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INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON OF STUDENTS' TRUST IN INFORMATION SOURCES

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Abstract:
The aim of this study is to explore how higher education students perceive the reliability of different information sources. The research is based on two samples: a smaller group of international students and a larger group of Hungarian students. Data were collected using a five-point Likert scale, where respondents evaluated both online and offline sources.
The results demonstrate that in both samples, scientific sources—especially printed and online books, as well as academic journals—are considered the most reliable. In contrast, social media, online forums, and certain traditional media channels received lower reliability ratings. Hungarian students tend to be more critical towards media content and show greater trust in formal, academic sources.
The findings highlight the importance of developing media literacy and critical evaluation skills in higher education.

Keywords: *Information source credibility, Student attitudes, Media trust, Information literacy*

Introduction

In today's modern society, information and data are the most important resources; the rapid spread of technological innovation and the presence of digital technologies in every aspect of life ensure quick access to information. By now, the internet and mobile devices are no longer just tools, but an integral part of the life of society. Data means value, and the speed of information processing is the key to gaining a competitive advantage. Success depends on how quickly relevant data can be extracted.

In the present, in the information society, disruptive technological innovation is leading to social changes such as rapid information exchange, new forms of communication, and growing importance of data. However, it also presents significant challenges to members of society, such as the digital divide and the filtering of reliable information.

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1. Theoretical Background

Information and communication technologies and connectivity ensure faster and easier access to data, and thus the availability of knowledge. In the education system, the improvement of digital competencies is a priority from the lowest to the highest levels.

Numerous studies in educational science focus on examining how digital literacy reshapes students' information-seeking habits in the modern, technology-driven environment of higher education. The literature highlights that, beyond the use of ICT tools and technical proficiency, digital competence now also includes the critical evaluation of sources, the ethical use of content, and the effective organization of data. The latest research findings emphasize that high-level digital literacy is directly linked to better performance and independent research skills, while also highlighting systemic challenges caused by misinformation and the digital divide. The conclusion drawn from all these is the need to implement digital skills development within an institutional framework and to consciously and systematically prepare individuals successfully asserting themselves in a knowledge-based society [1-5].

Assessing the reliability of information sources has become one of the most critical areas in both educational science and information technology research, representing a common intersection between the two disciplines. This is becoming increasingly relevant in the higher education sector. The rapid expansion of digital proliferation and information overload presents new challenges for students, who must now filter and verify information on their own [7]. In contrast, in the traditional environment (e.g. library) they were not left to their own in information retrieval process, an arsenal of support resources was available (e.g. scholarly experts, reliably known peer-reviewed publications) [1,2].

Relevant research findings in student behavior topic highlight that students rarely employ deep, analytical strategies to verify the credibility of online information. Instead, they often rely on mental shortcuts (cognitive heuristics) that enable quick decision-making with minimal cognitive effort [1, 6]. According to other research, there is a significant difference between the methods used by students and professional fact-checkers when it comes to source evaluation. Students tend to engage in vertical reading (more specifically, staying on a single page, scrolling up

and down, and attempting to assess credibility based on internal cues), a method that is easily circumvented in terms of credibility[6, 8].

Source criticism and credibility assessment, which must be incorporated into the information-seeking process as a necessary and mandatory element, are part of competency development, for which critical thinking and digital literacy are essential. Research data show that students often overestimate their own digital competencies. Although they are considered "digital natives," this technological proficiency is not necessarily accompanied by the ability to critically evaluate information [7]. Empirical data indicate that critical thinking disposition and media literacy significantly predict students' ability to recognize fake news [9,10]. The status of "digital native" often provides a false sense of security; technical proficiency is not the same as the ability to critically evaluate information [7]. Moreover, in an algorithm-driven information environment, "trust compression" can be observed among students: due to fear of disinformation, many resort to general cynicism and view all sources as inherently suspicious, which hinders the acquisition of genuine knowledge [7,11]. Recent research confirms that systematic training can improve students' ability to evaluate sources.

