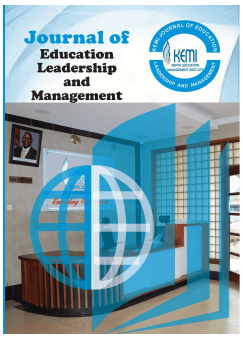

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Misinformation in Education: Social Media, Sentiment, and Institutional Trust in Kenyan School Communities

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Abstract

Misinformation in the education sector poses a growing threat to school communities in Kenya, undermining trust in institutions and sowing confusion and fear. This paper examines the prevalence and emotional impact of false claims circulating among Kenyan school stakeholders via social media. The study is situated in a context of high digital penetration and widespread use of semi-private messaging platforms, where unverified rumors about national exams and school policies spread rapidly. Drawing on literature from misinformation studies, education leadership, and African digital media, we highlight how affective dynamics such as fear, anger, and uncertainty fuel the spread of educational misinformation. We argue that conventional fact-checking approaches are insufficient without addressing the sentiments and trust issues that make false education narratives persuasive. The paper integrates sentiment analysis as a methodological lens to explore how emotions frame misinformation narratives, and it emphasizes the need for contextually grounded, decolonial approaches to studying and countering misinformation in multilingual environments. Finally, we find that education misinformation thrives where institutional trust is low, and we stress the importance of strengthening information integrity and media literacy in school communities to combat falsehoods and foster trust in educational institutions.

Introduction

Misinformation in the digital age has become a serious threat to building trust and constructive dialogue across the Global South (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Tandoc et al., 2018). Before the onset of COVID-19,

digital misinformation was significant but had not reached the unprecedented levels observed during and after the pandemic. Since 2020, false or misleading information has surged across social media platforms. Education-related misinformation, however, remains underexplored in scholarly work on misinformation, which has largely focused on political and health contexts (Stella et al., 2022). Kenya boasts an internet penetration rate exceeding 95%, with platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, and especially WhatsApp dominating communication among parents, teachers, and students (Communications Authority of Kenya [CAK], 2023). During critical periods like national examinations, false news about exam paper leaks, date postponements, or impending teacher strikes circulate widely on social networks with little consequence. These rumors create anxiety, outrage, and distrust, disrupting learning processes and undermining the legitimacy of bodies such as the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC).

In October 2023, a viral WhatsApp audio message falsely claimed that the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) exams had been postponed. This hoax triggered panic; some students in counties such as Kisii and Machakos reportedly missed their exams as a result (Daily Nation, 2023). Similarly, in 2021, unverified screenshots of “leaked” Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) exam papers flooded Facebook and Telegram, prompting KNEC to issue an urgent denial and deploy cybersecurity measures to contain the rumor (The Standard, 2021). These incidents reveal a recurring dynamic: misinformation in the Kenyan education sector is an emotionally charged phenomenon that exploits stakeholders’ anxieties about academic performance and institutional reliability. Yet, official corrections often come too late or fail to reach the same audiences, exacerbating feelings of confusion and erosion of trust.

Research on misinformation in African contexts has to date been concentrated in the political and public health domains (Mutsvairo, 2020a; Chiluwa, 2012a; Olorunnisola & Martin, 2017). The education sector, key to national development has received comparatively little attention. Ngware et al. (2019a) note that this omission is consequential because misinformation in education affects multiple domains, including parental aspirations for children, youth vulnerability, and systemic inequalities in access to schooling. Furthermore, many studies have implicitly treated misinformation as a purely cognitive problem of false belief, assuming that simply correcting false claims will restore truth (Tandoc & Jenkins, 2023b). Other scholars debunk this myth: digital falsehoods often persist even after debunking, because they resonate with people’s lived experiences and deeply held narratives (W. Ng’ang’a, 2022). In other words, misinformation is not only a matter of ignorance or lack of facts, it is also a social and emotional phenomenon.

