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ONLINE MEDIA AUDIENCE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AS AN ACTIVE AMPLIFIER OF DISINFORMATION: MOTIVATIONS OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS TO SHARE INFORMATION ON FACEBOOK

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ABSTRACT:

Disclosure of disinformation has attracted increasing attention in recent years. The society recognises that false reports pose a real threat to the credibility of information and, ultimately, to the security of society. On the Internet an active audience is a distributor of media content because they are convinced of its truth, and in the online environment they find it in other people. Therefore, the audience seems to be an active amplifier of disinformation (sharing), and thus explicitly as a creator of (unwanted) web content (sharing and commenting). People's willingness to share disinformation is linked to people's similar attitudes; it is related to the similarity of faith and to the perception of the message, considered as appropriate and interesting ("I like it"), etc. The term "homogeneity" turns out to be a key term in audience research, and experts speak about a phenomenon that in fact appears to be the main driving force for the dissemination of any content. The aim of the research is to identify and classify the factors that motivate university students to share information on the social networking site *Facebook*.

1 Introduction

Besides the relevant information, which has more or less dominated the media in recent decades, the corona crisis was accompanied by a wide-ranging wave of false and misleading information, including material of a fraudulent nature, misleading notions or propaganda claims that are inconsistent with the facts. Especially health-related disinformation has been considered particularly dangerous over the past two years. Although,

all kinds of disinformation have increasingly gained our attention, with serious consequences for the nature of interpersonal relationships (division of people based on vaccination), for the overall understanding of anti-pandemic measures among the population, or for the perception of each person's well-being.

The character of social media in particular helps to spread false messages among users, as users use unregulated space in the social media environment, low operating costs and easy handling of diverse and freely available content. In this context, social media can be introduced as channels as well as applications that highlight peoples' collaboration to create and share content. Alternatively, in the words of Vrabec et al., *"the media and information ecosystem are not only passive mediators of information content"*.[1] Cooperation between different people (i.e., users) does not only consist of creating new content, but also discussing the content, sharing the content or evaluating the content, which is an important part of the social media environment. As Sámelová pointed out, social media set up a more active agenda – self-publishing – and, along with it, a cognitive demand to acquire the ability to create and upload one's own content (texts, sounds, images). Social media thus brought the intricate publishing of original content, slightly modified content or seriously distorted (even false) content by media users, who use social media for self-information and self-entertainment.[2] Experts therefore associate the negatives of the current 'online existence' of the individual primarily with social media where millions of web users can create and, above all, share messages of a diverse nature.

Even though social media are used to shape public attitudes, discourses as well as opinions at home and abroad in last decade, the corona crisis shifted the meaning and use of social media more than ever before. Social media expanded and enriched the existing links between people by creating new spaces for communication (virtual open groups, private communities, blogs, etc.). Moreover, they became an essential communication tool for creating and disseminating fake news, misinformation, disinformation, hoaxes and propaganda during the corona crisis,[3] that has contributed to others' communicative failures.[4] That is why experts are currently associating social media with fundamental changes in the interpretation of information,[5] in the dissemination of information,[6] and in the fight against disinformation.[7] Thus, not only research, but also our daily experience shows that the use of social media (not only for news) correlates with a conspiratorial worldview.[8]

Despite the fact that interventions and initiatives to address these challenges involve different actors and are implemented at different levels,[9] the fact is that the growing popularity of social media is contributing to the increase in the volume of fake news.[10] That is why experts talk about *"the growing social atomisation and value fragmentation of society"*,[11] about the broken "internal ethical compass" of the individual[12] or about the new phenomenon of "digital dementia and the loss of critical perception of reality as a result of digital technologies".[13]

Another expert reminds us that 'traditional media' (print, television, radio) lose influence and are replaced by social media and so-called disinformation media (commonly regarded and falsely percieved as alternative media) that are oppositional voices to professionalised mainstream reporting, i.e., they position themselves as the *"corrective of 'traditional', 'legacy' or 'mainstream' news media in a given sociocultural and historical context"*.[14] Disinformation media see themselves as counter-forces or watchdogs to 'mainstream news media', thus they shape public opinion, in Holt's words, according to an agenda that is perceived as *"being underrepresented, ostracized or otherwise marginalized in mainstream news media"*.[15] It can be said that disinformation media publish false reports in order to increase the number of their readers (through so-called clickbaits) or as part of a psychological war. In the online environment, there is an increasing number of users who read websites with hoaxes and disinformation[16] as well as believe in these false ideas and myths.[17]

