

This Is What Happens When You Are Afraid. A Case Study of the Reach and Meanings of Fake Anecdotal Information During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract. *Social media proves to be extremely important in crises. During the Covid-19 pandemic, social media can have a dual role. Firstly, it can act as a crucial medium of communication for all the people that are affected by the lockdown. Secondly, it offers the ideal context for the development and spread of various dubious information, “fake news,” and conspiracy theories. The present study was interested in the subordinate role of social media. During the first days of the Romanian emergency state, an anecdote was massively shared on Facebook. This story presented how Avicenna used an animal experiment to show how induced fear is enough to kill a living being. However, the anecdote appears not to be based on any real evidence. The current analysis had two main aims: (1) to study the reach of the initial Facebook post and (2) to verify how peoples’ posts, comments, and messages on the post reinforce different narratives. The results showed that the initial post had the highest reach in the first days after it was published and that it received thousands of subsequent shares. Also, after analyzing the content of the comments, the paper showed that numerous topics were present. The most important ones either showed support to*

the anecdotal evidence and accepted that fear is a significant risk factor or considered that the anecdote presents evidence for various conspiracy theories. In the end, the paper presented how both narratives can lead to unfavorable outcomes for the population, and which are the best solutions to raise the level of online content literacy among social media users.

Keywords: Social media; Covid-19; Fake news; Content analysis; Fear; Conspiracy theory.

Introduction

The 2020's Covid-19 pandemic represents a significant burden on the individual's psychological well-being and social relationships. It is a period of uncertainty, strained with numerous health risks, significant social restraints, and political turmoil. Moreover, the recent months were characterized by severe misinformation provided by a sleuth of media sources (Kouzy *et al.*, 2020). Some of these sources present information that can be outright labeled as "fake news." Such as that the virus was designed to terminate the population. Or that the 5G systems are responsible for the propagation of the virus. At the same time, others are less clear and seem to favorize numerous narratives, some more pleasing and hopeful, and others more pessimistic (even apocalyptic) in nature.

One such example is a Facebook post that gained significant traction during the first days of the Romanian state of emergency. On March 19th, the Facebook page "Povestea mea / My story" and the website Ominune.net shared a picture presenting a supposed experiment by the medieval Persian polymath Avicenna. The anecdote was based on some older internet information and described how Avicenna put a lamb and a wolf in two nearby cages. The result was that the lamb died of fear. This post gathered a significant number of shares in the following days (Povestea Mea, 2020).

This study analyzes how Facebook users interpreted the anecdote. The paper starts by presenting the real facts behind the story. After that, the paper argues why this anecdote represents a more insidious type of social media misinformation. Given that a natural response during such a crisis is fear (Bavel *et al.*, 2020), fake stories, especially the ones that overtly address a concern, might accentuate negative emotions for the readers. Moreover, misinformation can also support many conspiracy theories (ex. "the government tries to control the people to impose its secret agenda"), even with negative consequences for the population (Pennycook *et al.*, 2020, 13).

This research tries to offer answers to three different questions:

1. How do the individuals react to an example of dubious online content?
2. Which are the main themes appearing throughout their online interaction with the said content?
3. Are the individuals' opinions related to the current real-world events?

The paper relies on a qualitative analysis based on several 1 561 shares of the post. Both messages that accompanied Facebook shares and the resulting comments were analyzed. The research was interested in a) the reach of the initial Facebook post and b) how the peoples' posts, comments, and messages reinforce one of two narratives ("fear is a natural emotion during these times" or "fear is used to control us better during these times"). This study is critical because it shows how a seemingly unimportant fake information might spread on the Internet and take different meanings for the population. The study also tries to offer a valuable analysis of the current state of Internet use in Romania, especially during a period of high uncertainty. It also discusses how people often use and abuse online information. The paper uses a complex content analysis based on Facebook posts of a large number of users, a source of information that, in recent years, became more and more important, but that is still underutilized. Moreover, this paper is novel because it considers information that is provided naturally by the users, thus offering precious insights on how people actually think and act on the Internet, about their real opinions and feelings.

