The Role of Source Credibility and Message Credibility in Fake News Engagement. Perspectives from an Experimental Study

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Abstract. *Nowadays controversial stories, conspiracy theories, or false information are massively shared on social media. Fake news is supported by the online environment because it generates traffic and financial benefits (Tandoc et al., 2018). It is a chain — users share the news on their feed, then they receive the same type of content, later on, creating the illusion of veracity through popularity. Media credibility becomes more and more relevant in the context of the proliferation of fake news. The present paper addresses the mediating role of source and message credibility in relationship with the engagement with 'poor journalistic' content. We aimed to identify the effects of media reputation and of the facticity of the news on (digital) behavior such as the intent to disseminate or to comment on fake news on social media and also on discussing these contents with friends. For this*

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purpose, we applied a 2x2 between subjects online experiment by manipulating the (1) the source (high vs. low reputation online media outlets) and (2) information facticity (high vs. low). Participants (N=177), aged 18 to 53 years were selected via Facebook and the study was carried out in February 2020. The results of our research are in line with previous literature that underlined the role of source and message credibility in influencing online and offline news engagement. We observed that source credibility has an impact on news sharing on Facebook and that message credibility encourages discussion with friends. This applies to both veridical and false information. The most important takeaway of our study is perhaps that users are aware that high reputation media outlets can make mistakes. Besides, media reputation is subject to change and is related to the audiences.

Keywords: Fake news; Disinformation; Source credibility; Message credibility; News engagement.

Introduction

Digitalization came with a new challenge for the field of journalism. The production and especially the consumption of news has gone through relevant changes in the last decade (Holton *et al.*, 2015; Kümpel *et al.*, 2015; Karnowski *et al.*, 2017). Social media allows everyone – be it a professional or a casual user – to spread online information and people often prefer this channel over traditional media (Wall, 2015). Social media has become essential for driving news engagement and updating people about current events (Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2017). Traditional media outlets adapted to the transformation of the media systems and often also have an online presence so that their content is shared on social media. On social media users can encounter a large diversity of sources, news that originates from media outlets that have gained a positive reputation as traditional media outlets, but also news providers that are problematic in terms of reputation.

The proliferation of online disinformation is one of the biggest challenges for contemporary democracies and has come to the attention of not only scholars but of governmental and non-governmental institutions, that have focused on this phenomenon and its implications in recent years. (Wardle, 2017; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017; Lazer *et al.*, 2018). The 2016 US presidential election campaign and the campaign for Brexit are just some of the prominent examples that were analyzed in previous literature on communication research. Disinformation is supported by the online environment because it generates traffic and thus, financial benefits (Tandoc *et al.*, 2018). Lately, the European Commission has intensified its efforts to combat disinformation and put additional pressure on the social media platforms (Saurwein & Spencer-Smith, 2020).

The key to understanding how fake news is spread online is to understand how users engage with online news. Kümpel (2019) analyzes the elements that favor the interaction with the news that is disseminated on social media. The source and the content of the article are essential for engagement with the news. This applies to fake news as well. Producers know the interests of users, then model their content according to them. These elements are capitalized by 'poor' journalistic outlets in the attempt to generate traffic to sites that imitate authentic news publications. They are easily confused with authentic news, given that technology is constantly advancing and allows the preferences of internet users to benefit news producers and distributors (Epure *et al.*, 2016). Conspiracy theories, invented news, or misinformation go viral and have more chances to continue to spread due to the dissemination possibilities offered by social media. It is crucial to understand the users' behavior that supports this phenomenon.

Media credibility has become more and more relevant in the context of a highly discussed concept of fake news. The present paper addresses the mediating role of source and message credibility in relationship with the engagement with 'poor journalistic' content. We aim to identify the effects of the media reputation and of the facticity of the news on both online and offline behavior such as the intent to disseminate or to comment on fake news on social media and also to discuss it with friends. The present research aims to contribute to a better understanding of the relation between the exposure to fake news on social media and users' online behavior in the form of engagement.

