

News Consuming Habits of Young Social Media Users in the Era of Fake News

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Abstract: Over the last few decades social media and networking have become popular with the young, middle aged and elderly alike. However, it is the young who tend to be connected to social media most. They use social media for several purposes of which social networking, news dissemination as well as news consumption seem to be the leading cause. As a consequence, users are allowed to share emotions, opinions, bias and manipulative information sometimes without any control, which may lead to the phenomenon of fake news. The objective of this study is to examine news consumption, attitudes and strategies to fake news among young social media users. It is hypothesised that young social media users do not trust fully in social media, especially women. However, they have strategies to cope with fake news. It is also assumed that young social media users support the introduction of social media as a subject into the school curricula. All of our hypotheses were supported by the findings of qualitative research (focus group) and quantitative research (questionnaire). It was concluded that although news consumers do not trust in social media, they have specific techniques to distinguish false news from real news. The respondents expressed their opinion according to which strategies that deal with social media news should be taught in school.

Key Words: social media, social networking, fake news, news consumption strategies, focus group research, Chi-squared test, Mann-Whitney test, communication

1 Introduction

In the past few decades, news consuming behaviour has dramatically changed (Goyanes, 2014; Shu et al., 2017). The circulation of newspapers and magazines has decreased sharply, and they have been replaced by new forms of media (Meyer, 2004; Ahlers, 2006). Social media platforms have become widespread (Gil de Zuñiga et al., 2017), and their popularity has been rising up to date (Reuters, 2017).

According to recent data from the Reuters Institute (2017), more than half (54%) of all online users across 36 countries use social media as a source of news, and more than one in ten (14%) use social media as their main source.

However, the news consuming habits and trust of social media users are causes for concern as large volume of non-journalistic content is shared practically unsupervised (Baum et al., 2017). This would lead us to the concept of misinformation and fake news and their viral spread (Gu et al., 2017). The main objectives of this paper are to present the

findings of research on trust in social media by gender and the fake news coping strategies of social media users.

2 Literature Review and Theoretical Background

2.1 Social Media and Social Networking

First of all, the terms 'social media' and 'networking' should be defined. Social media include 'websites and computer programmes that allow people to communicate and share information on the internet using a computer or mobile phone'¹

The European Union terminology database provides a comprehensive definition of social media: 'Social media services and tools involve a combination of technology, telecommunications and some kind of

¹Cambridge Dictionary, Social media. (24 October 2019) Retrieved from: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/social-media>

social interaction. They can use a variety of different formats, for example text, pictures, video and audio². The term 'social media' is applied to the tools in question, their applications and collaboratively developed practices.

Social media is a tool for collaboration and sharing through 'a virtual community, a profile site, a social network, a website that brings people together to talk, share ideas and interests, or make new friends. Unlike traditional media that is created by no more than ten people, social media sites contain content created by hundreds or even millions of different people'³.

As seen above, social media also act as a community with social, business and personal communication and fast interaction among people which is termed as social networking and defined as 'communication with people who share interests using a website or other services on the Internet'⁴.

People tend to think that social media and social networking are the same, but this is not the case. Social media is the use of web-based technologies to communicate through interactive dialogues, as was seen above. Social networking is a social structure in social media with people who are joined by a common interest. Social media can be used for social networking. In other words, social media help people to connect, whereas social networking enhances that connection by having common interests and passions.

2.2 Social Media News and Fake News

Social media and networking help people keep connected with their friends and family and provide a fast and easy way to communicate about news and information about current events, private lives, politics, and other social issues. An important feature of social media is that posts and news can be commented immediately. It acts as an interactive online dialogue, in which feedbacks and reactions are fast.

