

## **Disinformation, emotion, and cognition. Critical literacy education versus hate speech**

**Desinformación, emoción y cognición.  
Educación en literacidad crítica frente a discursos de odio**

**Desinformação, emoção e cognição.  
Educação em literacia crítica versus discurso de ódio**

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### **Abstract**

Adolescence is particularly vulnerable to disinformation due to its extensive interaction in digital environments. Previous research shows that, in educational contexts, students reinforce emotional and cognitive biases that act as obstacles when analyzing socially relevant issues. Within the socio-critical epistemological paradigm, research based on the narrative method was developed to understand how students confront their own beliefs and prejudices when engaging in discursive practices that analyze hate speech directed against migrant groups. An educational intervention based on critical literacy processes was designed to reflect on and debate how disinformation erodes democratic principles and values. The intervention was implemented in two schools with distinct socioeconomic and cultural characteristics. The non-probabilistic sample consisted of 135 secondary and high school students. The results indicate that simply being aware of how prejudice limits our ability to understand media and migration phenomena is not enough; emotional involvement, intellectually honest cognitive practice, and ethical commitment are also necessary. We conclude that to advance a complex understanding of the relationship between one's own identity and that of others, it is essential to recognize their vulnerability and their status as citizens.

**Keywords:** Disinformation, emotion, cognition, prejudice, social problems, hate speech, critical thinking, critical literacy, democracy, citizenship education.

### **Resumen**

La adolescencia es especialmente vulnerable a la desinformación por su amplia interacción en entornos digitales. Investigaciones precedentes muestran que, en contextos educativos, el alumnado refuerza sesgos emocionales y cognitivos que actúan como obstáculos cuando

analiza cuestiones socialmente vivas. Dentro del paradigma epistemológico sociocrítico, se desarrolla una investigación basada en el método narrativo para comprender cómo el alumnado se enfrenta a sus propias creencias y prejuicios, cuando realiza prácticas discursivas que analizan discursos de odio dirigidos contra colectivos migrantes. A tal fin se diseña una intervención educativa basada en procesos de literacidad crítica para reflexionar y debatir sobre cómo la desinformación erosiona los principios y los valores democráticos. Se desarrolla en dos centros educativos con características socioeconómicas y culturales diferenciadas. La muestra, no probabilística, está compuesta por un total de 135 estudiantes de educación secundaria y bachillerato. Los resultados indican que tomar conciencia de cómo los prejuicios limitan la capacidad para comprender el fenómeno mediático y migratorio no es suficiente, es necesaria una implicación emocional, una práctica cognitiva intelectualmente honesta y un compromiso ético. Concluimos que para avanzar en una percepción compleja de la relación entre la identidad propia y de otras personas, es necesario reconocerlas en su vulnerabilidad y en su condición ciudadana.

**Palabras clave:** Desinformación, emoción, cognición, prejuicio, problemas sociales, discursos de odio, pensamiento crítico, literacidad crítica, democracia, educación ciudadana.

## Resumo

A adolescência é particularmente vulnerável à desinformação devido à sua extensa interação em ambientes digitais. Pesquisas anteriores mostram que, em contextos educativos, os alunos reforçam os viesamentos emocionais e cognitivos que funcionam como obstáculos na análise de questões socialmente relevantes. Dentro do paradigma epistemológico sociocrítico, foi desenvolvida uma pesquisa baseada no método narrativo para compreender como os alunos confrontam as suas próprias crenças e preconceitos ao envolverem-se em práticas discursivas que analisam o discurso de ódio dirigido a grupos migrantes. Para tal, foi elaborada uma intervenção educativa baseada em processos de literacia crítica para refletir e debater como a desinformação corrói os princípios e valores democráticos. A intervenção foi implementada em duas escolas com características socioeconómicas e culturais distintas. A amostra não probabilística foi constituída por 135 alunos do ensino básico e secundário. Os resultados indicam que simplesmente ter consciência de como o preconceito limita a nossa capacidade de compreender os fenómenos mediáticos e migratórios não é suficiente; o envolvimento emocional, a prática cognitiva intelectualmente honesta e o compromisso ético são também necessários. Concluimos que, para avançar numa compreensão complexa da relação entre a sua própria identidade e a do outro, é essencial reconhecer a sua vulnerabilidade e a sua condição de cidadãos.

**Palavras-chave:** Desinformação, emoções, cognição, preconceito, problemas sociais, discurso de ódio, pensamento crítico, literacia crítica, democracia, educação cívica.

## Introduction

False information consists of narratives constructed to impersonate genuine sources. These narratives promote conflicting emotions and indignation around socially salient issues, on which they build naïve and reductionist theories with an ideological purpose. Together with hate speech, they circulate daily through social networks and mass media, contributing to disinformation, a phenomenon that is particularly relevant among secondary school students (Zorrilla et al., 2021).