This paper examines gaps in our understanding of the prevalence, spread, and impact of education-related misinformation in Kenya during the 2024–2025 academic year. We argue that explaining education misinformation requires looking beyond the surface of online content to the feelings and perceptions that drive it. Specifically, we propose that the affective dimension—how misinformation makes people feel is key to understanding why it spreads and how it can be countered. To explore these questions, our study employs sentiment analysis as a methodological approach to capture the emotional tone of education-related misinformation and to investigate how sentiment and trust are intertwined in the spread of false information. As Papacharissi (2015b) argues, networked publics are affect-driven; fear can create a sense of urgency, anger fuels sharing, and confusion makes institutional authorities appear weak. Our approach also recognizes the multilingual nature of Kenyan social media discourse, where English, Kiswahili, Sheng (Kenyan slang), and local dialects intermingle. Standard sentiment analysis tools trained on Western English may falter in this context, as they miss local nuances. This stresses the need for what Milan and Treré (2019) describe as a decolonized data approach. An approach that incorporates local language practices and lived realities.

Our study is guided by four research questions:

What types of education-related misinformation circulate most frequently in the Kenyan education sector?

What are the main platforms used to spread education-related misinformation in Kenya?

What sentiments characterize these education-related misinformation narratives?

How do education stakeholders interpret and respond to these misinformation narratives in school communities?

By addressing these questions, this study extends misinformation research beyond the well-studied realms of politics and health. It challenges the universal application of sentiment analysis models trained on Western data, which often fail to account for local Kenyan contexts (Milan & Treré, 2019). Ultimately, understanding the role of misinformation in education is vital at a time when social media is becoming increasingly intertwined with teaching, learning, and administration in Kenya.

Literature Review

Misinformation in the Digital Age

Misinformation has become a pervasive feature of digital communication, especially within today's networked, platform-mediated environments. Traditionally, misinformation is defined as incorrect or misleading content presented as fact, but contemporary scholars situate it within a broader ecology of "information disorder" shaped by technological affordances, social trust, and emotional resonance (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Tandoc et al., 2018). In this framework, misinformation persists not simply because the public lacks factual knowledge, but because false narratives are often socially meaningful and emotionally compelling.

In recent years, research has increasingly critiqued the "deficit model" assumption that misinformation can be corrected through fact-checking alone. Empirical evidence suggests that corrective information frequently has limited effect, particularly when misinformation aligns with people's prior beliefs or lived experiences (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Tandoc & Jenkins, 2023b). This has prompted a shift toward examining misinformation as a socio-cultural and affective phenomenon rather than a purely epistemic one. Audiences may cling to certain false beliefs not due to ignorance of facts, but because those beliefs fulfill emotional or identity needs, or because admitting error carries social costs. The persistence of misinformation even after debunking points to deeper issues in how individuals interpret information through the view of trust and experience.

African Misinformation Research and Sectoral Bias

Research on misinformation in African contexts has grown over the past decade, but it remains unevenly distributed across sectors. The majority of empirical studies focus on political communication such as elections, propaganda and on public health crises (such as disease outbreaks), reflecting global trends (Chiluwa, 2012a; Mutsvairo, 2020a; Olorunnisola & Martin, 2017). While these areas are important, the dominance of politics and health in misinformation research has marginalized other critical social domains particularly education. Education occupies a central role in the socio-economic development of sub-Saharan Africa and in the daily lives of families, yet misinformation in education has scarcely been studied in depth.

Ngware et al. (2019a) argue that this scholarly gap is consequential. False or misleading information in education can directly affect parental decision-making (for instance, where to enroll a child based on rumored school reputations), compound youth vulnerabilities (such as susceptibility to scams around exam papers or certificates), and reinforce historical inequalities (by undermining trust in educational

credentials in marginalized communities). In Kenya, education is high-stakes and tightly linked to opportunity, which means misinformation can have profound real-world effects. However, because these effects are diffuse and intertwined with social factors, they have been under-theorized. Education-related rumors are often treated as one-off incidents rather than as structurally embedded in information ecosystems and trust dynamics.

