SOCIAL NETWORKING USAGE AND CONSPIRACY BELIEFS AMONG UNDERGRADUATES IN THE COLOMBO DISTRICT, SRI LANKA: A CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY

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Conspiracy beliefs, fuelled by misinformation, have become increasingly prominent in the digital era, particularly through social media platforms. This study investigates the association between social networking usage and conspiracy beliefs among undergraduate students in the Colombo district of Sri Lanka. A descriptive crosssectional correlational design was used, with data collected from 452 undergraduates (aged 18 to 26) from various state and private universities in the district. The survey was conducted between May 2023 and January 2024. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Review Committee at KIU. Participants completed two self-report instruments through an online survey platform: The Social Networking Usage Questionnaire (SNUQ) and the Generic Conspiracist Belief Scale (GCBS). The SNUQ, specifically developed for this study, assessed the frequency, intensity, and patterns of social media use, including engagement. Participants rated their responses on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 5 = Very Often). Results indicated a mean score of 1.39 for social networking usage, indicating moderate usage, with males reporting slightly higher usage than females. The GCBS, a validated scale, measured the degree of belief in conspiracy theories across domains such as politics, science, health, and paranormal phenomena, using a similar Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree), resulting in a mean score of 3.11., reflecting a moderate endorsement. Notable variations in conspiracy beliefs were identified based on demographic factors, including age, gender, academic field, and residential area, with younger participants (aged 18 to 23) and those from urban areas exhibiting higher endorsement levels. A correlation analysis found a significant negative relationship between social networking usage and conspiracy beliefs (r = -0.457, p < 0.01), indicating that increased social networking usage was associated with lower endorsement of conspiracy theories. Demographic factors also showed varying degrees of association with conspiracy beliefs. The findings underscore the influence of social media on shaping Conspiracy beliefs among undergraduates, highlighting the necessity of addressing misinformation and promoting critical thinking among the younger generation in the digital era. Future research is recommended to explore further the mechanisms underlying this association and to develop targeted interventions aiming at mitigating the spread of conspiracy theories through social media.

Keywords: Conspiracy beliefs, Digital platforms, Social networking, Sri Lanka, Undergraduates.