Avicenna, his thought experiments, and the history behind this history

"You heard about Avicenna's experiment. Avicenna's experiment has a lamb in the foreground. A lamb was placed in a cage, and a wolf was placed in an adjacent cage. The lamb died shortly after from the stress caused by fear. Scientists say that when we are afraid, the body no longer secretes the basic chemistry, and the cell dies. And if the fear is great, then all the cells in the body die."¹

Avicenna or Ibn Sina contributed significantly to the development of early medieval medicine, but his writings also tackle critical psychological concepts. Avicenna was interested, like the soul (Rahman, 1987), emotion, cognition (Perler, 2012, 36), or stress (Nimrouzi, Danaye, & Daneshfard, 2017, 481). However, some

1 In Romanian: "Ai auzit de experimentul lui Avicenna. Experimentul lui Avicenna are în prim plan un miel. Într-o cușcă s-a pus un miel și într-o cușcă alăturată s-a pus un lup. Mielul a murit în scurt timp de stresul provocat de frică. Oamenii de știință spun că atunci când ne e frică, organismul nu se mai secretă chimia necesară și celulele moare. Și dacă frica este, mare atunci mor toate celulele corpului." This version also includes the writing errors from the Romanian text.

of his most famous and influential psychological theories were not empirically validated but supported through many thought experiments (one such example is the “suspended men experiment,” Rahman, 1987).

Avicenna also described how the soul could influence the body. In his view, “Strong emotions can destroy the temperament of the individual and lead to death by influencing vegetative functions” (Haque, 2004, 365). Still, he did not support his claims with any experiment, especially not with one describing the interaction between a lamb and a wolf. Finally, the author found only one reference to these animals throughout Avicenna’s works. The Persian thinker described how animals and humans have a mental faculty that allows them to infer meaning from the pure form of an external object. Thus, a lamb would not fear a wolf because of the wolf’s foreign way but because the lamb offers a meaning to that form (and the implication is that of a dangerous predator; Oelze, 2018)

Thus, it becomes apparent that the anecdote is, in fact, an amalgamation of Avicenna’s different viewpoints. It takes the thought experiments that he used to support his ideas, his interest in the effects of the mind over the body, and some of his claims on emotion and cognition and combines them into one story.

However, how did this story appear in our collective mind? It is important to note that none of the scientific sources about Avicenna specifies anything about this anecdote. Searches on the Internet using keywords such as “Avicenna,” “experiment,” “wolf,” “fear,” and “lamb” revealed only one comment posted on a psys.org article concerning the predatory-prey relationships involving song sparrows. The explanation, published in 2011, proposes a similar anecdote. However, when searching only Romanian sources, the author found numerous articles describing the so-called “Avicenna’s Experiment.” The oldest common cause for these articles (at least from what the author found) is a 2013 interview with Dumitru Constantin Dulcan published in Formula As (Radu, 2013). The Facebook anecdote that the paper was interested in is almost a word-by-word transfer from Dulcan’s meeting.

Misinformation and support to different narratives

Fake news is not a modern phenomenon (Tandoc Jr., Lim, & Ling, 2018, 2). Spreading false rumors was a common political tactic used during the Antiquity and the Middle Ages (Burkhardt, 2017, 6). However, the invention of many modern conveniences, such as the print machines and later the Internet meant that fake information became easier and easier to disseminate (Burkhardt, 2017, 6). According to Allcott and Gentzkow (2017, 213), fake news is “the news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers”. Moreover, fake news spread faster compared to real news (Zhao *et al.*, 2020), especially in an online environment. Social network sites (such as Facebook or Twitter) received criticism for their involvement in spreading fake news, but many other social actors

are involved in these misinformation practices (Marwick, 2019, 476). Thus, social network sites act only as the channels of propagation, while the creators of fake content and those who repost the information are also integral parts of this problem (Zhao *et al.*, 2020, 4). In recent years, different levels of fabricated or misleading information were found to be related to important political events, such as the 2016 USA elections, or various social movements and communities (Tandoc Jr. *et al.*, 2018, 7). This paper is interested in a particular situation that lead to numerous examples of problematic information, the Covid-19 pandemic.