In addition, it can be seen that in the days of the 'old media', manipulations originated especially from state, business and media structures. Today (the previously manipulated) audience has gradually transformed from readers/viewers/listeners into fully-fledged creators and distributors of media content; including those who are manipulative.[18] These people move daily between two worlds, i.e., the physical world and cyberspace. The existence of these worlds is "parallel but disjointed",[19] even though *"these two realms are slowly converging into one another"*.[20]

Relevant research, focusing on the reasons why Internet users become distributors and authors of media content, brings interesting conclusions. Empirical research has repeatedly shown that an individual's confidence in false information can be built when that information confirms an individual's own pre-existing attitudes, beliefs or hypotheses. And when false information confirms an individual's beliefs or attitudes, an individual's confidence in the false information even grows. Therefore, according to experts, attitude, opinion or emotional homogeneity is proving to be the main driving force for the emergence, dissemination and even growth of any content in the media environment, and disinformation content is no exception. Especially the current youth was encouraged (and forced) to use the media and social media on a daily basis for education, communication or leisure time and were therefore exposed to the great risk posed by the increase in the number of conspiracy websites and, in parallel, by the increase in disinformation on the Internet. In our opinion, the younger generation was not fully prepared to be online and 'exist' online as much as the pandemic situation required (none of us seemed to be ready). But because young people's time on the Internet has increased the most during COVID-19, the young generation has become an even more vulnerable group.[21]

