The overall findings revealed mixed susceptibility to misinformation among the respondents, with an average correct-response rate of 52.80%. Students performed best in Source Credibility and Institutional Verification, followed by Evidence Evaluation and Fact-Checking Behavior. Mixed susceptibility was observed in Health and Science Misinformation Recognition, while the highest vulnerability occurred in Emotional Manipulation, Sensationalism, and Conspiracy Recognition. The results indicate that students are more capable of identifying credible sources than recognizing

emotionally manipulative misinformation. While they generally know where reliable information originates, they remain vulnerable when misinformation is presented through fear, urgency, sensationalism, repetition, or social influence. This pattern suggests that misinformation resistance is not solely a cognitive skill but also involves emotional regulation, social awareness, and critical reflection. Consequently, media literacy interventions should move beyond source verification and fact-checking to include emotional awareness, resilience against manipulation, and responsible digital decision-making. Strengthening these competencies can help students become more discerning, emotionally resilient, and responsible consumers and sharers of online information.

3.3 Relationship Between Social Intelligence and Misinformation Susceptibility

This section examines the relationship between the dimensions of social intelligence and Generation Z students' susceptibility to online misinformation. Correlation analysis was conducted to determine whether higher levels of social intelligence were associated with greater ability to identify and evaluate misleading online information.

3.3.1 Correlation Between Social Information Processing and Misinformation Susceptibility

The analysis revealed a negligible negative relationship between Social Information Processing and misinformation susceptibility. The relationship was not statistically significant, indicating that students with higher levels of social information processing were not necessarily better at identifying and evaluating misleading online information. The findings suggest that the ability to recognize social cues, online intentions, and patterns of interaction does not automatically translate into resistance against misinformation. Students may understand online behavior and recognize certain forms of bias or manipulation while still struggling to evaluate the accuracy and credibility of complex online claims. This indicates that misinformation resistance requires additional competencies such as critical evaluation, analytic reasoning, fact-checking, and evidence-based judgment. The results support the view that social intelligence and misinformation resistance represent related but distinct constructs.

3.3.2 Correlation Between Social Skills and Misinformation Susceptibility

Social Skills demonstrated the strongest negative relationship among the three dimensions; however, the association remained negligible and statistically insignificant. Although students generally exhibited responsible online behavior, emotional control, and respectful communication, these competencies did not significantly predict their ability to recognize misinformation. The findings indicate that socially skilled students may still be vulnerable to persuasive misinformation despite demonstrating empathy, self-regulation, and responsible digital engagement. Respectful communication and positive online interactions do not necessarily equip individuals to recognize false claims, conspiracy narratives, sensational content, or emotional manipulation. From a guidance and counseling perspective, the results suggest that digital social skills alone are insufficient to ensure safe and mentally healthy online engagement. Students require additional training in critical evaluation, source verification, and analytical thinking to strengthen resistance to misleading information.

3.3.3 Correlation Between Social Awareness and Misinformation Susceptibility

The relationship between Social Awareness and misinformation susceptibility was also negligible and not statistically significant. Students who demonstrated awareness of the social consequences of online behavior were not significantly more capable of identifying misleading online information than those with lower levels of social awareness. The findings suggest that understanding the effects of online behavior on others does not necessarily protect individuals from misinformation. Students may recognize the importance of responsible information sharing and the social impact of digital interactions while remaining susceptible to emotionally appealing, repetitive, or socially endorsed misinformation. These results indicate that awareness of social consequences must be complemented by stronger evaluative and critical-thinking skills to effectively counter misinformation in digital environments.

3.3.4 Overall Relationship Between Social Intelligence and Misinformation Susceptibility

Overall, the correlation analysis showed weak negative relationships between misinformation susceptibility and all three dimensions of social intelligence. None of the relationships reached statistical significance, indicating that social intelligence was not meaningfully associated with students' ability to identify and evaluate misleading online information. Consequently, the null hypothesis stating that there is no significant relationship between the level of social intelligence of Generation Z students at Lyceo De Pasacao Inc. and their ability to identify and evaluate misleading online information was retained, while the alternative hypothesis was not supported. The findings suggest that although social intelligence contributes to empathy, respectful interaction, emotional regulation, and responsible online behavior, it is not sufficient by itself to protect students from misinformation. This result aligns with Pennycook and Rand (2019), who argued that misinformation susceptibility is more closely associated with analytic thinking and cognitive reflection than with social or emotional competencies. The findings are also consistent with Cialdini's (2009) principles of persuasion, which explain how individuals may be influenced by authority, consensus, liking, scarcity, and social proof, and with Lewandowsky et al. (2017), who emphasized the roles of emotional influence, cognitive bias, and repeated exposure in misinformation acceptance. Likewise, Livingstone (2004) highlighted the importance of media literacy in helping young people critically

