Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communications 2024, 10: 1-15
https://doi.org/10.30958/ajmmc.X-Y-Z

Pseudo-positive Information and COVID-19: Reasons behind Sharing Fake News (Georgian Social Media Analysis)

By Liana Markariani[*] & Maia Toradze[±]

A plethora of studies state that a perceptible gap can be observed concerning disinformation influence analysis, which is presented by a lack of research on this phenomenon. In a crisis precipitated by the pandemic disruption, the necessity to scrutinize these topics becomes particularly transparent, as an individual's critical thinking is incapacitated, which leads to a surge in fake news sharing. The article aims to expose and investigate the characteristics of a new, pseudo-positive disposition of false information and the reasons behind its extensive dissemination. By analyzing the original sources of fake news published on "Facebook", conducting an in-depth interview with eight field experts, integrated with a small survey of 204 Georgians, we identify that to overcome the pandemic-induced stress and create an optimistic environment, any positive information that is apprehensible under these conditions becomes effortlessly shareable and consequently, pseudo-positivity is utilized as a manipulator to foment a wave of disinfodemy.

Keywords: disinformation, pseudo-positivity, social media, COVID-19, manipulation, crisis, Facebook, mental health, media psychology

Introduction

The history of misinformation and manipulation spans centuries and has existed in almost every stage of human evolution in varying doses (MacDonald, 2017). However, false information has become exceedingly more active since 2016 (during the US elections) (Dewey, 2016). Disinformation seems to be an ancient art, but technology has taken it to another level - the spread of fake news is facilitated by social networks through automated buttons and viruses (Chesney & Citron, 2018). Information changes/repeats itself so quickly and reaches the consumer that its critical analysis seems impossible (Fazio et al., 2015). The influence the media possesses on the public and the formation of their opinion has increased considerably. People believe the information shared by their acquaintances, friends and liked/subscribed platforms (Murphy, 2017).

The information resource demand and supply model assumes that the typical news consumers have two main characteristics: first – they want to receive reliable information and understand the objective truth about the world; second, the consumers have a demand for news that fits their worldviews and desires (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2006). In 1977, scientists at Stanford University discovered

[*]PhD Student, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Georgia.
[±]Associate Professor, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Georgia.

the truth effect, in which a message that a user has already heard or read is more credible than new information (Hasher et al., 1977). Recent studies in the field of psychology have shown that people perceive the true story as what they most often understand or see (Fazio et al., 2015). This indicates that the users depend somewhat on visual manipulators and trust the information or platform they frequently see and share with their friends (Silverman, 2016). In addition, misinformation swiftly leads to racist and intolerant societal actions, instilling hate speech and xenophobia (Cerase & Santoro, 2018). Researchers believe that false information can undermine democracy, either directly or indirectly (Chesney & Citron, 2018).

Sharing helpful content makes social network users believe they are valuable, as they get positive feedback from their friends. Research has also shown a positive correlation between an individual's popularity demand and online self-disclosure (Utz et al., 2012). Thus, social media users may share "sensational" news without verifying the validity of the information. Science also argues that the concept of FoMO (Fear of Missing Out) is directly related to the sharing of unverified information (Talwar, 2019, p. 76). A causal link can also be observed between sharing positive information and having a positive attitude (Lambert, 2012). However, scholars also note that pictures with angry expressions or aggressive words attract more attention, but this content does not evoke grateful comments or pleasant feedback (Larsen et al., 2008). Negative information reinforces, while positive information weakens the understanding and discernment of right/wrong content (Trevors & Kendeou, 2020). It should be noted that positive false information does not exist, as the concept of "falseness" itself is considered only negatively, and all its forms deserve unfavorable evaluation. Considering that we examine false information consisting of positive context, we use the term "pseudo-positive false information," which refers to information saturated with false positives. Sharing pseudo-positive false information can also be examined in the same context. Social network users are more likely to share pseudo-positive false information in a crisis because it has a specific benefit. For positive content, they also get positive feedback.

