

# MODULE 2: SOCIAL MEDIA AND INFORMATION CONSUMPTION

## MODULE OVERVIEW

Social media plays a huge role in spreading information and has become one of the primary sources of news, especially among younger generations. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, and Facebook are often the first places young people turn to for current events, pop culture, and local happenings. However, this constant stream of information can sometimes include misleading or completely false content, which has a significant impact on young users' understanding of reality and the world around them.

This module is thus designed to provide some key points about how social media influences the spread of information and, specifically, fake news among young generations.

## MODULE OBJECTIVES

**Upon completion of this module students will be able to:**

- ◆ Distinguish the different social media platforms and their main functions
  - ◆ Recognize bias and manipulation techniques
  - ◆ Analyze content critically rather than accepting it at face value
  - ◆ Act responsibly by verifying sources and questioning the intent behind content
  - ◆ Build a personalized set of trusted resources and tools that empower lifelong learning
- In general, learn how to use social media constructively while mitigating its negative impacts.

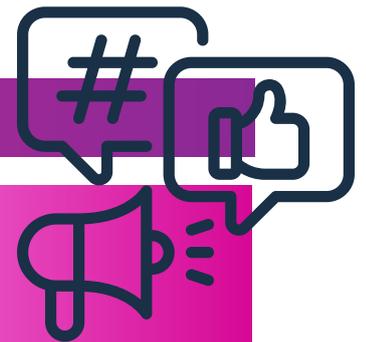
## STRUCTURE OF THE MODULE

### 2.1: Social Media platforms and their influence

- ◆ Overview of popular social media platforms
- ◆ The role of algorithms in content consumption
- ◆ Behavioural effects of social media on students

### 2.2: Media Literacy and critical consumption

- ◆ Evaluating the credibility of sources: Building a personal learning environment (PLE).
- ◆ How to identify biased or manipulative content
- ◆ Tools and strategies for verifying the truthfulness of online content



## 2.1. SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS AND THEIR INFLUENCE

Social media platforms, with their short, engaging content formats, indeed shape how young people think and interpret information. Short-form content encourages scrolling through lots of brief posts rather than engaging deeply with complex material, reducing the attention young people give to understanding the context of issues and can lead to surface-level thinking. Complicated social, political, or scientific topics are often boiled down to catchy sound bites or entertaining visuals, which may leave out essential nuances. This creates a distorted view where issues seem more black-and-white than they are, shaping young people’s understanding of complex matters. Content that goes viral is often emotionally charged, which can manipulate young people’s perspectives by playing to emotions rather than presenting factual information: this can skew perspectives on issues, creating fear, outrage, or overconfidence in unverified “facts.”

By combining education, platform-based changes, and tools that encourage critical thinking, we can better equip young people to navigate social media with an informed, discerning mindset. Different platforms serve diverse purposes and demographics, influencing how people consume content, communicate, and interact online.

### Overview of popular social media platforms

<b>TikTok</b>	En videoplatform i kort form, hvor brugere opretter og deler videoer fra 15 sekunder til 10 minutter. Kendt for sit algoritme-drevne feed, der serverer meget personligt indhold	Trendende udfordringer, dansevideoer og memekultur / Kreative redigeringsværktøjer, effekter og musikintegration / For dig"-side, drevet af AI, som driver opdagelse	Overvejende Gen Z og yngre Millennials (16-24 år) / Appellerer til skabere og seere, der er interesseret i underholdning, uddannelse og trends.	Underholdning, personlig branding, uddannelse gennem bid-sized indhold og viral markedsføring.
<b>Instagram</b>	En foto- og videodelingsplatform med funktioner som Stories, Reels og shoppingintegration. Det er et knudepunkt for visuel historiefortælling og influencer-kultur	Historier (24-timers indlæg), ruller (korte videoer) og karruseller / Integreret shopping og brandpromovering / Direkte beskeder og livestreaming	Bred appel, men især populær blandt Millennials og yngre Gen Z / En stærk tilstedeværelse af influencers, brands og små virksomheder	Livsstilsindhold, brand marketing, influencer kampagner og personligt udtryk
<b>YouTube</b>	En videodelingsplatform, der giver brugerne mulighed for at uploade, se og kommentere videoer fra et par sekunder til flere timer. Det er både et indholdshub og en søgemaskine til videoer	Lang- og kortformat videoindhold (YouTube Shorts)/ Indtægtsgenereringsmuligheder for skabere gennem annoncer, medlemskaber og superchat/Uddannelsesindhold, selvstudier, underholdning og musikstreaming	Alle aldersgrupper med en stærk tilstedeværelse blandt Millennials og Gen Z / Både afslappede seere og professionelle indholdsskabere	Underholdning, uddannelse, produktanmeldelser, tutorials og vlogging