When performing fake news analysis, the socio-cultural context in which information is spread should also be taken into consideration. Disinformation has increasingly become a prominent issue for communication research in Romania. Based on The Special Eurobarometer no. 464 entitled Fake News and Disinformation Online, Bârgăoanu & Radu (2017) analyzed the ways in which Romanians view disinformation. Fake news often uses controversy and negativity to become viral (Bârgăoanu, 2018). Similar to other countries, in Romania, many ideological subjects can create controversy: from government instability to political conflicts and normative decisions. The relationship between fake news and social media engagement effects in the specific case of ideology-driven fake news and misinformation on a Romanian audience was analyzed by Nicoleta Corbu and her colleagues (2020a). A significant *third-person effect* related to people's assessment of their capacity to identify fake news and to rate the effect of misinformation on themselves compared to others was also observed in Romanian samples (Ștefănită *et al.*, 2018; Corbu *et al.*, 2020b). We intend to add to that knowledge by applying an experimental design focusing on the mediation role that source and message credibility play on social media users' fake news engagement.

Theoretical background

Fake news and social media development

Social media development has influenced the journalistic field (Blumler, 2016). Beyond its meaning of recent events of public interest, news is relevant for online traffic that leads to financial benefits (Bettag, 2000). Journalists were traditionally the ones who had an active role as news *producers, selectors,* and *gatekeepers.* In the traditional media logic *receivers* or *consumers* were considered passive players (Harcup & O'Neil, 2017). On social media, anyone can be both a source of information and a receiver. That leads to the fact that social media has facilitated the production and the rapid dissemination of inaccurate information (Benkler *et al.*, 2018). Adding to this, social media engagement plays an important role for the news values nowadays as the literature has emphasized the role of the so-called news shareability even for high reputation media outlets (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017).

Platform affordance, in the form of specific features of some of the social network sites such as Facebook or Twitter, has contributed to the fact that content produced is quickly spreading. In the context of online content saturation or *information overflow,* with time as a valuable asset, users often tend to ignore the details of how the information was generated while navigating on social media. They remember how they felt about a piece of information rather than what its real meaning or how accurate the information was (Lazer *et al.*, 2018).

Fake news has two more essential characteristics besides mimicking an authentic journalistic format. Those are low facticity and the intention to deceive (Tandoc *et al.*, 2018). Fake news is similar to news media only in its form and not in the organizing process that leads to its production (Lazer *et al.*, 2018, 1094). Previous literature emphasized that low facticity is associated with false, misleading, fabricated, and imposter content (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). The information seems credible, and facticity is replaced by pseudoscience and emotional triggers especially when it comes to controversial issues. Emotions and repetitions increase the effects of fake news (Pennycook *et al.*, 2018).

Disagreements generate more traffic and opinion becomes more powerful when the former generate online conflicts (Bârgăoanu, 2018). Popularity creates an illusion of veracity and because of the number of reactions, the receiver feels included in a relevant online audience. But this audience is not always genuine, and it spreads faster than social networks can control each user's identity. Besides, the moderating role of platforms when it comes to content has been a highly discussed matter. Engagement can be thus forged by technical means that trick algorithms by automatically sharing information, manipulating the number of followers, and the showing order of posts in the newsfeed (Tucker *et al.*, 2018).

All virtual steps users take leave a digital footprint that is further used by the networks. Fake news creators examine the activity and target their content to the

audience that is most likely to interact with it. Facebook tried to improve its algorithms by prioritizing content that is shared by friends and family (Ghosho & Scott, 2018) but people are still incidentally exposed to news and they are more open to engage with content shared by a person close to them in this hyper-dynamic environment (Kapantai *et al.*, 2021). The message seems more personalized especially if it is received privately (Kümpel, 2019) and has a greater impact (Tando *et al.*, 2019). Even journalists that are active on social media are perceived as more credible than those who are not (Oeldorf-Hirsch *et al.*, 2020).

Previous literature operated with several definitions and talked about different types of content that are associated with fake news. Fake news, "fabricated stories that look like they come from legitimate sources" (Pennycook & Rand, 2017, 2) and trying to appear as real news (Tandoc *et al.*, 2018, 147). Some of the scholars prefer to call this *fake news* (Lazer *et al.*, 2018; Engelhofer & Lechler, 2019), others prefer the term *disinformation* (Wardle & Derekshan, 2017). Mainly because fake news was used not only to define a genre, but also as a label in the attempt to discredit traditional media (Engelhofel & Lechler, 2019), and because of the complexity of the phenomenon and its sources, some of the scholars prefer to use the term disinformation as: "all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit." (HLEG, 2018).