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2   SÁMELOVÁ, A.: The Paradigmatic Change in the Media-Mediated Communication after the Onset of Online Media Technologies. In *Communication Today*, 2021, Vol. 12, No. 2, p. 27.
3   See: BARUA, Z. et al.: Effects of Misinformation on COVID-19 Individual Responses and Recommendations for Resilience of Disastrous Consequences of Misinformation. In *Progress in Disaster Science*, 2020, Vol. 8, Article No. 100119; CHOU, W. Y. S., OH, A., KLEIN, W. M.: Addressing Health-Related Misinformation on Social Media. In *Jama*, 2018, Vol. 320, No. 23, p. 2417; GUYNN, J.: *Welcome to the First Social Media Pandemic. Here Are 8 Ways You Can Stop the Spread of Coronavirus Misinformation.* Released on 18th December 2021. [online]. [2023-08-10]. Available at: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/2020/03/19/coronavirus-covid-19-misinformation-social-mediafacebook-youtube-instagram/2870277001/>; KOUZY, R. et al.: Coronavirus Goes Viral: Quantifying the COVID-19 Misinformation Epidemic on Twitter. In *Cureus*, 2020, Vol. 12, No. 3, Article No. e7255.
4   See more: TELEZHKO, I., BIRYUKOVA, Y., KURILENKO, V.: A Model for Forming Tolerance in Profession-Oriented Text Translators as Part of the Process of Developing Their Sociocultural Competence. In *XLinguae*, 2019, Vol. 12, No. 1, p. 116-117.
5   Compare to: WU, L. et al.: Misinformation in Social Media: Definition, Manipulation, and Detection. In *ACM SIGKDD Explorer Newsletter*, 2019, Vol. 21, No. 2, p. 80-90; BRADSHAW, S., HOWARD, P. N.: *Challenging Truth and Trust: A Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation.* Oxford : University of Oxford, 2018, p. 58.
6   WU, L. et al.: Misinformation in Social Media: Definition, Manipulation, and Detection. In *ACM SIGKDD Explorer Newsletter*, 2019, Vol. 21, No. 2, p. 80-90.
7   SHU, K. et al.: Fake News Detection on Social Media: A Data Mining Perspective. In *Explorer Newsletter*, 2017, Vol. 19, No. 1, p. 22-36.
8   FOLEY, J., WAGNER, M.: *How Media Consumption Patterns Fuel Conspiratorial Thinking.* Released on 26th May 2020. [online]. [2023-08-10]. Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/how-media-consumption-patterns-fuel-conspiratorial-thinking/>.
9   VRABEC, N. et al.: Non-Formal Education Focused on the Development of Critical Thinking and Media Literacy: The Role and Activities of Key Stakeholders in Slovakia. In *Journal of Education Culture and Society*, 2023, Vol. 14, No. 1, p. 495.
10   See: OLTEANU, A. et al.: Social Data: Biases, Methodological Pitfalls, and Ethical Boundaries. In *Frontiers in Big Data*, 2019, Vol. 2, No. 13, p. 1-47; SLUMKOSKI, C.: History on the Internet 2.0: The Rise of Social Media. In *Acadiensis*, 2012, Vol. 41, No. 2, p. 153-162.
11   JUDAK, V. et al.: The Importance of Social and Spiritual Bridging in Relation to Post-COVID Society Polarization in Slovakia. In *Acta Missiologica*, 2022, Vol. 16, No. 1, p. 126.
12   KRÁLIK, R., MÁHRIK, T.: Interpersonal Relationships as the Basis of Student Moral Formation. In CHOVA, G. L., MARTÍNEZ, L. A., TORRES, C. I. (eds.): *ICERI 2019 Proceedings: 12th Annual International Conference of Education, Research and Innovation, 11-13 November*. Seville : IAcademy Publications, 2019, p. 8896.
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16   HACEK, J.: Dezinformačné weby v čase koronakrizy – atmosféra nedôvery v médiá. In *Otázky žurnalistiky*, 2020, Vol. 63, No. 1-2, p. 19.
17   TVRDOŇ, M. et al.: COVID-19 Pandemic and Human Rights – Myth or Reality? In *Journal of Education Culture and Society*, 2022, Vol. 13, No. 2, p. 226.
18   See: FLINTHAM, M. et al.: Falling for Fake News: Investigating the Consumption of News via Social Media. In *CHI '18: Proceedings of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. Montreal : QC, 2018, p. 1-10; LEVITSKAYA, A., FEDOROV, A.: Typology and Mechanisms of Media Manipulation. International. In *Journal of Media and Information Literacy*, 2020, Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 69-78.
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21   Compare to: MARTELLOZZO, E., BRADBURY, P.: *How the Pandemic Has Made Young People More Vulnerable to Risky Online Sexual Trade.* Released on 2nd March 2021. [online]. [2023-08-10]. Available at: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/medialse/2021/03/02/how-

Of course, false information is not new; it has been spread by 'traditional' media before, too.[22] But the Internet has made spreading fake news possible for both robots and real individual users. The latter is also the subject of this study. We believe that most individual users of social media do not create new posts or valuable content. They basically disseminate and repost other people's information, as well as fake information, the credibility of which, according to Fielden, Grupač and Adamko, is enhanced by the length of time and the accelerating exposure of the content. *"If recurrence magnifies perceptions of truthfulness even for strikingly problematic and optioned content."*[23] In the context of the researched issue, the audience appears primarily as an active amplifier of disinformation (sharing), although it can also be identified as a creator of web content (sharing true content and commenting on content) or even a creator of (unwanted) content (sharing false content). The term "homogeneity" is proving to be a key concept in audience research. In the article, we talk about homogeneity as a phenomenon that actually appears to be the main driving force behind the dissemination of any content, because it creates the idea of 'others like me'.

The study presents the theoretical basis, which is followed by research on the group of university students (n = 9) and (n = 60). The aim of the research is to identify, classify and evaluate the factors that motivate university students to share information on *Facebook*.