<b>Facebook</b>	En social netværksplatform fokuseret på at forbinde venner, familier og lokalsamfund. Det integrerer tekst, fotos, videoer og grupper	Nyhedsfeed, grupper og markedsplads / Facebook-historier og livestreaming / Forretningsværktøjer til annoncer, promovning af begivenheder og e-handel	Populær blandt ældre Millennials, Gen X og Baby Boomers / Virksomheder og samfundsorganisationer bruger det også i vid udstrækning	Samfundsengagement, forretningsfremme og personlige opdateringer
<b>Twitter (nu X)</b>	En mikrobloggingplatform kendt for opdateringer i realtid, nyheder og offentlig diskurs. Indlæg (tweets) er begrænset i længden, men tilskynder til hurtig, direkte kommunikation	Populære emner og hashtags til opdateringer i realtid / Mulighed for at dele tekst, billeder og videoer / Spaces (lydchatrum) og abonnements tjenester til premium-indhold	Journalister, fagfolk, aktivister og teknologikyndige publikum / Stærk blandt Millennials og Gen Z	Nyhedsformidling, politisk diskurs, kundeservice og offentligt engagement
<b>Snapchat</b>	En multimediebeskedapp, der fokuserer på flygtigt indhold (forsvinder efter at være blevet set). Kendt for sin legende tilgang til kommunikation	Snap Stories, direkte beskeder og AR-filtre / Spotlight til indhold i kort form og lokationsbaserede funktioner som Snap Map	Overvejende Gen Z (teenagere og unge voksne) / Bruges til afslappet kommunikation og legende interaktion.	Personlig kommunikation, afslappet deling og udforskning af AR-oplevelser
<b>LinkedIn</b>	En professionel netværksplatform til karriereudvikling, brancheforbindelser og jobsøgning	Professionelle profiler, indlæg og artikler / Jobannoncer, kompetencepåtegninger og LinkedIn-læring / Netværk gennem forbindelser og grupper	Fagfolk, rekrutterere og virksomheder / Populær blandt Millennials, Gen X og ældre Gen Z, der kommer ind i arbejdsstyrken	Professionelt netværk, karriereudvikling og brancheindsigt
<b>Pinterest</b>	En visuel opdagelsesplatform, hvor brugere "stifter" indhold som billeder, artikler og videoer til tematavler for inspiration og planlægning	Pins og tavler til organisation / Shopping-integration og indholdsanbefalinger	Overvejende kvinder, der spænder over Millennials til Gen Z / Populært for gør-det-selv-entusiaster, designere og planlæggere	Kreativ inspiration, eventplanlægning og produktopdagelse
<b>Reddit</b>	En fællesskabsdrevet platform organiseret i fora (subreddits), hvor brugere diskuterer emner, deler nyheder og poster indhold	Op-/nedstem-system til at prioritere populært indhold / Subreddits skræddersyet til nicheinteresser	Bred demografisk appel, men læner sig mod et yngre publikum (Gen Z og Millennials) / Kendt for sine aktive, emnefokuserede fællesskaber	Fællesskabsdiskussioner, nicheinteresser og Q&A-fora
<b>WhatsApp</b>	En meddelelsesplatform, der understøtter tekst-, stemme- og videokommunikation samt gruppechat	Krypterede beskeder til privatliv / Tale- og videoopkald, statusopdateringer og fildeling	Global brugerbase, der spænder over alle aldersgrupper / Udbredt til personlig og forretningskommunikation	Øjeblikkelig kommunikation, kundeservice og samfundsengagement

