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THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON STUDENTS' AWARENESS OF NATIONAL DEFENSE AND SECURITY IN THE CONTEXT OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION.

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Abstract

Social media is becoming a crucial information environment for students, thereby influencing how they receive, interpret, and share issues related to national defense and security. This study aims to systematize the bidirectional impact mechanism of social media, identify factors that increase perceptual risk, and propose appropriate educational directions for higher education institutions. This paper employs a method involving a targeted literature review, content analysis, and theoretical synthesis based on studies regarding misinformation, information echo chambers, and media and information literacy, as well as relevant policy documents. The results indicate that social media expands access to authoritative sources and enhances visual engagement, interactivity, and active learning; however, condensed content, personalized algorithms, fake news, and AI-generated content can diminish multidimensionality and the capacity for verification. Based on this, the paper proposes an intervention model comprising five groups of solutions: innovating teaching content and methods; developing verification capabilities; building a mainstream media ecosystem; fostering multi-stakeholder collaboration; and enhancing students' digital responsibility.

Keywords: social media; students; national defense and security awareness; information and communication competence; misinformation; digital transformation.

1. Introduction

The rise of smartphones, short-video platforms, and content recommendation systems has altered the structure of students' information environment. Social media is not merely a tool for communication and entertainment; it has become a channel for staying updated on news, learning, debating, and expressing opinions. For topics of national defense and security - which

demand a high degree of accuracy, context, and civic responsibility - this shift creates both educational opportunities and risks in awareness.

In Vietnam's higher education sector, national defense and security education aims to cultivate knowledge, a sense of responsibility, and the capacity to participate in the defense of the Fatherland.

However, the majority of current proposals focus primarily on describing the benefits or risks of social media, without clearly linking digital communication mechanisms, verification capabilities, and pedagogical solutions. The paper raises three questions: (1) Through what mechanisms do social media networks influence students' perceptions of national defense and security? (2) What factors do increase the positive or negative impacts? (3) How should higher education institutions need interventions to transform social media into a controlled educational resource?

2. Contents

2.1. Concepts and analytical framework

Students' awareness of national defense and security is understood as a system comprising knowledge, attitudes, evaluative capabilities, and a sense of responsibility regarding the tasks of nation-building and defense, national sovereignty, social order and safety, and cyber-security. This concept encompasses not only the memorization of knowledge but also the ability to distinguish reliable information, make well-founded judgments, and act in accordance with the law. The National Digital Transformation Program to 2025, with a vision toward 2030, identifies "Ensuring cyber-security is key to successful and sustainable digital transformation, as well as an integral, inseparable part of digital transformation. All equipment, products, software, information systems, and investment projects in information technology must incorporate mandatory safety and cybersecurity components right from the design stage"[1].

The study's analytical framework consists of four links: platform characteristics (speed, viscosity, interactivity, and personalization); student's reception behaviors (source selection, attention span, verification, and sharing); mediating variables (background knowledge, critical thinking, media and information literacy, and source credibility); and cognitive outcomes (understanding, attitudes, judgment, and digital behavior). This framework helps explain why the same content can create educational benefits for students with strong verification skills while leading to misconceptions among those who receive information passively.

2.2. Changes in information reception behavior

The growth of social media has significantly changed the way students access to and consume information. While information sources previously came primarily from books, newspapers, television, or mainstream media channels, social media has now become one of the fastest, most diverse, and most convenient sources of information. In particular, with the advancement of mobile technology and artificial intelligence, students can access information anytime, anywhere via smart phones, helping to foster a habit of staying updated in real time. A prominent current trend is that students consume information through short news updates, short videos, and visual content rather than long-form articles. Platforms such as TikTok, Facebook Reels, YouTube Shorts, and Instagram Reels are increasingly attracting large numbers of young users due to their engaging presentation, short duration, and ability to convey information quickly. For many students, videos ranging from a few dozen seconds to a few minutes in length have become a source of news updates on politics, the economy, culture, and society—and even issues related to national defense and security. This format makes information more accessible, but condensing the content can also diminish its completeness, objectivity, and depth.