2 Theoretical Basis of Current Issue – Users as Authors and Distributors of Online Content

According to experts, the number of disinformation media is rising rapidly in the area of social media[24] and, conversely, the ability of users to decide on the truthfulness of media content decreases in direct proportion to the volume of content that users 'consume'. In other words, the more we follow the rich, fast and inexpensive online offer of media content, the more there is information overload,[25] even to limited attention[26] which impairs our ability to make decisions about the veracity of online content. Moreover, experts believe that on social media biased information is often amplified and reinforced,[27] because it is not hindered by a barrier of physical distance, time or money (as is the case with traditional media, note). In addition, messages (true and false) have rich opportunities on the Internet to share, comment, vote, post, and tag other users in a discussion, extending not only the reach of the message but also the audience's participation in online activities. In the context of these findings the current research finding that information from both reliable and questionable

sources people do not present different spreading patterns is alarming.[28] Recently, increased user activity in connection with online administration has lead to serious consequences and significant potential political and economic benefits. *"Such generous benefits encourage malicious entities to create, publish, and spread fake news."*[29]

There are many factors that make information credible. To verify that the information is credible we can look at the source's authority of the information, expertise of the author of news, accuracy of information, objectivity of information, veracity of information, persuasiveness of information, accuracy of information, etc. In our opinion, a very significant risk is also the fact that the media message is followed by a false belief of the recipient's own 'immunity' against (covert and overt) media manipulation. The result of this false notion is the individual's belief that manipulation in media content does not 'affect' them ("I can easily recognise media manipulation") and does not 'touch' them ("It can't happen to me"). Such a person then resembles a 'house built on the sand', as their opinions, arguments or beliefs quickly collapse under the onslaught. Addressing this topic thus necessarily involves a focused discussion on strategies for verifying the credibility of information sources, rational assessment of issues, (minimal) reflection of reality, critical thinking and challenges in the context of media literacy.

According to experts, the most common reasons for Internet users to become authors and distributors of media content, include shaping the identity, self-worth, self-esteem, sense of belonging, following trends, desire to attract attention, and desire to maintain communication with peers.[30] Mikheev and Nestik state that people's willingness to share information (including disinformation) is related to their attitudes, which are often associated with their values, social trust, anxiety or social identity.[31] Vicario et al. speak of homogeneity as a phenomenon that in fact appears to be the main driving force for the dissemination of any content.[32] Marwick thinks specifically that people share fake news stories that support their preexisting beliefs and defend their identity to "likeminded others".[33] Nickerson speaks similarly; such trust in fake news can be built when the fake news confirms one's preexisting attitudes, beliefs or hypotheses, i.e., based on confirmation bias.[34] Fisher speaks of the need to perceive the message as appropriate, nice, interesting (i.e., "I like it"),[35] etc. Confidence in fake news in online environments is also rising under the influence of the Internet itself.[36]

Finally, the very nature of fake news does not help the situation either, as it is news that is usually written deliberately to mislead its readers. Another complication is the mixing of real news with half-truths, which is also typical for the construction of fake news.[37] The Internet has made spreading fake news possible for real individual users and also for robots; their performance is almost unstoppable. Last not but least, this can also be seen negatively, as a lack of regulation of social media content, despite the efforts of large social networking sites and tech companies (Google, Amazon, Apple, IBM, Microsoft, and so on), which try to eliminate various unethical efforts related to the recent pandemic,[38] including disinformation; for example, by strengthening the position of scientific institutions through online data tools, flagging disinformation about COVID-19 on the

the-pandemic-has-made-young-people-more-vulnerable-to-risky-online-sexual-trade/>; NGAMIJE, J.: *The Challenges in Early Detection of COVID-19 during Rain Seasons in Rwanda: Recommendation for Health Assessment Training and Occupation Hygiene Education.* Released on 2nd March 2022. [online]. [2023-08-10]. Available at: <https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3799882>; STOILOVA, M. et al.: *Adolescents' Mental Health Vulnerabilities and the Experience and Impact of Digital Technologies: A Multimethod Pilot Study.* London : London School of Economics and Political Science and King's College London, 2021, p. 6-28.

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29   ZHOU, X., ZAFARANI, R.: *A Survey of Fake News: Fundamental Theories, Detection Methods, and Opportunities.* Released on 3rd March 2022. [online]. [2023-08-10]. Available at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/329388190_A_Survey_of_Fake_News_Fundamental_Theories_Detection_Methods_and_Opportunities>.

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37   SHU, K. et al.: Fake News Detection on Social Media: A Data Mining Perspective. In *Explorer Newsletter*, 2017, Vol. 19, No. 1, p. 22-36.