In their systematic literature review on disinformation, Eleni Kapantai and her colleagues (2020) identified three important elements that are taken into consideration by the majority of authors that developed typologies of disinformation. These are motive, facticity, and verifiability. According to previous literature, the motives behind false news can be based on profit, ideology and/or psychology. In particular cases sometimes they are even unclear. In terms of facticity, the scholars distinguished between false, mostly false, and mostly true information (Kapantai *et al.*, 2020, 17). The lack of facticity and the intention to deceive are often mentioned when it comes to the characteristics of fake news (Tandoc *et al.*, 2018). A long list of possible forms in which disinformation (misinformation or malinformation, according to Wardle (2017)) is published was the result of the above-mentioned systematic literature review: clickbait, conspiracy theories, fabrication, misleading content, hoax, biased or one-sided content, imposter content, pseudoscience, rumors, fake reviews and trolling (Kapantai *et al.*, 2020, 17).

Source and message credibility and fake news

In line with the objectives of the present research, in this subchapter we focused on the concept of media credibility, which has never lost relevance for communication research in the last decades because of constant changes in the media environment (Metzger *et al.*, 2003; Metzger *et al.*, 2015). Previous literature underlined the fact that media credibility has significant consequences for users (Flanagin &

Metzger, 2003). Online media credibility is analyzed by some authors in the context of the spreading of inaccurate and biased information available online, of fake or false news, or dysfunctional information (Chadwick *et al.*, 2018).

Communication scholars have a longstanding interest in the relative credibility of various media channels through which a source sends a message. Long before social media emerged, but still relevant, media credibility was analyzed at three levels: the credibility of the source, of the message, and of the media that carries it. Previous research described the credibility of sources using several elements: trustworthiness and expertise on the one hand (Wilson & Sherrell, 1993) and dynamism, composure, and sociability on the other hand (Gass & Seiter, 1999; Perloff 1993). Organizations can serve as sources and corporate credibility is defined as the degree to which consumers, investors, and others believe in the organization's trustworthiness and expertise (Goldsmith et al, 2000). In the last years, research has been conducted on the credibility of websites (Fogg *et al.*, 2001; Flanagin & Metzger, 2001).

Nowadays, social media has become a relevant item in the media diet of the majority of the population in many countries. It is a dynamic field where platforms and usage practices are subject to constant changes in an established culture of connectivity (van Dijck, 2013) with multi-directional information flow in a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013).

The success of social media has brought a contemporary challenge to the research on media credibility. The idea that everybody can be a news producer of his or her own is reinforced in the time of user-generated content. Are there additional factors that influence media credibility perception in this new context? How does the perceived credibility of news take into consideration the variety of sources? Established media is competing with individual users on these platforms. Empowering online information providers is one of the key issues and this is why trust and credibility tend to be much more important. Appearance and graphical design issues, disclosure and security measures, functionality and connectedness and accuracy and comprehensiveness of content are only some of the new key elements of social media credibility (Flanagin & Metzger, 2003; Metzger *et al.*, 2015)

Social media challenges source credibility by the presence of anonymous and multiple authors. There are no gatekeepers on social media, users face the convergence of genres, and advertising blending (Metzger *et al.*, 2015). Previous research on the credibility of websites (Johnson and Kaye, 1998, 2000; Mashek, 1997; Kim *et al.*, 2001; Kiousis, 2001; Sundar and Nass, 2001) have revealed that credibility plays a role in the search for information, people being more likely to select a source that they judge as credible (Kerstetter & Cho, 2004). In the context of a high choice media environment, previous researches observed that sources with high reputations tend to be selected more often by users when it comes to news sites (Medders & Metzger, 2017).

Source credibility is challenged by fake news nowadays. Users do not expect established media outlets to deliver false information and when they do so, they admit it and issue statements underlining their mistakes. Reputation is built over time based on performing quality journalism with news that is accurate and reliable (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007, 2010). The name and the logo of a media outlet are often seen as a cue for source credibility (Medders & Metzger, 2017; Kumpel, 2018). Therefore, we posited:

H1. News published in a high reputation online media outlet will result in higher levels of source credibility than news published in a low reputation online media outlet.