Educating individuals today, to understand the society in which we live, requires teaching them how to select information and analyze it critically, in order to understand what kinds of reactions such content seeks to provoke (García et al., 2022). Addressing this socially relevant issue in the classroom requires examining students' perceptions of how the media and social networks influence their social representations of migrant groups. This, in turn, makes it possible to assess whether students understand that the media environment in which they interact daily is mediated by the dissemination of hate speech that shapes their understanding of society.

The central premise of this research is that, within educational contexts, the phenomenon of disinformation cannot be separated from education in democratic culture. In this regard, it is essential to address in the classroom how disinformation shapes our perception of society and, consequently, the construction of both self-identity and alterity, both grounded in the recognition of shared citizenship.

## Democracy, Disinformation and Media Education

Decades ago, Chomsky (2004) revealed the close relationships between freedom and control, as well as between persuasion and manipulation, through which media outlets serving elite interests exert influence over modern democracies. His work exposed how public opinion is shaped, generating both consent and polarized perspectives within society. In this context, he called upon educational systems to promote learning processes aimed at understanding how media messages are constructed, by whom, and with what manipulative intentions. Today, this scenario is compounded by new challenges to democracy, including the rise of populism, the manipulation of electoral behavior through the dissemination of fake news, hate speech, and conspiracy theories. These developments occur within a context in which the media play a crucial role in shaping social representations of such phenomena, often reinforcing stereotypes and social prejudices (Fernández-Piedra et al., 2023).

Han (2022, p. 9), in *Infocracy*, warns about how information is used for psycho-political surveillance, specifically for the control and prediction of individual and collective behavior in digital media and social networks. It influences behavior beneath the level of consciousness, operating within pre-reflective, instinctive, and emotional layers. The affective communication upon which this new information regime is based presents a blurred reality, indifferent to truth, that undermines factuality and manipulates emotions.

In polarized contexts such as the one we currently experience, this dynamic leads to disinformation being processed with high emotional intensity. The nervous system remains in a state of agitation and excitation, suppressing cognitive processes and limiting the use of discursive rationality necessary for knowledge construction and the strengthening of democracy (Han, 2022, p. 23).

The speed at which disinformation circulates creates echo chambers that reinforce an identity without alterity, grounded in opinion. It generates a form of digital rationality that disintegrates the public sphere by dispensing with discursive situations aimed at mutual understanding. As Han (2022, p. 33) argues, when emotion and affect dominate political discourse, democracy is placed at risk.

Since the beginning of this century, public administrations have responded to the information age by incorporating digital competence into educational curricula, often understood as a form of literacy with a more instrumental than educational character (Tyner & Gutiérrez, 2012). Early positive assessments of the digitalization of society did not anticipate the impact that phenomena such as disinformation and hate speech would have within the educational sphere.

Adolescents are particularly vulnerable to this issue due to their habits and patterns of media consumption. Approximately five years ago, INJUVE (Spanish Youth Institute) reported that students are not adequately prepared to resist hate speech because of their limited understanding of its ideological and historical foundations, a situation that becomes especially concerning when combined with weak critical thinking skills, insufficient digital literacy, and gaps in education more broadly (García-Juanatey, 2020, p. 59). One of the main consequences of this phenomenon is that disinformation can lead students to question scientific evidence and undermine trust in science (van der Linden et al., 2017). Although isolated educational programs attempt to mitigate its effects among younger populations, they have proven to be clearly insufficient (Pérez-Escoda, 2017).

The response to this situation, in the form of public policy, has largely been limited to recommendations such as those issued by the Council of Europe, which emphasize the need to educate about the sociocultural divisions generated by disinformation and the threat this poses to democracy (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). More recently, guidelines have been developed for the governments of member states and the educational community more broadly (European Commission, 2022), aimed at resisting forms of indoctrination and manipulation that lead to the radicalization of populations. However, despite adopting a political reading of the problem, the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (Barrett et al., 2023) fails to adequately address this issue, particularly considering that research has demonstrated that media education can play a significant role within systems shaped by far-right propaganda networks (Bennet & Livingston, 2021).

The situation is particularly concerning given that, within the European context, media education practices tend to have a transversal presence across the curriculum (McDougall et al., 2018), and

even more so when they are not adequately incorporated into teacher education, as highlighted by Frau-Meigs et al. (2017).

### **Educational Research and Strategies Against Disinformation**

Teaching and learning how to counter disinformation is becoming an increasingly widespread and researched practice. The initial tendency to reduce the problem to a technological phenomenon requiring interventions focused on digital literacy has been surpassed by approaches that emphasize the development of critical analytical skills (Huber et al., 2021).