Recently conducted research reveals that during the COVID-19 era, the spread of fake news and its negative impact has significantly increased (Pulido et al., 2020). Medical misinformation is most common in the early stages of a pandemic, accompanied by a message that calls them to action (O'Connor & Murphy, 2020). It has also been proven that due to the wave of fear, tension and panic, a part of the society starts recklessly sharing information (Shimizu, 2020). As the number of shares increases, the social network user is tempted to use unproductive, unfounded and often harmful medications for treatment (Pennycook et al., 2020). Pandemic-induced stress has also led to psychological distress, generalized anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Rajkumar, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). In emergencies, gratitude and expressions of appreciation are vital and often necessary to maintain a positive mood and to gain hope (Fredrickson, 2009; Seligman, 2011).

Despite the adverse effects of spreading false information, it is still unknown why people continue to share false information. The "behavioral aspects of fake news sharing by a social media user" have not been thoroughly examined and a

so-called gap exists (Talwar et al., 2019, p. 73). Newhoff argues that understanding sociological, psychological, and human-tailored methods and theories is necessary to understand why false information is shared (advertently or inadvertently) (Newhoff, 2018). The principal point is that sharing false information may be random, but its creation is mostly purposeful (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019).

As we ascertain that it is paramount to disseminate verified information during COVID-19, as any misleading news may have an enhanced detrimental effect in a crisis, the article examines the influence of pseudo-positive false information. It identifies the most effective manipulators operating in a pandemic, which leads us to the following hypothesis:

> **H:** In a crisis, social media users share pseudo-positive information to receive positive feedback and emotional benefits.
> This is examined by following research questions:
> **RQ1**: What kind of information do social media users prefer in a crisis - positive or negative - and how does the perceived information impact them?
> **RQ2**: Which manipulators are most common during the COVID-19 pandemic and what main functions do they serve?
> **RQ3:** Why did social media users share or like the pseudo-positive fake information?

The study period included 16 months - from February 2020 to May 2021.

Methodology

We selected appropriate research methodology, including quantitative research in the form of a survey, qualitative and quantitative content analysis and in-depth (unstructured) interviews with ten field experts. We developed a questionnaire consisting of 20 questions. The survey was launched on social media as it was necessary to get active social media user responses. The questionnaire was available to almost all regions of Georgia and we received 204 responses from people between 18 and 64. The Participants were given the opportunity to explain their actions, which revealed the main reasons for sharing information and its impact. The survey also identified the main manipulators by which a social media user is deceived.

We used content analysis to study 55 misinformation posts and fake news pieces with pseudo-positive content, reinforcing the survey responses. Unstructured in-depth interviews were conducted with field specialists, which included four social media and false information experts, two psychologists and two epidemiologists. The responses supported the trends in other research methods, as the responses fully matched the general results.

In addition to traditional methods, the research relied on several relevant theories. The research was based on: Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT), Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Social Comparison Theory (SCT), which are widely used in social media research to determine human choice and motivation.

General Quantitative Results

In total, Georgian websites published 55 pseudo-positive false information concerning COVID-19 on Facebook.

The number of pseudo-positive false information grew dynamically as the urgency and relevancy of COVID-19 increased (Figure 1). One of the highest rates was recorded in March 2020, when the first case of infection was recorded in Georgia. The false information increased in September, when "The second wave" began. Dynamic growth of fake publications was evident in December 2020, when the vaccine was developed. It is clear that the spread of pseudo-positive false information intensifies and the flow of falsification significantly grows with the gradual development of events.