² <https://iate.europa.eu/home>

³ Social network, Computer Hope (30 October 2019) Retrieved from: <https://www.computerhope.com/jargon/s/socinetw.htm>

⁴ Oxford Learners Dictionaries, Social Networking (24 October 2019) Retrieved from: <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/social-media?q=social+media>

As previously stated by Baum et al. (2017), this has given way to a large volume of unsupervised content to go viral online, resulting in misinformation, distorted contents and fake news itself. When hearing the term 'fake news', most people associate the word with social media posts telling us a fantastic, incredible story. This is only one part of the whole picture. Fake news as such can often include a grain of truth, which is twisted and removed from its context. Very frequently, fake news is disguised as a genuine news item imitating trustworthy institutions.

The objective of sharing fake news on social media is disseminating information that is fully or partially false in nature in order to influence opinion or stir controversy, or for financial gain. This phenomenon of manipulation has been with us for a long time so fake news is not considered a brand-new phenomenon, but the platform used, i.e. social media on the Internet, is the only new thing about it. In 2018 Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy and Sinan Aral from Michigan State University published an article in *Science* magazine, which is regarded as the most comprehensive and well-known study on fake news to date. The authors define fake news as misinformation, lies, false and fictional stories. The researchers examined tweets over a 12-year period, distinguishing between true/accurate and false/misinformation through six different fact-checking websites: factcheck.org, hoax-slayer.com, politifact.com, snopes.org, truthorfiction.com and urbanlegends.about.com. They found that 'falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information' (Vosoughi et al., 2018: 1148). It took six times longer for true information to reach an audience while 'fake news' were 70% more likely to be retweeted.

The European Union established its High-Level Expert Group on Fake News and Disinformation in 2017 to define misinformation and fake news first, and then make recommendations on how to manage this phenomenon. They conducted a survey (European Commission, 2018a) where 99% of the respondents were familiar with fake news, in most cases from social networking sites or online media, predominantly about politics and immigration. In addition to manipulating news and spreading fake news, fake community profiles, commenting and tweeting are also considered fake news. Therefore, the majority of the respondents consider traditional media and news agencies to be the most reliable sources of news.

According to the EU report above, 'disinformation is verifiably false or misleading information created,

presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public. It may have far-reaching consequences, cause public harm, be a threat to democratic political and policy-making processes, and may even put the protection of EU citizens' health, security and their environment at risk.' (European Commission, 2018b: 12).

The document drafts proposals for monitoring transparency, developing media literacy and introducing it as a school subject, promoting educational programmes, innovations and promoting quality journalism.

Among the still limited but dynamically growing number of theoretical and empirical research on fake news Gupta et al. (2013) examined the consequences of spreading fake news while others analysed the motivations of producing and disseminating fake news (Allcott – Gentzkow, 2017; Subramanian, 2017; Silverman, 2016; Marwick–Lewis, 2017) as well as the readers' interpretations on reality (Cook et al., 2012).

Recent research on the connection between social media and fake news reflect that 41.8% of fake news derives from social media while traditional and top news sites only represent 10% of the total share traffic (Allcott – Gentzkow, 2017).

Other authors attribute the viral diffusion of fake news to social bots (Shao et al., 2017). Ferrara et al. (2016) observed the prevalence of fake social media accounts disguised as humans but in real controlled by computer scripts.

According to the Pew Research Center, 74% of Twitter users receive news from such sources whereas between 9% and 15% of active accounts on Twitter are bots (Ferrara et al., 2016).

Fake news travels fast as barriers to information consumption have almost been dismantled and social media sites have become freely accessible for news sharing and consumption (Allcott – Gentzkow, 2017).

The free flow of information on the Internet also places a great amount of responsibility on people to critically evaluate the reliability of online news sources (McGrew et al., 2018). What is more, it has become even more difficult for the users to distinguish between journalistic and non-journalistic content (Tandoc et al., 2017).

People who use 'more time-consuming' media are not only older and generally have a higher level of education, but also have more accurate ideas about news (Allcott - Gentzkow, 2017). Goyanes and Lavin (2018) investigated demographic factors that influence the likelihood of sharing false political information. Those who are likely to share false

political news are primarily men, older people, or lower income individuals.

