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Who believes political fake news? The role of conspiracy mentality, patriotism, perceived threat to freedom, media literacy and concern for disinformation

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Who believes political fake news? The role of conspiracy mentality, patriotism, perceived threat to freedom, media literacy and concern for disinformation

Abstract

Purpose

Understanding individual susceptibility to political fake news is critical because fake news can target specific psychological profiles of vulnerable individuals. Consequently, this research examines five individual risk (i.e., susceptibility) and resilience (i.e., protective) factors, conspiracy mentality, patriotism, perceived threat to freedom, media literacy and concern for disinformation, to determine if they inform belief in political fake news and subsequently, to what degree belief impacts private engagement with political fake news.

Design/Methodology/Approach

Using a fictional political fake news stimulus, we conducted a deductive thematic analysis of 10 semi-structured interviews and an online survey of 722 UK citizens analysed using structural equation modelling.

Findings

Conspiracy mentality and patriotism were positively associated with belief in political fake news, while media literacy and concern for disinformation were negatively associated with belief in political fake news. Perceived threat to freedom was a strong theme in the qualitative data but had no statistical effect on belief in political fake news. Belief in political fake news was positively associated with further engagement with the fake news story, acting as a mediator in the model.

Originality/value

Distinct from previous research that focuses on partisanship and sharing behaviour, this research forwards a model underpinned by Social Identity Theory to build an integrated understanding of political fake news belief. The results demonstrate that political identity motivations beyond partisanship are salient when examining individual susceptibility to

political fake news, and that belief in political fake news plays a core role in understanding subsequent private engagement with the story.

Keywords: political fake news, disinformation, conspiracy mentality, patriotism, social media, belief, Social Identity Theory

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1. Introduction

The rise of digital media, particularly social media platforms, has changed the way citizens obtain news in democratic societies (Vraga *et al.*, 2015). Individuals are increasingly sourcing or being passively exposed to news on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, but these sites lack news media's journalistic standards for determining the accuracy of what they publish (Lazer *et al.*, 2018, Reisach, 2021). Consequently, social media platforms are littered with fake news, which borrows and 'bastardizes the credibility and legitimacy that the public has associated with the language, format, and feel of real news' (Tandoc, 2019, p.3).

The proliferation of fake news on social media platforms is problematic because news plays a unique role in democratic societies: it informs citizens to make 'sound democratic decisions' (Vraga *et al.*, 2015, p.42). Beliefs informed by disinformation may thus impede the performance of key social institutions (Hameleers, 2022, Pennycook *et al.*, 2018). This impediment is particularly pertinent when individuals are exposed to political fake news, which typically aims to generate partisan tension or nationalistic fervour (Anthony and Moulding, 2019, Rupar *et al.*, 2021) by playing on ideological beliefs to create a sense of threat to freedom (Ecker *et al.*, 2022, Faragó *et al.*, 2020). Political fake news may discredit certain politicians or states, aim to influence democratic outcomes, or incite violence for political benefit (Tandoc, 2019).

Given the significant social ramifications of political fake news, researchers have expended considerable effort to understand why some individuals are more susceptible to believing political fake news than others. This research examines individual factors as diverse as fear, conspiracy mentality, political ideology, and worldview (Baptista and Gradim, 2022). The influence of these individual factors is explained by psychological mechanisms such as cognitive dissonance, motivated reasoning, processing fluency, and identity expression (Ecker *et al.*, 2022). Much of this research, however, examines individual risk and resilience factors in isolation, which limits the conceptual impact of the field (Bryanov and Vziatysheva, 2021). Risk factors represent elements that contribute to one's *susceptibility* to believing fake news, while resilience factors represent elements that contribute to one's *protection* from believing fake news. Thus, van der Linden (2022, p.462) has recently called

for future research to offer 'a more integrated theoretical account of susceptibility to misinformation'.

Using Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979, 1986) as an explanatory framework, we draw on the disparate research on fake news susceptibility to build and test a model of what makes individuals susceptible or resilient to believing political fake news, and subsequently engaging with fake news. Specifically, we draw on the unique attributes of political fake news to select three risk factors and two resilience factors respectively (*conspiracy mentality*, *patriotism*, *perceived threat to freedom, media literacy* and *concern for disinformation*) to investigate resilience to believing political fake news. We further examine whether belief in political fake news then predicts private engagement behaviour, specifically clicking on a weblink to read the story more deeply.

This research makes three key contributions to the field of disinformation. First, we forward a model of individual dynamics underpinned by Social Identity Theory to build a more integrated understanding of political fake news belief. This model takes a broad view of political attitudes, extending beyond partisanship, to investigate what elements of political identity inform responses to political fake news. Second, we empirically demonstrate the core role of belief in understanding subsequent engagement with political fake news. Finally, unlike previous research that examines engagement solely by examining sharing behaviour, we focus on a potentially more worrying and concealed form of engagement: private engagement with political fake news.

2. Literature Review

Fake news is 'fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent' (Lazer *et al.*, 2018, p.1094). Political fake news is a sub-set of fake news that is typically negative in tone, aiming to generate partisan tension or incite nationalistic fervour (Anthony and Moulding, 2019, Rupar *et al.*, 2021). It plays on ideological beliefs to create a sense of threat to the freedom of individuals (Ecker *et al.*, 2022, Faragó *et al.*, 2020), and often contains conspiratorial elements that suggest powerful forces are working to implement evil plans (Anthony and Moulding, 2019). This form of fake

news became more prevalent in 2016 during the UK Brexit Referendum and US Presidential

Election and intensified in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic and US Presidential Election

(Pennycook and Rand, 2021). Most recently, the outbreak of war in Europe has promulgated

extensive political fake news to influence perceptions of Russia's invasion of Ukraine

(Baptista and Gradim, 2022).

Political fake news has the power to impede democratic functioning, but only if individuals

believe its contents (Bryanov and Vziatysheva, 2021). Pennycook and Rand (2021) propose

that there are two distinct conceptualisations of belief in fake news. The first

conceptualisation examines whether individuals can discern between true and fake news

(Pennycook and Rand, 2021). Measuring discernment thus captures the overall accuracy of

an individual's beliefs (Pennycook and Rand, 2021). The second conceptualisation examines

holistic belief, which is the extent to which an individual believes the news (Pennycook and

Rand, 2021). Measuring an individual's average belief in true and fake news captures a more

global bias in whether news is believed (Pennycook and Rand, 2021). Collectively, belief is a

critical outcome to assess the impact of fake news.

To determine which individuals are susceptible to believing fake news, extant research has

investigated a vast range of individual factors and mechanisms that might influence

judgements of belief and accuracy. One prominent stream of research investigates the

impact of political motivations on belief, arguing that individuals are motivated to engage in

'identity-protective cognition' via motivated reasoning (Pennycook and Rand, 2021, p.389).

Motivated reasoning is biased information processing that allows individuals to avoid

cognitive dissonance and accept information in accordance with their worldview. Although

political identity and motivated reasoning do not impede truth discernment, individuals are

more likely to believe news that aligns with their beliefs and identity and reject news that

deviates from their beliefs and identity (Baptista and Gradim, 2022). However, political

attitudes alone cannot explain belief in fake news (Sindermann *et al.*, 2020).