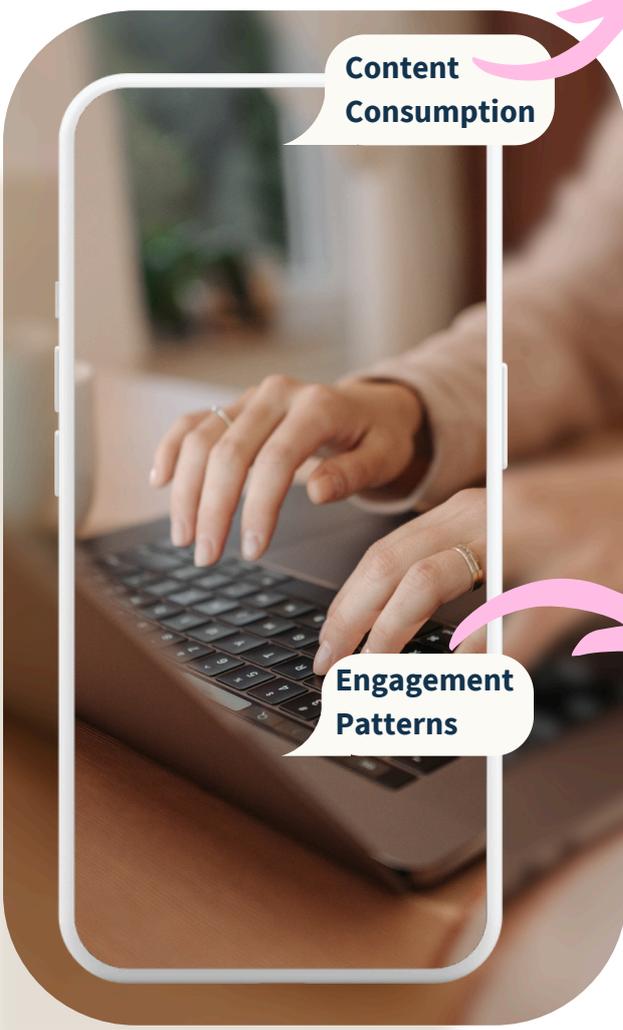
## The role of algorithms in content consumption

Social media relies on an algorithm to determine what feed of content each user will receive. These are a set of coded software instructions that are used to evaluate inputs to come up with the best outputs. The inputs include the content to be posted, information on users' preferences and activity, advertiser requirements and platform goals on social media. The output is the feed of content that each user receives in real time.

Different priority settings are based on various algorithmic approaches used by various platforms. Facebook wants users to have 'meaningful social interaction' with friends and families. TikTok's assertive algorithms promptly seek to understand users' interests and provide them with captivating videos. YouTube must control suggestions to assist content providers in reaching customers to ensure people remain interested in the videos.

Regardless of the strategy used, the companies protect the operations of their algorithms from the public to avoid revealing their advantages. However, there is one similarity, which is the desire to increase the user's engagement, as the calculated stimuli are intended to attract the viewers' attention.

Catapulted by powerful algorithms, social media has begun transforming user behavior in profound ways across two key areas:



### Content Consumption

Feeds offer content that is likely to appeal to each user and encourage interaction through likes, shares, and comments. Users are more inclined to engage with posts that are emotional, provocative, and those espousing their own beliefs. In the long run, users become entrenched in filter bubbles and echo chambers. That is, they only get information from sources with similar political leanings, thus promulgating particular stories. This weak point of the leverage algorithms has on the user worldviews has negative social implications.