Livestreaming has also become a popular method of conveying information. Livestreams hosted by media outlets, experts, organizations, or individuals with large followings attract significant student participation, thanks to their capacity for direct interaction and real-time information updates. However, not all live-streamed contents are verified or adheres to journalistic standards. This increases the risk of spreading unverified information or subjective, one-sided viewpoints. In reality, although students have access to a wealth of information, their skills in evaluating and verifying that information remain limited. A segment of students tends to merely read headlines, view images, or watch short videos without fully exploring the content before forming an opinion. Prioritizing the speed of information intake over accuracy makes the process of forming perceptions susceptible to the influence of one-sided or unverified information. Together with that, the habit of quickly sharing information is also quite common among the student community. A great deal of content is shared immediately upon being encountered to express an opinion or attract interaction without verification of its origin, authenticity, or reliability. This inadvertently contributes to accelerating the spread of fake news, misinformation, and distorted content in the online space.

One factor that has a profound influence on students' tendency to receive information is the content recommendation algorithm of social networking platforms. Based on search history, watch time, likes, comments, and shares, the algorithm continuously recommends content that aligns with the user's interests. This mechanism enhances the personalized experience but also fosters the formation of "echo chambers", causing students to primarily encounter like-minded viewpoints while having limited opportunities to access diverse and objective sources of information. In the fields of national defense and security, this can make learners susceptible to being misled by misinformation or distorted arguments if they lack foundational knowledge and critical thinking skills. In general, the way students access information on social media is shifting from a traditional reception model to one characterized by rapid, visual, and highly personalized reception. This trend both expands opportunities for accessing knowledge and poses significant challenges to forming a correct understanding of political, national defense, and security issues. This also serves as a basis for a comprehensive assessment of the two-way impact of social media on students' awareness of national defense and security in the context of digital transformation.

2.3. Positive impact

Social media is becoming one of the key communication channels for disseminating knowledge about national defense and security. With their advantages of rapid information dissemination, high interactivity, and diverse formats, social media platforms help expand access to information, raise awareness, and foster a sense of responsibility among students regarding the cause of national construction and defense.

Firstly, social media helps students quickly stay updated on information regarding national defense and security. Compared to traditional media, social media enables users to access information in near real-time through the official channels of state agencies, armed forces, press organizations, and socio-political organizations. Information regarding the search and rescue operations, disaster recovery assistance, and disease prevention efforts of the People's Army and the People's Public Security has

spread rapidly, helping students better understand the role of the armed forces in peacetime; meanwhile, activities such as military exercises, combat readiness training, the defense of national sovereignty over seas, islands, and borders, and defense diplomacy are also vividly conveyed through various formats, including videos, infographics, and short reports. Through images and real-life stories of Vietnamese officers and soldiers participating in peacekeeping operations, students gain a deeper understanding of Vietnam's national defense policy, which is characterized by peace, self-defense, and international cooperation.

Secondly, social media contributes to spreading patriotism and reinforcing students' trust in the cause of national defense. Through digital platforms, many inspiring images of soldiers and forces performing their duties in border areas, on islands, and in remote regions are being widely shared, generating a powerful ripple effect throughout the community. Stories of the sacrifice and resilience of border soldier, who safeguard national territorial sovereignty day and night, and images of Vietnamese Navy personnel steadfastly holding their ground at sea have helped inspire patriotism and national pride, while fostering deep appreciation for the contributions of the armed forces. Programs such as "Spring in Border", "Journey for the Homeland's Seas and Islands", and "Students with the Nation's Seas and Islands", along with volunteer campaigns in border areas and activities honoring policy-beneficiary families, wounded soldiers, and fallen heroes... contribute to fostering a deep attachment to the homeland and cultivating students' sense of responsibility regarding the defense of national sovereignty. Thus, if utilized for the right purposes, social media serves not only as a channel for the rapid dissemination of information but also as an effective tool for fostering patriotism, reinforcing political confidence, and raising awareness of national defense and security; simultaneously, it enables students to play an active role in communication efforts and the protection of the Party's ideological foundation in the process of digital transformation.

Thirdly, social media contributes to diversifying forms of national defense and security education and enhances the effectiveness of information reception among students. While national defense and security education was previously conducted primarily through classroom lectures, textbooks, and printed materials, digital technology now enables the delivery of educational content in diverse, vivid, and visual formats that align with the way the younger generation absorbs information. Media products such as infographics, podcasts, short videos, livestreams, documentaries, 3D simulations, and motion graphics help transform content that is inherently theoretical or professional into products that are accessible, engaging, and highly interactive. Integrating a diverse range of communication methods not only boosts learning engagement but also contributes to modernizing national defense and security education in a modern, learner-centered direction.