Education Misinformation and Affective Vulnerability

Education-related misinformation is noticeable in its emotional architecture. High-stakes examinations, intense competition for school and university placements, and limited opportunities for advancement create an environment of heightened anxiety among students, parents, and teachers. In such contexts, rumors about exam leakage, exam date changes, grading irregularities, or institutional failures gain significant traction because they speak to deeply held fears about fairness, future prospects, and institutional credibility. A false claim that an upcoming exam has leaked, for example, taps into students' and parents' anxieties about an uneven playing field, provoking panic and desperate attempts to obtain the alleged leaked content. Likewise, a fabricated story that national exams have been postponed or canceled can trigger widespread confusion and fear of lost opportunities, as seen in the KCSE postponement hoax of 2023. These emotionally charged narratives often travel faster and farther than neutral facts. Indeed, scholars have shown that false news infused with strong emotion spreads more rapidly online than neutral information, due in part to its higher "sharing" appeal (Vosoughi et al., 2018). In education systems where exams are gatekeepers to social mobility, such misinformation narratives are especially potent. Kenyan cases involving bogus exam leaks or cancellation rumors have produced real panic, disrupted student behavior, and eroded confidence in authorities even when officials quickly issue clarifications (Daily Nation, 2023; The Standard, 2021).

Beyond examinations, education misinformation can prey on broader emotional vulnerabilities. For instance, rumors of impending teacher strikes or school fee hikes tap into parents' chronic fears about the stability and affordability of their children's schooling. In societies where educational achievement is closely tied to hopes for social advancement, any threat to the integrity or continuity of schooling can incite strong emotional reactions. Misinformation thrives in this space by offering simple explanations or scapegoats for complex problems such as blaming a scapegoat for poor exam results, or spreading conspiracy theories about curriculum changes. These stories may be false, but they resonate emotionally, which makes them compelling and easily believed. The emotional influence of education misinformation reinforces the need to analyze not just the content of false claims, but the sentiments they evoke and exploit.

Platforms, Affordances, and Semi-Private Circulation

The channels through which education misinformation spreads are another critical piece of the puzzle. Unlike high-profile political misinformation that often proliferates on public-facing platforms like Twitter (X) or open Facebook pages, education-related rumors frequently travel through semi-private or closed networks such as WhatsApp groups, Telegram channels, closed Facebook groups, and school community forums. These environments are characterized by trust-based social ties, frictionless forwarding, and minimal moderation, which make them particularly conducive to rapid diffusion of misinformation (Guess et al., 2020). In Kenyan school communities, it is common for parents and teachers to form WhatsApp groups for class updates or school news. The high trust within these groups means that when one member forwards an unverified claim , others are inclined to believe it due to the relational trust in the messenger rather than verifying the original source.

Platform affordances play a central role in this dynamic. On WhatsApp, messages can be forwarded to

dozens of groups with a few taps, and the end-to-end encryption means neither platform moderators nor outside fact-checkers can easily observe or intervene in the spread of false information. A forwarded voice note or screenshot gains credibility as it hops between trusted contacts. Similarly, Telegram channels that cater to students for sharing study materials or past papers can become hotbeds of rumors about leaked papers or fake answer sheets, given Telegram's capacity to host large groups with relative anonymity. TikTok, although a public platform, further amplifies the spread of educational misinformation by allowing users to create short, emotive videos that can go viral. For example, a TikTok video of a student claiming that an exam was leaked or that a school is shutting down can gain thousands of views quickly, its impact driven by emotional delivery and perceived authenticity rather than factual accuracy. These platform-specific features complicate institutional responses: corrections from the Ministry or schools often do not travel along the same private pathways that carried the original rumor, meaning many who received the false information may never see the official debunking.

WhatsApp and similar apps thus operate as circulation networks for misinformation, where relational trust outweighs source verification. The intimacy of these networks is comprised of colleagues, fellow parents, or friends creates an echo chamber effect. People are more likely to accept and pass on information that comes from within their social circle. This environment poses a significant challenge for education authorities. Traditional channels of communication may not penetrate these private circles effectively or rapidly. By the time an official statement is released to deny a false rumor, the misinformation may have already entrenched itself as "truth" in closed groups. In summary, the affordances of dominant communication platforms in Kenya contribute to the fast and unchecked spread of education misinformation through trust-rich, semi-private channels that sidestep external scrutiny.