In general terms, a broad multidisciplinary review -drawing on studies in psychology, communication, and education- suggests that research on media education practices can be primarily organized around two main axes: on the one hand, students' interaction with digital media and their content; and, on the other, the analysis of students' beliefs, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Media literacy practices*

<b>Mass media and content</b>	<b>Students' beliefs</b>
Interpreting them to construct meaning (Rosenbaum et al., 2008)	Seeking information beyond self-confirmation (Mercier & Sperber, 2011)
Developing critical interaction (Marks et al., 2010)	Re-examining our perspectives (Dibbels & Meesters, 2017)
Constructing alternative digital narratives (McDougall, 2014)	Recognizing one's own prejudices (Miller, 2016)
Creating critical media content (Domingo-Coscollola et al., 2016)	Valuing alternative viewpoints, suspending judgment, and facilitating dialogue (Zorrilla-Luque et al., 2021)

*Source:* Author's own elaboration

Focusing on research conducted within educational contexts, traditional information literacy strategies -such as identifying fake news- or media literacy approaches that emphasize analyzing media as texts are increasingly being superseded by a perspective that points toward a media ecology, or the study of media as environments that structure human interaction (Mason et al., 2018).

Buckingham (2019) advocates for a critical media education that addresses the economic, ideological, and cultural dimensions of the social and political issues covered by the media, as well as engaging with students' media practices -namely, the sources of information they use- in order to analyze them critically. In the same vein, Herrero-Diz et al. (2023) have examined the impact of disinformation among younger populations, showing that higher levels of critical thinking are associated with a lower likelihood of moral disengagement.

To counter this situation, research has examined the outcomes associated with the use of strategies aimed at addressing disinformation. Beyond their practical feasibility, these strategies help to

understand how prejudices influence the ways we search for, accept, share information, and ultimately act upon it. The studies conducted reveal a range of cognitive and emotional responses that are important to consider and are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Strategies against disinformation*

Phenomenon	Strategie	Example	Response
Continuous influence (Lewandowsky, 2017)	Corrective confrontation	Exposing misconceptions	Self-defense reinforcing beliefs
False consensus (Levinston et al. 2013)	Self-awareness (Bauman, 1997)	Engaging in difficult conversations	Provides a sense of security and confidence
Without alternative facts (Huchon et al. 2022)	Critical analysis and argument validity	Teaching verification skills	The authenticity of information

*Source:* Author's own elaboration

The preceding review shows that selective exposure to personalized and individualized information, clearly biased and intentional, produces a false consensus effect that diminishes the impact of presenting accurate information or scientific arguments. This is largely influenced by the strong role that cognitive and emotional biases play in shaping students' conceptions and social representations. Furthermore, Kahne and Bowyer (2017) have examined how political ideas influence the understanding of controversial issues and the formation of critical judgments. They concluded that students tend to judge content as inaccurate when it does not align with their beliefs. Their main conclusion is that students should be encouraged to care about the veracity of information; however, this cannot be the only strategy. It is also necessary to adopt a critical stance when evaluating arguments, even when they challenge one's political inclinations, given that research has shown that the greater the exposure to false information, the more resistant individuals become to accepting accurate information.

Current trends in educational research addressing this issue focus on analyzing the obstacles faced by media education programs. Fasching and Schubatzky (2022) explore how phenomenon-based learning enables the development of basic multiliteracies; however, when their findings are examined in light of inoculation theory and online civic reasoning, they show that students tend to be resistant to disinformation. In other cases, emphasis is placed on fostering introspective reflection to better understand how we think, namely, the process of forming one's own opinions and identity in ways that enhance students' capacity to comprehend them (Otrell-Cass & Fasching, 2021).

Within this framework, the present study is designed around the research question of the extent to which addressing in the classroom the emotional responses generated by disinformation among secondary and upper-secondary students helps to elicit a critical cognitive practice committed to democratic values. The aim is to examine the viability of educational strategies that integrate emotional and cognitive elements when individuals are exposed to disinformation on socially salient issues.

## **Methodology**

Our methodological approach is qualitative and participatory. Following Creswell and Guetterman (2013), this option facilitates the interpretation of the meanings that secondary and upper-secondary students attribute to the analysis of media content that employs disinformation strategies. More specifically, this study follows a narrative research design, aimed at understanding, through an educational experience, how students confront their own beliefs and prejudices, thereby reshaping their perception of the phenomenon of disinformation. As Frank (1995) suggests, narrative research can help to uncover the meanings individuals assign to their experiences within social processes.

The research instrument was designed ad hoc to collect descriptive data following an educational intervention. It consisted of a one-hour workshop entitled *Informational Deconstruction of Hate Speech in Social Networks and Mass Media*. The instrument was developed based on the aforementioned literature review, integrating strategies for analyzing media content (Rosenbaum et al., 2008), introducing students to a critical perspective (Marks et al., 2010), and examining their own viewpoints (Dibbels & Meesters, 2017), as well as fostering awareness of the prejudices shared with the opinions expressed in news content (Miller, 2016). Unlike the strategies previously outlined in Table 2, the aim was to elicit an affective response from students, which would serve as a basis for developing dialogic processes focused on dismantling the confusion generated and producing brief narratives that function both as reflective exercises and as alternatives to hate.