Another prominent stream of extant research investigates whether cognitive styles inform

belief in fake news (Bryanov and Vziatysheva, 2021). Bryanov and Vziatysheva (2021)

identify that a lack of analytical thinking makes individuals susceptible to believing fake

news. This is explained by dual-process models of information processing, which propose that individuals will sometimes assess information using an intuitive process rather than a rational process (Bryanov and Vziatysheva, 2021). Cognitive styles such as dogmatism, faith in intuition, open-minded thinking, need for cognition, religious fundamentalism, and emotional processing all impact analytical thinking and thus susceptibility to believing fake news (Bryanov and Vziatysheva, 2021). Further, more media literate individuals are less likely to believe fake news because they are more able to accurately discern between real and disinforming content (Hameleers, 2022, Hopp, 2022). Analytical thinking is particularly effective at reducing susceptibility to fake news when individuals have time to deliberate on their judgements (Sindermann *et al.*, 2020).

A third prominent stream of extant research demonstrates that individual traits and predispositions impact susceptibility to believing political fake news (Bryanov and Vziatysheva, 2021). For example, Anthony and Moulding (2019) show that higher levels of conspiracy mentality make individuals susceptible to believing fake news. Calvillo and colleagues (2021) demonstrate that more agreeable, conscientious, open-mindedness and less extroverted individuals can discern accurate news from fake news more easily. Even a heightened emotional state can create susceptibility to believing fake news (Martel *et al.*, 2020).

Although investigations of who believes political fake news has been significantly advanced by these research streams, recent reviews note that 'much remains unknown regarding the vulnerabilities of individuals…to manipulations by malicious actors' (Lazer *et al.*, 2018, p.1094). Thus, van der Linden (2022, p.462) calls for future research to offer 'a more integrated theoretical account of susceptibility to misinformation'. In particular, van der Linden (2022) argues that identity motivations are likely to be salient when examining political fake news, which presents a fruitful avenue for further research. Consequently, we draw on Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979, 1986) to build and test a model of what makes individuals susceptible or resilient to believing political fake news, and subsequently engaging with fake news.

3. Conceptualisation and Hypothesis Development

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979, Tajfel and Turner, 1986) explains how individuals construct their identity relative to social groupings. The theory posits that individuals derive self-esteem from group membership(s) because groups provide social identity and a sense of belonging to the social world. To develop a social identity, individuals initially categorise people into social groups. By placing oneself into a category, "other" categories are immediately created and a desire to view one's own group(s) positively is activated (Rousseau and Garcia-Retamero, 2007). Members of in-groups will seek out negative characteristics of out-groups to enhance their self-image, particularly when faced with a powerful out-group (Rousseau and Garcia-Retamero, 2007).

When individuals decide whether to believe political fake news, they draw on elements of both their individual psychology and social identity that make them more susceptible or resilient to belief. Political fake news contains conspiratorial elements that manipulate perceptions of power, incite nationalistic tension, and threaten the freedom of individuals. Thus, we draw on these unique attributes of political fake news to select three risk factors, *conspiracy mentality*, sense of *patriotism*, and *perceived threat to freedom,* that are expected to increase whether an individual is likely to believe political fake news. We also draw on two inoculating individual differences from extant literature to propose that individuals with high *media literacy* and *concern for disinformation* (i.e., those who exhibit strong analytical thinking) will be less likely to believe political fake news. Finally, while belief in political fake news is problematic, we explore whether belief mediates the effect of the five risk and resilience factors on subsequent engagement with the fake news, specifically reading the story more deeply.

3.1 Conspiracy Mentality

Conspiracy theories seek to explain complex world events 'as a secret plot by a covert alliance of powerful individuals or organizations, rather than as an overt activity or natural occurrence' (Douglas and Sutton, 2008, p.211). These world events, such as presidential assassinations, terrorist attacks, and the emergence of diseases, are typically political or social in nature (Douglas and Sutton, 2008). At times when world events seem

outside an individual's control, believing in a conspiracy theory represents an adaptive response to feeling powerless and allows individuals to make sense of the forces that they perceive to be shaping their future (Douglas and Sutton, 2008).

An individual's conspiracy mentality is their 'general susceptibility to explanations' based on conspiracy theories (Bruder *et al.*, 2013, p.1). This mentality is forwarded in Popper's (1966) conspiracy theory of society, which argues that social phenomena occur because individuals or organisations collude to create them. A conspiratorial worldview leads 'individuals to attribute significant events to the intentional actions of mean-intending groups of individuals who are sufficiently powerful to carry out the suspected conspirational act' (Imhoff and Bruder, 2014, p.26). Thus, conspiracy mentality can be conceptualised as a generalised, stable political attitude that describes one's mental preparedness to believe in conspiracy theories (Imhoff and Bruder, 2014). Research demonstrates that individuals of all political orientations are equally susceptible to conspiracy mentality (Anthony and Moulding, 2019) and that conspiracy mentality is a stronger predictor of belief in fake news than political or ideological motivation (Baptista and Gradim, 2022).

Although fake news and conspiracy theories are often conceptualised as interchangeable, not all conspiracy theories are untrue and not all fake news contains a conspiratorial plot (Faragó *et al.*, 2020). However, most political fake news has a negative conspiratorial slant (Anthony and Moulding, 2019) because political figures and regimes are high-power authorities (Faragó *et al.*, 2020). Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979, Tajfel and Turner, 1986) proposes that powerful out-groups are likely to be treated with suspicion and perceived negatively. This effect occurs when reading fake news about powerful out-groups engaging in conspiratorial plots. Thus, we propose that individuals with a stronger conspiracy mentality would be more likely to believe political fake news.

H1. Conspiracy mentality is positively associated with belief in political fake news.

3.2 Patriotism

Conventional patriotism, or national identification, is 'a form of emotional attachment to one's country' (Rupar *et al.*, 2021, p.863). Patriotism is distinct from political orientation or ideology, which is conceptualised as how conservative or liberal an individual believes themselves to be (Faragó *et al.*, 2020). While political orientation is regularly examined in relation to political fake news (e.g., Faragó *et al.*, 2020, Imhoff and Bruder, 2014), patriotism is rarely considered. This is likely because most research has been conducted on political fake news generated during specific democratic processes (e.g., 2016 Brexit referendum, 2016 US election, 2017 French election, 2019 Hungarian election) (Pennycook *et al.*, 2018). However, disinformation can be used beyond creating partisan disharmony to incite nationalistic fervour (Faragó *et al.*, 2020). Thus, we consider broader political identity and investigate whether a strong emotional attachment to one's country influences an individual's belief in political fake news.

Extant research shows that individuals are more easily persuaded by information that conforms to their pre-existing political, social, or religious beliefs (Baptista and Gradim, 2022). Individuals will indiscriminately accept information unless it 'violates their preconceptions or they are incentivized to do so' (Lazer *et al.*, 2018, p.1095), predominately due to processing fluency that comes with cognitive consistency (Hameleers, 2022). Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979, Tajfel and Turner, 1986) suggests that this is particularly likely to be the case for political information that provides esteem to one's in-group and denigrates one's outgroup, as 'defending one's ingroup seems to be an automatic, intuitive reaction to country-related dilemmas' (Kołeczek *et al.*, 2022, p.1).

