CONSUMERS' PERCEPTION ON FAKE NEWS

Corina Pelău[1] and Mihai Ionuț Pop[2]
[1] [2] The Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania
E-mail: corina.pelau@fabiz.ase.ro; E-mail: mihai.pop@digitix.ro

Abstract

Social media networks have changed the way individuals communicate with each other. One of the new features of the communication on social media networks is the user-generated content. Anyone having a social media account can post any type of information on his social account, having the possibility to disseminate different opinions, feelings or comments. The main disadvantage of the user-generated content is the impossibility to check all the information which appear in the online public space. This development has favoured the appearance of the fake news phenomenon, which has affected many domains of our everyday life. In this paper there are presented the results of a research about the attitude and perception of consumers regarding the appearance of fake news. Most of the respondents are aware of the existence of the fake news phenomenon and most of them consider that the development of social media networks has favoured their appearance. The results also show that many consumers believe that others are more affected by fake news in comparison to themselves. Besides fake news is frequently associated with unknown publications and sensational headlines.

Keywords

Fake news, consumer, social media networks, perception, online information source, trust.

JEL Classification

M10, M31

Introduction

The world we live in is marked by extremes, whether we refer to social, economic, ideological, religious or political aspects. Societies around the world are divided as a result of internal or external disputes caused by social injustice, limited access to raw resources, unfair distribution of income and of course the inability of governments to adopt sustainable development policies and programs that directly contribute to the elimination of social imbalances and to the improvement of living standards. Even though, all these negative aspects have always existed, in recent decades we can observe an increase of the

dissatisfaction level of people around the world and an increasing need for action within the civil society. One of the main factors that led to this desire for manifestation and action is related to the emergence of social networks. These allow individuals, regardless of age, gender, educational and professional background or medical condition, to share their opinions, feelings and experiences without any verification or evaluation of the published information. This contradicts the journalistic deontology and the traditional journalistic act.

Despite the myriad benefits of social media platforms in informing users, while allowing them to interact based on interpersonal relationships, common interests or ideas, there are also threats associated with these new means of communication. In recent years, many of these have attracted the attention of authorities and institutions around the world. Moreover, some renowned companies managing social media platforms and consumer data have become subject of international investigations which have examined the role of social media platforms in influencing legislative processes, in intimidation or threating actions directed towards public figures, in attacks focused on certain public institutions, industries or companies, in instigation of street movements or protests and in many other events that endanger the stability of nations. The analysis of these reprehensible events has highlighted the existence of manipulation processes concentrated on disseminating fake news with the purpose of generating an artificial impact on online users. Thus, one of the main objectives on international agendas is related to the development and implementation of the necessary measures in the fight against fake news.

To better understand the origin and spreading patterns of this negative phenomenon, we have set out to conduct a quantitative research in order to test some of the criteria underlying the development of a fake news detection model.

Literature review

The development of social media networks and internet communication has changed radically the way in which people communicate with each other and inform themselves. Moreover, it has eased the way individuals share and develop their knowledge, while allowing them to become news co-creators by sharing news and information on social platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or Youtube (Hara and Sanfilippo, 2016, Orellana-Rogriguez and Keane, 2018). Besides the positive aspects related to these rapid and transparent means of communication, the trustworthiness of information is one of the main negative aspects related to these developments. Tambuscino et al. (2015) suggest that one of the main problems associated with social media is related to the spreading of inaccurate information, while Katzer et al. (2009) emphasize that the increased number of fake news victims is due to the large amount of information available on social media platforms and in the online environment. Furthermore, the probability of becoming a victim of fake news increases when there is a high uncertainty related to the encountered topic, such as a crisis situation (Spence et al., 2016). In opposition to the era of classic news channels, where each published information had to be checked and assumed by an editorial office, nowadays each author has the possibility to publish online any piece of information he/she desires (Lee et al., 2017). In this new context, Orellana-Rogriguez and Keane (2018) assert that nearly all important news providers use Twitter to promote their published articles with the objective of raising awareness and increasing engagement, despite the concern related to the fact that the journalistic integrity and objectivity may suffer under the pressure of receiving appreciation through social media interactions (de Zúñiga et al., 2018).