Misinformation became rampant in the last few months, and the consequences can be dire. Numerous rumors and hoaxes appeared in the media, and many people responded to these apparent threats with extreme and inappropriate measures, such as buying unneeded supplies or using erroneous medical or pseudo-medical practices (Ioannidis, 2020; Tasnin, Hossain, & Mazumder, 2020). Most of these practices had no positive results on the well-being of the individual and lead to higher risks of contagion, decreasing health, and poorer mental outcomes (Tasnim *et al.*, 2020).

Fear is a normal response when facing a crisis (van der Meer & Jin, 2020). However, fear (as well as other negative emotions) also determines the individuals to trust medical information less and to seek less treatment (Catellier & Yang, 2012). Thus, excellent communication is necessary during a medical crisis to offer the population correct information. Not only that, corrective information allows the people to understand better the risks associated with a pandemic such as the Covid-19 pandemic, but it also may lead to the development of positive emotions and helpful coping strategies (van der Meer & Jin, 2020). Thus, an anecdote that speaks about fear and how fear can kill, and organism might have some unwanted consequences during the pandemic. The expectations are to find that some comments would support the anecdote and speak about the dangers of fear. On the one hand, this could raise awareness regarding the disease and the prevention methods. On the other hand, such a post could lead to unreasonable levels of fear and a state of helplessness in the reader.

The pandemic also led to a rise in posts supporting conspiracy theories. Many different dubious stories appeared and spread in the social media in the last months. Contrary to popular opinion, the belief in conspiracy theories is not found only in low-educated individuals, but it is generally associated with lower levels of digital media literacy (Craft, Ashley, & Maksl, 2017; Lee, 2018). Such findings show that each individual is at risk of believing some fake news supporting different conspiracy theories. Some of the most prominent conspiracy theories regarding the Covid-19 pandemic support the idea that the virus is artificial, that it is spread by the 5G technology, and that a global elite uses it to depopulate the planet. Also, many people doubt that it is dangerous and consider that everything is a hoax designed by a worldwide covert government to control the population. Although

some of these theories present different or even opposing ideas, many of them claim that the global elite uses fear to control or exterminate the population. Thus, the paper considers that the comments might support a second narrative. The anecdote shows how fear can kill an organism. Thus, it becomes interesting to see whether this conclusion can be used by the supporters of different conspiracy theories as a basis for their claimed evidence.

Consequently, the present paper has two aims. The first aim is to investigate the spread and the impact of the Facebook post mentioned above. The second aim is to verify whether the post leads to two different narratives conceived by those who commented on the post and its different shares.

Methodology

As already stated in the introduction, the paper used a qualitative content analysis based on the shares received by the Facebook post in question and the comments from those shares (Povestea Mea, 2020). Every kind of Facebook content derived from the first source was considered, but only the text comments were analyzed. The analysis included emoticons or gifs in the analysis, but only calculated the frequency of these occurrences.

To understand the reach of the initial Facebook post, the paper verified the number of shares, likes, and comments, as well as the likes and comments from the shared content. The paper used the online service Export comments to analyze the number of shares, likes, and explanations of the post. This service extracts diverse and detailed data from Facebook (or other social media) posts, including the exact time of each share, the profile that shared the post, the number of likes and reactions, and comments received by each share. However, the service is limited to offering only the information extracted from public posts and shares and cannot retrieve information that is behind supplementary security walls.