On the one hand, young people's consumption of news in social media can be defined as "random" because for them news is just a form of entertainment found on the Internet while surfing on social sites (Gil de Zuñiga et al., 2017).

On the other hand, emotions play an important role in how people respond to incorrect political assumptions (Weeks, 2015). People share information that can trigger an emotional reaction in the receiver regardless of whether the information is true or not (Cook et al., 2012). As a result, journalists, consciously or unconsciously, can contribute to spreading false news by sharing news that may have a greater impact on their online social relationships (Barthel et al., 2016).

Despite the relevance of fake news literature, it is rare to uncover demographic and situational factors that may influence news consumption in sharing online fake news. Previous studies have focused primarily on the prevalence of phenomena (Reuters Institute, 2017), the motivations for creating false stories (Allcott-Gentzkow, 2017; Marwick - Lewis, 2017), and the impact of spreading false news on society, political leaders, and the population (Silverman, 2016; Ferrara et al., 2016; Gu et al., 2017).

All in all, why do people believe in fake news? According to one theory (Allcott-Gentzkow, 2017), the dissemination of such information on social networks has shown many similarities with the development and spread of infectious diseases.

3 Research Questions, Hypotheses and Research Methods

3.1. Research Questions

Research questions were formed and determined on the basis of the definitions, literature on social media, networking and fake news, and the hypotheses. The paper provides answers to the following central research questions which were connected to our hypotheses.

- Do you use social media? Do you trust in social media?
- Imagine that you see some news on social media. How do you decide whether it is true or false? Illustrate with some examples.
- What has to happen to completely lose trust in social media?
- How do you feel about teaching social media managing strategies at school?

In our study, we have tested the following hypotheses.

3.2. Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were set up based on the literature review and theoretical background.

Hypothesis 1: News consumers do not trust in social media.

Hypothesis 2: Women trust in social media less than men.

Hypothesis 3: Social media news consumers have specific strategies to cope with fake news.

Hypothesis 4: Strategies to deal with social media news should be taught at school.

3.3. Research Methods

3.3.1. Qualitative Research: Focus Group Research

A current Visegrad 4 (V4) no. 21820245 international research focuses on social media and fake news consumers including a comprehensive focus group research on social media and trust building. All the four countries, Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland, carried out research using the same research focus and research questions.

In total, the Hungarian research was carried out in 6 focus groups at Szent István University, in its Gödöllő and Budapest campuses, Hungary, in October 2019. According to the research design, participants were university students studying in different academic study programmes, and all of them know and use social media on a daily basis. The focus groups consisted of 8 to 12 student participants and the focus group research usually took from 60 to 90 minutes. Due to the optimal size of the focus groups, rapport was soon created among researchers and students and a smooth, fluent and candid conversation which enabled the moderator to follow and stick to the research focus.

The focus group research is a qualitative research method used in sociology and marketing research the most. This methodology gains in-depth information about the thoughts, ideas and experience of the research population. Data collected by focus group research substantially differ from the data collected by quantitative methodology.

The methodology of focus group research was first recorded by Bogardus (1926). "Data collection in the focus group research takes place through a

discussion of a certain topic among the individual members of the group" (Vicsek, 2006:17.)⁵

It is a more inclusive method which adapts to the unexpected thoughts of participants and directions of the conversation emerged in the course of the focus group research, thus bringing up unexpectedly new and innovative topics, results and findings. Consequently, answers and findings may be diverse making statistical standardization problematic. The methodology relies on the interaction among participants in the conversation which is called group synergy (Kitzinger, 1994). Wilbeck et al. (2007) argue that the focus group data collected during the interactions among the individual group members are rarely analysed, discussed and assessed for empirical research purposes. Gaining information from the group members is the main goal of the method, instead of teaching or informing them (Vicsek, 2006). The focus group method is a suitable research tool if we want to know the hidden aspects of the research topic, those which we are unfamiliar with (Babbie, 2010).