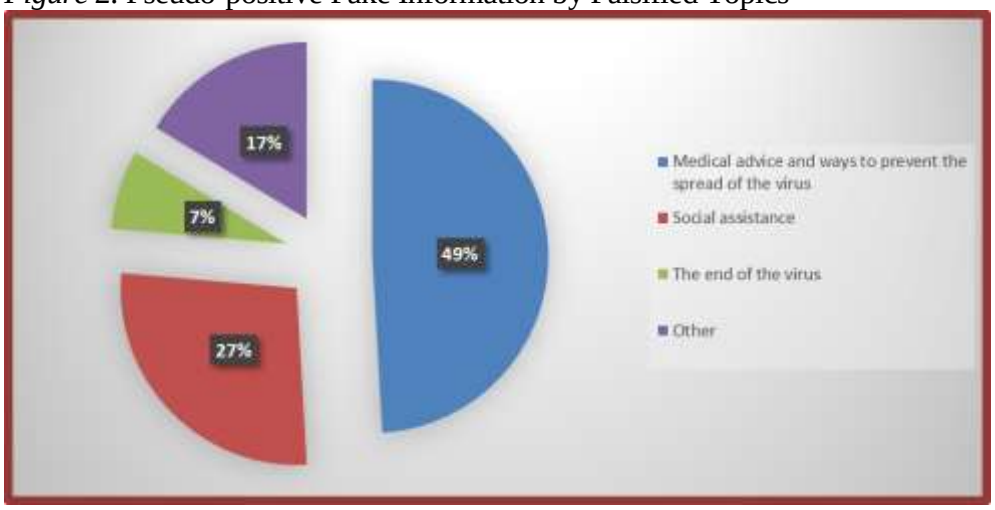
Figure 1. Pseudo-positive Fake Information by Date of Publication

Fake Information by Falsified Topics

To understand the direction in which the pseudo-positive false information was mainly spread, we sorted the publications by falsified topics. As a result of the content analysis, the following areas were identified:

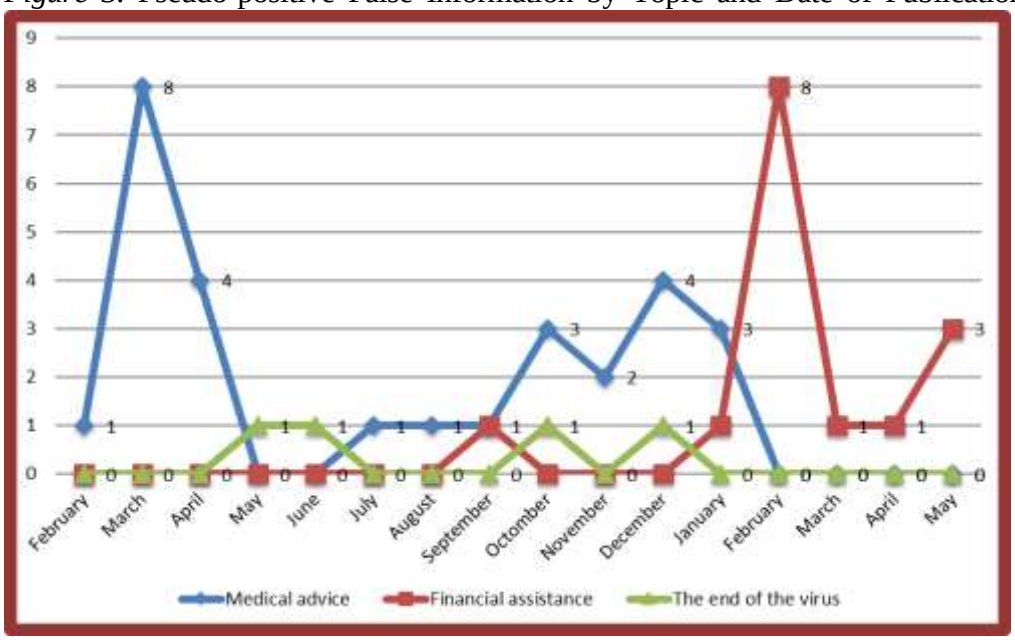
- Medical advice and ways to prevent the spread of the virus - 27
- Social assistance - 15
- The end of the virus - 4
- Other - 9

Figure 2. Pseudo-positive Fake Information by Falsified Topics



The breakdown by the topics shows that 49% of 55 pseudo-positive false information is medical advice, instructions on protecting yourself from the virus and ways to treat it (Figure 2). 27% represents fraudulent social and financial assistance. If we sort fake news topics by publication date, we will get a complete picture of the specific themes and the cause-and-effect relationship of the disseminated information and time.