The research used inductive content analysis to analyze the specific comments received by the post. This method is recommended when research questions were not addressed in previous studies or when there is no consensus regarding prior knowledge. Thus, the researchers create their own coding procedure based on seeing a critical moment or piece of data and encoding it before a process of interpretation (Boyatzis, 1998). For this paper, the procedures described by Webber (1990) were used. The coding was made by two independent researchers who individually coded the data. During the first phase, the researchers selected the unit of analysis, which, for this paper, was the comment. After that, the researchers read the raw data and familiarized themselves with the contents. During the second phase, the researchers used a data abstraction process to achieve the most important categories. Firstly, an open code for each unit of analysis (each comment) was established. The open code consisted of the main idea that could be derived from each comment. For example,

for the comment “Well, don’t let yourself be defeated by fear! Come on, you can!”, the open code was “reassurance”. After establishing the open codes, they were grouped into sub-categories based on their similarity. Some sub-categories could not be further grouped into larger categories because they were too dissimilar to other sub-categories. Thus, for these sub-categories, this was the highest achievable level of data abstraction. In order to retain most of the data, we used these sub-categories as proper categories in the later analysis. Other sub-categories were further grouped into main categories. The inter-coder reliability was verified. It was calculated by using the joint probability of the agreement method (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2004). We calculated the inter-coder reliability coefficients for the answers given for the initial open codes, to the sub-categories grouping, and to the categories grouping. The coefficients varied from .81 to .88. All of them being over 0.80 (Lombard *et al.*, 2004), we considered them acceptable for the current research. Several different categories resulted from the gathered data.

Results

Data included in the analysis was extracted on May 7th, 2020. At that moment, the post gained more than 4 700 shares on Facebook. However, only 1,561 came from profiles that allowed their shares to be public and thus could be analyzed. The post also garnered 230 likes, and ten other reacts. The post did not attract any direct comments.

From the total available shares, 150 came from the day the post was made (March 19th), 937 were made the next day, and by the end of the month, another 140 shares were made. During April, only 18 shares were made, the last one being on April 21st.

The results also show that the analyzed shares gathered 7,137 reacts (including 6,623 likes) and 312 comments. Finally, 36 shares were accompanied by some comments made by the profile owners. Thus, in total, 348 units of text, emoticons, or gifs were included in the analysis.

Ten categories were derived from the data (see Figure 1). The first one referred to *support/acceptance* (the commenter accepted the anecdote as accurate, while also supporting the idea that fear is a crucial risk factor during the crisis). Many people tended to accept the claims from the anecdote. They affirmed that they “knew that fear weakened the immune system” or that “fear is worse than any virus.” Others considered that “we should remain positive, do not panic, and help each other.” Many comments included in the first category showed that people seriously thought about the dangers and risks associated with Covid-19. The second category included the comments that expressed *concern* (the commenters were concerned about their health or the health of their loved ones). Some believe that fear was grave danger, and its effects could be far more aggravating than the ones of the virus. Other comments showed that the people were concerned that the fear (and not necessarily the virus) can be very damaging for them. “Am I going to die soon?

I'm terrified of the dentist. I can't control myself at all", "We are advised not to panic, not to be afraid. But no one tells us how to succeed. Because fear comes anyway, we don't make it" or "I'm afraid for my loved ones, not for me!" are some relevant examples for this category of comments.