According to the Heuristic-Systematic Model, source credibility often works as a heuristic cue. If the source is perceived as credible, that will have a positive impact on the message credibility as well (Kang *et al.*, 2011). In an attempt to minimize the information processing efforts, users tend to rely on heuristics when dealing with information flows (Metzger *et al.*, 2010, 434).

The credibility of the message is influenced by (1) the structure of the message (Gass and Seiter, 1999), thus unorganized messages are less credible than well-organized messages, balanced messages are considered to be much more credible than unbalanced messages; (2) the content of the message, information quality, language intensity and message discrepancy (Bacon, 1979; Hamilton, 1998) opinions vs. facts, factual language tends to be more credible; and (3) the message delivery — the use of a powerful vs. less powerful communication style. In online communication, it is hard to separate between message structure and website structure, so the credibility of the source interferes with the credibility of the message. Therefore, we posited:

H2. News published in a high reputation online media outlet will result in higher levels of message credibility than news published in a low reputation online media outlet.

Professional reporting has always been associated with factuality, objectivity, and neutrality (Bender *et al.*, 2012). As a part of the phenomenon of *centrifugal diversification of the media* (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999; Mourao & Robertson, 2019), fake news sites do not follow the rules of traditional journalism, they only mimic *a presumed associated editorial process* (Lazer *et al.*, 2017, 4). Low facticity is one of the common features of fake news according to previous literature (Tandoc *et al.*, 2018; Kapantai *et al.*, 2020).

Fake news content mimics the format of classic news and intentionally provides inaccurate information intending to deceive. False news mimics authentic news in terms of form, but not in terms of editorial rigor, which underlies the development of accurate journalistic products (Lazer *et al.*, 2018). The public is often exposed to manipulations of the context that make the information seem credible. In line with these, we posited a conditional moderating effect of facticity on source and message

credibility:

H3. The facticity of the news will moderate the effect of the reputation of the source, in that high facticity will increase source credibility compared to low facticity.

H4. The facticity of the news will moderate the effect of the reputation of the source, in that high facticity will increase message credibility compared to low facticity.

Engagement with the (fake) news

Fake news is not a completely new phenomenon that first emerged in the context of social media. Social media delivered the virtual space for the unprecedented wide-spreading of disinformation (Bârgăoanu, 2018). Therefore, the dissemination of false information is achieved through tools provided by technology that facilitates the registration of Internet users' preferences (Ghosho & Scott, 2018). Due to complex algorithms, the chances of fake news reaching people willing to interact with it are high. Facebook and Twitter are the most popular social network sites worldwide when it comes to news sharing also because of the features (share and retweet buttons) that easily allow users to disseminate content posted by others.

Social media engagement is the act of using the interactive features of social media and it is also a sign of attention (Oeldorf-Hirsch & Sundar, 2015; Oeldorf-Hirsch, 2017). When it comes to news sharing on social media, involvement is related to news engagement, valuable comments leading to a sense of influence. Engagement to news on social media contributes to their spreading for both quality and poor journalistic productions.

Engagement with social media content is a form of participatory practice that is important in democratic societies (Carpentier, 2016; Kalogeropoulus *et al.*, 2017). Liking, sharing and commenting news have an impact at both individual and aggregate levels and affect both offline and online political participation (Gil de Zuniga *et al.*, 2014). Moreover, news sharing has become relevant for media outlets also in terms of revenue. Another relevant item has been added to news values in a platform society: shareability, defined as the degree to which the news will be distributed by users on social media (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). Having the objective of analyzing the relationship between source and message credibility on items of news that differ in terms of facticity and the social media engagement of the users we posited:

H5. High source credibility will have a positive effect on (a) the intention to share the news on Facebook, (b) the intention to comment on the news on Facebook, and (c) the intention to discuss it with friends.

H6. High message credibility will have a positive effect on (a) the intention to share the news on Facebook, (b) the intention to comment on the news on Facebook, and (c) the intention to discuss it with friends.

The hypothesis model was depicted in figure 1.