The content of the workshop was selected to analyze social and structural injustices reproduced in digital news media. Its approach aims to encourage social action by fostering a more active, critical, participatory, and responsible form of citizenship in relation to the social issues arising from processes of disinformation. The design envisages the development of critical literacy processes based on these contents, understood as a reflection on the relationship between power and discourse, as conceptualized by Lankshear and McLaren (1993). These authors coined the concept in the aforementioned monograph, drawing on Freire's (1984) pedagogy, which is centered on the idea of reading both the word and the world. Numerous scholarly associations around the world are dedicated to the study of critical literacy. In the Spanish context, the concept has been adopted within the field of Social Science Education to distinguish it from a technocratic conception of media literacy and from a psychologized interpretation of critical thinking within educational processes (Tosar-Bacarizo, 2018).

The workshop is designed to promote individual and social change that contributes to the exercise of

critical citizenship. Within the educational context, literacy involves a critical reading of texts in order to:

- a. Distinguish facts from opinions.
- b. Differentiate ideology from information.
- c. Question the accuracy and reliability of information.
- d. Reflect on the intentionality of discourse.
- e. Identify silences.

Critical literacy processes are understood as learning spaces for addressing socially relevant issues, through which students learn based on their personal experiences (Vasquez et al., 2019). Their application responds to a sociocultural perspective on teaching, in which learning is conceived as a dynamic process centered on the social and cultural representations (Weng, 2021) of learners. From this perspective, students are encouraged -through analytical and reflective processes- to engage with information in various formats (stories, news, texts, videos, images, songs, etc.), fostering forms of thinking oriented toward action and civic participation. In this particular case, the aim is to understand the phenomenon of disinformation and its effects, in order to promote responsible digital interaction and strengthen competences related to democratic culture.

The study was conducted using a non-probabilistic sample consisting of a total of 135 students in compulsory secondary education (ESO) and upper-secondary education (Bachillerato) from two schools in the city of Málaga (Spain), which present distinct characteristics, as shown in Table 3. The first is a mixed public-private institution located in an upper-class neighborhood, while the second is a fully public school situated in a lower-middle-class area with a high proportion of immigrant population. The names of the schools have been anonymized as follows: CPP for the first case and CP for the second.

**Table 3**

*Sample of the study*

<b>Educational center</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Course</b>	<b>Students</b>
CPP	06.10.22	2º ESO	29
		2º Bachillerato	32
CP	11.11.22	3º ESO	37
		1º Bachillerato	37

*Source:* Author's own elaboration

Although we do not have access to specific data from the schools included in the sample, official sources indicate that, in the 2022–2023 academic year, 14.3% of students enrolled in compulsory secondary education (ESO) and upper-secondary education (Bachillerato) in the province of Málaga held foreign nationality (Rodríguez-García de Cortázar & Gómez-Domínguez, 2024, p. 20). It should be noted that these figures do not fully capture the diversity present in classrooms, as a significant

proportion of students, despite having an immigrant family background, hold Spanish nationality. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight their distribution according to the type of educational institutions, as presented in Table 4.

**Table 4**

*Distribution of foreign students population by school type*

<b>Educational center</b>	<b>ESO</b>	<b>Bachillerato</b>
Public	7.125	1.734
Private and semi-private	1.280	271
<b>Total</b>	<b>8.450</b>	<b>2.005</b>

Source: Author’s own elaboration

The design of the workshop was adapted to the specific characteristics of each educational institution and its student body, incorporating emerging news items relevant to the time at which it was conducted. Its aim was to teach students how to select information and analyze it critically.

The documentation generated throughout its implementation was rich, diverse, and extensive, providing suitable material for analyzing the reactions that disinformation and the hate speech it disseminates provoke among students, as well as how the ways in which controversial social issues are addressed in the media and on social networks influence these reactions.

The research was carried out during the 2022–2023 academic year. In the case of the mixed public–private institution, the intervention was structured around an initial text taken from *El País Digital*, a news source not commonly used by students for information purposes. Students were introduced to the analysis of a news article through a set of critical questions designed to reflect on how the affective response triggered by reading a clickbait headline influences their perception of the issue being addressed.

The comparison with the subheading was used to raise awareness that, at times, the editorial line of media outlets employs sensationalist uses of information to capture readers’ attention, while also generating reactions that bring to the surface prejudices and stereotypes in spaces of public participation, many of which take the form of hate speech. The activity unfolds as follows (Table 5).