### Engagement Patterns

The fact that the algorithms for curation allow for individualization in recommendations has revolutionized the ways in which users engage with content. Where social interactions were once a government statistic, today's consumers in the US, for instance, spend nearly three hours on social media daily and open platforms more than 200 times a week. The race created by the algorithms for engagement results in designs that are deliberately made to increase the daily visits of the user and its addictive intrinsic rewards with notifications, validation, and feedback in the form of quantifiable likes and shares.

## Behavioral effects of social media on students

Social media has significant behavioral effects on students aged 12 to 17, as this age group is in a critical stage of emotional, social, and cognitive development. Effects can be both positive and negative.

### Positive Behavioral Effects



#### Improved Communication Skills

Social media helps students develop digital communication skills, enabling them to connect and collaborate with peers. Platforms like WhatsApp or Instagram enable them to maintain friendships, even across long distances.



#### Enhanced Self Expression

Social media provides a space for young people to express themselves creatively, whether through writing, art, or multimedia content. Platforms like TikTok and YouTube empower students to share their talents and hobbies.



#### Access to Support Networks

Students can join groups or communities that provide emotional support and information on shared interests or struggles (e.g., mental health forums on Reddit or Facebook groups). Social media can help marginalized students find acceptance and solidarity.



#### Educational Opportunities

Platforms like YouTube, Pinterest, and even Instagram provide access to educational content, tutorials, and study tips, helping students learn beyond the classroom. Students can follow influencers or content creators who promote positive habits, such as studying, fitness, or volunteer work.

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### Negative Behavioral Effects



#### Increased Anxiety and Depression

Cause: constant comparison to peers and influencers can lead to feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, and body image issues / Effect: the fear of missing out (FOMO) can heighten stress and cause anxiety about being left out of social events or trends.



#### Cyberbullying

Cause: social media makes it easier for bullying to occur anonymously and reach a wider audience. Effect: victims of cyberbullying may experience emotional distress, academic difficulties, and even withdrawal from social activities.



#### Addiction and Distraction

Cause: algorithms are designed to keep users engaged, leading to excessive screen time. Effect: students may struggle to focus on schoolwork, physical activities, and face-to-face relationships due to overuse of social media.



#### Distorted Reality and Expectations

Cause: exposure to curated, idealized portrayals of others' lives (vacations, achievements, appearances) on platforms like Instagram or TikTok. Effect: students may develop unrealistic expectations about success, relationships, or appearance, leading to dissatisfaction with their own lives.



#### Reduced Interpersonal Skills

Cause: over-reliance on online communication instead of face-to-face interactions. Effect: students may find it harder to navigate real-world social settings, impacting their ability to form deeper connections.



#### Privacy and Safety Concerns

Cause: sharing personal information online without understanding the risks. Effect: students may face risks such as identity theft, online grooming, or unauthorized use of their data.

## 2.2. MEDIA LITERACY AND CRITICAL CONSUMPTION

Media literacy is indeed a crucial concept in this context. Media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act upon media in all its forms. It empowers individuals to interpret the messages they encounter in the media, understand the motives behind them, and make informed decisions about how to respond. Media literacy includes understanding both the content (what is being said) and the context (who is saying it, and why), as well as the ability to identify biases, stereotypes, and misinformation. To promote a real critical consumption it is essential to teach students to recognize manipulative content, understand algorithms, and evaluate the credibility of information.