Figure 3. Pseudo-positive False Information by Topic and Date of Publication



Sorting by the dates revealed that the falsified content changed dramatically as other events occurred (Figure 3). From March to May 2020, the most frequently falsified information was medical advice - how social media users could treat COVID-19 at home and protect themselves from the virus. This topic was relevant throughout most of the study period but decreased from February 2021 until

March, when vaccinations began and the public interest in seeking other ways of treatment was reduced. Consequently, pseudo-positive false information changed its characteristics and subject matter. In the last 4-5 months, fake news about financial assistance significantly increased. This occurrence was related to the growth in unemployment rates as many people lost their jobs and inflation reached its highest point. Thus, manipulations of this message proved to be most influential. Accordingly, we can conclude that the topic of pseudo-positive false information fits the needs of social network users, which can be considered a provocative factor for sharing false information by the user in a particular period.

Indicators and Characteristics of Pseudo-positive False Information

As a result of content analysis, we can formulate the leading indicators and characteristics of pseudo-positive false information.

- Pseudo-positive false information includes one specific idea, which is positively perceived by most of the social media users in the relevant period;
- Pseudo-positive false information has a distinctly "positive" title, in which the used words evoke a positive mood: "good news", "congratulations", "the end of the epidemic", "medicine is found", "vaccine is created", etc.;
- There are frequent cases when the title utilizes the persona/image of a well-known person, who is in a decision-making position and often appears on screen (e.g., a doctor, epidemiologist, etc.);
- Products that the articles refer to as "cures" of the virus are widely accessible, familiar to all and considered to be beneficial in threatening the viral diseases (e.g. lemon, garlic), i.e., the article uses reality, existing knowledge/experience for manipulation;
- The text often uses phrases like: "according to experts", "doctors note that", "a group of researchers found". However, the names of the experts, the title of the research and other detailed data that may help us verify the information are not disclosed;
- The source is cited, but the link is not accurate, does not work and various errors occur when following it;
- The photo is not taken explicitly for this publication; already existing graphics and photos, easily found in various search engines are used;
- The photo enhances and confirms the positive message in the title, and a solid logical connection can be observed between the photo and the title.

Comparative Analysis of Pseudo-positive and Negative False Information

We compared the feedback from sharing negative and pseudo-positive false information (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Pseudo-positive and Negative False Information

Headline	Shares	Likes	Reach	Source
"You will not be infected with COVID if you use this simple method once every three days"	Up to 1000	Up to 13000	Up to 800000	Tvalsazrisi
"You must know that face masks have certain side effects! - Doctor Nona Agdgomelashvili is alarmed: …"	900	555	33000	Tvalsazrisi
"Inhalation of hot water steam 100 percent kills the coronavirus"	663	3500	Up to 10000	Facebook
"Only those who want to kill themselves will get the vaccine"	52	60	Up to 3000	Facebook
"Walk boldly and greet people, I tell you with 100% confidence that..." - a shocking discovery about the coronavirus"	10	300	200000	football
"What happened to the people who got the coronavirus vaccine"	7	200	7537	football

* Green color indicates - pseudo-positive false information, red - negative

We can state that feedback from social media users is closely related to the degree of falsification (Table 1). Comment analysis reveals that while sharing pseudo-positive false information, the "sharer" receives positive feedback; in the case of negative information - negative feedback. It is also apparent that under negative falsifications, the comments about verifying the source and the absurdity of the article prevail. The latter gives us reason to conclude: Pseudo-positive false information is compelling since the social media user is accustomed to the idea that falsifications are negative. In the instance of pseudo-positive content, the desire for verification decreases as the desire for the article to be accurate surpasses it.