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biggest social networking sites, or supporting global health organisations through free online advertising.[39] The description can be continued, however Shu et al. provide a clearer and more comprehensive survey of available scholarly work[40] on fake news detection to whom we refer the readers.

3 Methodology

The aim of the research is to identify and classify the most important factors that motivate college students to share information on *Facebook*. A partial objective is to find out whether students' willingness to share a message on *Facebook* is affected by their belief in the truth or falsity of the message. The research is of a qualitative nature and was carried out on a group of university school students (n = 60), which was divided into four separate small research groups. Students were aged 19 – 24 and were from four universities in the Middle and East part of Slovakia. Design of the research sample can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Introducing the pre-research sample

Research Phase	Number of Respondents
Pre-research (1st phase)	University students (n = 9)
Pre-research (2nd phase)	University students (n = 9)
Main research (3rd phase)	University students (n = 60)

Source: Own processing

Our own research consisted of three phases; two phases were part of the so-called preliminary research and one phase was part of the main research. The pre-investigation took place in October and November 2021 with the use of the qualitative focus group method. The pre-research discussed potential factors that may affect university students' willingness to share information online, via social media. The next phase of pre-research brought the categorisation of findings. Nine university students took part within discussions in both phases of pre-research.

The collection of data needed for main part of the research was carried out online between December and February 2022 among 60 university students. With the use of open discussion methods, the evaluation the factors that increase students' willingness to share online content has been realised. Design of the research can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Design of the research

Research Phase	Goal	Method	Research Sample
Pre-research (1st phase)	Identification the factors that increase students' willingness to share online content	Focus group	University students (n = 9)
Pre-research (2nd phase)	Categorisation of qualitative findings from focus groups	Focus group	University students (n = 9)
Main research	Evaluation of the factors that increase students' willingness to share online content	Open discussion method	University students (n = 60)

Source: Own processing

39   See: JIN, K. X.: *Keeping People Safe and Informed about the Coronavirus.* Released on 18th December 2021. [online]. [2023-08-10]. Available at: <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/12/coronavirus/#joint-statement>; SHU, C., SHIEBER, J.: *Facebook, Reddit, Google, LinkedIn, Microsoft, Twitter and YouTube Issue Joint Statement on Misinformation.* Released on 17th March 2020. [online]. [2023-08-10]. Available at: <https://techcrunch.com/2020/03/16/facebook-reddit-google-linkedin-microsoft-twitter-and-youtube-issue-joint-statement-on-misinformation/?guccounter=1>.
40   See: SHU, K. et al.: Fake News Detection on Social Media: A Data Mining Perspective. In *Explorer Newsletter*, 2017, Vol. 19, No. 1, p. 22-36.

The purpose of the open discussion method was exploring the ways respondents evaluate the online news and the aspects that tend to motivate their willingness to share online content of different types of online news. The course of our qualitative research was inspired by Loos et al. empirical study in which the authors researched the vulnerability of young people to fake news.[41]

In order to better manage the research, 60 students were divided into four smaller separate groups (n = 15). This has allowed us not only to create smaller and more intimate groups, but to capture the content of the statements in a real and reliable way. In the beginning students of each of the small groups were instructed to access six different news websites and carefully read all texts. Three of the researched texts were true and three were false. The partial objective was to find out whether students' willingness to share a message is affected by their belief in the truth or falsity of the message. Within the partial objective one main hypothesis was formulated:

H1: Students' willingness to share content on *Facebook* is primarily affected by their belief in the truth or falsity of the message.

Students could search the Internet, click and check *Wikipedia*, encyclopedias and other online information and sources. Further they were asked to answer several questions, including: "What convinced you that this news was true?" or "Would you share this message on *Facebook*? If so, why?" Open discussion methods produced several interesting findings. The whole research was conducted online, via the Zoom platform in the period October 2021 to February 2022. Research procedures were designed to protect students' privacy.