**Table 5**

*Action in CCP*

<b>Mass Media</b>	<b>Information</b>	<b>Critical Questions</b>
	<i>From Peru to the local community pool: the scam that</i>	What is your opinion of the headline? What do you feel when reading the subheading? What differences are there between

 <p><i>El País</i> (Spanish newspaper), 02.10.2022</p>	<p><i>hires lifeguards in Spain who cannot even swim</i></p>	<p>the two? Does it inform or confuse?</p>  <p>Comment on the news article</p> <p>What kind of hate speech might the headline reinforce? Think of an alternative headline How would you present the news?</p>
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Source: Author's own elaboration

The strategy used to identify hate speech was adapted from the manual developed by the Institut de Drets Humans de Catalunya, SOS Racisme, and Barcelona City Council, aimed at recognizing and responding to hate speech (Bazzaco et al., 2017). The objective was to deconstruct such discourse in the classroom, enabling students to collaboratively develop counter-narratives through dialogic processes, either by directly confronting the article, or by generating alternative narratives that promote an inclusive perspective on migration. Evidence of this process can be observed in the development of alternative headline proposals. An image illustrating this is presented in Figure 1 as an example of the workshop's implementation.





**Figure 1**

CPP 05.10.2022. 2º ESO Group



Traditional media source and a structured strategy was introduced students through an analytical and reflective dynamic; then, they would apply it to fake news they had received on their smartphones. Specifically, the intervention addressed false information related to a public health issue, which was used to generate suspicion, distrust, and fear toward China as the country of origin of COVID-19. This was complemented by anti-vaccine graffiti found on the external walls of the school. In the first case, the verification process developed by Newtral -a startup founded in 2018 by the Spanish journalist Ana Pastor- was used, along with the strategies recommended by the Guardia Civil (Spanish military police) as a law enforcement institution “concerned with public safety”. In particular, emphasis was placed on combating disinformation by consulting official sources whenever messages are anonymous, although neither of these sources was presented as an absolute criterion of “truth.” The sequence followed is presented in Table 6.

**Table 6**  
*Intervention sequence in CPP*

Mass Media	Information	Critical Questions
 <p>YouTube</p>	<p><i>China releases laboratory-bred birds</i></p>	 <p>Fake news (24.11.21)</p>
 <p>Graffiti CPP, 04.10.2022</p>	<p><i>Poison in vaccines. Everything that is done so that you receive their dangerous vaccine. It alters DNA. Get informed on YouTube</i></p>	 <p>Spanish Guardia Civil considers it fake news.</p>


Source: Author’s own elaboration

In the public school, the same procedure and strategies were followed, replacing the initial news item with a more recent one, as reflected in Table 7. In this case, disinformation does not lie in the framing of the news, but rather in the case being addressed, and its intention to criminalize a specific group (migrant minors), through the dissemination of racist and Islamophobic hate speech spread by a

Spanish Guardia Civil.

**Table 7**

*Intervention in CP*

Mass Media	Information	Critical Questions
 <p><i>El País</i>, 08.11.2022</p>	<p><i>First conviction in Spain for spreading fake news about migrant minors</i></p> <p><i>A Guardia Civil accepts a 15-month prison sentence for posting on Twitter a video of an assault that occurred in China and attributing it to migrants.</i></p>	<p>Why did they share the news knowing it was false?</p> <p>What kind of hate speech did it reinforce?</p> <p>What is your opinion on the sentencing of a Civil Guard officer?</p> <hr/> <p>Propose an alternative headline</p> <p>How would you report the news?</p>

Source: Author's own elaboration

Beyond specific resources and strategies, countering disinformation in the classroom involved understanding how it creates confusion and how it can influence what we think and how we behave. In this regard, discursive practices based on debate and dialogue proved highly relevant to reflect on how democratic principles and values are eroded.

The narratives produced by students at the end of the workshop, submitted voluntarily and anonymously, provide key insights into how hate speech circulating in the media and on social networks can be deconstructed in the classroom. These narratives were coded using the initials of the school, educational stage (ESO for Compulsory Secondary Education and B for Bachillerato), age, gender, and order of presentation in the research findings. In addition to these narratives, audio recordings from both sessions -although not reproduced- were used to contextualize and interpret the data on the basis of the class discussions, thereby strengthening the triangulation of sources.

A controversial analysis of the narratives was conducted (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998) in order to understand the dialogue established by students between the media resources presented in the classroom and the debates generated within the class group. The written reflections provide insight into students' conceptions of the hate speech either evoked by the media or openly expressed by themselves. Data analysis was carried out using a double-entry framework (see Table 8), drawing on students' emotional responses to the topic addressed, as well as on the confusion produced by the initial news items used in the workshop, or, in some cases, the indifference resulting from their

recognition of facing a socially relevant issue in which the information itself generates confusion. The presentation of the findings is organized according to whether students' narratives reflect an affective or a cognitive understanding of the social problem and of the disinformation situation they encountered.