### Evaluating the credibility of sources: Building a Personal Learning Environment

A Personal Learning Environment (PLE) is a system that allows learners to take control of and manage their own learning process. It is a concept that has gained popularity in the field of education due to the increasing use of technology and the shift towards more personalized learning experiences. A PLE typically consists of 4 key components: Content, Tools Connections and Activities [see the diagram for details]. Teaching young students to evaluate the credibility of sources is essential for helping them build a robust Personal Learning Environment (PLE), here intended as a self-directed ecosystem of tools, resources, and practices that support their learning goals. Some specific actions can reach this goal:

**Content:** the resources and materials that learners use to acquire knowledge and information. Content can be in various forms such as text, videos, audio, and interactive simulations

**Tools:** the applications and software that learners use to interact with the content and engage in learning activities. These tools can include learning management systems, social media platforms, online collaboration tools, and productivity apps

**Activities:** Activities are the tasks and exercises that learners engage in to apply their knowledge, practice skills, and demonstrate their understanding. These activities can be individual or collaborative and can take place both online and offline

**Connections:** refer to the networks and relationships that learners establish with peers, instructors, experts, and other resources. These connections play a crucial role in supporting collaborative learning and knowledge sharing

Teach the Basics of Source Credibility

Key Criteria for Evaluating Sources are **Authority** (Who created the content? Are they an expert or qualified on the topic?), **Accuracy** (Is the information backed by evidence, references, or reputable sources?), **Bias** (Is the source impartial, or does it have an agenda?) **Relevance** (Is the information aligned with the student's learning goals or research topic?) and **Currency** (Is the information up-to-date?)

**Activity:** provide examples of credible vs. non-credible sources and discuss why one is more trustworthy.

### Encourage Use of Trusted Educational Tools

Introduce students to platforms like: **Google Scholar** (for academic papers and research), Khan **Academy or EdX** (for free courses on a variety of topics) and **Fact-Checking Websites** (such as Snopes, FactCheck.org, or PolitiFact).

**Activity:** have students practice searching for credible sources on a topic using these tools and present their findings.

SIFT stands for

1. Stop - pause and think before trusting or sharing information
2. Investigate the source: research the publisher or creator of the content
3. Find better coverage: look for the same information in more credible or authoritative sources
4. Trace claims: follow links and citations back to the original context or evidence.

**Activity:** provide students with a dubious article or social media post and ask them to apply the SIFT method to evaluate its credibility.

### Teach the SIFT Method

### Create a Personal Information Audit

Have students reflect on their current sources of information: where do they get news and educational content (e.g., Instagram, YouTube, school websites)? Are these sources reliable?

**Activity:** students map their existing information habits and identify areas where they could add credible sources, such as academic databases or reliable news outlets.

Teach students to incorporate reliable tools into their daily learning: RSS Feeds and News Aggregators (set up feeds like Feedly to gather news from credible outlets); Bookmarking and Note-Taking Tools (use platforms like Pocket or Notion to organize and store high-quality resources); Collaborative Tools (introduce apps like Padlet or Trello for managing projects and sharing resources).

**Activity:** guide students through setting up their PLE using a mix of tools and sources tailored to their learning goals.

### Build a Digital Toolkit for a PLE

### Evaluate Real-Life Scenarios

**Activity:** give students a research topic (e.g., climate change or historical events); ask them to search online, evaluate sources using the SIFT method, and build a resource list for their Personal Learning Environment; have them explain why they included each source in their PLE.

Encourage students to regularly reflect on their PLE: What's working? What needs improvement? Are they using diverse and up-to-date sources?

**Activity:** have students journal about their learning journey and how they can improve their source evaluation and PLE over time.

### Promote Reflection and Iteration

## Evaluating the credibility of sources: Building a Personal Learning Environment

Teaching young students to identify biased or manipulative content is critical for their ability to navigate media responsibly. First of all it is necessary to start with the definitions:

### Bias

content that shows preference or prejudice toward one side of an issue, often committing counterarguments or presenting them unfairly.

### Manipulation

content crafted to influence opinions or behavior by distorting facts, using emotional appeals, or other deceptive techniques.