Political fake news that aims to incite nationalistic fervour often creates country-related dilemmas by promoting threats from powerful political out-groups. For example, political fake news aiming to incite nationalism in a democratic society might present disinformation about alternative ideologies of social organisation. In line with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979, Tajfel and Turner, 1986), we expect that patriots who have a strong emotional attachment to their country will be more likely to believe political fake news that leverages a powerful "enemy" out-group to incite nationalistic fervour.

H2. Patriotism is positively associated with belief in political fake news.

3.3 Perceived Threat to Freedom

Freedom is often considered a cornerstone of democracy. However, the creation and dissemination of political fake news is an 'attack on freedom of choice and the right to be well informed' (Ecker *et al.*, 2022, p.24). Political fake news disseminated on social media threatens the democratic decision-making process because it is carefully optimised and targeted to a desired audience, disseminated more widely than traditional news, reinforced by algorithms that prioritise similar content, and is difficult to check or falsify (Reisach, 2021). Political fake news thus undermines functional social discourse and deliberately creates division (Reisach, 2021).

Researchers seeking to understand the virality of fake news note content that seeks to stimulate threat, fear, and panic is more likely to be viewed as credible and shared with others (O'Connor and Murphy, 2020). Political fake news aims to threaten individual and collective freedom when it manipulates perceptions of out-group power and nationalistic tension, in accordance with Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979, Tajfel and Turner, 1986). However, there is not yet clear evidence that individuals who perceive political fake news to be particularly threatening to their freedom are more likely to believe it. Consequently, we examine whether perceived threat to freedom influences the believability of political fake news. We propose that individuals that perceive more threat to freedom in fake news will be more likely to believe the disinforming content that presents the threat.

> **H3.** Perceived threat to freedom is positively associated with belief in political fake news.

3.4 Media Literacy

Media literacy is conceptualised as 'a skillset used to analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages' (Vraga *et al.*, 2015, p.41). When consumers of news are literate, they comprehend how political forms of information are produced and how biases influence how

news is created and interpreted (Hameleers, 2022). In the context of fake news, media literacy captures how well an individual can critically process disinformation they encounter (Jones-Jang *et al.*, 2021).

The positive impact of media literacy on fake news discernment is explained by self-efficacy (Hopp, 2022). Self-efficacy refers to one's belief in their ability to generate a positive task-related outcome (Bandura, 1982). Previous research by Hopp (2022) demonstrates that individuals who are confident in their ability to identify fake news can more accurately identify fake news on social media. This confidence is informed by the skillset that media literacy provides.

Media literacy is widely accepted to be one of the most effective defences against belief in fake news because it "inoculates" individuals from the effects of disinformation (Jones-Jang *et al.*, 2021). The proliferation of political fake news undermines a central tenet of democracy: that citizens undertake their civic duty from an informed perspective (Jones-Jang *et al.*, 2021). However, individuals can improve their media literacy skills to better assess the accuracy and validity of the content that they read.

Improved media literacy allows individuals to read fake news more critically, reducing the believability of fake news stories (Jones-Jang *et al.*, 2021). For example, Hwang and colleagues (2021) demonstrate that individuals with high media literacy are less likely to find disinformation persuasive. Consequently, we propose that individuals who perceive they are news media literate will be less likely to believe the disinformation contained in political fake news.

H4. News media literacy is negatively associated with belief in political fake news.

3.5 Concern for Disinformation

The proliferation of fabricated, deceptive, and hyper-partisan disinformation online has 'become an increasingly salient social concern' (Hopp, 2022, p.229). Newman and colleagues (2022) survey citizens from 38 countries and note a steady increase in citizens'

concern about political fake news. This concern is justified given the significant negative impact that disinformation can have on how individuals think, feel, and act in all facets of life, including political processes (Talwar *et al.*, 2020). Fake news is 'specifically designed to plant a seed of mistrust and exacerbate the existing social and cultural dynamics by misusing political, regional and religious undercurrents' (Talwar *et al.*, 2020, p.1).

Rising concerns for disinformation can be better contextualised by exploring the novel social dynamics created by emergent media technologies. The speed, information abundance, and connectivity of social media platforms have resulted in the development of media ecospheres that amplify inaccurate content (Apuke and Omar, 2021). Some 58% of UK social media users have seen disinformation in the last month, and 43% have knowingly shared fake news content (Chadwick and Vaccari, 2019). This exposure to fake news breeds distrust in the entire media ecosystem (Reisach, 2021).

Consequently, we propose that the rising public concern for disinformation will drive increased disbelief in fake (and legitimate) news. The mechanism underpinning this relationship is trust (Di Domenico *et al.*, 2021a). Individuals who are concerned about disinformation will be less likely to believe information contained in political fake news due to their generalised distrust of news content.

> **H5.** Concern for disinformation is negatively associated with belief in political fake news.

3.6 Belief in political fake news

To explore the consequences of believing political fake news, we examine whether belief predicts an intention to further engage with political fake news stories. When individuals believe information is true, they are more likely to further engage with the narrative (Kim and Dennis, 2019, Pennycook *et al.*, 2018). The mechanism explaining this engagement is confirmation bias, which occurs when individuals are biased to seek information that relates to what they already believe (Tandoc, 2019). Further, information that concords with an individual's existing knowledge and beliefs can be processed more fluently (Hameleers,

2022). In their study of news headlines, for example, Kim and Dennis (2019) find that confirmation bias is widespread: social media users are more likely to read, share, or comment on an article if the content aligns with what they already believe.

Most research operationalises engagement by examining how often fake news is shared (Di Domenico *et al.*, 2021b) due to the implicit endorsement that sharing suggests (Lazer *et al.*, 2018). Recent research, however, shows that individuals do not always believe what they share on social media: misinformation is often shared due to inattention (Pennycook and Rand, 2021). Furthermore, other kinds of engagement (e.g., liking, searching for information) also amplify the spread of political fake news exponentially (Lazer *et al.*, 2018). The strong existing research focus on sharing political fake news may underrepresent the impact of fake news by failing to investigate individuals who are privately affected by fake news but do not disseminate it.

Thus, we use an alternative operationalisation of engagement—clicking a weblink to read more about the story—to capture a private engagement behaviour. We propose that individuals who believe political fake news are more likely to engage further with disinformation by clicking a weblink to read more, in accordance with confirmation bias and processing fluency.

> **H6.** Belief in political fake news will be positively associated with further engagement
> with the political fake news story.

3.7 Research Approach

Following the above conceptualisation and hypotheses, we used a sequential initiation mixed-method approach (see Davis *et al.*, 2011) to build and test a model of what makes individuals susceptible or resilient to believing political fake news, and subsequently engaging with fake news. The first study qualitatively explored whether the conceptual model accurately reflected people's lived experiences of what kinds of individuals are susceptible and resilient to fake news. The second study quantitatively tested the model using a large representative sample.

4. Study 1: A Qualitative Examination

4.1 Study 1 Method

Ten UK residents (40% male, aged 25 to 67 years old) participated in semi-structured interviews with two researchers to examine what kinds of individuals might believe or disbelieve fake news. This single stimulus was used as a prompt because this research aims to examine individual differences in what makes someone susceptible or resilient to disinforming content, rather than to examine the characteristics of that content. Leveraging similar narratives from the media, the first author developed three potential stimuli that were subsequently reviewed by a panel of experts comprising three academics and two civil servants. The stimulus chosen by this panel discussed the political use of spy dolphins.

