
RELIABILITY OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS AND ONLINE NEWS AS SOURCE OF INFORMATION FOR CONSUMERS

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Abstract

The development of the internet has changed radically the way people communicate and inform themselves. The traditional information sources and communication of news have happened with the help of classic media such as television, radio or newspaper. The development of the internet and especially the appearance of the social media, have increased the interaction between consumers, allowing them to communicate in real time, from one part of the world to another, overpassing space barriers. Moreover, in the era of social networks, the online users were allowed to be content creators, by freely posting different information, opinions and comments on the internet. In opposition to the classic media, where all published information has passed through an editorial check, in the present time when users are content creators, anyone is allowed to post anything without any further control. This situation has led to the appearance of fake news, fake reviews and other similar uncontrolled information in the public online space. In this paper there are presented the results of a research about the attitude of consumers related to fake news and online information sources. With the help of the discriminant analysis, there are presented the differences of opinion for people older and younger than forty years. The results show that fake news is a general phenomenon and that the two generations have similar perception for several situations. The main differences for the perception of consumers are related to social networks, of which the young generation is fonder of it. The people older than 40 years have stronger believes related to the improvement of legislation regarding the information posted on the internet and regarding the check of the read information.

Keywords

Social media platforms, online communication, fake news, consumer, information.

JEL Classification

M10, M31.

Introduction

Online communication and social media networks have had a crucial role on the nowadays interaction between individuals, having both advantages and disadvantages. The positive contribution of online communication refers to a higher degree of interaction, the real time communication and an easier way to overcome space barriers. The negative aspects refer mainly to the quick spreading of false or untrue information (Jang & Kim, 2018), the misuse of private data posted in the online environment (Haynes, et al., 2016) and the addictive use

of social media networks (Baccarella, et al.; 2018). The development of fake news was possible, because of the misuse of the feature of social media networks to allow each consumer to freely create, write and post any information on the internet. In opposition to classic media, where each information was checked in the editorial office of the publication, nowadays any message can now be posted with the help of social media and other content websites. What initially has been a great advantage of online users, to express their opinions and thoughts with the help of the internet, has become nowadays a big disadvantage because of the fake, misleading content posted online. Several authors point out the fact that the biggest amount of fake news, is posted intentionally with the purpose of gaining financial, economic or ideological gain (Jang et al. 2018). In spite of the fact, that it is difficult to quantify the effect of fake news, the public opinion is concerned about the confusion it can create by undermining the right of consumers to be well informed (Jang & Kim, 2018). In the following paper there are analysed the perception of the consumers related to the trust in online information and the phenomenon of fake news.

Literature review

The role of Internet and social media in the communication of individuals

Social media represents a very important activity of the present consumer and it is a source of information and a media channel for following and spreading latest news and trends worldwide (Kang, Lee, 2017). Over the past decade, social media has registered a significant increase with estimates of more than 32% of the global population using social media platforms in 2016 (Emarketer, 2016). It is expected that the number of worldwide users to reach a monthly number of more than 3.02 billion active social media users in 2021 (Statista, 2018). Facebook is the first social network, which had more than 1 billion monthly active users at the beginning of the year 2017 (Chaffey, 2019).

Social media has undeniably transformed the way people communicate and it has created new opportunities for individuals and brands. Social media allows a higher interactivity between users and besides, they can generate content and develop their online behavior (Szolnokia et al., 2018; Pelau & Acatrinei, 2019). The users can express an opinion about the news and information posted on social media by liking, sharing or commenting on them. These number of likes, shares, and comments received by a post, are used as a tool for measuring the engagement of users (Kumar et al., 2018). This information are useful for companies and advertisers for improving their communication with the customers, by having an impact on the online presence of companies, their marketing activity, product development and other consumer oriented activities (Scheiner, et al., 2016). The major changes brought by social media platforms are related to a direct communication between companies and their target audiences by developing a more personal interaction and because of the fact that messages can be sent in real time. The disadvantage of these developments is the fact that not only consumer communication, but also negative news is spread very quickly. The change in communication generated by social media has modified the way users search and trust the information they encounter on these platforms. Moreover, the content posted by different entities can be misleading, therefore users must pay attention and trust what they read only after double checking the information.