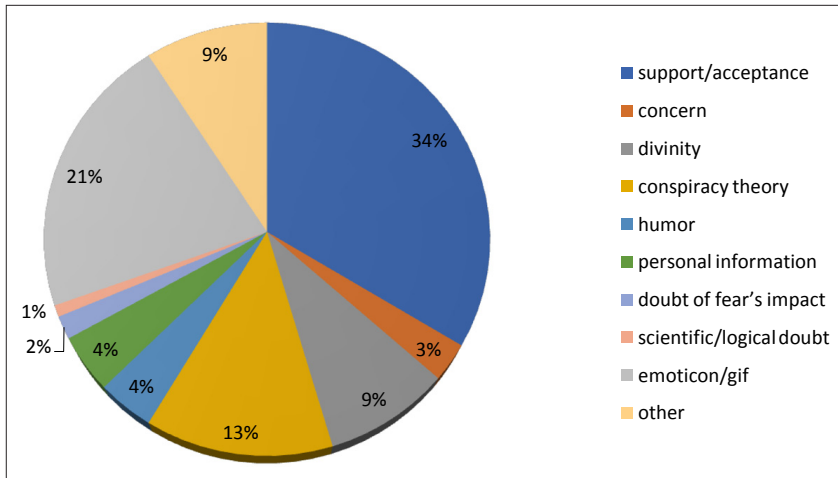


Figure 1. The identified categories

In contrast, the third one included the observations that referred to the *divinity* or *divine intervention*. People tend to find solutions in their comments. However, few of these solutions (if any) focus on gathering information from medical or other official sources. Many commenters referred to the divine power and expect divine intervention in their texts. Some people consider that God is directly responsible for their situation: "But some of us are not afraid. And do you know why? Because whatever we do, the directives come from above. And when I say above, I do not mean the greatest people in the world, but God!"), others blame the devil for the fear ("Fear is from the devil, said the Holy Fathers. So do not be afraid"). Nevertheless, people ask for divine help and hope that God will listen: "If we have hope in God, we are not afraid!", "God, help us all and protect us from harm!". Or: "The exact opposite happens if you believe in God, the fear disappears, and only beautiful things happen").

The fourth category included comments that supported any kind of *conspiracy theory*. Some commenters considered that "in the end, we will die of fear, not of this virus; this is the plan" or that "people don't think it's manipulation, if I tell them and explain what it's about, they tell me I'm crazy, that I don't see how many people die, they tell me I'm crazy!". Other commenters believe that the numbers of infected persons or deaths are fictitious and affirm that they do not know anybody infected. In general, they think that the pandemic is manipulation and that "Through fear, man is controlled."

Comments included in the fifth category had an important *humorous* touch (“I’m not scared of the Boogeyman!” or “Yes, but if you bought a few boxes of toilet paper, you are not afraid of anything!!!”), while the sixth category dealt with *personal information* transmitted or required by the commenter. The seventh category included the comments that *doubted the impact of fear*. Five commenters doubted that fear poses a risk to one’s health (“I am not afraid of anyone or anything. Life goes on. If I were afraid, I would have died a long time ago”). However, these comments seem to reveal either an underestimation of the risk or a passive-aggressive attempt to counter the conclusion of the anecdote: “The coronavirus doesn’t just choose the cowards but also those who stay in the house ... the brave one. Just go for a walk and see if the virus avoids you.” The eighth category included the observations that *questioned the scientific or logical base of the anecdote*. Only three comments were included. One of the commenters criticized the link between fear and death and the gullibility of the others (“That’s why we prospered (in quotes), and we spawned during communism, out of fear...We haven’t learned yet. It seems that not everything posted on the Internet is credible. It’s like April 1st every day. If someone tells us something on the street, we consider him crazy, but if we read on the net, it must be true”), another contested whether Avicenna knew stress and last one revealed a vocabulary error in the text. Finally, the ninth group included all the comments that presented only *emoticons or gifs*, and the tenth category included the comments that could not be included in any *other* category.

Frequency analysis showed that almost 30% of the comments to the shares accepted the anecdote as being true (see Table 1). Only 3.2% of the commenters expressed their concern, and 9.6% put their trust in divine power. Interestingly, 12.8% of the comments supported a conspiracy regarding the coronavirus pandemic.

Table 1. Frequency of occurrence for each category

Category	Comments of shares		Comments accompanying shares	
	Frequency	Percent (%)	Frequency	Percent (%)
1. support/acceptance	93	29.8	24	66.7
2. concern	10	3.2	-	-
3. divinity	30	9.6	1	2.8
4. conspiracy theory	40	12.8	6	16.7
5. humor	14	4.5	-	-
6. personal information	15	4.8	-	-
7. doubt of fear’s impact	5	1.6	1	2.8
8. scientific/logical doubt	3	1	-	-
9. emoticon/gif	74	23.7	-	-
10. other	28	9	4	11.1

However, it is also worth noting that more than 30% of the comments were not adequately analyzed. These were either emoticons/gifs or were included in the “other” category. This category usually contained the comments that did not allow to extract any meaning from them (they had no apparent relationship with the topic, were poorly written or nonsensical).