#### Common Types of Bias are:

##### Framing Bias

highlighting certain aspects of a story while downplaying others.

##### Selection Bias

choosing only evidence or examples that support a particular viewpoint.

##### Confirmation Bias

seeking or interpreting information that confirms pre-existing beliefs

#### Common Types of Manipulation are:

##### Emotional Appeals

using fear, anger, or sympathy to sway opinions.

##### Clickbait

sensationalized headlines designed to attract clicks rather than provide accurate information.

##### Cherry-Picking Data

presenting statistics selectively to mislead.

### A first task then is to develop analytical skills with guiding questions such as:

- ◆ Who created the content? Is the author credible or qualified to speak on the topic?
- ◆ What is the purpose? Is it to inform, persuade, entertain, or provoke?
- ◆ Is the content balanced? Does it present multiple perspectives or favor one side?
- ◆ How is the language used? Look for emotionally charged words or exaggerations.
- ◆ Are sources cited? Are claims supported by reputable evidence or data?

### A second step is to teach Media Literacy basic concepts:

- ◆ Fact vs. Opinion: help students differentiate between factual statements and subjective opinions.
- ◆ Agenda Setting: explain how media can shape what we think about by choosing which stories to cover.
- ◆ Echo Chambers: show how algorithms reinforce existing beliefs by limiting exposure to diverse viewpoints.

### Then it is surely useful to introduce Tools for Fact-Checking and Bias Detection such as:

- ◆ Fact-Checking Websites: introduce platforms like Snopes, PolitiFact, or FactCheck.org.
- ◆ Bias-Checking Tools: use resources like AllSides (for media bias ratings) or Media Bias/Fact Check.
- ◆ Reverse Image Search: teach them how to verify the origin of images with tools like Google Lens or TinEye.

### Moreover, the following practices surely lead to a more responsible use of the information:

- ◆ Encourage Reflection and Discussion: host open discussions where students share examples of biased or manipulative content they've encountered. Discuss how they felt about the content and whether they initially believed it.
- ◆ Promote Responsible Sharing Practices: teach the "Think Before You Share" rule (is the source credible? Is the information verified? Could sharing this cause harm or spread misinformation?)
- ◆ Analyze Real-Life Examples using a case study: analyze a viral post or video for elements of bias or manipulation, e.g. a political ad or a trending news clip on social media. Discuss the impact of misinformation or one-sided reporting in shaping public perception.



### Fact-Checking Websites

01

- **Snopes:** investigates rumors, urban legends, and viral claims.
- **PolitiFact:** focuses on political claims and rates them on a "Truth-O-Meter."
- **FactCheck.org:** nonpartisan checks on statements by public figures.
- **AFP Fact Check:** specializes in debunking misinformation globally.

### Source Bias and Reliability Checkers

03

- **AllSides:** shows media bias ratings and presents news from multiple perspectives.
- **Media Bias/Fact Check:** rates the political bias and factual reliability of news outlets.

### Social Media Fact-Check Features

05

- Platforms like Facebook and Twitter have built-in fact-checking labels or partner with organizations to flag false information.

02

### Image Verification Tools

- **Google Reverse Image Search:** find the original source of an image or detect manipulated visuals.
- **TinEye:** reverse image search with detailed metadata.
- **InVID & WeVerify:** browser plugins for verifying videos and images shared online.

04

### URL and Website Validators

- **Whois Lookup:** provides ownership information about websites to verify credibility.
- **Wayback Machine:** access historical versions of web pages to check for edits or suspicious activity.

# Fact-Checking a Viral Claim

## Practical Activity 1

(OFFLINE)



### Objective

Teach students how to critically evaluate the credibility of online content:

- Develop their skills in identifying false or misleading information
- Familiarize students with fact-checking tools and techniques
- Encourage responsible sharing practices on social media.