Fourthly, social media helps enhance students' interaction and active learning in the fields of national defense and security. Through fan pages, forums, study groups, or the official media channels of agencies and units, students can comment, exchange views, ask questions, and share their perspectives on issues related to national defense and security. This interactive process enables learners not only to receive information passively but also to actively engage in discussions, critical analysis, and the clarification of points they find unclear. Social media also effectively supports online learning activities, particularly in the

context of digital transformation and the digitization of higher education. Through online platforms, students can participate in discussions, scientific seminars, special topic classes, competitions on national defense and security, and exchange events with officers and soldiers serving at the borders and on the islands. Connecting directly with experts in the fields of national defense and security requires a high level of specialized expertise, as stipulated by the Law on National Defense and Security Education: "Teachers and lecturers of national defense and security education must hold a bachelor's degree or higher in national defense and security education; in cases where they hold a university degree or higher in a different major, they must possess a certificate of pedagogical training and a certificate of training for national defense and security education teachers and lecturers." [2] helps students gain access to official information, address outstanding questions, and enhance their understanding of the domestic and international defense and security situation.

Beyond expanding the learning environment, social media interaction also enables students to develop critical thinking, academic communication skills, and information processing capabilities. When properly guided and managed, social media becomes a supportive environment for national defense and security education, contributing to enhancing awareness, a sense of responsibility, and the capacity of students to participate in defending the Fatherland in the digital era.

2.4. Negative impact

In addition to its positive aspects, social media also poses numerous challenges for national defense and security education. "Information in cyberspace containing fabricated or false content that causes public alarm, damages socio-economic activities, hinders the operations of state agencies or persons performing official duties, or infringes upon the legitimate rights and interests of other agencies, organizations, or individuals." [3]. Characterized by rapid information dissemination, difficulty in controlling sources, and a strong influence from content recommendation algorithms, social media can become an environment for the spread of misinformation, thereby affecting students' perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs regarding national defense and security issues.

First, the spread of fake news and misleading information about national defense and security can distort students' knowledge and awareness. In the digital environment, unverified information can be shared a high speed through posts, images, videos, or live streams. Some content employs tactics that distort history, misrepresent revolutionary events, deny achievements in the cause of national liberation, or selectively edit historical materials to create a distorted understanding of the past. This information is often presented in an interesting format, combining visuals, audio, and assertive commentary, making it difficult for the recipient to recognize without the necessary background knowledge. Furthermore, image editing technology and artificial intelligence have led to an increase in videos cutting & splicing, images editing, and the creation of highly realistic fabricated content intended to mislead the public regarding events related to national defense and security. A significant amount of information is shared without clearly stating the source, timing, or context, resulting in the viewer's misunderstanding of the nature of the matter. For students, frequent exposure to misinformation without the ability to analyze and cross-reference it with official sources directly impacts their knowledge and capacity to accurately assess national defense

and security issues, thereby diminishing the effectiveness of national defense and security education in schools.

Second, distorted information on social media can undermine the political trust and sense of responsibility of a segment of students. One of the objectives of much online misleading content is to influence the perceptions and emotions of the audience through information that is sensational, one-sided, or lacking in context. Some articles, videos, or comments employ inflammatory language to tarnish the image of leaders, deny the Party's leadership role, or present one-sided views on socio-political issues without relying on verified information. Distorting the roles, functions, and activities of the people's armed forces, and exploiting isolated incidents or unverified information to draw stereotypical conclusions, thereby creating a biased perception of the People's Army and the People's Public Security. When such information spreads widely and combines with content recommendation algorithms, users may be continuously exposed to like-minded viewpoints, increasing the risk of developing a one-sided perspective. This not only affects the effectiveness of national defense and security education in schools but also impacts the development of civic awareness and social responsibility among the younger generation in the context of digital transformation. Therefore, along with promoting the positive values of social media, it is essential to focus on enhancing students' capacity to process information and think critically, as well as their ability to identify misleading content, thereby contributing to reinforcing a correct understanding of national defense and security in the new situation.

Third, social media content recommendation algorithms can create "echo chambers", resulting in limiting the objectivity of students' perceptions. One of the defining features of current social media platforms is the use of AI-based algorithms to analyze user behavior, thereby prioritizing content that aligns with each individual's interests, search habits, and interaction history. In the area of national defense and security, if learners are continuously recommended one-sided or unverified content by algorithms, they may gradually develop an incomplete understanding of issues concerning national sovereignty, defense and security policies, or socio-political events. The lack of an environment for scientific critical discourse and debate also diminishes the capacity for objective assessment, making learners easy to accept information that aligns with their personal views without proactively verifying its accuracy.