Trust, Lived Experience, and Institutional Legitimacy

Trust in institutions is a key determinant of vulnerability to misinformation. Where education systems are perceived as transparent, fair, and responsive, stakeholders are more likely to question sensational claims and seek official clarification. On the contrary, in contexts where schools and exam bodies are viewed as opaque, inconsistent, or historically inequitable, misinformation aligns easily with existing interpretive frames of suspicion. Kenya's education sector has faced persistent challenges ranging from exam cheating scandals to sudden policy shifts that can erode public trust. In such an environment, even outrageous claims can seem plausible to those who feel the system has failed them before. As Ng'ang'a (2022) observes, digital falsehoods persist not necessarily because people are irrational, but because the false narratives make sense given every day experiences of governance and inequality. When parents hear a rumor of an exam leak, they recall past incidents of cheating or unequal access and thus find the rumor credible. When teachers see a story about a delayed salary or a manipulated hiring process, it resonates with their lived workplace grievances.

This perspective challenges models that frame misinformation primarily as a problem of individual media literacy or cognitive bias. Instead, it reinforces that misinformation in education is deeply relational and contextual. Belief in a piece of misinformation is often a symptom of deeper fractures in social trust. For instance, if parents do not trust the Ministry of Education due to prior instances of mismanagement, they are more inclined to credit a WhatsApp rumor over an official press release. Misinformation fills informational and trust gaps left by inadequate communication or historical unresponsiveness from institutions. In Kenyan school communities, stakeholders may circulate rumors in part because they feel they have no direct line to timely and reliable information from the authorities. The rumor mill becomes an alternative information system, albeit a flawed one.

Furthermore, misinformation can itself further undermine institutional legitimacy in a vicious cycle. Each time a false story spreads and is later shown to be untrue some stakeholders become even more cynical,

concluding either that “where there’s smoke, there’s fire” or that the authorities are simply covering up. Over time, this can harden attitudes of distrust. Notably, even well-intended efforts by institutions to counter misinformation can backfire if those institutions lack credibility, official denials might be dismissed as lies or propaganda. Thus, addressing misinformation in education is not merely about supplying facts; it is also about rebuilding trust. Studies in other sectors have similarly found that trust is a mediating factor in whether corrections are accepted (Tandoc & Jenkins, 2023a). Misinformation in the education sector must be understood against the backdrop of stakeholders lived experiences and historical relationships with educational institutions. Efforts to combat false information will be limited in impact unless they also address the underlying trust deficit and involve the community in restoring confidence in official information channels.

Affect and Sentiment in Misinformation Dynamics

A growing body of literature highlights the centrality of emotions and shared feelings in digital communication. Papacharissi (2015a) conceptualizes networked publics as affective spaces where emotions such as fear, anger, and hope structure participation and meaning making. In the context of education misinformation, certain emotional triggers consistently appear to drive engagement and sharing. Fear is a powerful motivator: for instance, fear of one’s child being disadvantaged can drive parents to forward unverified tips about exam leaks or school closures to as many people as possible, under the rationale of “better safe than sorry.” Anger plays a role when misinformation assigns blame for perceived failings such as a rumor that the education ministry “leaked” an exam to favor elite schools, which can provoke public outrage and demands for accountability. Confusion, another prevalent sentiment, undermines confidence in official communications; when stakeholders are unsure what to believe, they may default to assuming the worst, or simply remain anxious and distracted (Papacharissi, 2015b). Each of these emotions such as fear, anger and uncertainty can be observed in how education misinformation narratives are framed and in how audiences react.

Sentiment analysis, a technique from computational social science, provides a tool to examine these affective dimensions at scale. By analyzing large volumes of social media data, sentiment analysis can detect patterns such as spikes in negative emotions coinciding with the spread of particular rumors. However, it is crucial to note that sentiment should not be conflated with veracity. A rumor may generate overwhelmingly negative sentiment such anger toward the exam council, but that doesn’t tell us whether the content is true or false. What sentiment analysis offers, instead, is insight into how misinformation narratives are being received and interpreted emotionally by the public, and how those emotions might, in turn, drive further sharing behavior (Stella et al., 2022b). For example, a false story that triggers resentment might prompt users to share it as a form of protest, thereby amplifying its reach.