The disinforming content was designed to achieve fabricated legitimacy (Di Domenico *et al.*, 2021b). First, the stimulus mimicked a legitimate news source. Second, the stimulus was designed to imitate a regular piece of disinformation on social media (i.e., it contained a website link, a hashtag, an image, used impactful language, and the layout emulated a social media post). To reduce bias, the stimulus did not mimic a single social media platform. Third, the stimulus discussed a topic from mainstream media, as the UK media have previously reported on the use of dolphins for covert intelligence and government-backed military operations (Campbell, 2015). The research was conducted prior to the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine, from which discussions about the use of spy dolphins have been reignited (Anonymous, 2022). These recent news stories, however, confirm the kernel of truth on which the disinforming content relies and its legitimacy as a suitable stimulus for this research.

To explore what makes individuals susceptible or resilient to believing political fake news, participants were initially asked to reflect on what kind of person would (and would not believe the stimulus. The questions required respondents to reflect on others' traits to avoid social desirability bias. Their answers were thematically coded by a third researcher using the six-phase approach of Braun and Clarke (2022). Deductive coding was used to examine

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the presence and prevalence of the five risk and resilience factors to test the conceptual coverage of the proposed model and hypotheses.

4.2. Study 1 Results

Overall, the five identified risk and resilience factors, conspiracy mentality, patriotism, perceived threat to freedom, media literacy, and concern for disinformation, were present and prevalent following deductive coding (see Table I).

[Insert Table I about here]

The most prevalent theme that was present in the analysis was media literacy. Respondents reported that they perceived that individuals high in media literacy were more likely to be "inoculated" from political fake news, while individuals low in media literacy were perceived to be vulnerable. This aligns with the findings of Jones-Jang and colleagues (2021). Media literacy was often discussed in relation to the emergent theme of education because media literacy is a learned skill that is actively developed in formal education in the UK. This provided initial support for H4, which proposed that self-perceived news media literacy is negatively associated with belief in political fake news.

An almost equally prevalent theme that was present in the analysis was patriotism. Respondents noted that individuals who are more emotionally attached to their county are more likely to believe disinformation that threatens their current way of life. This theme was often discussed in relation to perceived threat to freedom. Respondents noted that the stimulus leveraged Communist ideology to create a powerful political out-group (see Table I), which was often speculated to be Russia or Cuba and occasionally China or North Korea. This provided initial support for H2, which proposed that patriotism is positively associated with belief in political fake news.

The third most prevalent theme was perceived threat to freedom. Political fake news undermines functional social discourse and creates division by stimulating threat, fear, and panic (Reisach, 2021). Almost every respondent noted that individuals who felt threatened or endangered by the stimulus would likely believe it, providing initial support for H3, which

proposed that perceived threat to freedom is positively associated with belief in political fake news. Respondents linked this perceived threat to a loss of control, historic concerns about opposing political ideologies, and heightened emotional states (see Table I).

The fourth most prevalent theme was concern for disinformation. Respondents reported from their lived experience that individuals who had a high level of awareness of disinformation were less likely to believe political fake news. These individuals displayed an inherent distrust of news reporting and constant vigilance to incorrect information (see Table I). Conversely, those with low levels of awareness about fake news are thought to be far more likely to believe fake news. This provided initial support for H5, which proposed that concern for disinformation is negatively associated with belief in political fake news.

The fifth most prevalent theme was conspiracy mentality. Half of the respondents mentioned that some individuals have a conspiratorial mindset that predisposes them to believing political fake news, which often has a negative conspiratorial slant (Anthony and Moulding, 2019). Conspiracy mentality was often discussed in relation to the emergent themes of age and gender, as young men were perceived to be particularly vulnerable to perceiving powerful out-groups negatively (see Table I). This provided initial support for H1, which proposed that conspiracy mentality is positively associated with belief in political fake news.

Finally, there was strong evidence that fabricated legitimacy was essential to individuals believing disinforming content (Di Domenico *et al.*, 2021b). Respondents reported that political fake news is more believable when it is difficult to distinguish from real news and contains a kernel of truth. Several respondents noted that they were aware of military forces using animals for various purposes, which made the political fake news more plausible.

5. Study 2: A Quantitative Examination

5.1 Study 2 Method

Seven hundred and twenty-two UK residents (49.3% male, aged 18 to over 70 years old) recruited from Qualtrics completed an online survey between 19 March and 6 April 2020. To ensure a nationally representative sample, quotas for gender, age, and rural versus urban location were applied. Participants provided informed consent, answered demographic quota questions (gender, age, country of residence, location of residence), read the political fake news stimulus from Study 1, and answered a questionnaire. To minimise response bias, no reference to disinformation or fake news was made when introducing the survey. The survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete and remunerated participants a small amount for their time.

Conspiracy mentality (α = 0.79) was measured using four items on a seven-point Likert-type scale (1= strongly disagree; 7= strongly agree) from Bruder and colleagues (2013). Item wording included, "There are secret organisations that greatly influence political decisions" (item 1); "Many very important things happen in the world, which the public is never informed about" (item 2); "Government agencies closely monitor all citizens" (item 3); and "Politicians usually do not tell us about the true motives for their decisions" (item 4). A higher mean score indicated that the participant had a stronger conspiracy mentality.

Patriotism (α = 0.93) was measured using four items on a seven-point Likert-type scale (1= strongly disagree; 7= strongly agree) from Kosterman and Feshbach (1989). Item wording comprised, "I love my country" (item 1); "I feel great when I see my country's flag flying" (item 2), "I am proud of my country" (item 3), and "My country is important to me" (item 4). A higher mean score indicated that the participant felt more patriotic.

Perceived threat to freedom (α = 0.85) was measured using four items on a seven-point Likert-type scale (1= strongly disagree; 7= strongly agree) adapted from Dillard and Shen (2005). Item wording included, "It tries to make decisions for me" (item 1); "It tries to manipulate me" (item 2); "It threatens my freedom to understand the truth" (item 3); and "It tries to pressure me" (item 4). A higher mean score indicated that the participant perceived a stronger threat.

Media literacy (α = 0.88) was measured using four items on a seven-point Likert type scale (1= strongly disagree; 7= strongly agree) from the self-perceived media literacy measure of Vraga and colleagues (2015). Specifically, this measure sought to gauge participant's sense of self-efficacy regarding critical media consumption. Item wording comprised, "I am confident in my ability to judge the quality of the news" (item 1); "I have the skills to interpret news messages" (item 2); "I am media literate" (item 3); and "I understand how the news is made in my country" (item 4). A higher mean score indicated that the participant was more confident in their ability to critically consume news content and thus they perceived they had better media literacy skills.

Concern for disinformation (α = 0.88) was measured using four items on a seven-point Likert-type scale (1= strongly disagree; 7= strongly agree) adapted from Newman and colleagues (2019). Item wording included, "I am concerned that a lot of news is not wholly accurate" (item 1); "I am concerned that a lot of news is fake" (item 2), "I am concerned that a lot of news is sensationalized" (item 3), and "I am concerned that a lot of news is false" (item 4). A higher mean score indicated that the participant had increased concern for disinformation.