Although, individuals perceive online encountered information with mistrust and do not completely rely on it, they still tend to be influenced by the high amount of news available in the virtual environment (Kanoh, 2018). The information overload to which present consumers are exposed to, makes it difficult for them, to evaluate the truth behind each information they receive, especially in the situation in which fabricated stories are promoted with the purpose

of deceiving the public opinion for ideological and/or economic and financial gain (Jang et al., 2018).

The spreading of false information has attracted a lot of attention after the 2016 US Presidential Election and after the 2018 Brexit (Ko et al., 2019). While, Han (2017) suggests that it is impossible to fully prevent the publishing and dissemination of fake news, several researches and methods designed for the identification of fake news, have shown that an important aspect in filtering the real news from the fake ones can be done with the help of the human intervention and algorithms (Figueira and Oliveira, 2017). Therefore, several criteria are needed for the identification of fake news, one of them referring to the trustworthiness of the author, the website or the social media account that publishes a certain information (Pop, 2020).

Several researches have shown that consumers have the tendency to believe the first impression of an item. In the case of information, if the first impression is to trust a fake information, then it depends very much on the cognitive ability of the user, to evaluate and to change the false idea through its thinking and value pattern (Ross et al., 1975; De Keersmaecker and Roets, 2017). On the long term, a higher perceived credibility of an information determines a positive and trustworthy image of the author or of the social media account (named source in the following) which has published the information.

Similar as in the case of traditional media, the readers have the tendency to believe more the authors or publications they know. The higher the popularity and the better the image of the publication, the higher is the probability that a reader will believe the presented information. Taking into consideration the fact that classic publications have been replaced by social media authors (influencers, bloggers), the trust level associated with a piece of news depends to a higher extent to the image of its author or source.

Methodology

The objective of our research is to determine the consumers' general perception on fake news. More precisely, we have analyzed the general opinion on the appearance of fake news, the possible factors influencing fake news and the opinion of the consumer about the possibility of being manipulated through fake news. In order to find out this information, we have applied a questionnaire on a sample of 370 respondents with different demographic characteristics. In this article, we have analyzed with the help of the discriminant analysis in SPSS 20 the differences of perception between consumer younger than 40 years (young consumers) and consumers older than 40 years (old consumers). The second part of the analysis has been focused on the similarities and differences of perception between women and men.

Results and discussion

The results of the discriminant analysis have shown that there are more significant differences between the two age groups in comparison to gender. Both age groups consider that the public opinion has been invaded by fake news, but there is a significant higher believe in the case of the people younger than 40 years in comparison to the people older than 40 years ($F=4.509$, $p=0.034$, $M_{young}=5.93>5.63=M_{old}$). In opposition to this, the older generation has in a significant way a stronger believe that social media networks are responsible for the phenomenon of fake news ($F=4.774$, $p=0.030$, $M_{young}=5.24<5.58=M_{old}$). Regarding the manipulation done through fake news, there are no significant differences between the two age groups. In spite of that, the people older than 40 years rather believe that they know people who have been manipulated with the help of fake news ($F=0.106$, $p=0.745>0.1$, $M_{young}=4.93<5.00=M_{old}$), while the younger consumers believe less that they can be manipulated with fake information ($F=2.395$, $p=0.123$, $M_{young}=5.07>4.79=M_{old}$). Younger people also believe that they can identify more easily fake news than older people do ($F=3.984$, $p=0.047$, $M_{young}=5.35>5.06=M_{old}$). Regarding the past activity, older people

consider that they have been manipulated by fake news, than younger people do (F=3.962, p=0.047, M_{young}=5.52<3.94=M_{old}). Both age groups consider with no significant differences that fake news includes sensational headline (F=0.006, p=0.938, M_{young}=5.57; M_{old}=5.56) and that popular and known journalists don't publish fake news (F=0.011, p=0.916, M_{young}=4.94; M_{old}=4.92). In opposition to this, young people rather believe that fake news is promoted by unknown publications (F=4.141, p=0.043, M_{young}=5.40>5.06=M_{old}). There are similar over average results regarding the willingness to pay for access to quality content (M_{young}=4.72; M_{old}=4.72). These results can be observed in table no. 1.