The fake news phenomenon

It has been proven that fake news generates a complex impact and implications on public matters (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), being a widespread phenomenon of the digital information age. Nowadays, the fake news phenomenon refers to the online publication of intentionally or knowingly false information (Klein & Wueller, 2017). Fake news is generated by people, “fakesters”, who create an article with fake content often injected to an original real and trusted news content (Gravanis, et al., 2019). The term “fake news” has gained popularity especially after the 2016 US election and it was even voted as the “word

of the year” by Collins Language Publications, as its usage increased by 365% since 2016 (Hunt, 2017).

While the concept isn’t new – false information and mistruths have been circulating for as long as stories have been told – smartphones, the internet and social media have given it a new lease of life and a new high-speed distribution mechanism. Modern technology and digital communication enable any news to spread like wildfire, from one consumer to another, before anyone’s has analyzed its accuracy. The rapid distribution of fake news is due to the widespread use of Social Media which offer a proper ground for immediate sharing and circulating news with the users having no means of quality checking over the shared content (Gravanis et al., 2019). According to Nielsen & Cherubini (2016), more news organizations use social media platforms for editorial content and as well for evaluations of journalists’ performance. Knobloch-Westerwick et al. (2005) demonstrated that people select specific online news article more often if there are explicit recommendations.

Research methodology

The conducted quantitative research aims to determine if age has a significant impact on the spreading degree of fake news and on the perception of social media platforms. In this perspective, throughout December 2018- January 2019, a multiple topic survey has been completed by 252 individuals, out of which 161 with ages younger than 40 years (defined as group G1) and 91 with ages older than 40 years (defined as group G2). The sample includes 132 women and 120 men, all of them having residency in the urban areas. Moreover, the survey has tested 23 items related to the new means of communication, social media and fake news. The respondents had to evaluate the included items based on a 7-points Likert scale.

The reliability of the data is given by the Cronbach’s Alpha=0.718 for the dataset related to fake news. Furthermore, with the help of the discriminant analysis we have tested the different perception of individuals regarding the surveyed topics depending on their age.

Results and discussion

The results of our survey show that there are different perceptions regarding the evaluated items depending on the age group of the respondents. From the 23 analysed items, 8 present significant differences having $p < 0.10$, while 18 have registered similar perceptions in both age intervals. As can be observed in table no. 1, the 8 items which have generated different evaluations among the two age groups are related to the understanding degree of social media platforms as information and communication sources, the trust associated with the online encountered information and the perception of fake news and the risks it implies.

The item which points out the highest difference between the two analysed age intervals refers to the evaluation of social media as a platform which allows individuals to access content and information based on their personal interests ($F=22.402$, $p=0.000$). Individuals younger than 40 years seem to better understand the characteristics associated with the new means of communication, especially with social media platforms, as well as the possibilities and opportunities these tools offer ($M_{G1}=4.86$). On the other hand, respondents older than 40 years have a higher reticence regarding social media as source of information and personalized content ($M_{G2}=3.86$). This affirmation is also supported by three other items. The perception of Facebook as a great way to interact with other people is more widespread among people younger than 40 years ($F=14.788$, $p=0.000$, $M_{G1}=4.81$) in comparison to individuals older than 40 years ($M_{G2}=3.90$). Moreover, younger respondents have registered a higher acceptance of social platforms as important sources of information ($F=10.235$, $p=0.002$, $M_{G1}=5.11$) and perceive online groups or communities as a great way to gather information of interest ($F=7.803$, $p=0.006$, $M_{G1}=4.72$).