Belief in the political fake news stimulus content was measured using a single item on a five-point Likert-type scale (1= I'm certain it's false; 2= I think that it's false but I am not completely sure; 3= I have no idea if this story is true or false; 4= I think it's true but I'm not completely sure; 5= I'm certain it's true) adapted from the belief tests of Thouless (1935) and Brown (1962). The lead question asked, "Thinking about the information in the social media post above, which of the below statements best describes how you feel?". A higher score indicated that the participant was more certain the content was truthful and thus the measure captured participants' degree of certainty regarding accuracy.

Engagement was measured using a single item indicating that the participant would further engage with the stimulus after reading the disinforming news story by clicking on the link provided to read more. This measure is adapted from Buchanan and Benson's (2019) indices of organic reach.

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Since the reliability for each construct (conspiracy mentality, patriotism, perceived threat to freedom, media literacy, and concern for disinformation) were all within acceptable ranges (α > 0.79), we averaged the items in each construct.

Finally, we measured age, gender, income, education, social media use, perceived prior exposure to the news story, and political orientation to control for their effects (aligned with Jones-Jang *et al.*, 2021 and the results of Study 1). *Political orientation* was measured using a single item on a five-point Likert-type scale (1= left; 5= right) adapted from the European Social Survey (2018). The item asks, "In politics, people sometimes talk about 'left' and 'right'. Where would you place yourself on this scale, where 1 means the left and 5 means the right?".

5.2 Study 2 Results

5.2.1 Descriptive statistics

Table II presents means, standard deviations and zero-order correlations for the variables. In general, study participants did not believe the fake news stimulus was true. The mean value of belief in political fake news (i.e., that participants believed the stimulus content to be truthful) was 1.82 (*SD* = 1.08), which was significantly below the mid-point of the scale (mid-point = 3, $t(721)=-28.86$, $p <.001$). While 53% of the sample were certain the story was false and 3% were certain the story was true, 44% of the sample reported being uncertain as to the accuracy of the story. Seven percent of the sample believed the story to be true, but were not completely sure, 23% reported that the story was false, but were not completely sure, while 14% 'have no idea' if the content was true or false. Thus, the data illustrated that belief in political fake news is not a dichotomous concept. Interestingly, 24% (*N*= 174) of participants indicated that they would click on the weblink to find out more and further engage with the content.

[Insert Table II about here]

Mean values for the five key predictors were also examined against the mid-points of their scales. Participants indicated that participants were more likely to be patriots (mid-point =

4, M=5.46, SD=1.28, t(721)=30.69, p <.001) and perceive they are media literate (mid-point = 4, M=5.38, SD=.95, t(721)=38.90, p <.001). They had a reasonable conspiracy mentality (mid-point = 4, M=5.05, SD=1.04, t(721)=27.14, p <.001) and concern for disinformation (mid-point = 4, M=5.29, SD=1.08, t(721)=31.99, p <.001). The degree to which participants perceived the story as threatening to their freedom was below the mid-point of the scale. In general, participants perceived a low level of threat from the story (mid-point = 4, M=3.71, SD=1.44, t(721)=-5.26, p <.001).

We also examined the control variables. The mean value of participants' political orientation was close to the mid-point of the scale, although it leaned slightly right (mid-point = 3, M=3.07, SD=.95, t(721)=2.01, p=.036). To detail, 6% of participants reported they were 'left', 17% were 'somewhat left', 49% were 'central', 21% were 'somewhat right' and 8% were 'right'. We also asked participants whether they had heard of/read about the fabricated story elsewhere. Results show that 87.3% of participants responded "no", whereas 5.1% responded "yes" and 7.6% responded "maybe." We created a binary variable, *perceived prior exposure to the news story* (0: no, 1: yes/maybe), to control for this effect.

Zero-order correlations indicated that the bivariate correlations were low or moderate, ranging from .00 to .39. Belief in political fake news was positively correlated with perceived prior exposure to the news story (r = .39, p < .001), such that those who reported they had heard of/read about the story tended to believe that the story was true, providing evidence of processing fluency. Belief was also positively correlated with perceived threat to freedom from the story (r = .15, p < .001) and negatively correlated with age (r = -.19, p < .001), education (r = -.11, p < .01), media literacy (r = -.11, p < .01), and concern for disinformation (r = -.10, p < .01). Engagement was positively correlated with social media use (r = .17, p < .001), perceived prior exposure to the news story (r = .17, p < .001), conspiracy mentality (r = .12, p < .001), perceived threat to freedom from the story (r = .22, p < .001), concern for disinformation (r = .10, p < .01), and belief in fake news (r = .22, p < .001). In addition, engagement was negatively correlated with age (r = -.27, p < .001) and education (r = -.11, p < .01). The correlations showed several significant associations between predictors and dependent measures. However, bivariate correlations were not sufficient for determining whether the associations were unique while controlling for other variables.

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5.2 Confirmatory factor analysis

Before testing the proposed structural model, we ran a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with IBM SPSS AMOS v26 to examine convergent and discriminant validity, as well as overall model fit. This analysis included five latent variables: conspiracy mentality, patriotism, perceived threat to freedom, media literacy, and concern for disinformation. Each latent variable had four indicators. The results show that the measurement model had an adequate model fit, $\chi^2 (160) = 776.73$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2/df = 4.85$; CFI = .928; RMSEA = .073.

To assess the convergent and discriminant validity of the measurement model, we used Fornell and Larcker's (1981) criteria. The convergent validity was assessed by the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Composite Reliability (CR) (see Table III). The values of AVE were acceptable because they were all greater than the suggested threshold of 0.5. The values of CR were also acceptable since they were all greater than the suggested threshold of 0.7. Thus, convergent validity was established. To assess discriminant validity, we examined whether the maximum shared variance (MSV) and average shared variance (ASV) were lower than AVE, and the square root of AVE was greater than the inter-construct correlations. The results supported both criteria and were subsequently confirmed using the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) ratio of correlations method, where all HTMT ratios were found to be less than the threshold value of 0.9. Thus, discriminant validity was established.

[Insert Table III about here]

5.3 Structural model testing

We tested the proposed structural model, controlling for age, gender, income, education, social media use, perceived prior exposure to the news story, and political orientation. Table IV presents the results. The evaluation of goodness-of-fit indices supported the model, $\chi^2 (300) = 1109.56$, $p < .001$; $\chi^2/df = 3.69$; CFI = .913; RMSEA = .061.

[Insert Table IV about here]

Hypothesis 1, which posited conspiracy mentality is positively associated with belief in political fake news, was marginally supported (b = .09, t = 1.76, p = .077). Those who were high in conspiracy mentality were more likely to believe the news was true, supporting Anthony and Moulding's (2019) previous findings. Hypothesis 2, which posited that patriotism is positively associated with belief in political fake news, was supported (b = .13, t = 3.59, p <.001). The data suggest that those high in patriotism were more likely to believe the news was true, which is a novel finding. Hypothesis 3, which posited that perceived threat to freedom is positively associated with belief in political fake news, was not supported (b = .03, t = .84, p = .398). Perceived threat to freedom was not statistically associated with belief in fake news, which is a novel (if non-significant) finding. Hypothesis 4, which posited that news media literacy is negatively associated with belief in political fake news, was supported (b = -.18, t = -3.89, p <.001). Those who perceived that they are media literate were less likely to believe the fake news, which aligns with Hwang and colleagues' (2021) finding that high media literacy reduces the persuasiveness of disinformation. Hypothesis 5, which posited that concern for disinformation is negatively associated with belief in political fake news, was supported (b = -.09, t = -2.55, p = .011). Individuals who were concerned about disinformation were less likely to believe the fake news, which is a novel finding. Last, Hypothesis 6, which posited that belief in political fake news is positively associated with further engagement with the fake news story, was supported (b = .05, t = 3.74, p < .001). Those who believed the fake news were more likely to engage further with the disinformation by clicking a weblink to read more, which is a novel finding. Figure 1 presents a summary of findings.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Regarding socio-demographic variables, age (b = -.11, t = -5.13, p <.001), gender (b = .18, t = 2.47, p = .013) and education (b = -.14, t = -2.81, p = .005) were significant in predicting belief in political fake news. Participants who are younger, male, and less educated tended to believe the fake story was true. In addition, perceived prior exposure to the news story was a very strong predictor of belief in political fake news (b = 1.21, t = 11.07, p < .001).