This study is aimed at the research and analysis of such data. The reliability and validity of the data are guaranteed and enhanced with focused sampling through consciously selecting and choosing the research participants from the diverse research population (Erlandson et al., 1993). Our research used this methodology by involving carefully selected university students in the focus group research, which enabled the researchers to collect a broad range of personal, comprehensive and diverse opinions, ideas, experience (Vicsek, 2006). The methodology provided the researchers with a big amount of concentrated and focused data collected within a short period of time, which is a big advantage and makes the research extremely effective. The research design adopted the methodology of Liamputtong (2011) who suggests the participation of a notary who also takes notes in course of the research, parallelly with the moderator.

3.3.2. Quantitative Research: Questionnaire

The database of the quantitative research derives from questionnaire data collection. In developing the questionnaire, social media usage habits, data security and information acquisition habits, as well as fake news were the concepts that were further broken down into subconcepts and generally measured on a 4-point scale as a result of

⁵ Translation of the authors

operationalization after conceptualization. In this article we will only assess issues that are closely related to fake news.

The method of sampling is arbitrary. The period of filling in the online questionnaire was fixed between October 15 and November 20, 2019. The sample item number is 301.

The composition of the sample by gender is as follows: male 93 (30.7%), female 208 (68.6%) and missing value 2 (0.7%). The average age amounts to 25.06 years with the standard deviation of 7.35 years.

Data was processed by using IBM SPSS Statistics 25 software.

During the quantitative research, descriptive statistics were applied to the various variables after data cleaning. The appearance and distribution of variables in the sample was characterized by frequency.

A Chi-squared test of the contingency table was used to examine the relationship between the different variables as they were measured at nominal and ordinal (1-4) levels. (Babbie, 2010).

The Chi-square test provides a method for testing the association between the row and column variables in a two-way table. The null hypothesis H_0 assumes that there is no association between the variables (in other words, one variable does not vary according to the other variable), while the alternative hypothesis H_a claims that some association does exist. The alternative hypothesis does not specify the type of association, so close attention to the data is required to interpret the information provided by the test. The Chi-square test is based on a test statistic that measures the divergence of the observed data from the values that would be expected under the null hypothesis of no association.⁶

To examine the gender difference, the Mann-Whitney Test was used in addition to the Chi-squared test of the contingency table. (Sajtos - Mitev, 2007).

The Mann-Whitney Test is a non-parametric test that is useful for determining if the means of two groups are different from each other. It requires four conditions to be met:

- The dependent variable must be at least ordinally scaled.
- The independent variable has only two levels.

⁶ Two-Way Tables and the Chi-Square Test (4 January 2020) Retrieved from: <http://www.stat.yale.edu/Courses/1997-98/101/chisq.htm>

- A between-subjects design is used.
- The subjects are not matched across conditions.

The Mann-Whitney Test is often used when the assumptions of the t-test have been violated. Thus, it is useful if

- The dependent variable is ordinally scaled instead of interval or ratio.
- The assumption of normality has been violated in a t-test (especially if the sample size is small.)
- The assumption of homogeneity of variance has been violated in a t-test.⁷

4 Results and Analysis

4.1 The Results of the Focus Group Examination

The objective of our focus group examination was to prove our hypotheses H1, H3 and H4.

Our initial questions were directed at the news consuming habits of the students and their trust in social media, together with their usage of social media in line with our research questions. The distribution of the sample with respect to the use of different social media interfaces is shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Use of social media

Platform	Use	Not use	Missing value
Facebook	96,7%	3,0%	0,3%
YouTube	100,0%	0%	0%
Twitter	13,5%	86,1%	0,4%
Instagram	77,6%	22,1%	0,3%

Source: authors' own editing, 2019

The participants basically used social media to obtain some news instead of watching TV. This can be a generation specific feature as all of our respondents belong to Generation Z, the 'multitasking' or 'online' generation.