4 Results and Discussion

In the process of deciding to share/not to share content on *Facebook*, it is most important for most students that the message corresponds to what students just believe (33.32%). The second most common response when students were willing to share a message was when the message is a narrative carrier that students like (26.65%). The third most common response from students was with the option "I share it if the message corresponds to my current opinion" (23.32%). Students' willingness to share content on *Facebook* is finally affected by their belief in the truth or falsity of the message (16.66%). All results are shown in Figure 1.
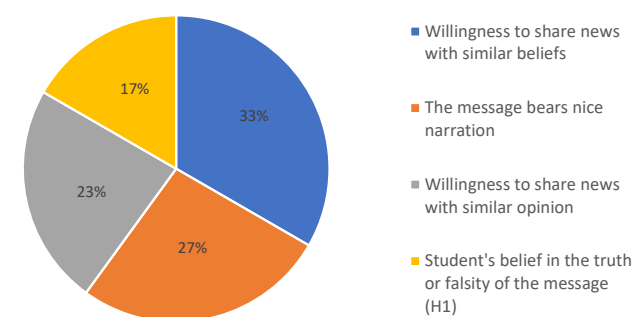

Figure 1: What affects students' willingness to share a message on Facebook the most
Source: Own processing

41   LOOS, E., IVAN, L., LEU, D.: "Save the Pacific Northwest Tree Octopus": A Hoax Revisited. Or: How Vulnerable Are School Children to Fake News? In *Information and Learning Sciences*, 2018, Vol. 119, No. 9, p. 514-528.

Identification and Classification of Factors That Stimulate Willingness of University Students to Share Content on Facebook

Via focus group methods (n = 9) we can confirm that the three most important factors to stimulate willingness of university students to share content on the social network Facebook are:

(1) *Willingness to share narratives.* Students like to share narratives. Within the focus group method, they state that they like that they become a source of "important news" as well as source of "interesting messages" for other people within *Facebook*. Researched students appreciate that the Internet has become a place where they can see specific or locally-oriented narratives (that regular media and other sources of information have not covered comprehensively). *"I consider as benefit those interesting narratives we can share directly with specific groups in which we are members,"* pointed out one respondent. This finding can be considered a warning signal, as in closed online groups where students meet to share their views and attitudes to the surrounding phenomena, there may be inappropriate dissemination of false messages. In mind we have so-called information bubbles, which focus on selected topics and ignore, falsify or even *"crush reliable and responsible sources of information"*[42] and information understood as ideologically cross-cutting. Moreover, in all four researched groups (n = 20) we can confirm that university students are ready to be a narrative source for other people within the Internet, if they "like a story". Similarly, if students[5] very much like stories, even 'weird' stories, they are ready to share. This finding agrees with Fisher's research findings, which talk, for example, about the increase in credibility and willingness to share messages if one perceives them as nice or interesting.[43] Likewise, Chadwick and Vaccari's study found that almost a third of their respondents shared a news story they either thought was made up when they saw it or knew was exaggerated.[44]

(2) *Willingness to share news with similar opinions.* Social media provide a platform for rapid and seamless access to information, becoming a common news source for millions of people[45] and the primary source of information for a large percentage of the population.[46] We can confirm that social media are common sources of information for younger respondents of our research. More of them state within the focus group that they do not read newspapers or watch television because the Internet is their only source of information. Based on this finding we consider the same source of information (i.e., *Facebook*) among research students as a negative. Students do not value, for example, access to the broadcast archives or the wide range of news services (news podcasts, news agency reports, short news reports in opinion-forming online media, etc.) that all are available online. Moreover, it seems that respondents do not see the homogeneity of their source of information as a problem, because they reach for sources *"that are not considered as manipulative"*. Within the focus group most students speak about good sources of information in relation to their own friends and relatives. We can see that our research findings correspond with the conclusions of other research, which also points to the search for a sense of belonging, following trends or a desire to maintain communication with peers among young people.[47] Let us add that the willingness to share news appealing to one's beliefs, which was found in our research set as the second

most frequent research variable, was also noted by, for example, Nickerson, who spoke about trust in fake news which can be built when the fake news confirms one's preexisting attitudes or hypotheses, i.e., confirmation bias.[48]