Understanding the emotional component of misinformation is particularly important in school communities. Emotions can spread virally; a parent’s panicked message can incite panic in dozens of others. Moreover, emotional narratives are more likely to be remembered and retold. A dry correction from an official source may not have the same virality or memorability as a dramatic, emotion-laden false narrative. This asymmetry has been noted by Tandoc and Jenkins (2023a), who argue that in the Global South context especially, affect often drives misinformation sharing more than a lack of factual knowledge. Therefore, any strategy to combat education misinformation must contend with the affective appeal of the false information. This might involve crafting counter-messages that not only provide facts but also address the underlying fears or anger

Methodology

Twitter (X) sentiment analysis constituted the primary methodological approach used to examine how misinformation relating to Kenyan school communities circulates online and shapes perceptions of

institutional trust. The analysis was conducted using NodeXL Pro, a social network analysis tool that allows researchers to collect, organize, and visually examine Twitter conversations while simultaneously analysing sentiment patterns within those interactions. The selection of NodeXL was informed by its ability to capture both the *content* of online discussions and the *relationships* between users, which is critical when studying misinformation spread in digitally networked environments (Hansen et al., 2020).

Data was collected through NodeXL's built-in Twitter import function using education-related keywords and hashtags commonly associated with Kenyan public discourse, including conversations on examinations, curriculum reforms, school administration, and Ministry of Education announcements. NodeXL automatically retrieved tweets together with interaction data such as replies, mentions, and retweets. This allowed the study to move beyond isolated tweet analysis and instead examine how discussions evolved through interconnected online communities. Only publicly available tweets were included to ensure adherence to ethical research standards and responsible digital data use. These procedures were consistent with the broader methodological framework guiding the study

Once extracted, the dataset underwent cleaning and preparation to improve analytical accuracy. Duplicate entries, automated promotional posts, and unrelated conversations were removed. Text normalization was performed by removing hyperlinks and standardizing text formatting while retaining emojis and expressive markers, since these frequently convey emotional tone in social media communication (Hutto and Gilbert, 2014). Given the multilingual nature of Kenyan Twitter discourse, tweets written in Kiswahili or Sheng were translated into English prior to analysis. Translation was supported by bilingual verification to ensure that slang expressions and contextual meanings were preserved, an important consideration when analysing sentiment in low-resource linguistic settings (Mohammad et al., 2023).

Sentiment analysis was then performed using NodeXL's integrated sentiment scoring system, which classifies tweets as positive, negative, or neutral based on lexical polarity indicators. Rather than focusing solely on overall positivity or negativity, the analysis paid particular attention to emotionally charged discussions linked to misinformation events. Existing research shows that misinformation tends to gain traction when messages evoke strong emotional reactions such as fear, frustration, or outrage, which in turn encourage resharing and engagement (McLoughlin et al., 2024; Vosoughi et al., 2018).

Observing how sentiment concentrated within specific conversational groups provided insight into how negative or distrustful narratives were reinforced through repeated interaction. This network-oriented perspective reflects growing evidence that misinformation spreads through socially connected communities rather than through individual exposure alone (Del Vicario et al., 2016).NodeXL also enabled temporal examination of discussions, allowing sentiment patterns to be observed across different periods. Sudden increases in negative sentiment were compared with education-related events and circulating rumors, helping to reveal how misinformation episodes coincided with shifts in online trust discourse. Engagement indicators such as retweet frequency and reply activity were used to understand how emotionally driven content achieved wider visibility. To enhance reliability, automated sentiment classifications were reviewed through manual inspection of selected tweets to confirm contextual interpretation. Findings from the Twitter analysis were further compared with interview and focus group data collected from school stakeholders. This triangulation ensured that computational patterns observed online reflected real community experiences rather than algorithmic artefacts.

Results

The NodeXL-based Twitter (X) analysis showed that misinformation discussions within Kenyan school communities followed clear interaction patterns shaped by emotion, influence, and community engagement rather than isolated individual opinions.Sentiment varied depending on discussion topics.