2. Methods

Survey Design: In the fall of 2025, a survey was conducted using Google Forms among students enrolled in a Hungarian-language and an English-language course at the University of Dunaújváros. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. A quantitative research approach was employed in the study, with data being collected via a structured self-report questionnaire. Respondents rated various statements on a five-point Likert scale (1 = not at all reliable, 5 = completely reliable), which allowed them to assess the reliability of different information sources. The questionnaire included both online and offline sources, ranging from academic sources to media and user-generated content.

Participants: The study was based on two independent samples. One sample consisted of international students (n = 14), while the second, larger sample consisted of Hungarian students (n = 39). All participants were full-time students enrolled on the IT Project 2 course at the University of Dunaújváros, studying either Computer Science Engineering or Business Informatics. Study program. It is vital to highlight that the curriculum included instruction on source criticism prior to the survey,

Survey Questions: Respondents evaluated the reliability of various information sources, including:

- printed and online books (e.g. textbooks and reference books);
- academic journals (online and in print);
- theses;
- documentation available on company websites;
- collaboratively edited knowledge bases (e.g. Wikipedia);
- content found on video-sharing sites;
- online news portals
- traditional media (television, radio and print newspapers).
- content found on social media;
- posts on internet forums and blogs.

Each source was evaluated separately using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 = not at all reliable and 5 = completely reliable.

3. Data Analysis

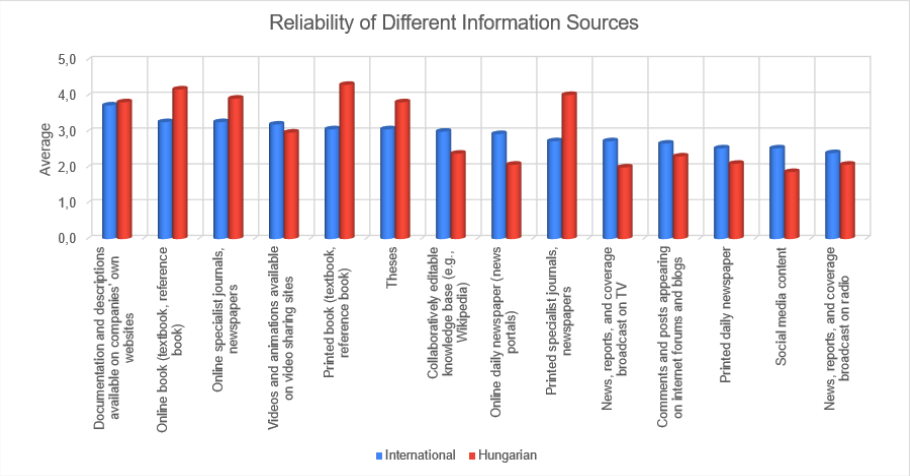
Descriptive statistical methods were used to analyze the data. For each variable, the minimum, maximum, mean, standard deviation, median and mode were calculated. The aim of the analysis was to identify differences and similarities between the two samples by examining the means and measures of spread. No inferential statistical tests were performed. The results reveal clear patterns in the assessment of the reliability of information sources.

The academic sources and formal sources (printed and online books) were rated the highest in both samples. Among international students, the most reliable sources were documentation available on company websites (average rating = 3.7), online textbooks (average rating = 3.3) and online academic journals (average rating = 3.3). By contrast, Hungarian students gave academic sources even higher ratings, particularly printed books (average = 4.3), online books (average = 4.2) and printed and online academic journals (average = 3.9–4.0).

The user-generated content and the media content received the lowest reliability scores in both samples. In the international sample, social media (average rating = 2.5), print newspapers (average rating = 2.5) and TV and radio news (average rating = 2.4) were rated the lowest. Hungarian students gave even lower ratings to social media (mean = 1.9), television and radio news (mean = 2.0) and online news portals (mean = 2.1).

Wikipedia and video-sharing sites were rated as moderately reliable. A greater standard deviation was particularly observable for these sources in the international sample (e.g. videos: standard deviation = 1.2; Wikipedia: standard deviation = 1.3), indicating greater variability in the responses. Based on the minimum and maximum values, it can be concluded that the assessment of the information sources shows significant variation, particularly in the international sample. Although the minimum values are higher for scientific sources, indicating a higher level of trust in general, social media and other informal sources show the full range of values, suggesting that students have different attitudes.