Those who believed they had seen the story before reported that the story was more truthful, compared to those without perceived prior exposure to the news story, providing evidence of processing fluency. Political orientation was just statistically significant (b = .07, t = 1.97, p = .049). Those who hold right-wing political views tended to believe the fake story was true.

Age (b = -.05, t = -5.42, p < .001), education (b = -.05, t = -2.37, p = .018), social media use (b = .08, t = 3.39, p < .001), and perceived prior exposure to the news story (b = .11, t = 2.26, p = .024) predicted engagement. Participants who were younger and less educated had an increased likelihood of engagement. Furthermore, those who used social media more frequently showed higher engagement.

Finally, given the proposed structural model, we conducted a *post hoc* test of the mediating role of belief in political fake news. Using AMOS bootstrap analysis, we set 1,000 bootstrap samples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals. The results confirmed that belief in political fake news mediated the relationship between conspiracy mentality and engagement (b = .005, 95% CI [.000, .014], p = .024), patriotism and engagement (b = .007, 95% CI [.002, .01], p = .001), media literacy and engagement (b = -.010, 95% CI [-.023, -.004], p = .001), and concern for disinformation and engagement (b = -.005, 95% CI [-.011, -.002], p = .004). However, belief in political fake news was not found to mediate the relationship between perceived threat to freedom and engagement (b = .002, 95% CI [-.002, .008], p = .315). In summary, the data supported all proposed hypotheses excluding H3.

6. Discussion

6.1 Theoretical implications

The research findings offer several important implications for theory. First, by using Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979, Tajfel and Turner, 1986) to explain how individual political attitudes affect belief in political fake news, we answer the call to develop 'a more integrated theoretical account of susceptibility to misinformation' (van der Linden, 2022, p.462). The findings demonstrate that identity motivations are salient when examining

individual susceptibility to political fake news, providing empirical evidence for van der Linden's (2022) assertion that they are particularly important in the political sphere.

Second, we forward a model that draws together extant research threads to demonstrate what makes individuals susceptible or resilient to believing political fake news, and subsequently, to what degree belief impacts private engagement with political fake news. In modelling these dynamics, we build an integrated understanding of belief in political fake news that advances the field beyond examining risk and resilience factors in isolation (Bryanov and Vziatysheva, 2021). Importantly, the findings show that belief in political fake news is a catalyst for further engagement with disinforming content. Thus, our findings position belief as the starting point of the illusory truth effect (Pennycook *et al.*, 2018), wherein initial and then repeated exposure to a false idea or argument breeds further conviction in the argument and additional engagement with content that confirms this viewpoint.

Third, our empirical model is unique because it takes a broad view of political attitudes, extending research beyond partisanship to examine patriotism. To date, almost all political fake news research focuses on individual political events such as an election (Tandoc, 2019). While these studies forward important knowledge, they do not consider that disharmony can be incited across national political divides as well as intra-nationally. Thus, in addition to confirming the importance of political orientation (as a control variable), this research examines political fake news susceptibility using patriotism to demonstrate the influence of political attitudes about the broader geo-political sphere. Patriotism demonstrably plays an important role in fake news belief, which offers important insight into the context of increasingly turbulent geo-political relations. Future research might additionally consider more nuanced political attitudes such as globalist versus isolationist positions or pro- versus anti-government perspectives.

Fourth, to extend previous research that examines engagement with fake news solely as sharing behaviour, we focus on a concealed form of engagement: private engagement with political fake news. Previous research demonstrates that most social media users do not regularly share the content that they read (Pennycook and Rand, 2021). Consequently,

research focusing on sharing disinformation ignores problematic private engagement behaviour, such as liking or reading content, that is likely to be undertaken by a broader subset of the population. By investigating private sharing behaviour, we contribute to a broader understanding of disinformation and how it seeds the illusory truth effect during private consumption.

Finally, investigating the role of concern for disinformation, an understudied concept, also contributes to existing research on political fake news. The fake news ecosystem continues to evolve rapidly. High-profile political events that have been tainted by hostile influences, including the Brexit referendum and COVID-19 pandemic (Apuke and Omar, 2021, Pennycook *et al.*, 2018), increasingly make citizens aware that the media they consume might be infected with fake news. Our research demonstrates the role that this awareness plays in protecting political news consumers against believing fake news content. This research thus provides new knowledge into how concern for disinformation impacts belief in political fake news.

6.2 Practical implications

To develop effective interventions against disinforming political content, practitioners need to understand the underlying psychology of belief in fake news (Pennycook and Rand, 2021). This research demonstrates that individual differences in analytic thinking (i.e., media literacy) and deliberation (i.e., concern for disinformation) improves resilience to believing political fake news. Consequently, practitioners need to consider how to leverage platform features and algorithms to encourage more analytical thinking. For example, pre-bunking strategies that build the confidence of individuals to identify fake news (as opposed to more structural media literacy education) should increase resilience. In-platform communication campaigns may drive stronger awareness of disinformation generally, which should also increase resilience.

Conversely, this research demonstrates that conventionally patriotic individuals with strong conspiracy mentalities are more susceptible to believing fake news. Consequently, practitioners need to implement strategies to manage these vulnerabilities. For example,

social media platforms could use artificial intelligence to scan for political fake news that contains words and imagery designed to amplify conspiracies or encourage patriotic tension. Such stories could be automatically matched with verified news articles to interrupt the "echo chamber" effects that vulnerable individuals might experience. Social media platforms could also build cognitive "speed bumps" around problematic content to overcome the cognitive fluency that political attitudes facilitate when individuals are exposed to political fake news.

6.3 Limitations and future research

Although this research makes important theoretical and practical contributions to the field of political fake news, the results must be considered in light of their limitations. First, while a single stimulus design is common when studying the impact of persuasive messaging (O'Keefe, 2015), this approach does not explore the interaction between message design and individual factors. Thus, future research might adopt a factorial experimental design to test the interplay of message and individual differences.

Second, this research adopts a self-reported measure of media literacy that seeks to capture participants' self-efficacy about their critical media consumption. However, previous research highlights that some individuals may overestimate their media literacy skills via the Dunning-Kruger effect, which is a cognitive bias where those that lack skill tend to overestimate their capabilities (Mahmood, 2016). Consequently, future research could replicate and extend our findings with other measures and forms of media literacy.

