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Social networks, politics and disinformation: An analysis of the circulation of fake news among Brazilian university students.

Social Networks, Politics, and Disinformation: An Analysis of the Circulation of Fake News among Brazilian University Students

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Abstract

This article analyzes the circulation of fake news among Brazilian university students, considering the role of social media, political polarization, and contemporary dynamics of disinformation. Although they have higher levels of education and broad access to information, students are also exposed to algorithms that reinforce digital bubbles and the emotional appeal of conspiracy theories. The research uses an exploratory-descriptive approach, combining a literature review and a snowball sampling survey. The questionnaire investigated informational habits, exposure to false content, self-reported sharing, and adherence to conspiracy narratives. The results indicate a high dependence on social media as a news source, distrust of traditional media, and the influence of factors such as political positioning and religiosity on the propensity to believe or disseminate disinformation. The study highlights the need to strengthen media literacy and critical skills to combat disinformation in the university environment.

Keywords: misinformation, fake news, conspiracy theories, university students, social media.

Abstract

This article examines the circulation of fake news among Brazilian university students, considering the role of social networks, political polarization, and contemporary dynamics of disinformation. Although they have higher levels of education and broad access to information, students are also exposed to algorithms that reinforce digital echo chambers and to the emotional appeal of conspiracy theories. The study adopts an exploratory-descriptive approach, combining a literature review with a survey conducted through snowball sampling. The questionnaire investigated informational habits, exposure to false content, self-reported sharing of misleading news, and adherence to conspiracy narratives. The results indicate strong dependence on social networks as a primary source of news, distrust of traditional media, and the influence of factors such as political positioning and religiosity on the propensity to believe or disseminate disinformation. The study highlights the need to strengthen media literacy and critical information skills to confront disinformation within the university environment.

Keywords: misinformation, fake news, conspiracy theories, university students, social networks

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the rise of digital social networks has profoundly transformed...

Forms of communication, sociability, and political participation. The emergence of these platforms.

coincided with a global process of reconfiguration of information flows, marked by

abundance of data, due to the acceleration of social time and the progressive weakening of

The boundaries between truth, belief, and opinion. In Brazil, this phenomenon has taken on specific characteristics and particularly intense from 2013 onwards, when large street demonstrations inaugurated a

A new cycle of political mobilization sustained by interaction in digital environments. Starting from that

During this period, social networks ceased to function solely as spaces for sociability and began to...

to act as central arenas of symbolic, ideological, and affective dispute, in which narratives



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Competitors clash and produce concrete effects on public life.

The June 2013 protests represent a symbolic milestone in Brazil's relationship with the United States. between politics and social media. Initially convened to protest against the increase in fares of transportation, quickly expanded into multiple areas and became a large laboratory for contemporary communication logic. There, an engagement model marked by... was consolidated. apparent horizontality, due to the viral spread of content, discursive fragmentation, and... The ability of organized groups to influence large audiences through digital strategies. This context highlighted that algorithmic mediation broadened not only the reach, but also the The emotional intensity of the messages creates conditions for inaccurate content. manipulated or completely false information spread rapidly and often uncontrollably.

Starting in 2014, during the heated electoral cycle of that year and throughout the process of Following the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff, an infrastructure was consolidated in the country. A form of communication parallel to traditional media, based on the dissemination of rumors, gossip, and content. Conspiratorial. The intense activity of digital movements, such as the Free Brazil Movement (MBL), contributed to the circulation of manipulated information that gained traction through strategies. Microtargeting and emotional engagement. The convergence between economic crisis, Political instability and institutional discredit created fertile ground for theories Conspiracy theories, previously confined to small groups, became part of everyday public debate.

The international scenario offered a significant parallel. Between 2015 and 2016, the referendum Brexit and the elections that brought Donald Trump to the presidency of the United States demonstrated The political power of *fake news* and conspiracy narratives amplified by social media. interference from organizations specializing in data analysis and audience segmentation, such as *Cambridge Analytica* demonstrated that misinformation was not merely a spontaneous phenomenon, but part of a global ecosystem of ideological manipulation. This model would later be replicated in several countries, including Brazil, with profound impacts on democracies. contemporary.