Regarding the comments that accompanied the shares, the majority were representative of the first category (66.7%). However, the second most frequent occurrence happened to the fourth category, 16.7% of the individuals that shared the post supporting a conspiracy theory in their post.

Discussion

The aim of this study was twofold. Firstly, the paper verified the spread of one particular piece of Facebook misinformation. Secondly, the comments on the post and its shares were analyzed to find out how they support different narratives concerning the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Facebook post that was under scrutiny presented a supposedly real experiment attributed to Avicenna. Its conclusions backed the idea that fear can kill a person in the absence of any other internal or external intervention. However, there is no proof that Avicenna wrote about such an experiment in any of his works. Thus, it is more probable that the post is a fake anecdote circulating for several years on the Internet. Moreover, the Facebook post is nearly identical to some previous claims made by Dumitru Constantin Dulcan, who is considered to be an essential supporter of pseudo-science in Romania (Cheta, 2014).

The research answered to three important questions. Firstly, the paper shows how the individuals react to an example of dubious online content. The results reveal that the post gained numerous shares in the first days after its appearance. In a span of fewer than two months, the post was shared more than 4 500 times. However, it is also worth noting that in the first few days after publication, the post gathered the majority of its shares. This pattern is consistent with the ones found by other studies concerning the spread of misinformation (Vicario *et al.*, 2016). People tend to trust their “echo-chambers” (informal online networks that share the same beliefs and mostly use the same sources of information), and this might lead to the rapid diffusion of the contents they deem relevant to them.

Interestingly, the popularity of the post was not due to a celebrity sharing it. However, people share the information they see on profiles that are similar to theirs. Thus, people probably saw the anecdote on their friends’ profiles and decided to share it on their own. Also supporting this idea is the fact that the initial post had no comments and a relatively low number of reacts and likes. It shows that the individuals that shared the information did not interact with the initial post, but with the shares, they saw on other profiles.

The subsequent content analysis of the comments tends to show a similar picture. Although the comments covered a variety of topics, the topics were generally consistent on each share. When one share attracted some comments supporting a conspiracy, it usually did not attract comments that could be included in any other category (except for emoticon/gif). Also, the comments underlining the topics of support/acceptance or concern rarely appeared on the shares that supported a conspiracy theory.

Secondly, some important themes were found throughout the analyzed posts. Some people were optimistic when facing the dangers of the pandemic, while others were more fearful. Some of them considered that the medical personnel have all the right solutions for this crisis, but many others found their hope in the divinity and asked for God's help. Nevertheless, some commenters considered that the post was important because it discussed how the government or other sources of power use fear to kill the population. Some of them denied the existence of the Sars-Cov-2 virus, while others minimized its effects.

Thirdly, some of the themes are related to reality of the Covid-19 pandemic. People created different narratives around the posts. Contrary to the expectations, the study revealed more than two apt descriptions. The proposed stories were also present. Some of the categories are relevant to the narrative concerning the reality of fear and the effects of fear. Previous studies have shown that fear can have a positive impact on information-seeking behavior (van der Meer & Jin, 2020). Fear can determine the people to estimate the effects of a crisis correctly and to seek professional help when they need it. However, the source of the information that creates fear and the intervention is essential in this case. Misinformation can make people overestimate/ underestimate a crisis. Corrective information might lead to optimal levels of fear in a functional individual. Fearful people are more interested in their well-being, thus becoming better-informed (van der Meer & Jin, 2020). The authorities must also offer the best interventions to limit the levels of fear and stress in the population. Unfortunately, the present analysis does not show a positive impact of fear. Firstly, the source of information is not reliable. It creates a highly interpretable anecdote that makes people greatly overestimate the negative implications of fear.