Table no. 1 Discriminant analysis values based on grouping variable age

| Item | Mean G1 | Mean G2 | SD G1 | SD G2 | F (1,250) | p |
|--|---------|---------|-------|-------|-----------|------|
| The information and content available on social networks correspond to your personal interests | 4.86 | 3.86 | 1.50 | 1.79 | 22.402 | .000 |
| Social platforms, like Facebook, are a great way to interact with other people | 4.81 | 3.90 | 1.70 | 1.98 | 14.788 | .000 |
| Social platforms are an important source of information regarding events and trending topics | 5.11 | 4.42 | 1.55 | 1.79 | 10.235 | .002 |
| Participating in groups/ communities on social networks represents a great way to access information of interest | 4.72 | 4.07 | 1.73 | 1.83 | 7.803 | .006 |
| I trust all the information I read and do not check if these are true or not | 2.02 | 2.41 | 1.31 | 1.73 | 4.091 | .044 |
| I trust the information posted on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram | 3.36 | 2.93 | 1.63 | 1.64 | 4.038 | .046 |
| I believe that the legislation regarding the publishing of false information (fake news) should be improved | 5.91 | 6.27 | 1.43 | 1.28 | 3.970 | .047 |
| I often check the truth of the information read on social media | 4.94 | 4.56 | 1.57 | 2.05 | 2.761 | .098 |
| Most of the content and information published on social networks presents a high level of trust | 3.26 | 3.01 | 1.46 | 1.56 | 1.689 | .195 |
| I do not trust websites that in the past have posted false information | 5.81 | 5.47 | 2.24 | 1.75 | 1.556 | .213 |
| I tend to read stories and articles with sensational titles, such as Breaking News | 3.47 | 3.81 | 2.01 | 2.13 | 1.532 | .217 |
| I'm bothered by the existence of articles which include untrue information | 5.89 | 6.12 | 1.51 | 1.45 | 1.339 | .248 |
| Social networks are a tool for disseminating fake news | 5.31 | 5.09 | 1.39 | 1.60 | 1.271 | .261 |
| On the Internet, I only read news posted on some renowned sites | 4.78 | 4.54 | 1.71 | 1.93 | 1.032 | .311 |
| I can distinguish real information from fake ones (fake news) | 5.01 | 4.82 | 1.33 | 1.67 | 1.018 | .314 |
| Blogs, publications and online newspapers are an excellent source of information and present a high level of trust | 4.32 | 4.10 | 1.55 | 1.73 | 1.000 | .318 |
| I would be willing to pay in order to have access to real information | 3.62 | 3.83 | 1.90 | 2.15 | .629 | .428 |
| I often read articles which include false information (fake news) | 4.21 | 4.06 | 1.74 | 1.81 | .427 | .514 |
| Social platforms are used to manipulate the public opinion | 5.00 | 4.87 | 1.49 | 1.66 | .386 | .535 |
| Often, I believe certain information, which turn out to be untrue | 3.16 | 3.29 | 1.66 | 1.70 | .343 | .559 |
| I often check the truth of the information read on the internet | 4.77 | 4.70 | 1.52 | 1.80 | .097 | .755 |
| I would be willing to pay a fee for the removal of false information from social networks | 3.26 | 3.34 | 1.97 | 1.98 | .094 | .759 |
| I often check the truth of the information read in the written press | 4.31 | 4.36 | 1.75 | 1.82 | .039 | .844 |

Observation: G1 are people younger than 40 years; G2 are people older than 40 years

Source: Own research results

The interpretation of the registered results referring to the trust related to online information or news and the checking of the online encountered content emphasises that younger people are more reticent when reading online articles or news stories (F=4.091, p=0.044,