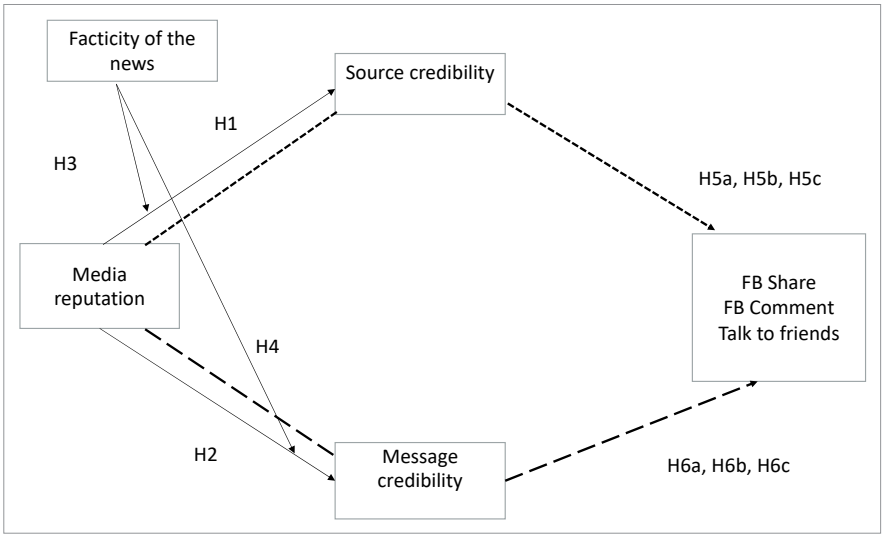

Figure 1. Conceptual model

Methods

Sample and participants

Our research aims to explore the role of source and message credibility in sharing low facticity content on social media. For this purpose, we applied a 2x2 between-subjects online experiment by manipulating (1) the source (high vs. low reputation online media outlets) and (2) information facticity (high vs. low).

The survey-based experiment was distributed via social media to increase external validity. The stimulus consists of different, manipulated versions of an online news article. The original article was visually adapted to simulate the fact that it was published in a high reputation source, the Romanian publication *Adevărul* in the first case, and a low reputation publication, *Exploziv News 24* in the second case. External validity was again reinforced, this time by creating a layout that imitates authentic news websites. For both source appearances, we had the original high facticity news and we manipulated a low facticity version of it. Participants were indicated to pay the same amount of attention they would normally do when encountering an online article they engage with. The stimuli are presented in the appendix.

Participants (N=177) were Romanians aged 18 to 53 (M= 21.76, SD=3.72) were selected via Facebook and the study was carried out in February 2020. The sample consists of 53.1% women, 46.3% men and a person who chose not to specify their gender. The percentage of urban population was overrepresented in our sample (82.4%). Regarding education, 64.4% of the participants were high school gradu-

ates, 25.4% had a bachelor's degree and the rest of the participants had a master's degree or higher. The participants that volunteered were randomly assigned in four groups: n_1=45 (high facticity news in high reputation media outlet *Adevărul*-referred to as group 1), n_2=45 (low facticity news in high reputation media outlet *Adevărul*-referred to as group 2), n_3=41 (high facticity in low reputation media outlet *Exploziv News 24*-referred to as group 3) and n_4=45 (low facticity in low reputation media outlet *Exploziv News 24*-referred to as group 4).

Procedure and stimulus material

The high facticity news originated from the Romanian press agency *Mediafax* and was an article entitled *The Project for the 2020 Budget is based on a 4.1% growth and a 3.59% deficit of the GDP*. A symbolic picture suggesting economic growth was added to the text. This was the stimulus used for the first and the third group. The only difference between groups one and three was the source of the news (*Adevărul* for group 1 and *Exploziv News 24* for group 3). For the low facticity news, we manipulated the title of the article, by changing it to: *We're swimming deeper in debt. The Project for the 2020 Budget is based on a 2.5% growth and a 5.7% deficit of the GDP*. In addition, we manipulated the body of text in line with the title and added a symbolic image that suggests economic downfall.

The survey disclaimer indicated that participants are invited to read some online news and then to answer some questions related to them. The survey started with two introductive questions about social media and the participants' frequency of mass media usage. Then the stimulus was inserted, followed by other questions related to the dependent variables that are presented below. Demographic variables such as age, gender, education, and living environment were added in the final part of the questionnaire. For ethical reasons, a short disclaimer indicating that the real purpose of our research was related to fake news and that the article they had read, or its source had been manipulated appeared at the end.