Third, the studies sample participants from a single country, the United Kingdom. This may limit the generalisability of these findings to democracies like the United Kingdom (e.g., Australia). Considering the deeply nuanced, culturally specific, and geopolitical nature of political fake news, future research could examine whether citizens' susceptibility and resilience to political fake news belief and engagement differs across nationalities to ascertain the generalisability of the study findings to multiple geographic and cultural populations.

When considering future research directions, our research highlights the importance of belief and how it constitutes a key starting point to the illusory truth effect. Future research might further investigate these dynamics with the aim of identifying individual and environmental mediators that can interrupt and mitigate the catalytic effect of belief.

Next, in response to existing research that typically centres on the drivers of social media users' sharing behaviour, our study adopts an alternative dependent variable: citizens' private engagement behaviour. Fruitful future research might offer more nuanced insights and employ a broader conceptualisation of engagement, capturing online, offline, public, and private engagement behaviours with disinforming content. In doing so, researchers can capture the multiple means by which citizens engage with a single piece of disinforming content and investigate how each of these means contributes to their internal and external processing of this information.

Finally, our findings highlight how awareness of disinformation can play an inoculating role in protecting citizens against belief in political fake news. Future research should further build on this knowledge of inoculating effects. For example, what is the most effective means of raising awareness of disinformation among different populations? How might pre-bunking mechanisms be manipulated to produce the greatest gains? Such research will substantially benefit practitioners and policy makers looking to protect their citizens from harm.

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European Social Survey (2018), "ESS9-2018 Data file edition 1.2. NSD - Norwegian Centre for Research Data, Norway – Data Archive an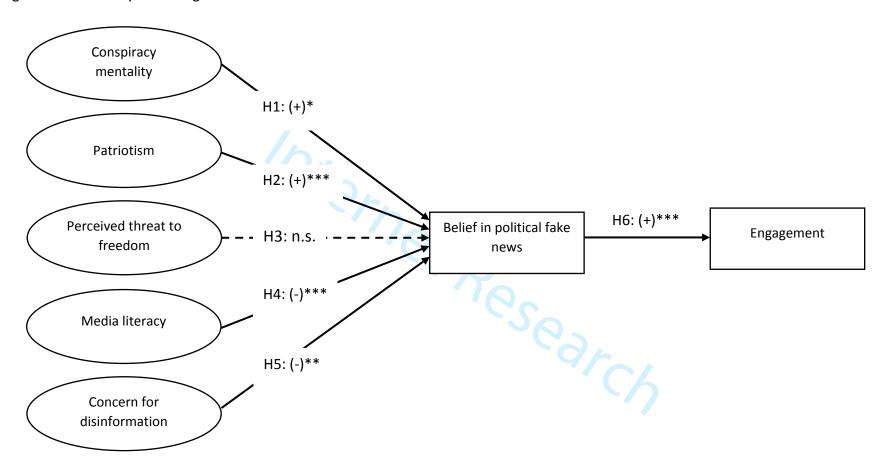d distributor of ESS data for ESS ERIC.", available at: https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/docs/round9/survey/ESS9_data_documenta tion_report_e03_1.pdf (accessed 7 July 2023)

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Figure 1. A summary of findings

Note:

1. * p <.10; ** p <.05; *** p < .001
2. (+) refers to a positive association whereas (-) donates a negative relation.
3. Control variables are not shown, but they were included in analysis.

Source: Author's own creation/work.

Table I. Key themes in semi-structured interviews (Study 1)

Theme	Description and prevalence	Example quotes
Risk factors		
Conspiracy mentality	General susceptibility to explanations based on conspiracy theories (Bruder et al., 2013) *Discussed by 5 of 10 respondents*	Some kinds of people are minded to believe conspiracies more easily than others; they are more open to being persuaded to think or act a certain way. I think these kinds of people are more likely to believe fake news stories. (P4, female, 34 years old) Some people are easier to persuade and lie to than others; they have a mindset that takes things in. They don't question what they see. They believe stories that tell them the world is going to end and everyone has it out for them, then they see stories like this one and they believe it's true. (P10, female, 52 years old)
Patriotism	A form of emotional attachment to one's country (Rupar et al., 2021) *Discussed by 8 of 10 respondents*	An individual who cares about protecting their country might be more open to this disinformation. Thinking back to the Cold War, individuals were threatened [because] their way of life was under attack, and they believed they had to protect the US and everything that makes an American. It was the same here in England too and harks back to the Second World War. Individuals felt the need to protect what it meant to be English and the English way of life. This disinformation attempts to chip away and [raise] a reaction from the reader. (P6, male, 65 years old) The West is always trying to paint Communists as trying to invade our spaces or do things they shouldn't, so it fits with that aura. (P5, male, 25 years old)
Perceived threat to freedom	Stimulating threat, fear, or panic about one's freedom of action (O'Connor and Murphy, 2020) *Discussed by 9 of 10 respondents*	This story plays on making someone feel that they in danger, that they have something to fear and that their country is under attack in some way. It stirs up emotions. (P9, male, 43 years old) It tries to make you think that Communists are lurking in the shadows and collecting all sorts of information that they're not supposed to have. (P1, female, 63 years old) [I]t doesn't want people to feel settled and calm; someone wants to whip up fear and confusion. (P2, female, 25 years old) It makes individuals feel they lack control: they don't know what's going on and what higher powers are doing that could impact all of us… Everyone was…and still is, I suppose, scared of Communist rule: having no control over one's life, where one lives, the job one does and so forth. It's scary and these kinds of news stories make people feel that way: scared their way of life is under threat and bigger forces are at play. (P6, male, 65 years old) This kind of story scares people, it makes them question everything, it's threatening… When something is threatening, people pay more attention to that message because it could be something that has a bad effect on them and their lives. (P10, female, 52 years old)
Resilience factors		
Perceived media literacy	One's (self-perceived) skillset used to analyse, evaluate, and	[Media literacy] skills will play a key role. Schools are starting to do a good job at teaching kids how to spot fake news and how to interrogate a story. (P7, female, 48 years old)