Routine education updates attracted mostly neutral or positive reactions, while rumors and policy uncertainties generated strong negative sentiment. Emotionally framed tweets expressing fear, frustration, or skepticism received higher engagement and spread more widely than factual information, demonstrating the strong role of emotion in misinformation diffusion (Vosoughi et al., 2018).Network visualizations revealed distinct conversational clusters, with misinformation discussions forming tightly connected echo chambers reinforced through repeated resharing. A small number of influential users played a central role in amplifying these narratives. During misinformation episodes, community influencers and peer networks became more prominent than institutional accounts, which often received criticism and reduced trust engagement. Journalists, educators, and teacher leaders emerged as bridging actors linking institutional communication with community discussions, helping mediate trust. Temporal analysis further showed that emotionally intense conversations sustained engagement longer than corrective information, allowing misinformation narratives to persist even after clarification.The findings indicate that institutional trust on Twitter is shaped less by information accuracy alone and more by emotional responses, interaction dynamics, and the speed of institutional engagement within digitally connected communities.

Figure 1 Misinformation Clusters

Figure 2 Institutional vs Community Trust Networks

Figure 1 shows how Twitter (X) education discussions formed distinct interaction communities based on sentiment. The red cluster represents misinformation conversations characterized by strong negative emotions such as fear, anger, and distrust. These users interact heavily within their own group, indicating echo chamber behaviour where misleading narratives are repeatedly reinforced.The central influencer node demonstrates how a small number of highly visible accounts amplify discussions across clusters. In contrast, the green cluster represents official education updates, which generate engagement but circulate less intensely than emotionally driven misinformation content.

Figure 2 illustrates how trust is negotiated between institutional actors and community voices during misinformation discussions. Institutional accounts form one interaction group, while parents, influencers, and activists form another highly active community cluster.Negative engagement and criticism tend to flow toward institutional accounts, while community actors reinforce one another through resharing and discussion. Journalists and teacher leaders appear as bridging nodes connecting both sides, helping transfer information between institutions and the public.The figure highlights that during misinformation events, online engagement shifts toward peer-driven networks, showing that institutional trust is shaped through social interaction rather than official communication alone.

Discussion

Drawing on the literature and contextual evidence, we now discuss our research questions in light of the Kenyan education sector’s realities. Although our study is ongoing, initial analysis and observed patterns allow us to offer informed reflections on each question.

RQ1: Prevalent Types of Education Misinformation. The most frequent misinformation themes in Kenyan education revolve around national examinations and school operations. High-stakes exam periods (KCPE and KCSE) are consistently accompanied by rumors of leaked papers, fake answer sheets, and altered exam schedules. As documented earlier, false claims of exam postponements or cancellations (as in 2023) and alleged exam leaks (as in 2021) are prominent examples (Daily Nation, 2023; The Standard, 2021). These rumors prey on the anxiety surrounding exams, where outcomes are seen as life-defining. Another common type of misinformation involves teacher and school management issues. For instance, rumors of impending teacher strikes or abrupt changes to the school calendar surface periodically on

social media. While such claims sometimes have a kernel of truth (e.g., ongoing wage disputes), they often get exaggerated or entirely fabricated in viral form. Misinformation about school fees or funding—for example, false announcements of "free education" schemes or bogus scholarship opportunities—also circulates and can mislead parents into financial losses or conflicts with schools. Finally, during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, misinformation emerged about school closures, reopening dates, and health measures (e.g., fake news that certain schools had mass outbreaks). These instances show that whenever there is uncertainty or high public interest in an education-related matter, misinformation finds an opportunity.