**Table 8**

*Framework for the analysis of emotional responses to disinformation*

<b>Disinformation</b>	<b>Effects</b>
Information detached from reality and factual evidence	Undermines the ability to discern truth from falsehood
	Neither guidance nor social cohesion
Information overload	It undermines the social narratives that foster a sense of community
	It confuses our beliefs and social conceptions
	Try to change our behavior
The truth prevented	Fact-checking cannot establish truth
	It lacks a claim to validity established through discourse
	The absence of dialogue and debate undermines arguments and counterarguments

*Source:* Author's own elaboration

The results are presented through an inductive coding process, organized as narrative segments that function as meaning structures (Munita, 2016). The categories of analysis are dialogic in nature, emerging from the interaction between researchers and participants involved in the study (Salmerón-Vílchez & Sebastián-García, 2022).

**Results and Discussion**

In qualitative research, the presentation of results is typically carried out through detailed and descriptive narration of the most representative reflections of the students who make up the sample (Nieto-Bravo, 2022). In narrative research, results and discussion are often intertwined to strengthen interpretation and generate meaning (Moen, 2006). In the present study, this section is structured by differentiating the contexts in which the research was conducted and by applying a theoretical triangulation based on the initial literature review, to account for the different levels of emotional, cognitive, and ethical responses identified in students' reflections. The interpretive analysis of the narratives seeks to understand the reflections and meanings constructed by students, providing valuable insights into the reactions generated by the way a digital media outlet presents a news item that induces confusion and disinformation, both in terms of its editorial framing and its content. These responses range from indifference to ethical commitment to a more just society, forming a spectrum of positions that are outlined below.

In the mixed public–private institution, expressions of indifference are common and are associated with the distance that students display regarding the issue of migration and its representation in the media. Evidence of this can be found in comments that focus solely on the informational phenomenon without engaging with the content itself, such as: “I think that at the beginning it was Spain’s fault, and in the end, it was both” (CPPEO13X2). This occurs even when students construct their own alternative narratives, for example: “The headline blames Peru and the subheading blames Spain” (CPPEO13X6).

When indifference is not explicitly expressed, it appears in the form of claims about veracity, as in: “I think that the headline does not provide completely accurate information, while the body of the article gives the true information” (CPPEO13X0), or in the accurate perception of the situation combined with emotional detachment: “I felt indifferent, as it is not something that affects me. Alternative headline: a company scams Peruvians by selling them false lifeguard certificates in Spain” (CPPB17X6).

The most extreme manifestation of indifference appears in relation to the issue of migration and the victims of the scam, in some cases acknowledging the criminal act and in others justifying it by attributing ulterior motives to those affected: “Honestly, I don’t care that this happened if those who were scammed are people looking for easy money. If it happened to people who genuinely wanted it, I wouldn’t feel sorry for them” (CPPB17X5).

Affective responses were the most numerous and elaborated, expressed through feelings such as pity, anger, frustration, sadness, or outrage in response to the deception and the false hopes given to migrant individuals.

It makes me angry to think how people can be so cruel as to carry out such a scam. We are talking about people who risk their lives for a new opportunity and end up worse off. This shows how society works... the victims are the Peruvians, not the residents living in those communities. (CPPB17M4)

Empathy emerges when students become aware that all individuals are vulnerable to being deceived:

I feel sadness for all the people who have lost their lives in their home countries and who are working very hard, earning little, and living far from their families. At the same time, I feel anxious about the possibility that I or someone close to me could be deceived. (CPPB17M2)

When affective responses toward a group converge with an interest in how the news is presented, more complex perceptions emerge. Deception is no longer seen as affecting only others but also includes the reader, who becomes aware of how the media draw on emotional and cognitive biases related to the issue to attract attention.

When I read the subheading of the news, I felt angry, first with myself, for having judged the story before reading it and understanding the headline in a different way. As I processed the situation, I became angry with the scammers (businesses) and felt sorry for those who were deceived (in this case, the Peruvians). When the teacher finally explained the situation, I saw everything differently, stopped judging, and realized that the headline is simply a way to attract attention so people will read the article, when in reality the deceived are the victims. Alternative headline: Spanish businesses scam Peruvians, forcing them to work as lifeguards without any experience. (CPPB17M6)

Awareness of how our biases contribute to a distorted reading of news is complemented by personal values and an appeal to professional ethics, which are necessary to avoid contributing to the stigmatization of a group and to mitigate the effects of hate speech that underpin disinformation strategies.