evaluate media content. These findings indicate that social intelligence should be complemented by critical digital literacy, fact-checking skills, skepticism toward unsupported claims, and evidence-based reasoning.

3.3.5 Implications for Media Literacy and Digital Resilience Programs

The findings support the need for a structured Digital Social Intelligence and Media Literacy Program that integrates social intelligence, media literacy, digital resilience, emotional regulation, and critical thinking. Students demonstrated strengths in social interaction and responsible online behavior but remained vulnerable to misinformation that relied on emotional manipulation, persuasive tactics, and social influence. As a result, interventions should focus on source evaluation, fact-checking practices, identification of persuasive techniques, recognition of emotional triggers, and resistance to unsupported claims. The results emphasize that effective guidance programs should move beyond promoting values, empathy, and responsible communication. Programs should also develop evaluative judgment, cognitive reflection, skepticism, and evidence-based reasoning consistent with established critical-thinking frameworks (Paul & Elder, 2019). Integrating media literacy, emotional regulation, and digital resilience can help students become not only socially responsible online users but also critically resilient and mentally protected digital citizens capable of navigating complex information environments.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

Generation Z senior high school students of Lyceo De Pasacao Inc. demonstrated a high level of social intelligence when engaging with online content, particularly in social information processing, social skills, and social awareness. However, they showed mixed susceptibility to online misinformation and manipulation, with stronger performance in recognizing credible and institutional sources but greater vulnerability to emotional manipulation, sensationalism, conspiracy-related claims, health misinformation, and repeated unsupported information. The findings further revealed that social intelligence was not significantly related to misinformation susceptibility, indicating that while social intelligence supports responsible online behavior, empathy, and emotional regulation, it does not automatically equip students with the critical thinking, fact-checking, source verification, and media literacy skills necessary to evaluate misleading online information.

It is recommended that the school implement a Digital Social Intelligence and Media Literacy Program that integrates social intelligence, media literacy, critical thinking, fact-checking, emotional regulation, and mental health literacy, consistent with global recommendations for supporting adolescent well-being and resilience in digital environments (UNICEF, 2021). Strengthening resilience among Generation Z learners is particularly important as young people continue to adapt to rapidly changing social and digital environments (Selig, 2025). Guidance counselors, teachers, class advisers, parents, and relevant school personnel should collaborate in providing structured activities that strengthen students' ability to identify misinformation, evaluate sources, recognize emotional manipulation and persuasive tactics, verify claims, resist peer influence, and practice responsible digital citizenship. These interventions should be incorporated into guidance services, classroom instruction, homeroom activities, and parent engagement programs to promote critical awareness, independent judgment, emotional resilience, and informed online decision-making among students.

The study was limited to Generation Z junior and senior high school students of Lyceo De Pasacao Inc. and focused on examining social intelligence, misinformation susceptibility, and their relationship. The findings showed that social intelligence alone did not significantly predict students' ability to identify and evaluate misleading online information, suggesting that other factors such as media literacy, critical thinking, source verification, cognitive reflection, emotional regulation, and digital resilience may also influence misinformation susceptibility. Therefore, the results should be interpreted within the context of the study population and variables examined.

Compliance with ethical standards

The authors conducted this study in accordance with established ethical principles for research involving human participants. Appropriate measures were undertaken to protect the rights, dignity, privacy, and welfare of all participants throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, informed consent and assent procedures were observed where applicable, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained. All data were collected, stored, analyzed, and reported responsibly and were used solely for academic purposes in compliance with institutional requirements and applicable data privacy regulations. The authors further ensured honesty, transparency, and integrity in the conduct, analysis, and reporting of the study.

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