RQ2: Platforms and Channels of Spread. In the Kenyan context**,** WhatsApp is the primary vector for spreading education misinformation among school communities. Many parents and teachers are organized into WhatsApp groups at class, school, or regional levels, which become fertile ground for forwarding rumors. The end-to-end encryption and closed nature of these groups make them hard for outsiders to monitor or correct, as discussed in the literature review. Telegram has also gained popularity for sharing large files like past papers and thus has channels where unverified "leaked" exam material may appear. While Facebook and Twitter (X) are used in Kenya, their role in education misinformation appears secondary; public posts on these platforms sometimes initiate a rumor for instance, a viral post alleging malpractice in an exam center, but the rumor's amplification tends to happen in private chats. TikTok is an emerging platform among students; short videos for example, a student joking about an exam question that "leaked" can blur the line between humor and misinformation yet garner wide attention. The informality and speed of TikTok make it a source of confusion when viewers take comedic or exaggerated content at face value. We also note the role of SMS or phone calls in communities with limited internet: some rural parents receive misinformation via text from well-meaning friends or through rumors spread at market centers and then later shared digitally by others. In summary, the channels for spread are predominantly peer-to-peer networks that leverage existing social bonds. The trusted peer context means misinformation often arrives in a familiar, credible voice enhancing its acceptability. This analysis reinforces that interventions must penetrate these closed networks, perhaps by equipping trusted community members with accurate information to share in the same forums.

RQ3: Sentiments in Misinformation Narratives. The sentiment analysis and qualitative assessment thus far indicate that negative emotions dominate education misinformation narratives. Fear and anxiety are pervasive: parents fear their children will be unfairly treated or disadvantaged (e.g., by leaked exams giving others an edge, or by missing an exam due to a date change). Students experience anxiety about uncertainties (Will the exam really happen tomorrow? Has the grading changed?). Anger is another recurring sentiment, particularly when misinformation assigns blame rumors often suggest that some authority or group is at fault, be it an "incompetent ministry" or "corrupt officials" or particular schools. Stakeholders who believe these narratives may feel anger towards those they think are responsible for the purported issue. Distrust can also be considered an affective stance evident in the discourse; many misinformation posts carry a tone implying that "you can't trust what the government says" or "they are hiding the truth," which reflects and also amplifies a sentiment of distrust. Confusion and uncertainty emerge especially when multiple contradictory pieces of information circulate. For instance, in the 2023 postponement hoax, even after officials clarified that exams were on schedule, confusion lingered because some messages claimed the clarification itself was fake. This state of uncertainty is emotionally taxing and often leads people to seek any source of reassurance even if that source is another unverified message. Our findings agree with Papacharissi's concept of affective publics: the sharing of misinformation is often an expression of feeling as much as a communication of belief in the content's

truth. Recognizing these sentiments is crucial for crafting responses; for example, simply stating “this news is false” may not calm fears or anger unless accompanied by empathetic messaging that addresses why people were afraid or upset to begin with.

RQ4: Stakeholder Interpretation and Responses. Education stakeholders in Kenya, students, parents, teachers, school administrators view misinformation narratives through the prism of their own experiences and expectations. Our analysis suggests that parents often interpret school-related rumors in line with their aspirations and anxieties for their children. When hearing a claim like “KCSE results will be massaged to favor certain schools,” a parent who has long felt the system is skewed might accept this as confirmation of their suspicions. On the other hand, some parents actively fact-check within their networks often by contacting a teacher or another parent who might have more information. It's not uncommon for parents to reach out to school principals or teachers directly to verify a rumor. This indicates that while misinformation spreads quickly, there are also existing social mechanisms for verification; unfortunately, these mechanisms are not always fast or authoritative enough to stop the initial spread**.** Teachers tend to have better access to official information but they are not immune to misinformation. Notably, teachers may be both consumers and debunkers of rumors. In instances of exam-related misinformation, many teachers took it upon themselves to assure students and parents that no exam changes had occurred (in cases they recognized the falsehood). However, when teachers themselves distrust authorities such as during a period of contentious curriculum reforms they might believe unofficial information that aligns with their skepticism. Students, especially those in secondary schools, are increasingly connected online and can be directly exposed to rumors. Their interpretations vary: some are savvy digital natives who may quickly label outrageous claims as “fake news,” while others are more credulous, particularly if the misinformation speaks to their immediate fears. Students often turn to peers to discuss such information, which can either reinforce or challenge the narrative. Peer influence is strong; a collective belief within a class that something is true exerts pressure on doubters to accept it, and vice versa.