Survey of Social Media (Facebook) Users

A survey was conducted on Facebook. A unique online questionnaire was developed, consisting of 20 open and closed questions. 204 social media users took part in the survey.

During the survey, participants were given the opportunity to choose which false information to share in a crisis. All fake news was taken from online sites, but their authenticity was not disclosed. Participants had to explain their reasoning - why they made the particular choice.

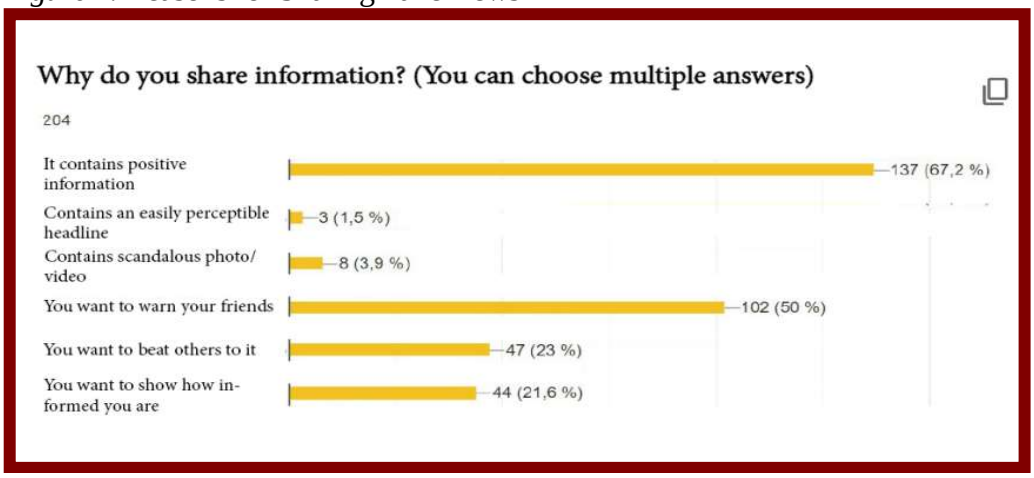
Most social media users (first question - 93%, second question - 86%), given the opportunity to "share" pseudo-positive and negative fake information, choose

to share the former. They express that sharing a positive piece of information is almost always better. This sentiment is more substantiated if the given news is accompanied by a picture of a trustworthy, knowledgeable person in a positive context (in the second case, a photo of Amiran Gamkrelidze - a Georgian immunologist). Those who shared the negative news mentioned that they found the other news more trustworthy. In another question, asking what type of content the social media users would share in a crisis, 97.5% of the respondents answered that they would share a positive one. Furthermore, 92.6% stated that they were reassured by reading positive articles and shared them to provide others with optimistic information.

During the survey, respondents were asked to react to seeing, in one case – a pseudo-positive and in another – negative false information on social media. Overall, pseudo-positive information received more engagement – 12% more shares, 24% more likes and 29% more reactions. Conversely, negative false information obtained more comments, analyzing which elucidates that the excessiveness is prompted by participants' desires to express their skepticism (writing: "This is misinformation", "Of course, this is false information", "It is fake", etc.).

Participants state that their desire to spread positivity is the primary motivation for sharing information (Figure 4). Thus, positivity can be considered a trigger or a manipulator for more active sharing, especially in a stressful environment like a pandemic. Other prevalent reasons can be examined according to the Self-Determination Theory, which demonstrates that positioning and activity on specific platforms are essential for this type of social media users as they consider their Facebook friends the main audience. They share the given information with the audience mentioned above and in response, they have particular expectations from their social media friends, meaning overall feedback - likes, comments, shares, etc. Some respondents who write that they want to beat everyone to it belong to the psychological type defined by the theory of FoMo – Fear of Missing Out (Figure 4). In this case, the key is speed, as there is a fear of "falling behind", which reduces the chances of verifying information and increases reckless sharing.