In the Brazilian context, the 2018 election campaign marked a turning point. The rise of Jair Bolsonaro was accompanied by an intense circulation of false content about him. Public safety, morality, corruption, and customs. Disinformation has become a tool. strategic for mobilizing affections and consolidating political identities. WhatsApp, in particular, It played a central role as a means of dissemination through networks of trust and ties. Family members, which lent even more credibility to the messages. The 2022 elections reaffirmed this. This trend, with a significant increase in the circulation of rumors involving electronic voting machines, Electoral fraud and attacks on democratic institutions. This process culminated in episodes of Symbolic and material violence, such as the invasion of the headquarters of the Three Branches of Government on January 8, 2023.



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Given this history, it has become evident that misinformation is a structural phenomenon and which goes beyond the mere circulation of false content. It is a complex ecosystem that articulates political, technological, emotional, and sociocultural factors. The algorithmic logic of Platforms amplify content that generates engagement, which includes messages loaded with... Fear, hatred, or a sense of threat. Simultaneously, the crisis of confidence in traditional media contributes to this. The search for alternative sources of information, often without validation criteria. Furthermore, the The actions of organized political groups and the presence of digital influencers broaden the reach. misleading narratives produce lasting subjective effects.

In this scenario, young university students occupy a paradoxical position. Although they represent a segment of the population associated with increased access to knowledge and development Critical skills and academic experience are also highly exposed to digital environments. which promote misinformation. The intensive use of social media as the main source of Information, coupled with the speed of content circulation and the logic of fragmented consumption, makes These young people are particularly vulnerable. The universalization of internet access and the ubiquity of Smartphones intensify this process, leading students to use digital platforms. not just for entertainment, but to understand and interpret political events.

University students are also in a process of identity and political formation. affective, in which beliefs and values are still being shaped and reconfigured. This aspect makes The most significant influence is that of emotionally charged narratives, such as theories conspiracy theories, which offer simplified explanations for complex phenomena and create... A sense of belonging to communities that share similar worldviews. The digital environment, in turn, reinforces these perceptions through algorithmic personalization, which It filters content based on previous interactions and creates echo chambers that reduce contact with... divergent perspectives.

Recent research indicates that Brazilian university students exhibit behaviors Ambivalent about misinformation. While acknowledging its existence They denounce fake news and express concern about its impact, also admitting to having shared it before. information without verifying its veracity or even believing content that is later... They revealed falsehoods. Empirical data from the research conducted as part of the dissertation that supports it. This article confirms these trends by demonstrating that many students use social networks as Their primary source of information is content they trust more, relying instead on information shared by friends and family. than in journalistic outlets, and they identify difficulties in distinguishing facts from opinions when exposed to politically charged content.

This picture reveals that misinformation among university students cannot be understood solely not as an individual failure of interpretation, but as a product of a complex environment that combines



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Technological architecture, political disputes, and the weaknesses of democratic institutions. The analysis. Understanding these processes is fundamental to grasping how political perceptions are formed in Brazil. contemporary issues and how misleading narratives shape public debate. Understanding this This phenomenon is especially relevant in the academic environment, as universities play a significant role. a central role in the formation of critical citizens capable of participating in democratic life.

Given this historical and socio-political context, this article seeks to analyze how the Brazilian university students engage with misinformation; what factors influence their behavior? Belief in or sharing of fake news and how social networks structure information flows. that affect this group. The goal is to offer a reflection that contributes to the public debate and for the development of effective media literacy strategies, strengthening the capacity Criticism from students and contributing to the fight against misinformation in Brazil.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Disinformation as a political phenomenon

Disinformation has become a central political phenomenon in contemporary times. especially in societies marked by the expansion of digital technologies and the crisis of Institutional trust. Pinheiro and Brito (2015) state that misinformation should not be understood not as a simple factual error or lack of information, but as an instrument of Collective alienation, strategic manipulation, and ideological domination. In this sense, fake news is not... These are not isolated deviations, but rather structured mechanisms aimed at producing confusion and to weaken the critical thinking skills of individuals.

The use of fake news for political purposes is widely documented in research. recent. Da Empoli (2019) demonstrates that disinformation campaigns were fundamental to processes such as Brexit, the election of Donald Trump, and the rise of populist movements in In Europe and Latin America, fake news operates as a tool. Emotional factors that simplify complex phenomena and mobilize social resentments.