(3) *Willingness to share news with similar beliefs.* Within the focus group most university students state that *"if more people we consider to be opinion-forming talk about something, we will believe the information sooner"*. It can be seen that similar beliefs of others are important parts of students' lives; they literally look for opportunities to meet 'similar others'. Marwick pointed out one significant danger that occurs when people trust and share information that in some way support *"their connection with similar others"*. According to the author, *"bringing the individual closer to his/her immediate surroundings"* also leads to the person's willingness to believe and continue to share false information and narratives.[49] In short, because students often seek validation and approval from their peers on social media platforms, they may share content that aligns with the beliefs and values of their social circle; for example, to gain likes, comments, and shares. Speaking about negatives, users with the same beliefs similarly tend to be more encouraged in the online space by social actors and opinion-forming people, if, after all, users only minimally sympathise with them; this statement includes also people with radical ideas. The problem is, that these social actors or more or less radical opinion-forming people often contribute to the increase of disinformation in social media, to social fear in public spaces or to the polarisation of society. The example of this kind of use of a communication facility in the context of homogeneity in users' beliefs can be seen in the current anti-vaccination sentiment within the infodemic on social media.[50] Students looking for opportunities to meet 'similar others' are therefore considered as an essential exclamation mark in our research findings.

Hypothesis Verification: Students' Willingness to Share Content on Facebook Is Primarily Affected by Their Belief in the truth or Falsity of the Message

Contrary to our initial hypothesis, it appears that the belief in the truth or falsity of the message is not the primary driver of information-sharing behaviour. Thus, within the sub-objective the hypothesis among all researched students (n = 60) was not accepted.

Students' willingness to share content on Facebook is in most cases not primarily affected by their belief in the truthfulness or untruthfulness of the content. Surprisingly, we found high agreement in the findings (i.e., statistically negligible differences), which we recorded in four evenly separated research groups. Due to small statistical differences within the four research groups, the interpretation of the findings took place within the whole research sample.

Within the research findings it can be stated that respondents may be motivated to share content that resonates with their personal beliefs, even if they are unsure about its factual accuracy. It seems that while the veracity of content may still hold some sway, it is overshadowed by other compelling factors. One possible explanation for this deviation from our hypothesis is that the *Facebook* platform is a dynamic environment where various social and emotional factors come into play.[51] It seems that students' decisions to share content

42   CSEPELI, G. et al: *Disinformation and Science: A Survey of the Gullibility of Students with Regard to False Scientific News*. Released on 13th February 2022. [online]. [2023-08-10]. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/656300/EPRS_STU(2020)656300_EN.pdf>.
43   FISHER, R. J.: Social Desirability Bias and the Validity of Indirect Questioning. In *Journal of Consumer Research*, 1993, Vol. 20, No. 2, p. 303-315.
44   CHADWICK, A., VACCARI, CH.: *News Sharing on UK Social Media: Misinformation, Disinformation, and Correction*. Released on 9th May 2019. [online]. [2023-08-10]. Available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/37720>.
45   GUNTHER, A. C.: Biased Press or Biased Public? Attitudes Toward Media Coverage of Social Groups. In *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 1992, Vol. 56, No. 2, p. 147-167.
46   See: WESTERMAN, D., SPENCE, P. R., VAN DER HEIDE, P.: Social Media as Information Source: Recency of Updates and Credibility of Information. In *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 2013, Vol. 19, p. 171-183; COLEMAN, V.: Social Media as a Primary Source: A Coming of Age. In *Educause Review*, 2013, Vol. 48, No. 6, p. 60-61; MYERS, M. C., HAMILTON, J. F.: Social Media as Primary Source. In *Media History*, 2014, Vol. 20, No. 4, p. 431-444.
47   KUNSHCHIKOV, S. V., STROGANOV, V. B.: Transformation of the Specificity of the Political Manipulation in "New Media". In *Management Questions*, 2018, Vol. 6, No. 55, p. 7-12.