Figure 4. Reasons for Sharing Fake News



23% of the respondents state that only the title is attractive and intriguing. If we deduce the content analysis results, we can conclude that this type of falsification has more influence, as the manner and the tone are exhibited in the title itself, which is caused by the relevant words. Moreover, since the title and the photo carry a clear message, there is no need to follow the link - the user shares the information based on the "idea" perceived by combining these two components.

Analysis of the In-depth Interviews with Experts

As mentioned, we turned to another form of qualitative research - an unstructured in-depth interview to confirm our hypothesis and answer our research questions. Content analysis and focus groups partially demonstrated the results and impacts of sharing pseudo-positive information. To confirm the theory, we interviewed eight experts, based on their respective fields. We selected four experts in social media and false information, two psychologists and two doctors/TV hosts.

- **The psychology of positive information during a crisis**

During a crisis, people become more vulnerable and their emotions are more accessible to manipulate. Social media experts expressed that even media becomes more polarized at such times. Meanwhile, media psychologists think that, in general, there is a strong positivity bias on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. There might be less positive news during the pandemic, but overall, positive news prevails.

Experts also note that in uncertain situations or in "probable" cases, it is crucial to receive positive information. This often happens during wars or disasters when they do not want to panic and alarm people. However, it can be and is false information, just presented positively. Often**,** people try to see and capture some positivity. Viktor Frankl wrote about the psychological state of individuals in concentration camps. He observed that those who had a positive outlook - that the war would end soon and kept hope throughout, escaped the bitterness of the camp. Conversely, those with a negative state of mind could not withstand these conditions.

Psychologists believe this is precisely the modus operandi of the modern world: during a pandemic, people believe that they must cling to the positive to survive. Social media experts also expressed that the pandemic has modified social media content. The amount of positive content in the form of "life hacks" has increased. These are the pieces of advice that are packaged and adjusted to social media. Naturally, the packaging of false information has also developed in this direction - the demand comes from social media users.

The interviewed doctors highlighted that the answers would have vastly differed if we had discussed the impact of pseudo-positive information without the pandemic. However, when an individual's critical thinking has been debilitated, as this is an extreme situation and puts people in distress, any information accessible to them is automatically shared. When we talk about mass risks, both - negative

and positive - are risky. Experts mention that from an epidemic point of view, it is hazardous to falsify information about regulations, face masks, or whether the vaccine will be helpful or not. It is an attempt to establish a mass movement against the vaccine, as well as regulations, which implies that the risk of the virus spreading further automatically increases and the date when we defeat the disease is longer delayed.

Interviewed psychologists emphasize that, especially when the end of the virus is not discernible, a person accepts and perceives pseudo-positive information better than negative. Even though it is fake, it still gives you a chance to "survive". People in such extreme environments (crisis, war, pandemic) enjoy thinking that everything will be fine, which once again proves that they desire positivity to be more hopeful.

- **Pseudo-positive information and disappointment/panic**

According to psychologists, if a "positive story" is false, those who believe it will panic and be disappointed, eventually leading to a negative impact. This panic will pass on to others and will spread to groups. In frenzy and panic, people tend to make decisions they later analyze and regret. In Georgia, during the pandemic, by the influence of various false information, people started buying unnecessary products, including "curative" drugs. The panic was also visible in other countries, where supermarkets were almost emptied. If we suppose the information that evoked positive feelings was false, panic and frustration will escalate repeatedly. Psychologists argue that disappointment and frustration manifest when you finally realize you have bought a useless product. The more critical the falsified topic is, the more exacerbated the reader will become after discovering that this positive information is fake.

In such cases, we are dealing with panic, which could reach large crowds. Panic is characterized by action. This is why pseudo-positivity is vital simultaneously - it stops society from acting and thinking irrationally. Therefore, this false-positivity is necessary to some extent and could even have a positive effect - mentally strengthening people. However, in most instances, they are plain fabrications, which are harmful. It always depends on the falsified subject matter.