The literature on populism reinforces this understanding. For Terenzi (2021), populism It depends on the construction of a homogeneous and morally superior people, generally placed in Opposition to supposedly corrupt elites who are enemies of the nation. Conspiracy theories provide the an ideal narrative framework for this logic, as it assigns responsibility to hidden actors, reinforcing the idea of a constant threat. Wainberg (2018) complements this perspective by to argue that conspiracy theories spread primarily through emotional activation, and not through Rational verification criteria create fertile environments for political manipulation.

Therefore, misinformation and conspiracy theories should not be analyzed as phenomena. isolated. They operate as central devices of ideological dispute in the public sphere, articulating



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affects, identities and power strategies in a deeply interconnected communicational ecosystem transformed by digital technologies.

2.2 Communication, algorithms and network society

Understanding the environment in which misinformation spreads requires a perspective. historical overview of communication theories. Mills (1981) describes mass society as a A centralized communication system in which a few senders hold great power and influence. about the audience, which assumes a predominantly passive role. In this model, traditional media... It presents itself as the main mediator between facts and citizens.

Adorno and Horkheimer (1947), in formulating the concept of the culture industry, further develop the This critique demonstrates that mass-produced cultural goods reinforce consumption patterns and social conformity. For them, culture transformed into a commodity limits critical autonomy and It tends to reproduce dominant ideologies, shaping perceptions and behaviors in a way that... standardized.

From the end of the 20th century onwards, however, digital technologies have brought about changes. profound in this scenario. Castells (2020) proposes that we live in a networked society, characterized by the decentralization of information flows, interactivity, and Simultaneity of communications. Although these technologies broaden the participation of individuals. In the production of content, Castells warns that new forms of power concentration are emerging. especially in the control of technological infrastructures and algorithms.

Lévy (1998) describes these transformations within the context of cyberculture, a set of practices, values, and modes of sociability specific to the digital environment. For the author, devices Technicians reconfigure cognitive activities such as reading, interpretation, and memory, affecting directly relates to how individuals construct meaning.

Algorithmic mediation intensifies this process. Digital platforms organize and filter. content tailored to economic interests and engagement patterns, prioritizing messages. Fast-paced and highly emotional. As a consequence, sensationalist and misinformation. They gain greater visibility. This informational architecture, based on attention rather than veracity, It favors the spread of fake news and conspiracy theories and profoundly alters the ecosystem. contemporary communication (Castells, 2020; Lévy, 1998).

2.3 Journalism, public trust and the democratic crisis

Another key element in understanding disinformation is the decline in trust in... Professional journalism. Economic crises in the media, fragmentation of audiences. Systematic attacks by political leaders contributed to growing distrust in the media. traditional. Bonavides (2001) and Chauí (1980) highlight that, in democratic societies, the press



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It plays an essential role in overseeing and mediating public debate. When its legitimacy is

This is contested, opening space for alternative sources of information with less rigorous verification.

The architecture of social networks deepens this process by favoring the formation of echo chambers.

Informational algorithms tend to prioritize content that confirms users' pre-existing beliefs.

users, expanding the feeling of subjective truth and reducing contact with perspectives.

divergent. This dynamic, widely discussed by Castells (2020) and Mancebo (2002), creates

Echo chambers that reinforce polarization and increase the likelihood of adherence to false content.

The university community finds itself in a particularly sensitive position in this scenario.

Although they have higher levels of education and broad access to digital resources, this group uses social media.

as the primary source of information, and often consumes content in a fragmented way.

Recent studies, including applied research in the dissertation that forms the basis of this article,

They demonstrate that students recognize the presence of fake news, but still share it.

content without prior verification, influenced by social ties, identity narratives, and by

The platforms' own operating logic.

Thus, the combination of the crisis in journalistic mediation and the fragmentation of digital consumption

The algorithmic architecture of the platforms shows that misinformation has become a challenge.

structural for contemporary democracy, requiring new forms of media literacy and

Strengthening critical thinking in the university environment.