	communicate messages (Vraga et al., 2015)	[I]f you saw it on a reputable news site, it might make you believe it more. (P8, female, 26 years old)
	Discussed by 8 of 10 respondents	individuals aren't able to discern fact from fiction anymore. They don't have the skills and they don't care to gain the skills. On the other hand, social media trots out an endless stream of dubious content … It's so mixed and so fast, individuals aren't able to tell what's real. (P6, male, 65 years old)
Concern for disinformation	Rising public awareness of the presence of disinformation *Discussed by 6 of 10 respondents*	The kind of person who acknowledges that fake news exists and worries about it is less likely to believe stories containing disinformation. They are more aware and can locate it, like they know what they are looking for because they can identify it. (P4, female, 34 years old)
		My friend, she's really aware of fake news being around and she knows what to look for. I think she enjoys trying to find things that aren't correct and call it out. Because she worries about fake news and the effect it has on the world, she's vigilant. She questions everything she hears and reads; she takes nothing at face value and will question things. (P10, female, 52 years old)
		A lot of people don't even know what the term 'disinformation' means. They think fake news is just used by Donald Trump when he doesn't like accusations against him! … If someone doesn't care about what they read, whether or not it is correct, then they are less likely to call out disinformation and fake news because they cannot recognise it or worse, they do not care to recognise it. (P9, male, 43 years old)
Other factors		
Age	Age of reader *Discussed by 6 of 10 respondents*	Younger people are more likely to believe fake news because they spend more time on social media compared to older people and are seeing more fake news in their news feed. (P4, female, 34 years old)
		Older generations who might not have seen as much fake news and are more reliant on the news of the past [might believe it]. (P5, male, 25 years old)
Gender	Gender of reader *Discussed by 2 of 10 respondents*	I think gender plays a role with kids: my daughter is much more likely to question something compared to my son. (P7, female, 48 years old)
		I hate to say it but this someone is also likely a young man! … Teenage boys believe anything, particularly if someone good looking is saying it (laughs). I shouldn't laugh; it's sad. We have a lost population of young men in this country. They lack purpose in life and that's a dangerous state. They are looking for something- looking for a cause to believe in and fight for. These [fake news] stories are ripe for these men: they feed them with lies and call them to arms. Look at the rise of the far right. It's a genuine worry. (P9, male, 43 years old)
Education	Formal education level of reader *Discussed by 6 of 10 respondents*	Educated people are also less likely to believe disinformation. Like during uni, I studied history: we were taught to think critically [and] to question our sources. I like to think that makes me question what I read and not just take everything on face value. (P4, female, 34 years old)
		It's a domino effect: someone who is young and not doing so well in school is less able to analyse and evaluate what they read and identify red flags. Because they are young and less educated, they are easier to persuade. They might believe conspiracies about goings on in the world. (P9, male, 43 years old)

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Source: Author's own creation/work.

Table II. Means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations

Variable	Mean	SD	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)
(1) Age (1-7)	4.55	1.69	--												
(2) Gender (0: female, 1: male)	.49	.50	--	--											
(3) Income (1-4)	3.04	1.26	.08a	.13c	--										
(4) Education (1-5)	3.18	.68	.05	.03	.10b	--									
(5) Social media use (1-4)	3.60	.69	-.20c	-.06	-.01	-.04	--								
(6) Perceived prior exposure to the news story (0: no, 1: yes or maybe)	.12	.33	-.17c	.06	-.03	.03	-.00	--							
(7) Political orientation (1-5)	3.07	.95	.12b	-.01	.15c	-.00	-.03	-.05	--						
(8) Conspiracy mentality (1-7)	5.05	1.04	-.10b	.02	-.14c	-.02	.13b	.04	-.07a	--					
(9) Patriotism (1-7)	5.46	1.28	.18c	.03	.17c	-.00	-.00	-.07	.22c	.05	--				
(10) Perceived threat to freedom (1-7)	3.71	1.44	-.07a	-.06	-.08a	-.02	.03	.14c	-.02	.14c	.06	--			
(11) Media literacy (1-7)	5.38	.95	-.10b	.22c	.10b	.12c	.14c	.00	-.03	.15c	.19c	.04	--		
(12) Concern for disinformation (1-7)	5.29	1.08	-.05	.05	.02	.01	.19c	-.01	-.04	.34c	.13c	.08a	.29c	--	
(13) Belief in political fake news (1-5)	1.82	1.08	-.19c	.05	-.06	-.11b	-.00	.39c	.05	.06	.04	.15c	-.11b	-.10b	--
(14) Engagement (click, 0: no, 1: yes)	.24	.42	-.27c	-.02	-.01	-.11b	.17c	.17c	-.00	.12c	.01	.22c	.02	.10b	.22c

1. N = 722

2. Age was measured by seven categories: 1 (under 18), 2 (18-29), 3 (30-39), 4 (40-49), 5 (50-59), 6 (60-69), and 7 (over 70).

3. Income was measured by four categories, 4 being "living comfortably on present income."

4. Education was measured by five categories, 5 being more than 24 years.

5. Social media use was measured by four categories, 4 being a high SNS use (I check my accounts regularly throughout the day).

6. a: $p < .05$, b: $p < .01$, c: $p < .001$

Source: Author's own creation/work.

Table III. Test for convergent and discriminant validity

	CR	AVE	MSV	ASV	CM	Patriotism	PT	ML	CFD
CM	0.801	0.503	0.179	0.059	0.710				
Patriotism	0.932	0.775	0.045	0.018	0.059	0.880			
PT	0.834	0.568	0.022	0.012	0.147	0.063	0.753		
ML	0.882	0.651	0.083	0.043	0.183	0.213	0.098	0.807	
CFD	0.886	0.664	0.179	0.073	0.423	0.134	0.114	0.288	0.815

1. CM = Conspiracy mentality; PT = Perceived threat to freedom; ML = Media literacy; CFD = Concern for disinformation

2. CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted; MSV = Maximum Shared Variance; ASV = Average Shared Variance

3. The diagonal values are the squared root of the AVE. Other remaining values are factor correlation matrix.

Source: Author's own creation/work.

Table IV. Results of structural equation modelling

Paths	Estimates	t value	p value
Conspiracy mentality → item 1	1.00		
Conspiracy mentality → item 2	1.07	14.84	<.001
Conspiracy mentality → item 3	1.04	13.81	<.001
Conspiracy mentality → item 4	1.05	14.69	<.001
Patriotism → item 1	1.00		
Patriotism → item 2	1.26	32.92	<.001
Patriotism → item 3	1.18	29.55	<.001
Patriotism → item 4	1.03	29.38	<.001
Perceived threat to freedom → item 1	1.00		
Perceived threat to freedom → item 2	1.18	12.83	<.001
Perceived threat to freedom → item 3	1.69	15.25	<.001
Perceived threat to freedom → item 4	1.64	15.21	<.001
Media literacy → item 1	1.00		
Media literacy → item 2	1.04	23.51	<.001
Media literacy → item 3	1.04	25.15	<.001
Media literacy → item 4	.79	20.86	<.001
Concern for disinformation → item 1	1.00		
Concern for disinformation → item 2	.62	19.64	<.001
Concern for disinformation → item 3	1.01	33.67	<.001
Concern for disinformation → item 4	.80	26.90	<.001
Age → belief in political fake news	-.11	-5.13	<.001
Gender → belief in political fake news	.18	2.47	.013
Income → belief in political fake news	-.03	-1.15	.247
Education → belief in political fake news	-.14	-2.81	.005
Social media use → belief in political fake news	-.00	-.03	.970
Perceived prior exposure to the news story → belief in political fake news	1.21	11.07	<.001
Political orientation → belief in political fake news	.07	1.97	.049
Age → engagement	-.05	-5.42	<.001
Gender → engagement	-.01	-.49	.618
Income → engagement	.00	.69	.485
Education → engagement	-.05	-2.37	.018
Social media use → engagement	.08	3.39	<.001
Perceived prior exposure to the news story → engagement	.11	2.26	.024
Political orientation → engagement	.00	.59	.552
H1: Conspiracy mentality → belief in political fake news	**.09**	**1.76**	**.077**
H2: Patriotism → belief in political fake news	**.13**	**3.59**	**<.001**
H3: Perceived threat to freedom→ belief in political fake news	**.03**	**.84**	**.398**
H4: Media literacy → belief in political fake news	**-.18**	**-3.89**	**<.001**
H5: Concern for disinformation → belief in political fake news	**-.09**	**-2.55**	**.011**
H6: Belief → engagement	**.05**	**3.74**	**<.001**

Note: Estimates are unstandardised coefficients

Source: Author's own creation/work.