This news makes me angry because, although the purpose of a newspaper (like any business) is to make money, this does not justify creating a headline that alarms all readers by appealing to something as important as their own lives, only for those initially perceived as responsible to turn out to be victims. It also serves to attract a group of workers (lifeguards), who are precisely the ones people rely on when they cannot get out of the water. All of this ultimately reveals a network of human trafficking sustained by falsehoods and lies about people's dignity. I propose the headline: The Spanish scam that devastates Peruvians. (CPPB17H2)

Although it is acknowledged that anyone can be deceived, regardless of their origin or circumstances, it is striking that no comment referred to the fact that local communities in Spain were also among the victims, as they had employed individuals lacking the required qualifications. The perception of the other as a vulnerable group, in contrast to a self-perceived as privileged, obscures the fact that the scam affected both parties. This is clearly reflected in the following proposed headline: "Spanish scam that deceives Peruvians" (CPPB17X3).

In the public school, the news headline does not generate confusion; rather, it clearly states that a state security officer was convicted for sharing false information that disseminated hate against migrant minors. Unlike the previous case, no expressions of indifference toward the targeted group or disinformation strategies were identified. The responses, largely devoid of emotional elements, instead emphasize the need for media literacy: "These kinds of stories go viral because we share them as if they were true, and they end up reaching everyone; as a result, they make us think differently and can lead us to adopt different attitudes." (CPB17M0)

The perception of the problem leads to the identification of individual solutions -"all of this happens because of us" (CPB16H1)- as well as collective ones: "they can be stopped by controlling fake news,

with more talks” (CPB16H4). Students perceive themselves as media-competent, stating for instance: “I usually don’t believe a news story until I have verified it” (CPB16H3), while also acknowledging the important role played by media education programs:

Honestly, thanks to the many workshops and assignments completed throughout these school years, I am able to tell when a news story is false and when it is not. I do this by looking for the same news in different media outlets, checking whether it is disseminated through a trustworthy source, identifying the real messages behind the headlines, analyzing the length of the article, and so on. I believe that, thanks to all of this, we will be able to identify them permanently. (CPB16M4)

Confidence in education extends beyond personal experience and is also demanded for those who deliberately spread disinformation: “There should be more justice and more investigation... anyone who has produced hate speech should be required to attend an educational session.” (CPB16H2) Students are fully aware of the intentional nature of disinformation: “It is created with the aim of influencing and manipulating us.” (CPB16M5) They also demonstrate awareness of their own emotional and cognitive biases.

Every piece of fake news is disseminated with an agenda, whether related to opinion or form. It is also used as a method of thinking or manipulation, mainly with the purpose of promoting hate, since the first piece of information received creates a closed mental framework that is difficult to change or reframe. Convincing people is easy; the difficult part is making them realize that what they believed was wrong. (CPB17Mb)

The student body as a whole, aware of the consequences, feels called upon and inclined to critically evaluate the content of the news, often making explicit reference to their own migrant condition:

I think that hate speech from people who exclude others simply for being different is discriminatory and clearly wrong... we should make sure what is real before believing it; we should stop and become aware that it is wrong and immoral. (CPB16M7; the student explicitly noted her Paraguayan origin in the written reflection).

Every piece of fake news is disseminated with underlying interests, whether related to opinion or format. It is also used as a form of thinking or manipulation, primarily with the aim of fostering hate, since the first piece of information received creates a closed mental framework that is difficult to reshape or reconsider. Convincing people is easy; what is difficult is making individuals realize that what they believed was wrong. (CPB17Mb)

The student body as a whole, being aware of the consequences, feels interpellated and inclined to critically assess the content of the news, often making explicit reference to their own migrant condition:

I believe that hate speech from people who exclude others simply for being different is discriminatory and clearly wrong... we should make sure what is real before believing it; we should pause and become aware that it is wrong and immoral. (CPB16M7; the student explicitly noted her Paraguayan origin in the written reflection).

The emotional response is expressed through reactions to the dissemination of hate speech, without necessarily addressing the offense itself or its broader implications, both in close personal contexts -“I wouldn’t believe it, but my grandparents might” (CPESO14H3)- and at the level of society as a whole: “that person is promoting racism” (CPESO14M0). A more concrete perception of the moral harm inflicted on migrant minors emerges when attention is directed toward the identity of the individual expressing hate: “It’s a police officer who posted a false tweet about a Muslim minor. If the Muslim person saw it, they would feel hurt” (CPESO14H4).

Reflections grounded in ethical judgment, which call for justice, question the legitimacy of a public servant deliberately harming a particular group: “I think it is very wrong that a police officer -who is supposed to protect and guide us- publishes this kind of tweet that causes a great deal of harm to citizens” (PPESO15H0). Particularly due to the expectation that such figures should serve as role models: “Because people will feel afraid about those who are falsely accused” (CPESO14H2).