3. Methodology

This research adopts an exploratory-descriptive approach, suitable for the objective of

Understanding patterns, perceptions, and behaviors related to the circulation of misinformation.

among Brazilian university students. The exploratory nature allows for the investigation of phenomena that are still poorly understood.

structured within the national literature, especially in the context of the academic community, while the

The descriptive dimension makes it possible to map sociodemographic characteristics, information habits, and

levels of adherence to false content. This methodological combination makes it possible to build a

A robust and coherent initial overview of the research problem.

The study was developed in two complementary stages. The first consisted of a

a systematic literature review, conducted based on structured search procedures in

national and international academic databases. The review followed selection criteria that

They included temporal scope, thematic relevance, and theoretical pertinence, allowing for the identification of

Key concepts, authors, and current debates on disinformation, fake news, and conspiracy theories.

University students, digital consumption, and algorithmic mediation. This survey supported the construction of

The data collection instrument provided the necessary theoretical framework for interpreting the...

empirical results.



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The second stage involved administering a quantitative survey, developed with the aim of collecting information about the informational behavior of university students, their relationship with misleading content and the presence of indicators associated with adherence to conspiracy theories. The instrument was made available online and consisted of closed-ended questions and scales of perception. The questionnaire included sociodemographic variables such as age, gender, and income, and courses attended, as well as variables related to information consumption, platforms and digital technologies used, exposure to fake news, self-declared sharing of dubious content, and trust in journalistic sources. Items that sought to identify the level were also included, in accordance with claims typical of conspiracy narratives, allowing for the measurement of adherence to this type of social explanation.

The sampling method used was snowball sampling, a technique commonly used in research that investigate specific or hard-to-reach groups. As described by Vinuto (2014), this strategy is based on the successive nomination of participants, which makes it possible to broaden the reach of the... It collects and gathers individuals who share social characteristics relevant to the study. In this work, the technique was used to access students from different universities and courses, ensuring diversity of profiles and expanding the analytical potential of the data. Although the snowball sampling does not allow for the statistical generalization of results to the entire... The Brazilian university population is effective for exploratory studies that seek to understand... Trends and patterns of behavior in defined groups.

The research instrument was structured into thematic blocks that allowed for the organization of the data analysis. The first section gathered sociodemographic information. The second investigated... information consumption habits, platforms used, frequency of access to news and perception of the reliability of sources. The third section examined exposure to content, misleading information and the sharing of fake news. The fourth section addressed adherence to theories, conspiratorial arguments through statements representative of this type of narrative, to which the participants assigned levels of agreement. This structure was designed to allow for an integrated reading between objective data and subjective perceptions of respondents.

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistical procedures, including frequencies, percentages, and simple cross-tabulations between variables. This treatment made it possible to identify recurrences, response patterns, and preliminary associations between exposure to misinformation, sociodemographic characteristics, and sharing behaviors. Analyses were performed with the support of digital data organization and visualization tools, which allowed the results to be structured in a clear and accessible way.

Some methodological limitations must be acknowledged. Snowball sampling, although suitable for exploratory purposes, it does not allow for inferences that are representative of the entire...



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Brazilian university population. The use of online questionnaires tends to favor individuals with Greater access to and familiarity with digital platforms, which can influence certain patterns. of response. Furthermore, the self-declared sharing of fake news depends on recognition an individual's behaviors that are socially perceived as negative, which can generate underreporting. Even so, these limitations do not compromise the central objective of the study, which is... To identify relevant trends and provide input for more in-depth future analyses.

Taken together, the procedures adopted allow us to understand how university students Brazilians access, interpret, and share information in the digital environment, providing a A solid basis for analyzing the presence of misinformation and conspiracy theories in this audience. specific. The articulation between theoretical review and empirical research strengthens consistency. The research methodology contributes to broadening the debate on informational dynamics. contemporary.

4. Results and Analysis

The applied research was conducted through the distribution of a questionnaire. semi-structured form on the Google Forms platform, primarily motivated by security and safety guidelines. health officials who recommended isolation and social distancing to reduce the spread of Covid-19 19 during the period in which the study was applied. In total, 107 participants took part in the research. between February 25, 2022 and May 22, 2022.