They obviously use social media, but whether they trust them is another issue. Consequently, the answers varied. Some students mentioned that they knew a lot of fake news, but they could not make a difference between fake news and real news. Others

⁷ Using SPSS for Ordinally Scaled Data: Mann-Whitney U, Sign Test, and Wilcoxon Tests (4 January 2020) Retrieved from:

<http://academic.udayton.edu/gregelvers/psy216/spss/ordinaldata.htm>

revealed that distinguishing fake news from real news was not so easy for them, however, they used reliable and specific strategies, which are the following. They usually check the author's Facebook profile, photo and resources. They always read the comments below the posts and check the number of likes, especially whether their acquaintances also liked it or not. It makes them suspicious if the title is very 'sensational-hawkish' or the title and the content do not overlap. A lot of spelling and punctuation errors also make them even more suspicious. An article whose content is unable to be retrieved and confirmed by Google is considered fake by students. On the other hand, they consider news reliable if it is verified and reviewed by prestigious reviewers, the authors are well-known and trustworthy, and if they have scientific references. They also highlighted that the inclusion of pictures and videos made the content of the article more credible. News and information from public authorities, official bodies, can generally be considered as true and generally trusted. They also mentioned that they warned each other in Facebook posts about scams.

We find it extremely exciting and important from the researchers' point of view that most of the answers to the question of where they learned the strategies to distinguish false news from real news, were the following: "Nowhere. Everyone learns it on their own skin".

However, some of our respondents reported that they had classes on social media use and user safety in the secondary school and they talked about social media and smart devices in certain university courses while others stated that, unfortunately, they had never heard about the safe use of social media, anti-fake news and how to cope with the extremes of social media use such as cyber bullying.

The majority of students believe that this is a skill that cannot really be taught. However, the minority would appreciate to have the opportunity to participate in a course on the strategies of safe use of social media either at secondary school or at university, and prefer communicating with their parents about them.

All in all, we can say that undergraduate students in the focus group examination use the different social media platforms a lot to have information about the university and the events happening around them. They are fully aware of the concept of fake news; they all know what it means and have experienced it empirically, therefore they expressed their general lack of trust in social media. Based on the results of the focus group research, it is concluded that our H1

hypothesis, i.e. news consumers do not trust in social media, is confirmed by our research.

This result is not particularly surprising since the respondents were the members of Generation Z, the first multi-tasking generation who had practically grown into the use of social media and virtual social space, and they obtain information and knowledge and consume news online.

At the same time, they are self-confident to think that they are able to decide whether the information and news are fake or real, trustworthy or not, because they use firm strategies consciously. So they think that they can handle the information obtained in social media with complete confidence, and they listed some strategies for distinguishing fake and real news. Therefore, our hypothesis H3 is also justified by the focus group results, according to which social media news consumers have specific strategies to cope with fake news.

It has also become clear that currently there are no common methodology, education and training (either in secondary or in higher education) to provide effective and useful strategies to help growing intellectuals to find their ways in the use of social media safely. Adapting to a rapidly changing and exponentially growing social media and IT environment it may be worth considering developing a training methodology of a range of strategies and solutions that can effectively help young people to use social media more safely and consciously. Accordingly, we can state that our H4 hypothesis is also approved, and it also echoes our recommendation: strategies to deal with social media news should be taught in secondary school and/or university.

4.2. The Results of the Questionnaire

The objective of our questionnaire survey was to prove hypothesis H2.

In our quantitative research, the following variables were examined (Table 2).

Table 2 The examined variables with their measurement level

Variable	Measurement level (code)
<i>Use of social media:</i> Q1: Sharing information and news on social networks	Yes, I used this resource to obtain news last week. (4) No, I did not use this resource. (3) I never use this resource to read news.