Civic commitment and the willingness to propose solutions to the problem are reflected in calls to adopt both technological and legal measures. In the first case, it is suggested that: “the algorithm should at least detect and remove them... or at least there should be an entity with sufficient credibility to investigate and debunk these news stories” (PPB16M6). Civic awareness is also evident in the demand for accountability and exemplary conduct from public representatives: “a politician, on a daily basis in parliament, delivers hate speech against many groups such as the LGBTQ+ community or women, without being penalized or condemned, is unfair, as it generates a high level of homophobia and sexism” (CPB16H0).

## **Conclusions**

This research provides relevant evidence for understanding how disinformation and hate speech disseminated in digital environments can be addressed within the classroom, and, in some cases, how these are also propagated by public administrations (Valenzuela, 2026), or by state security forces that contribute to the criminalization of migrant populations (Ouled, 2024). It contributes to understanding how teenagers use mass media and social networks, as well as the degree of credibility they attribute to news containing false information or homophobic, racist, and sexist discourse. In this regard, it also highlights their capacity to construct alternative discourses or narratives in which respect for a plural and diverse citizenship prevails (Massip et al., 2021).

Returning to the research question, it is important to recall that it sought to examine whether addressing the unreflective and emotional responses generated by disinformation among students fosters the emergence of a cognitive practice committed to democratic values. In order to answer this question, it is necessary to revisit the findings and engage with their discussion, while also considering how such processes influence students' perceptions of these phenomena and of migrant populations. The indifference identified in some of the narratives analyzed was not expressed or shared during classroom discussions; however, it emerged subtly in the written reflections voluntarily produced by students, particularly in the mixed public-private institution (CPP). Although indifference may be associated with an absence of emotional response, it functions rather as a way of avoiding engagement with the vulnerability of migrant individuals. This disinterest, openly expressed as distancing, is concealed within responses that appear to reflect cognitive engagement. In reality, such engagement is limited to analyzing the situation from a media perspective, thereby avoiding a personal stance on the stigmatization and violation of the rights of migrant groups. Personal distancing serves to reaffirm one's own identity, constructed in sharp opposition to that of migrant individuals. It cannot be claimed that these responses lack affective components; on the contrary, they represent a form of self-censorship that suppresses dialogue while masking the stereotypes and prejudices reinforced by disinformation.

Narratives in which emotions are openly expressed are predominant, although they manifest in different ways. Initially, they reveal an empathetic connection through which the vulnerability of a given group is recognized; however, this acknowledgment occurs insofar as the individual does not belong to that group. Framed from a position of perceived privilege, this perspective entails a form of blindness, namely, the failure to recognize oneself as a potential victim of media manipulation, a pattern observed in both schools included in the sample.

Awareness of this situation emerges when affective responses and an interest in the media framing of the news converge within students' narratives. In such cases, reflections become more complex and begin to acknowledge personal biases and prejudices, particularly in the public school (CP). However, students do not always recognize the influence of disinformation on their perceptions of migrant groups, or on the hate speech directed toward them.

This tendency is overcome when students demonstrate a deeper understanding of the manipulative strategies involved and of their effects. To the extent that students focus their narratives on the condition of those who express hate -a position with which they do not identify-, they develop a more genuine awareness of the influence of disinformation, particularly in its role in reinforcing exclusionary modes of thinking and in causing moral harm both to migrant communities and to society as a whole.

Social and ethical commitment to democratic values emerges when individuals reflect on the degree of individual and collective responsibility they bear in relation to the phenomenon of disinformation. It becomes evident insofar as there is a development of civic awareness, and a proactive attitude aimed at countering the hate disseminated through disinformation.

Beyond the limitations inherent to narrative qualitative research -particularly its subjectivity and the potential for interpretive bias- it is possible to identify certain weaknesses in the research design, such as the non-probabilistic nature of the sample and the one-off character of the educational intervention from which it derives. Nevertheless, we consider exploratory and experimental studies of this kind to be necessary. First, it should be noted that the findings reveal differences between the schools, influenced by the described social context and by the educational models implemented in each case: in the CPP, oriented toward Catholic education, and in the CP, characterized by its commitment to media education programs. However, it has not been the intention of this study to use this variable as an explanatory factor for the results. Rather, the study explores the educational potential of a form of discursive rationality that integrates, at the same level of understanding, identity and alterity to generate an ethical response to the phenomenon of disinformation and the proliferation of hate speech that undermine dignity and violate the rights of groups such as migrants.

It can be concluded that the degree of credibility that students in secondary and upper-secondary education attribute to news containing false information or hate speech depends not only on their level of media literacy, but also on their willingness to become aware of how their own prejudices limit their ability to understand the media phenomenon and its political-ideological intentionality. Awareness is insufficient; personal engagement, intellectually honest cognitive practice, and ethical commitment are also required. In this way, it is possible to move toward a more complex understanding of the relationship between one's own identity and that of others, recognizing them in their vulnerability and in their condition as citizens.

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