The first section, concerning the sociopolitical profile of the respondents, reveals a predominance of students who identify as cisgender men and cisgender women, with Over 90% of the responses were concentrated in these two categories. Ages ranged from 18 to over. 50 years old, but about 70% of participants are in the 20-35 age range, which corresponds to the typical age profile of Brazilian higher education. In racial terms, 57 respondents... They self-identified as white, 34 as mixed-race, 12 as black, and the remainder were distributed among Asian and Indigenous. reflecting both the diversity and inequalities of access to higher education. Regarding Academic career path, the majority is linked to undergraduate studies, followed by stricto sensu postgraduate studies and In a broad sense, comprising a predominantly university-educated audience with an active educational background.

The institutional distribution reveals that the majority study at federal public universities. while a smaller portion is linked to the private network. Almost all take courses in In-person or hybrid format, with few students exclusively distance learning. Income The family background of the participants is unevenly distributed, but approximately 40% are concentrated in... income brackets of up to three minimum wages, while approximately 25% are above five minimum wages. indicating significant socioeconomic diversity. Religion appears as a relevant marker: Slightly more than half claim to have some religious belief, while the rest declare themselves to have no.



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religion. Finally, the political self-definition of the participants shows diversity, with greater concentration on the left and center-left, followed by the center, right, and a group that does not... It doesn't identify with any specific spectrum.

In the second session, concerning the information consumption profile, the results show that social media occupies a central position. Most students report using it. They have become the primary source of daily information, surpassing television, radio, and traditional newspapers. Still, when asked which media outlet they consider most trustworthy, almost half attribute greater credibility to professional journalism, even if it doesn't use it as a primary source. Internet content, combined with social media, is mentioned by more than 80% of respondents as present in the informational routine. Regarding access to health information, most participants claim to rely on internet research, news portals, and professionals in the field, with a strong emphasis on... The presence of social media in this process.

The behavior of sharing information also reveals elements of important information. The survey shows that 86% of students share only... occasionally, and 12% say they never share content they receive. Still, more than half of the participants, exactly 51%, acknowledge that they have shared content that they later... discovered they were false. When this happens, 71% say they delete the information, and 44% notify whoever... 33% of those who sent the post alerted those who had interacted with it, revealing an informational ethic geared towards correcting the error, albeit reactively. Prior verification appears as a common practice: 73% of respondents state that they use criteria to assess reliability before to share. Among the most cited criteria are source verification, comparison with others on platforms and the search for journalistic evidence that confirms or refutes the information.

The influence of religious and intellectual leaders is also evident: a portion of students follow religious figures to guide personal decisions, while a larger group follows intellectuals, artists, and writers on social media as a way to shape public opinion. About... Having had direct experience with misinformation, 65% say they have received fake news from colleagues. University students, and about 30% admit to having forwarded fake news. The vast majority, however — 84% — claim to correct the sender upon identifying inaccurate content and say that they do not... She would feel offended to receive the same type of correction, revealing an openness to critical dialogue.

The third session, concerning reactions to the statements presented in the questionnaire, reveals important contrasts exist between narratives of widespread rejection and others marked by significant doubt. On consensual topics, such as the claim that the Earth is flat, the rejection is almost unanimous, with 94% of the vote in responses classifying the statement as false. In the case of widely debunked fake news, such as the claim that Marielle Franco was the ex-wife of drug trafficker Marcinho VP is also widely accepted. The statement is considered false, although there are still responses that demonstrate doubt or partial agreement.



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However, more politically sensitive issues exhibit greater fragmentation. The statement
The notion that emergency aid was the largest social program in the world divides opinions, reflecting
Distinct political interpretations. The claim that Brazil was one of the countries that vaccinated the most.
It presents similar variations, indicating that narrative disputes during the pandemic still...
The opinions resonate. Regarding confidence in vaccines developed against Covid-19, 77 students
They classify as false the idea that they would not be reliable due to the short time of
development, while 7 consider it true and 23 express uncertainty. Narratives
More extreme anti-vaccine positions, such as the existence of "liquid chips," are widely rejected, but not
In an absolute sense: answers emerge that reveal doubt, highlighting that such theories
Conspiracy theories still leave cognitive traces even among university students.

The belief that China created the coronavirus is rejected by most, but 12 students...
29 people classify the statement as true and 29 say they are uncertain, totaling about 40% agreement.
partial or doubtful. Regarding the reliability of the electronic voting system, 74 respondents rate it as...
the claim that it is unreliable is false, but 16 consider it true and 17 express
uncertainty. This means that approximately one third of students do not completely rule out
possibility of fraud, demonstrating the strong impact of electoral disinformation narratives on
country.