48   NICKERSON, R. S.: Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises. In *Review of General Psychology*, 1998, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 175-220.
49   MARWICK, A. E.: Why Do People Share Fake News? A Sociotechnical Model of Media Effects. In *Georgetown Law Technology Review*, 2018, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 474-512.
50   See: GERMANI, F., BILLER ANDORNO, N.: The Anti-Vaccination Infodemic on Social Media: A Behavioral Analysis. In *PLoS ONE*, 2021, Vol. 16, No. 3, Artcile No. e0247642; KIM, J., KIM, D., OH, A.: *Homogeneity-Based Transmissive Process to Model True and False News in Social Networks*. New York : Association for Computing Machinery, 2019, p. 18.
51   KRÁLIK, R. et al.: The Relevance of Therapeutic Approaches in Accompaniment for Social Work Students with Post-COVID-19 Syndrome. In *Acta Missiologica*, 2003, Vol. 17, No. 1, p. 97-106.

is the most influenced by the desire to share narratives online, by the need for social validation and peer approval. The third factor mentioned above suggests that students tend to share content that they believe will gain approval or likes from their friends and followers. This 'social validation' factor often outweighs the consideration of whether the content is factually correct. Additionally, the influence of algorithms and the filter bubble effect on *Facebook* cannot be discounted. The platform often presents users with content that reinforces students' existing beliefs and interests, which may further impact sharing behaviour. In this context, the 'truth of the news' becomes a secondary consideration compared to the desire of sharing narratives, shared opinions and news, and social validation.

In summary, the research suggests that the truth or falsity of content is just one piece of the puzzle when it comes to students' content sharing on *Facebook*. These findings emphasise the need for a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics that govern social media sharing behaviour, as well as the importance of promoting critical thinking and media literacy among students to navigate their online existence effectively.

Similarly, our research findings underscore the complexity of content sharing on social media platforms like *Facebook*. To gain a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon, future research should explore the interplay of various psychological, social, and algorithmic factors that contribute to the decision-making process of sharing. Understanding these dynamics is essential for both academic research and social media platforms' efforts to combat disinformation and promote responsible content sharing.

5 Conclusion

The huge potential of fake news on the Internet, where millions of web users can exchange their instant messages, is appreciated and seen only in the last few years. This can no longer be said of the manipulative potential of the Internet, to which experts have pointed out in recent years, speaking of a significant problem. The fact remains that approaching the truth is a highly subjective arena.

Based on the findings of our research, we state that the three most important factors to stimulate the willingness of researched university students to share content on Facebook are as follows. The willingness to share news able to attract attention of peers was found to be the most common. As for the second factor that stimulates the willingness of researched university students to share content on *Facebook*, it appears within contexts in which the message bears nice narration. The third most common factor was willingness to share news identical with beliefs and opinions of respondents. Within the working hypothesis a fourth factor was assumed, i.e., students' belief in the truth or falsity of the message, which was identified in the research group to the lowest extent. Thus, students' willingness to share content on *Facebook* is in most cases not primarily affected by their belief in the truthfulness or untruthfulness of the content. While truth or accuracy may play a role, it is not the dominant factor driving the sharing behaviour among students.

This indicates that at least other three variables may have a more substantial impact on students' decision to share content on social media platforms. Future research should delve into the other factors that were found to be more influential in shaping students' sharing behaviour, providing insights into the complexities of online information sharing. Thus, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics behind content sharing on *Facebook*, deeper future research is needed, to focus at least on 1) the willingness to share narratives, 2) the willingness to share news able to attract the attention of the 'similar ones' and 3) the willingness to share news appealing to one's pre-existing beliefs.

Based on our research, it can be stated that easy access to information and knowledge on the Internet is co-determined by the time people spend under the influence of fake news. Therefore, it is necessary to consider the examined factors as part of the individual status and the resulting personal attitudes, values and social opinions that are among the researched youth, and to consider the possibilities of how we can reduce the negative findings and better manage them. Recognising the complexity of these dynamics is crucial for understanding and addressing the challenges of disinformation and responsible content sharing in the digital age. Education and media literacy initiatives that empower students to critically assess information are essential components of addressing this issue.

The common research warning reminds us that willingness to share online content (even unverified information) is considered as risky behaviour on the Internet; today's experts are even talking about it as a global problem.[52] The necessity of testing students' confidence in disinformation and willingness to share this kind of information seems to be a real necessity, based on the recent pandemic situation and the availability and ubiquity of social media. In our opinion, it is important to understand how users (and especially young users) view false information, and identify how to create social media content as well as design social media networking sites in order to minimise the undesirable and clearly negative effects and consequences.

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