### Required Tools and Materials

1. Digital Tools (access to computers, tablets, or smartphones with internet connectivity)
  - Fact-checking websites (e.g., Snopes, FactCheck.org, PolitiFact)
  - Reverse image search tools (e.g., Google Images, TinEye)
  - Media bias and reliability checkers (e.g., AllSides, Media Bias/Fact Check)



### Contents

- Understanding what constitutes credible information
- Exploring fact-checking tools and their applications
- Practical application of fact-checking strategies on a real-world example

### 2. Printed Materials:

- Worksheets for note-taking
- A curated set of viral claims (real and fabricated) for analysis

### 3. Whiteboard/projector for group discussions and demonstrations.

## Activities

### Step 1: Introduction (15 minutes)

Objective: establish foundational knowledge about fact-checking

- ◆◆ Briefly explain what fact-checking is and why it is important
- ◆◆ Use an example of a viral claim (e.g., a popular meme or news story) to illustrate how misinformation spreads
- ◆◆ Discuss the consequences of sharing false information

Interactive Question: have you ever shared something online that turned out to be false? How did it feel?

### Step 2: Familiarize Students with Tools (20 minutes)

Objective: equip students with knowledge of fact-checking tools

Demonstrate how to use:

- ◆◆ Snopes or similar platforms to investigate the credibility of claims
- ◆◆ Google Reverse Image Search to verify the source of an image
- ◆◆ AllSides to check for bias in news reporting

Show students how to identify credible sources by looking for:

- ◆◆ Author credentials
- ◆◆ Reputable organizations
- ◆◆ Evidence and citations

Hands-On Activity: practice using one tool with a simple example (e.g., searching if “Humans only use 10% of their brain” is true or false).

### Step 3: Group Fact-Checking Challenge (30 minutes)

Objective: allow students to apply their knowledge in a collaborative setting

- ◆▶ Divide students into small groups (3-4 per group)
- ◆▶ Assign each group one viral claim to investigate.  
Examples: a sensational headline (“Aliens Discovered on Mars!”) / A widely circulated image (“Sharks swimming on a flooded highway”) / A controversial political statement
- ◆▶ Both claims to be investigated and the tools to be used have to be different for each group
- ◆▶ Provide each group with a worksheet to document their process:
  - 1.Claim: write down the claim they’re analyzing
  - 2.Source Check: investigate the website or person sharing the claim
  - 3.Checking Tools: use Snopes, reverse search, etc., to verify the claim
  - 4.Conclusion: determine if the claim is true, false, or misleading

Expected Outcome: groups should provide a reasoned explanation for their conclusion.

#### Wrap-Up Tips:

- ◆▶ Emphasize the importance of stopping and thinking before sharing content
- ◆▶ Encourage students to share fact-checking tips with family and friends.

### Step 4: Group Presentations (20 minutes)

Objective: share findings and reinforce learning.

- ◆▶ Each group presents their assigned claim, their fact-checking process, and their conclusion
- ◆▶ Encourage other groups to ask questions or add observations
- ◆▶ Highlight strong examples of critical thinking and teamwork

### Step 5: Reflection and Discussion (15 minutes)

Objective: reinforce lessons and discuss broader implications

Discussion Prompts:

- ◆▶ “What was the most surprising thing you learned during this activity?”
- ◆▶ “How can you apply these skills in your everyday life?”
- ◆▶ “What should you do if you’re unsure whether something is true?”

#### Assessment and Follow-Up

- ◆▶ Collect and review worksheets to assess understanding of the fact-checking process
- ◆▶ Assign homework: students choose a viral post or news article at home and fact-check it using the tools they learned
- ◆▶ Follow up with a class discussion on their findings.

## Practicing Responsible Social Media Use

### Practical Activity 2

(ONLINE)



Both the online and digital-free activities can be accessed on: <https://wiseme.eu/module2-students-en/>

# REFERENCES

## MODULE 2: SOCIAL MEDIA AND INFORMATION CONSUMPTION

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