Measures

Mediators

Source credibility was measured using eight statements (e.g., "The source of the article is qualified") on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree" (α= .929, *M*=3.97, *SD*=1.13; McCroskey, Holdridge & Toomb, 1995).

Message credibility was measured using three statements (e.g., "The message that you read is authentic.") on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree" (α= .857, *M*=4.11, *SD*=1.20; Appelman and Sundar, 2015).

Dependent variables

The intention to share the news on Facebook was measured using a single statement ("I would share the above-presented article on my Facebook account.") on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree", (*M*=2.18, *SD*=1.39).

The intention to comment on the news on Facebook was measured using a single statement ("I would comment on the Facebook post related to the above-presented article.") on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree", (*M*=2.22, *SD*=1.42).

The intention to discuss the news with friends was measured using a single statement ("I would discuss the above-presented article with my friends.") on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree", (*M*=3.88, *SD*=1.83).

We also measured the *relevance of the information* using a single statement ("Please rate how relevant the information that was presented above was for you") on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "extremely irrelevant" to 7 = "extremely relevant", (*M*=5.54, *SD*=1.23).

After viewing the stimulus material, respondents were asked to include the news presented in the stimulus material in one of the categories: (1) *false, (*2) *veridical* or (3) *neither false, nor veridical.*

The means per condition for mediators and dependent variables are shown in table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics per condition

Group	Variable	M	SD
1. high reputation/ high facticity	Source credibility	3.73	0.99
	Message Credibility	3.84	0.96
	News Sharing on FB	2.21	1.47
	Commenting on FB	2.36	1.35
	Discuss with friends	3.96	1.65
	Information relevance	4.27	1.05
2. high reputation/ low facticity	Source credibility	4.02	1.24
	Message credibility	4.35	1.28
	News sharing on FB	2.00	1.41
	Commenting on FB	2.02	1.31
	Discuss with friends	3.78	1.94
	Information relevance	4.13	1.11
3. low reputation/ high facticity	Source credibility	4.26	1.12
	Message credibility	4.07	1.19
	News sharing on FB	2.07	1.19
	Commenting on FB	2.20	1.40
	Discuss with friends	3.43	1.74
	Information relevance	4.00	1.20
4. low reputation/ low facticity	Source credibility	3.91	1.13
	Message credibility	4.19	1.32
	News sharing on FB	2.33	1.46
	Commenting on FB	2.31	1.64
	Discuss with friends	4.31	1.93
	Information relevance	4.31	1.17

Results

Randomization check

Randomization checks were performed using one-way ANOVA or chi square tests for age (F *(3, 176)* = 1.62, p=.183*)*, gender (χ^2*(3)* = 0.805, p = .848*)*, relevance of information (*F3, 176)* = 0.664, p = .575*)*, for Facebook use (*F(3, 176)* = 1.088, p = .356), online newspaper consumption (*F*(3, 176)=1.363, p=.256*)*, residence area (χ^2*(3)* = 6.826, p = .078*)*. The results showed that the differences of the outcome variables are not a result of inherent differences between conditions. When it came to the level of education of the participants, significant differences between groups were observed (χ^2*(12)* = 23.043, p = .027*)*, thus education should be taken into consideration as a covariate for future analysis.

Data analysis

Before testing the hypotheses, it is relevant to see how participants rated how veridical the information contained in the news they were exposed to was. Even if the information was rated as relevant, there is a large percentage of participants that rated the information as being neither false nor veridical (see table 2).

Table 2. Participants' rating of how veridical the news was

	Group 1 High reputation/ high facticity (%)	**Group 2** High reputation/ low facticity (%)	**Group 3** Low reputation/ high facticity (%)	**Group 4** Low reputation/ low facticity (%)
False	37.8	30.4	31.7	46.7
Veridical	6.7	15.2	4.9	6.7
Neither false, nor veridical	55.6	54.3	63.4	46.7

To test the proposed hypotheses of the conditional effect of facticity on outlet reputation via 1) source and 2) message credibility on a) news sharing, b) commenting on Facebook, and on c) discussing the news with friends, a moderated mediation analysis was run using Model 7, PROCESS V3.4 in SPSS (Hayes, 2018) employing 5,000 bootstrap sample for each dependent variable. The participants' level of education was used as a covariate.