Thus, although false, people sometimes require pseudo-positive information to maintain optimism, which is the main reason for the abundance of pseudo-positive information during a pandemic.

- **False-positive information and medicine**

Most experts share one viewpoint: False-positive information is detrimental to human health as it has no medical basis. They argue that striving for such positive conclusions harms the medical field. At first glance, we could be looking at academic research. However, if the study is in an obsessive pursuit of a distinctly positive result, there are always higher risks of making mistakes while analyzing facts, let alone concluding. This problem is exacerbated when these conclusions are not made by a competent person.

In terms of credibility, there is a hierarchy - what degree of credibility a research has, which is almost never seen in journalistic material. Experts state that 100% reliability is almost non-existent. Our content analysis showed that information regarding medical advice is often accompanied by a source and indicated studies. However, the reliability hierarchy of these studies or other accurate information is not found, which is necessary, according to the specialists. The study may have been conducted, but its reliability rate is 1%. Consequently, pseudo-positive false information often includes a "scientific" source, the credibility of which has not been proven.

As for the impact of pseudo-positive false information on an individual's health, interviewed doctors believe these falsifications are the most influential and dangerous. For example, in April 2020, fake news spread that hot water intake was adequate against COVID-19. Several people (as doctors claim, 13) drank boiling water and were taken to the hospital with internal burns. Media psychologists believe that the impact of the information depends on the users, media literacy, political orientation, fears, beliefs in conspiracy theories, and so on. However, the impacts still hurt these people equally.

- **Reasons behind sharing pseudo-positive false information**

According to psychologists, people who often share different articles act according to one of the principles/effects common in social psychology and sociology: the "self-fulfilling prophecy." This refers to people foretelling optimistic predictions that may or may not happen. But, if it does happen, they state in a self-satisfied manner that: "they said so". This is also a form of emotional fulfillment. One day, someone may say, "I said it would end", "I said it would save us" and "It may happen". Consequently, it is reaffirmed that pseudo-positive false information is shared for particular motives and the need to satisfy specific emotional desires.

At the same time, media psychologists note that some might not carefully read what they heard from their friends, trust them, and reshare it when asked to do so. Others feel threatened by the virus and the information that the virus is not a real threat helps them regulate these negative emotions.

- **FoMo and social networking as the main reasons for sharing**

All the experts on social media, media psychology and fake information argue that it is essential for social media users to present themselves among friends correctly.

According to media psychologists, the information is shared to warn others. Concurrently, people present themselves strategically on social media - usually happy, beautiful, successful. If being competent and informed is central to a person's self-concept, it can explain strategic information sharing. If we observe, all three theories imply this: the strategic and rational selection of information will bring specific emotional benefits to the social media user.

Emotions play an essential role in sharing fake news, which is why people believe and share this type of information. In this case, we can consider the concept of receiving emotional feedback and benefits, thus why a social network user shares positive information with others.

Experts believe that a big part of sharing fake news is to project an identity and receive affirmation from your followers and friends. In a sense, people often post what they think will make them look good to their audience. Therefore, if positive content is important to the audience, the page's author tries to meet this requirement in a crisis to receive the desired comments and feedback. In a crisis, people feel more emboldened to take a hard line in their views because this is what often gets likes and shares. Thus, people share news that validates their views and identity. Therefore, if they are anti-vaxxers and see a story about how dangerous vaccines could be, they will share it. This is not because they found it an interesting article, but because the title alone reinforces their identity and ideas. Social media platforms now have algorithms that detect whether people share content without reading.

Social media can lead to creating echo chambers where people only hear views similar to their own. Social media posts are short, divisive, often over-simplistic and unverified. Social media is a tool. It can be used for good or for bad. Experts indicate that the pandemic has shown how misinformation or unbalanced information can lead to some real-world problems. So, society promotes sharing this type of information for a single purpose - some benefit. Mainly, when it comes to social media, this benefit is the comments, likes and positive feedback.