A comparison of the two samples (shown on Picture 1.) reveals that Hungarian students generally adopt a more critical attitude towards media content and demonstrate greater trust in formal, academic sources. Additionally, lower standard deviations are observed in the Hungarian sample in several cases (e.g. videos: standard deviation = 0.6), suggesting a more consistent assessment.



Picture 1. *Reliability of different information sources - International students & Hungarian students*

Overall, the results highlight that students can clearly distinguish between academic and non-academic sources in terms of reliability. However, there are differences between the two groups in terms of the strength and consistency of their trust. Academic sources are generally trusted less by international students than by their Hungarian peer. However, non-academic content is considered to be slightly more reliable by them.

4. Discussion

The results of the study clearly show that students distinguish between formal academic sources and informal media-related sources in terms of reliability. Academic sources — particularly books and academic journals — received the highest ratings in both samples, which is consistent with previous research indicating that students view institutionalized sources of knowledge as the most reliable. In contrast, social media, forums and specific traditional media channels received lower ratings. This suggests that students adopt a more critical attitude towards user-generated content and the rapidly changing media. However, based on the minimum and maximum values, it can be seen that opinions on these sources are divided, which may refer to varying levels of media literacy and user experience.

Comparing the two samples reveals that Hungarian students generally have more trust in academic sources and evaluate media content more critically. In contrast, the international sample presents a more heterogeneous pattern, which may be investigated by future research. The small sample size limits the generalizability of the results.

The results are also relevant from a practical perspective, as they show that students can distinguish between different types of information sources indeed. However, in certain areas, particularly digital media, some divergent and contradictory assessments emerge.

The results of the study suggest that further investigation in several areas. First, it would be valuable to repeat the study with a larger and more representative sample, with a particular focus on international students, to ensure more reliable comparability. In addition, more precise control of the sampling and the inclusion of demographic variables—such as field of study, academic level, or digital competencies—would be warranted, as these can significantly influence the evaluation of information sources.

In future research, it would be advisable to apply inferential statistical methods to determine the statistical significance of the differences. Moreover, incorporating qualitative methods could help discover the underlying reasons behind student attitudes.

Finally, an important area of research could be examining how the development of media literacy affects the assessment of the reliability of information sources, particularly in the case of digital and social media.

Another key area for research could be examining how the development of media literacy affects the judgement of information reliability, especially in the context of digital and social media.

5. Limitation

When interpreting the results of this study, several limitations must be considered. Firstly, the sample sizes are relatively small (n = 14 for the international group and n = 39 for the Hungarian group), which restricts the generalizability of the results.

Secondly, convenience sampling was employed, which also restricts representativeness. The research is based on self-reported data, which may occur biases such as subjective interpretation or the desire to meet social norms and expectations.

Furthermore, the international sample is mixed, the ratio of different nationalities is unknown. Different cultural backgrounds can also potentially influence the evaluation of information sources.

Additionally, the analysis was based exclusively on descriptive statistics and did not include inferential tests (e.g. t-tests or ANOVAs), meaning the statistical significance of differences between groups cannot be determined.

6. Conclusion

It can be concluded that students' source evaluation practices are characterized by speed and superficiality, but significant improvement can be achieved through targeted pedagogical methods that focus on cognitive processes and lateral reading. The dynamics of online trust are no longer a static state but an ongoing activity requiring metacognitive effort, based on a balance of technological proficiency, cognitive awareness, and ethical participation. [10, 12]

In the digital world, education must reinforce the characteristics of a successful researcher within the framework of digital competencies, which are as follows:

- Critical analyst: always gathers information from multiple sources and verifies the reliability and credibility of the soruce and the information found.
- Conscious researcher: masters algorithms through click restraint and does not rely on unverified sources.
- Ethical researcher: some: is aware of legal regulations and uses technology to further their own intellectual development.

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