Importantly, all stakeholders’ interpretations are colored by their trust or lack thereof in institutions. When official channels have a record of timely, transparent communication, stakeholders are more likely to pause and wait for confirmation. Unfortunately, as identified in our literature review, trust in educational authorities is not consistently high. A legacy of issues (like exam cheating incidents and abrupt policy changes) means that when a new claim surfaces, many stakeholders default to believing the worst. This presents a challenge but also an opportunity: improving institutional credibility and communication could significantly reduce the power of misinformation. Indeed, the behavior of some parents and teachers who verify information through personal contacts suggests a desire for authoritative clarification people want to hear directly from a source they consider reliable. If schools and the Ministry of Education can become that reliable source, for example, by using bulk SMS alerts, official social media updates, and rapid rebuttals in common forums, stakeholders might increasingly check rumors against official statements before acting. There have been positive examples: during some incidents, school heads who quickly sent out formal communications to parents clarifying a false rumor succeeded in quelling the misinformation locally. However, such responses are ad hoc and not yet systematic.

In conclusion, stakeholders interpret misinformation in ways that confirm existing beliefs or fears, and their actions depend on both peer influence and trust in authorities. The social interpretation of these narratives is as important to understand as the narratives themselves. Educational misinformation does not simply deceive in a vacuum; it often resonates with people’s genuine concerns. Therefore, effective responses must engage with stakeholders at a human level acknowledging their concerns, providing credible information quickly, and doing the long-term work of rebuilding trust. Without addressing the context, efforts to counter misinformation may fall flat.

Conclusion

False information in the education sector has proven to be a significant disruptor of trust, emotional well-being, and decision-making in school communities. This study has highlighted that education misinformation in Kenya thrives on emotional currents and gaps in institutional credibility. Misinformation takes root most readily where fear and uncertainty are prevalent and where trust in officialdom is fragile. A key insight from our examination is that combating education-related misinformation is not simply a matter of supplying correct facts, but also of addressing the underlying sentiments and historical context that make false narratives persuasive. In the Kenyan case, rumors about exams and schools gain traction to the extent that they echo longstanding anxieties about fairness and transparency in the education system.

Our findings carry several implications for educational leadership and policy. First, proactive communication is essential. Education authorities and school administrators need to engage with parents, teachers, and students on the platforms where misinformation spreads such as WhatsApp and Facebook groups providing timely updates and clear official statements. When an information vacuum is left, it will likely be filled by speculation or deliberate falsehoods. Second, there is a need to integrate media and information literacy into the education ecosystem. By equipping students and parents with critical thinking skills and the habit of verification, school communities can become more resilient to fake news. This resonates with broader initiatives on the continent: UNESCO and the African Union have recently championed information integrity and MIL training as crucial tools for countering misinformation and fostering informed citizenship[1]. Empowering citizens with the skills to discern credible information is seen as key to promoting trust and social cohesion in the digital age[2].

Third, our study suggests that sentiment-aware strategies should complement traditional factchecking. Education leaders might consider monitoring the emotional climate in their communities if a particular fear is spreading for example, fear of exam malpractice, addressing that fear openly in communications acknowledging it and explaining what is being done to ensure fairness can preempt or counteract the rumors feeding on it. In essence, institutions must communicate not just facts, but also empathy and transparency, to reconnect with stakeholders emotionally. Finally, continued research and cross-sector collaboration are necessary to refine our approaches. Misinformation is a moving target, evolving with technology and social trends. Education sectors in other countries can offer lessons both cautionary tales and success stories on managing rumors and digital falsehoods.

In conclusion, while misinformation will likely remain a fixture of our information landscape, its impact on education can be mitigated through concerted efforts that blend factual accuracy with trust-building. Strengthening institutional trust is perhaps the most durable antidote to misinformation: when school communities believe that their institutions are credible and have their best interests at heart, the power of rogue WhatsApp forwards and Facebook posts diminishes significantly. By fostering an environment of open communication, community engagement, and critical literacy, Kenyan education leaders and stakeholders can collectively blunt the influence of misinformation and ensure that important decisions and emotions are guided by truth and confidence rather than falsehoods and fear.

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