H1 posited that news published in a high reputation online media outlet will result in higher levels of source credibility than news published in a low reputation online media outlet. The reputation of the media outlet has a significant direct effect on source credibility (b= 1.19, SE= .54, 95% $BCBCI$=[.1228, 2.26], p=.029). The participants' level of education has no significant effect as a covariate on source credibility (b=- 0.05, SE= .09, 95% $BCBCI$=[-0.2131, 0.1225], p=.594). Thus, H1 was supported.

H2 posited that news published in a high reputation online media outlet will result in higher levels of message credibility than news published in a low reputation

online media outlet. The reputation of the media outlet has no significant direct effect on source credibility (*b*= 0.65, *SE*= .58, 95% *BCBCI*=[-.4819, 1.79], *p*=.257). Again, the participant's level of education has no significant effect as a covariate on the source credibility (*b*=- 0.94, *SE*= .09, 95% *BCBCI*=[.2720, 0.0844], *p*=.300). Thus, H2 was supported.

H3 posited that the facticity of the news will moderate the effect of the reputation of the source, in that high facticity will increase source credibility compared to low facticity. Facticity only has a tendential significant effect on source credibility (*b*=- 0.96, *SE*= .53, 95% *BCBCI*=[-.0891, 2.0163, *p*=.073), so does the interaction between reputation and facticity (*b*=- 0.66, *SE*= .34, 95% *BCBCI*=[-1.3371, 0.0081], *p*=.053). Only high facticity news published in high reputation media outlets have a high source credibility (*effect=.53*, *SE*= .24, 95% *BCBCI*=[.0478, 1.0086], p=.031). H3 was not supported.

H4 posited that the facticity of the news will moderate the effect of the reputation of the source, in that high facticity will increase message credibility compared to low facticity. Facticity has no significant effect on message credibility (*b*=-0.94, *SE*= .57, 95% *BCBCI*=[-.1774, 2.0589], *p*=.098), nor does the interaction between reputation and facticity (*b*=- 0.43, *SE*= .36, 95% *BCBCI*=[-1.1409, 0.2879], *p*=.240). H4 was not supported.

H5 posited that high source credibility will have a positive effect on a) the intention to share the news on Facebook, b) the intention to comment on the news on Facebook, and c) the intention to discuss it with friends. Source credibility has a significant impact on the intention to share the news on Facebook (*b*=0.29, *SE*= .13, 95% *BCBCI*=[0.0417, 0.5333], *p*=.022). The participants' level of education also has an impact on news sharing on Facebook in the sense that participants with lower levels of education tend to share the news on Facebook (*b*=- 0.21, *SE*= .10, 95% *BCBCI*=[-0.4020, -0.0181], *p*=.032). Thus, H5a was partially supported. Source credibility has no significant impact on the intention to comment the news on Facebook (*b*= 0.19, *SE*=.13, 95% *BCBCI*=[0.0738, 0.4474], *p*=.159). Subsequently, H5b was not supported. Source credibility has no significant impact on the intention to discuss the news with friends (*b*=0.11, *SE*=.17, 95% *BCBCI*=[0.2152, 0.4429], *p*=.50). In line with that, H5c was not supported.

H6 posited that high message credibility will have a positive effect on a) the intention to share the news on Facebook, b) the intention to comment on the news on Facebook, and c) the intention to discuss it with friends. Message credibility has no significant impact on the intention to share the news on Facebook (*b*= 0.18, *SE*= .18, 95% *BCBCI*=[-0.0557, 0.4065], *p*=.136). Thus, H6a was not supported. Message credibility has no significant impact on the intention to comment the news on Facebook (*b*= 0.20, *SE*= .12, 95% *BCBCI*=[-0.0411, 0.4478], *p*=.102). Subsequently, H6b was not supported. Message credibility has a significant impact on the intention to discuss

the news with friends (b= 0.46, SE= .16, 95% $BCBCI$=[0.1510, 0.7683], p=.003). In line with that, H6c was supported. Direct effects are depicted in figure 2.