$M_{G1}=2.02$) and have a higher tendency of checking the online available facts ($F=2.761$, $p=0.098$, $M_{G1}=4.94$), in comparison to individuals older than 40 years ($M_{G1}=2.41$). In spite of the differences, both generations had an under-average value for this item, so they don't trust all the information they read. The same is valid for the information posted on social media networks ($F=4.038$, $p=0.046$), where both generations have an under-average evaluation. It must be mentioned that the young generation ($M_{G1}=3.36$) rather believes the posts on social media networks in comparison to people older than 40 years ($M_{G2}=2.93$). Both generations consider that the legislation for combating the fake news should be improved, having an over average value for this item, but there a significantly higher believe in this sense, for the people older than 40 years ($F=3.970$, $p=0.047$, $M_{G1}=5.91$, $M_{G2}=6.27$). Both generations have an under average value for the affirmation related to the trust in the information posted on social media networks ($F=1.689$, $p=0.195>0.10$, $M_{G1}=3.26$, $M_{G2}=3.01$), and the young generations affirms that they check the truth of the existing posts ($F=2.761$, $p=0.098>0.10$, $M_{G1}=4.94$, $M_{G2}=4.56$). Both generations affirms that they do not trust sites, that have posted fake news in the past ($F=1.556$, $p=0.213>0.10$, $M_{G1}=5.81$, $M_{G2}=5.47$) and that they rely mainly on information read on renowned sites ($F=1.032$, $p=0.311>0.10$, $M_{G1}=4.78$, $M_{G2}=4.54$). All respondents state that they do have the ability to distinguish real information from fake news ($F=1.018$, $p=0.314>0.10$, $M_{G1}=5.01$, $M_{G2}=4.82$) and they seldom believe in information, which happens to be untrue ($F=0.343$, $p=0.559>0.10$, $M_{G1}=3.16$, $M_{G2}=3.29$). Both groups have an average estimation of the frequency of getting in touch with fake news ($F=0.427$, $p=0.514>0.10$, $M_{G1}=4.21$, $M_{G2}=4.06$).

Referring to the similar perception of the evaluated items, there can be observed that individuals belonging to both age intervals would be willing to pay in order to remove fake information from the virtual environment ($F=0.629$, $p=0.428>0.10$, $M_{G1}=3.62$, $M_{G2}=3.83$) and have online access to real facts and data. Moreover, the members of both age categories are convinced that social media platforms facilitate the spreading of fake news ($F=1.271$, $p=0.261$, $M_{G1}=5.31$, $M_{G2}=5.09$) and have expressed their disappointment regarding the existence of false information ($F=1.339$, $p=0.248$, $M_{G1}=5.89$, $M_{G2}=6.12$).

Conclusions

Social media has become part of our daily routine both at personal level as well as in our professional activities. The developed tools offer users the possibility of sharing, commenting or co-creating content and of interacting with each other. On the other hand, companies use social media platforms to better integrate their marketing and communication strategies. Due to its constantly growing popularity, social media has attracted the attention of researchers and specialists, who point out that besides the positive aspects of these new means of communication, there are also risks associated with the use of online platforms (Tantau et al., 2018).

In this context, the conducted study has been carried out with the objective of analysing if individuals' perception regarding social media and fake news depends on age. In terms of the perception and awareness related to the existence of fake news, the generated results emphasise that there are no significant differences between the two defined age groups. Moreover, individuals belonging to both age intervals have expressed their willingness to pay for tools which target the removal of fake news.

On the other hand, the results of our survey show that younger people are more aware of the functionalities and facilities of social media platforms. Moreover, individuals younger than 40 years have a stronger sense regarding the risks associated with online platforms and declare having a lower level of trust in information accessed online in comparison to people older than 40, who have a lower tendency of checking the online encountered content.

Previous researches have shown that demographic criteria like age, gender and education level can influence the spreading degree of fake news (Tantau et al., 2018; Pop, Ene 2019). The results of researches referring to social media and fake news probably depend on the debated topic and on the environment in which these have been carried out. Moreover, in this survey, the direct affirmation has been measured, in comparison to other studies, where the reaction of the consumers has been evaluated. To sum up, the conducted survey has revealed perception differences between individuals younger than 40 years and those belonging to the plus 40 years age group in terms of their perception regarding social media as an important information source, the trust level associated with the online content and the awareness related to social media functionalities and instruments.

In order to better understand the impact of social media on social, economic or political events and the acceptance degree of these new means of communication among individuals, further researches need to be carried out.

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