Moreover, even people who are optimistic in their assessment tend to focus on fear. And underestimate the effects of the virus. Also, regardless of their level of concern, some people seem to direct their hopes of overcoming the crisis towards the divinity and not towards medical professionals. Finally, humor can alleviate the effects of stress during a crisis, even when the tone is more sarcastic (Prerost, 1989)

Many people support various conspiracy theories in their posts. As previously mentioned, people trust their "echo-chambers," but especially in Romania, they profoundly distrust the Government and many public institutions. In conclusion, the information and opinions that one shares with their online friends might be

more critical in shaping one's view on the current situation than the data coming from official sources (Spohr, 2017; Tandoc Jr. *et al.*, 2018).

Finally, few people are willing to fact-check or even think about a Facebook post in a critical way. Still, this tendency might be influenced by the perceived relevance of the information (Koochikamali & Sidorova, 2017). The anecdote was especially relevant during the Covid-19, and people might be less interested in verifying it based on its importance to them. Previous studies have shown that fake news spread faster compared to real news because more people are willing to share this kind of content (Zhao *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, many users share dubious information regardless of their good intentions because they see that their online friends also shared it (Papanastasiou, 2018). Thus, it becomes crucial that when fake news is detected, the user should take immediate action to flag it as false. The present results show that although critical, some comments did not try to address the failures of the anecdote rigorously. The authors criticized without offering any solutions or understanding, thus supporting the ideological polarization that leads to the resilience of fake news in the media.

Conclusion

This analysis showed that even a simple Facebook post could spread and support different narratives among users. Moreover, the relevance of the post in the current situation can determine people to be less interested in verifying its authenticity. The fact that the meaning of the post remains ambiguous can lead to an abundance of interpretations, with the majority of them having negative connotations. The content analysis revealed that most people are well-intended when sharing this type of content. However, their intentions might also lead to some unwanted results. Some people might become unreasonable frightened by a post describing how fear alone can kill an organism, while others can underestimate the risks of the current situation. Also, when reaching a sufficiently enclosed echo-chamber, an unclear post can act as supposed evidence for conspiracy theories.

The lack of online content literacy might be a factor affecting how people react to dubious posts on social media. Some researchers consider serious fact-checking the right solution against "fake news," but even such strategies have their limitations (Lazer *et al.*, 2018, 1095). Fact-checking is time-consuming, and it does not act against the people's predisposition towards the confirmation bias. Thus, education might become the best possible strategy, but its long-term efficacy has yet to be confirmed. Also, different authors have proposed several cues that are relevant in detecting clickbait articles and fake news (Chen, Conroy, & Rubin, 2015, 18). Some of them can be found in the "Avicenna's Experiment" post. The post uses affective language and emotional content: "This is what happens to you if you are afraid." Or use suspenseful language: "You heard about Avicenna's experiment") and creates

an unclear context for the information (it never states who Avicenna is or which scientists found the results about the effects of fear).

The study also has a limitation. Firstly, the paper did not have access to all the shares of the post. The analysis included approximately a third of the total share count. There is a possibility that the rest of the shares could have presented a completely different picture. Secondly, the study did not take the context of the shares into account. Many shares did not have any comments and thus had little contribution to the analysis. However, analyzing their context (who shared them, which is the direction of the user's other posts, is this share associated with additional shares and posts, thus creating a convincing narrative of the user) might have offered another level of understanding.

Concluding, despite its limitation, this study shows that Romanian Facebook users can be significantly influenced by “fake” information. The relevance of the data makes it even more salient. Furthermore, the unclear nature of a post leads to different responses among the users, and some of these responses can stimulate panic and false theories. The current findings can be used to create some filters against “fake” information and to educate the public against using unclear statements that lack any scientific support.

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