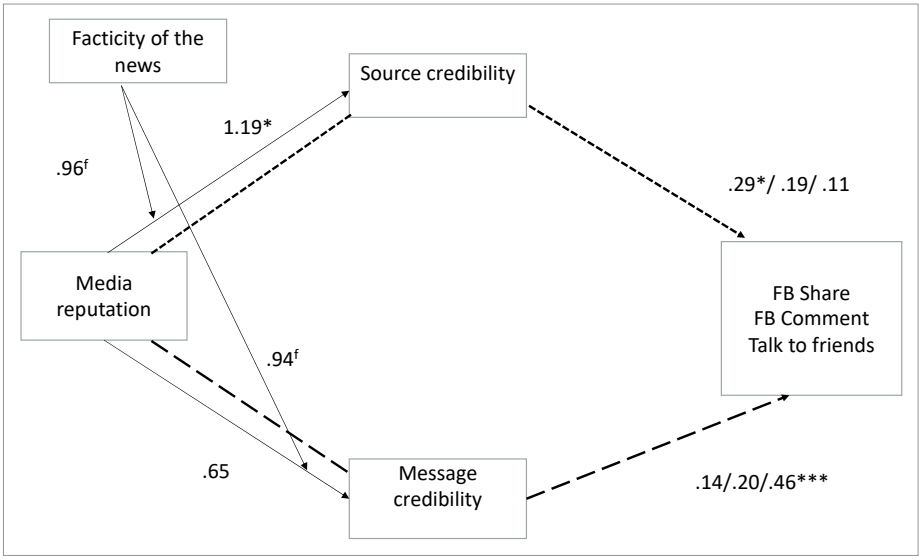

Figure 2. Direct effects

Discussion

Our findings showed that media reputation has an impact on source credibility, but not necessarily on message credibility. This can be interpreted as an indicator of users' beliefs that even high reputation sources can publish news that can be perceived as having low message credibility. We observed a tendency according to which high reputation media outlets that publish high facticity information will be perceived as having high source credibility. When the source of news is perceived as being credible, Facebook users will tend to share it on Facebook, but will not necessarily comment on the post related to the news or discuss the topic of the news with friends. A credible message is not associated with the intention to share or comment on the news on Facebook, but it significantly increases the intention to discuss the topic with friends, especially on relevant information, such as the information we used in our study.

Conclusion

The results of our research are in line with previous works that underlined the role of source and message credibility in influencing online and offline behavior. We observed that source credibility has an impact on news sharing on Facebook

and that message credibility encourages discussion with friends. This applies to both veridical and fake news. It is a chain — users share the news on their feed, then they receive the same type of content later on, creating the illusion of veracity through popularity. Probably the most important takeaway of our study is that users are aware that high reputation media outlets can make mistakes. Reputation is subject to change and it is related to the audiences.

To gain social media visibility, fake news uses elements that generate a lot of traffic. News shareability is higher for content that instigates the reader (Harcup & O'Neil, 2017). Moreover, the news is subjective and adapted to audience expectation and the context is manipulated for the information to seem credible and to increase its spreading. People also feel that the closer the source, the more credible the shared content (Tandoc *et al.*, 2018) and this is why for future research we might take into consideration the effects of seeing news shared by Facebook friends compared to the news that is shared by the account of the media outlet.

We are aware of the limits of our study. First, the stimuli that we used are related to news on the economy and only had a limited degree of emotionality compared to other topics that are often subject to fake news. Economic changes are indeed an important subject, but not so polarizing as other issues. Second, within a high choice media environment, people are usually exposed to multiple types of content. Third, we did not measure for other relevant variables such as confirmation bias. Fourth, the sample of our study was a convenience sample that does not allow further generalization of our results.

However, our study is relevant in showing an insight into the mechanism that makes fake news viral. Acknowledging this might help several actors fight disinformation. It is a phenomenon that involves several parties such as platforms, media outlets, users, and policymakers that all bear a certain amount of responsibility (Lazer *et al.*, 2018). Our study underlines the accountability of users and contributes to raising awareness on the topic of disinformation.

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Annex 1. Stimulus materials

Group 1. High reputation/high facticity

Group 2. High reputation/low facticity

Group 3. Low reputation/high facticity

Group 4. Low reputation/low facticity