	(2) I never use this resource for any purposes. (1)
<i>Trust in social media:</i> Q2: In general, I trust the news in the media. Q3: I trust the news from the sources I use. Q4: I trust the news I search on an engine (Google, Yahoo, etc.). Q5: I trust the news on social networks. Q6: I can trust most policy-related reports in the last 3 months. Q7: When I read news published on social networks, I am concerned about whether they are trustworthy.	This is typical of me. (4) This is rather typical of me. (3) This is rather not typical of me. (2) This is not typical of me at all. (1)
<i>Institutional trust:</i> To what extent you trust the news published by the following institutions: Q8: Government; Q9: Private companies Q10: My employer; Q11: Non-profit organizations; Q12: Media (television, radio, press); Q13: Information portals	I do not trust in any or almost any news by this institution (1). Sometimes I trust some of the reports by this institution (2). I often trust the news of this institution (3). I always or almost always trust the news of this institution. (4)

Source: authors' own editing, 2019

We examined whether men and women information and news using and sharing habits in social media networks differed. As a result, we concluded that gender did not significantly influence the information and news using and sharing habits on social networks (Pearson Chi-Square value: 3.915, p = 0.271).

For each question, we measured the level of trust in the form of averages. The summarized data are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Results of the survey on the difference in trust by gender

Variab-le	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mann-Whitney Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Q2	male	93	2.32	0.645	0.860
	female	208	2.33	0.652	
Q3	male	93	2.73	0.709	0.266
	female	208	2.64	0.606	
Q4	male	93	2.47	0.746	0.160
	female	208	2.59	0.661	
Q5	male	93	2.01	0.634	0.052
	female	208	2.16	0.651	
Q6	male	93	1.92	0.811	0.885
	female	208	1.93	0.761	
Q7	male	93	3.31	0.751	0.070
	female	208	3.13	0.815	

Source: authors' own editing, 2019

The data of Table 3 also show that, on the basis of averages which can be interpreted as a community trust index, people are more likely to trust social media content than not. It is important to note that there was a campaign period at the time of the municipal election, which explains why the value of the statement of 'I can trust most policy-related reports in the last 3 months' is only 1.93, which means that trust is not typical of the respondents. So, our hypothesis H2, according to which men and women have different levels of trust in social media, i.e. women trust social media less than men, has not been justified as the Mann-Whitney results are always p> 0.05.

When examining the institutional trust variables we can state that both men and women trust in private companies and non-profit organizations to the same extent while in the case of the Government, My employer; Media (television, radio, press), Information portals women had a higher level of trust (Table 4).

Table 4 Level of trust

Variab-le	Sex	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mann-Whitney Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Q8	male	93	1.89	0.949	0.003
	female	208	2.21	0.907	
Q9	male	93	2.32	0.740	0.268
	female	208	2.43	0.725	
Q10	male	93	2.82	0.908	0.053

	female	208	3.03	0.825	
Q11	male	93	2.54	0.788	0.983
	female	208	2.53	0.767	
Q12	male	93	1.90	0.627	0.000
	female	208	2.23	0.661	
Q13	male	93	2.34	0.699	0.050
	female	208	2.51	0.749	

Source: authors' own editing, 2019

Based on the results above, our hypothesis H2 was partially accepted.

5 Conclusions

In this paper we present the results of a focus group and a questionnaire-based survey examination carried out on a sample aged between 18 and 33. Diverse opinions were surfaced as a result of the questionnaire and the focus group examination regarding the issue of whether the young trust in social media. This may be due to the fact that although young people are the main consumers of online platforms, their opinions, trust and experience differ on evaluating social media content, which emerged in a more subtle and precise form during the focus group examination.

The respondents believe that strategies to deal with social media news should be taught in school.

Although the picture might be distorted by solely analysing Generation Z, we truly hope that our findings would help understand social media use and make students more aware and conscious while using them.

Future research will focus on the extension of the research population with population of the same age from other higher educational institutions. However, probability sampling is not possible due to the content of the research. The sampling of the population of the questionnaire was not random but on a voluntary basis among the students of our university and the Facebook page of a well-known company. Due to the high number of respondents, they can be considered as the main representatives of the base population, which is Generation Z. In the future, the scope and focus of research could be extended with other aspects of social media news consumption to obtain a more nuanced picture.

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