Fourth, social media increases the risk of students being drawn into or influenced by unlawful information and activities in cyberspace. Cyberspace is an open environment where any individual or organization can create accounts, build communities, and disseminate information. In reality, some organizations and individuals have exploited this characteristic to establish online groups and associations for the purpose of propagating extremist ideologies, disseminating misinformation, or inciting unlawful acts. Content calling for participation in illegal gatherings or protests, the dissemination of unverified information, or the incitement and division within the great national unity are often disguised under the guise of "sharing viewpoints", "defending justice", or "freedom of speech." Lacking legal knowledge, digital skills, and the ability to identify harmful or toxic information, some students may have their perceptions influenced and be drawn into sharing or disseminating unlawful content without fully realizing the consequences of their actions.

Thus, the negative impacts of social media are not only the dissemination of misinformation, but also affect students' methods of information reception, critical thinking skills, and the process of cognitive development. Without adequate knowledge, political steadfastness, digital skills, and the ability to verify information, students are susceptible to being swayed by the multifaceted flow of online information, which in turn affects their awareness, trust, and sense of responsibility regarding the cause of national construction and defense. This also serves as the basis for requiring the reform of national defense and security education, aiming to combine the provision of specialized knowledge with the development of students' digital competencies, critical thinking skills, and online behavioral culture in the current context.

2.5. Proposing some solutions

First, reforming the national defense and security education by integrating digital competencies into the subject's objectives. Each topic should be linked to the tasks of analyzing sources, verifying evidence, and handling media situations. Project-based learning, evidence-based debating, information crisis simulations, and case study analysis can help students apply their knowledge rather than simply memorizing it. The use of videos or social media should be accompanied by guiding questions and criteria for analysis and evaluation.

Secondly, building verification capacity based on a unified process. Students need to be trained to "dare to use their own reason"[4]: identify the creator and purpose of the content; locate the original source; verify the date, location, and context; cross-reference with at least two authoritative, independent sources; distinguish facts from commentary; and withhold sharing until there is sufficient evidence. Under current circumstances, this is of immense importance to students.

Third, developing a compelling mainstream media ecosystem with the ability to engage in dialogue. Competent authorities, armed forces, and universities need to provide concise content that includes links to full explanations, data, or original documents. Short-form videos, podcasts, infographics, and online Q&A sessions should adhere to principles of accuracy, contextual appropriateness, ease of access, and timely response.

Fourth, establishing a multi-stakeholder coordination mechanism. Lecturers of national defense and security education need to collaborate with experts in communications, technology, and law, as well as the Youth Union and the library to design learning materials, update scenarios, and support students. The school may organize a network of student collaborators for information verification, provided there are professional guidelines, an approval process, and a transparent mechanism for making corrections.

Fifth, promoting students' sense of responsibility for self-study and digital conduct. This responsibility includes proactively selecting sources of information, protecting personal data, refraining from amplifying unverified content, respecting differences, and complying with the law. This is how to turn accountability standards into observable and responsive behaviors.

To evaluate effectiveness, educational institutions can track four groups of indicators: knowledge of national defense and security; the ability to identify and verify information; the quality of reasoning when faced with conflicting information; and the responsible sharing behavior. The measurement design should

incorporate situational tests, product assessments, behavioral observations, and pre- and post-intervention surveys, rather than simply asking about learners' confidence levels.

3. Conclusion

In summary, “cognitive autonomy is a prerequisite for individuals to maintain the ability to think rationally rather than being entirely driven by emotions and public pressure” [5]. Social media influences students' awareness of national defense and security through a two-way mechanism. It expands access to information and enhances visual appeal and interactivity, facilitates the connection between knowledge and real-world application; at the same time, it enables the spread of misinformation, content lacking context, and uniform viewpoints. The ultimate impact depends on the combination of platform design, source quality, background knowledge, verification capabilities, and the educational environment.

The paper's primary contribution is the proposal of a four-link analytical framework and a five-group system of solutions, thus connecting national defense and security education with information-communication competence and digital responsibility. A limitation of the study is that it did not use survey or experimental data; therefore, no conclusions could be drawn regarding the scale of impact among Vietnamese students. Future studies should develop a multi-component perception scale, compare behaviors across platforms, and evaluate the effectiveness of information-verification educational modules by using pre-post or controlled experimental designs.

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