Table no. 1 Fake News perception depending on age

	M_{young}	M_{old}	F	p
Public opinion has been invaded by fake news	5.93	5.63	4.509	.034
Social media platforms are responsible for the appearance of false news	5.24	5.58	4.774	.030
I know people who are victims of fake news content	4.93	5.00	.106	.745
I don't think I can be manipulated by fake news	5.07	4.79	2.395	.123
I can identify fake news	5.35	5.06	3.984	.047
Fake news content includes sensational headlines	5.57	5.56	.006	.938
Fake news content is promoted by unknown publications	5.40	5.06	4.141	.043
Popular authors/ journalists do not write fake news articles	4.94	4.92	.011	.916
I would be willing to pay to have access to quality content	4.72	4.72	.000	.994
I consider that I was the victim of a manipulation through fake news	3.52	3.94	3.962	.047

As many of the recent topics, there are no significant differences in the perception of the two genders. The only significant difference is related to the fact, that women believe more that social media networks are responsible for the appearance of the fake news phenomenon (F=6.185, p=0.013, M_{women}=5.55>5.18=M_{men}). Men rather believe that they cannot be manipulated by fake news (M_{men}=5.08>4.86=M_{women}), that they can identify fake news (M_{men}=5.33>5.16=M_{women}) and that they know other people who have been manipulated by fake news (M_{men}=5.08>4.83=M_{women}), without having significant differences in comparison to women. Both genders believe that fake news are promote by unknown publications (M_{men}=5.32; M_{women}=5.24) and that they have sensational headlines (M_{men}=5.60; M_{women}=5.54).

Table no. 2 Fake News perception depending on gender

	M_{women}	M_{men}	F	p
Public opinion has been invaded by fake news	5.87	5.78	.443	.506
Social media platforms are responsible for the appearance of false news	5.55	5.18	6.185	.013
I know people who are victims of fake news content	4.83	5.08	1.593	.208
I don't think I can be manipulated by fake news	4.86	5.08	1.744	.187
I can identify fake news	5.16	5.33	1.492	.223
Fake news content includes sensational headlines	5.54	5.60	.132	.717
Fake news content is promoted by unknown publications	5.24	5.32	.236	.628
Popular authors/ journalists do not write fake news articles	5.03	4.83	1.657	.199
I would be willing to pay to have access to quality content	4.77	4.67	.250	.617
I consider that I was the victim of a manipulation through fake news	3.65	3.69	.032	.858

Conclusions

The results of our research show that people are aware of the existence of fake news and the fact that social media networks are responsible for the development of fake news. It is also interesting to observe that older people, who use less social media and women consider them responsible for the appearance of this phenomenon. This fact was confirmed also in other previous studies, where women and older people has reacted less to sensational distorted information on social media (Pelău and Acatrinei, 2019; Tantau et al., 2018). Another important aspect is the fact that people rather believe that others are more easily manipulated by fake content, while especially young people and men consider that it doesn't happen to them.

All categories of consumers/users agree with the fact that fake news include most of the time sensational headlines, they are usually promoted by unknown websites and in the same time they don't believe that popular journalists write fake news. Taking into consideration the fact that known, familiar or popular are subjective concepts, we aim to analyze further in the future the reaction of consumers' to this.

The phenomenon of fake news is and will be a hot topic in the next years, as it affects many domains of our everyday life such as politics, business and economics and also health issues as it was proven in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic. For this reason, it is important to understand and research the factors behind fake news in order to be able to develop algorithms or legal procedures in order to stop the spreading of fake content. From a consumers' perspective, it is also important to raise the awareness of the society of this possibility in order to develop in time cognitive patterns for the identification of fake news.

Acknowledgement

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