In general, quantitative results broaden our understanding of behavior.
Informational data from university students reveals that, although a critical stance predominates among many
Despite these issues, doubts, weaknesses, and partial adherence to false or distorted narratives persist.
especially when associated with recent political disputes or contexts of intense tension.
Misinformation, such as the pandemic. The coexistence of criticism, doubt, and partial belief illustrates the
The complexity of the contemporary informational environment reinforces the need for strategies.
Continuous media literacy training and strengthening of critical thinking.

Conclusion

The results of this research reveal a complex scenario regarding the relationship of university students.
Brazilians with information, especially during a period marked by the intense circulation of
false content and narrative disputes, as occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic and in the turbulent
post-2018 political cycle. Although they are individuals with higher levels of formal education and access to sources.
Despite the high number of qualified individuals, the data shows that this group is not immune to the effects of misinformation.
confirming the thesis that political lies are structured as an instrument of symbolic domination.
and ideological manipulation, as argued by Pinheiro and Brito (2015).

The simultaneous presence of rejection, doubt, and, to a lesser extent, adherence to false narratives.
evidence that misinformation acts not only as a lack of knowledge, but as a



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a complex sociopolitical phenomenon, traversed by disputes over meaning and marked by activation.

affective, in line with what Wainberg (2018) analyzes when discussing the emotional appeal of theories

conspiratorial theories. This becomes even more evident when we observe that topics such as vaccines and ballot boxes...

Electronics and the origin of the coronavirus present significant rates of uncertainty, confirming what Da

Empoli (2019) characterizes it as a war of narratives.

The study also showed that social media is the main source of information for

students, even though professional journalism is perceived as more reliable. This dissociation

The relationship between use and trust highlights that informational behavior does not stem solely from...

credibility, but from the functioning of the network society, described by Castells (2013) as a

an environment marked by decentralization, the speed of information flows, and logic.

An algorithm that organizes content according to engagement criteria. The strong presence of responses

Intermediate responses, such as "I don't know" and "I'm not sure," illustrate the erosion of typical cognitive security.

of modernity and reinforces Mills' (1981) thesis on the vulnerability of the public in the face of systems

mass communication.

Analyses also indicate that more than half of the participants have already shared fake news.

news without realizing it, which aligns with international research that identifies that the

Disinformation is driven more by the logic of circulation than by explicit intent.

to deceive (WARDLE; DERAKHSHAN, 2017). The students' willingness to correct errors –

evidenced by the fact that 84% stated they would notify the sender when they identified the forgery –

This demonstrates a collaborative, albeit still reactive, information ethic. However, the persistence of

Misconceptions about politically charged topics reinforce the idea that disinformation operates in a way...

continuous and emotional, engaging with what Terenzi (2021) describes as narrative structure.

fundamental to digital populism.

At the same time, the data reveal that informational uncertainty is not an isolated event.

but a structural condition of digital culture, as described by Pierre Lévy (1999) when discussing

Cyberculture as an environment of information overload and reorganization of regimes of truth. In this

In this sense, misinformation should be considered as part of a permeated communicational ecology.

by the culture industry, as pointed out by Adorno and Horkheimer (1985), who argued that the

Massive repetition of content shapes perceptions and limits critical thinking.

Given this context, the urgency of media literacy policies becomes evident.

that involve not only technical verification of facts, but also ethical, emotional and

Politics. Higher education institutions play a strategic role in addressing...

misinformation, since they are privileged spaces for critical and civic education. As observed

Buckingham (2015) argues that media literacy should empower students to understand how

Information is produced, distributed, and legitimized, instead of simply consuming content from...



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passive form.

Finally, this research demonstrates that understanding the informational behavior of University students are fundamental to understanding the formation of public opinion in Brazil. contemporary. Students don't just consume information: they circulate it, reinterpret it, They correct and legitimize content within their social networks. Therefore, analyzing this group means to access a microcosm of the symbolic disputes that structure the Brazilian public debate. By identifying both weaknesses and potential strengths, this study reinforces the importance to strengthen institutional and social initiatives that promote more informational environments. safe and democratic.

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