Conclusion

To summarize, we can candidly state that every research question was thoroughly and adequately answered. The first research question (RQ1: What kind of information do social media users prefer in a crisis - positive or negative - and how does the perceived information impact them?) was answered by the summary of the survey and in-depth interview results. The survey showed that 94% of social media users prefer positive information during a crisis, reinforced by the field experts' professional opinions and various studies - society is inclined to positivity during a crisis.

Concurrently, the survey confirmed that social media users favor positive medical advice, evident in quantitative content analysis, as 49% of the published pseudo-positive information concerns medical advice. Hence, we can conclude that pseudo-positive false information corresponds to social media users' demands.

Social media users' feedback appeared in the comment and share analysis, while the focus group results were the key elements here. The results can be examined in two ways:

1. In the instance of pseudo-positive information, the feedback is positive, which can be considered the main objective of sharing. Nevertheless, the

annulment of this information, i.e., realizing that it is false, disappoints the consumer and exacerbates the crisis.

2. The feedback of the negative false information is always negative, but understanding that this information is false reassures the public.

In-depth interviews and surveys, combined with theories, also revealed what type of impact the false information might have on social media users. According to specialists, particularly doctors, fake medical advice has the potential to cause severe damage to an individual's health, which various examples have proved. Concurrently, the psychologists' opinions and the focus group experiments show that by spreading pseudo-positive false information, the social media user receives positive feedback, including positive emotions, in the form of comments, which can also be considered the main provoking factors for sharing false information. The theories correspond to the same idea - the users choose the content that benefits them (RCT), which ultimately satisfies their desires (UGT) and promotes their strategic activity (SDT) on social media.

As for distinguishing the manipulators (RQ2: Which manipulators are most common during the COVID-19 pandemic and what main functions do they serve?), the answer to this question is unambiguous and was obtained by summarizing every research method. Experts, content analysis and surveys lead us to conclude that the main manipulator is the logical correlation between the headline and the photo - their combined idea. It is noteworthy that the social media users (200 to 156 responses) only share information containing a positive story, which proves that positivity is a non-traditional form of manipulator, but is the most effective tool in a crisis, according to the experts.

At the same time, utilizing photographs and quotes (as a manipulator) of an authoritative figure impacts the public perception of the news and increases the share rates. This was confirmed by comparing pseudo-positive information packaged with this type of picture with a publication not displaying a photograph of a famous person.

The 3rd question is especially crucial (RQ3: Why did social media users share or like the pseudo-positive fake information (did it make them happy, hopeful, or angry?) and is answered by summarizing all used research methods and theories. The first and foremost reason for sharing is the conveyed positivity in the information (this is also confirmed by the answers of 153 out of 200 participants). Content analysis has also shown that positive information shares significantly more than negative information during the study period.

The second objective is hidden behind the activities of social network users on particular platforms. The survey showed that when sharing information to warn their friends (connected to gaining authority in their circle), social media users want to beat everyone to it and display their knowledge, which is closely linked to SDT and FoMo.

The third objective concerns the specific benefit that presents itself through positive feedback, positive evaluation from other social media users and emotional gain, which are related to the RCT and UGT theory: benefits and gratification.

By summarizing the theories and research results, it was unveiled that utilizing a particular name/product in pseudo-positive false information benefits three links (triple benefit principle): the sender/creator of the fake information; the object/person/organization mentioned in the fake information and the social media user.

Therefore, after exploring the answers to the research questions analyzing the qualitative and quantitative data, we can conclude that the first hypothesis we formulated: in a crisis, a social media user shares pseudo-positive information to receive positive feedback and emotional benefits, was confirmed.

As for the second hypothesis, after analyzing the comments, focus group and in-depth interview results, it became apparent that the users shared pseudo-positive information to reinforce their desire - that everything would be fine.

Thus, the second hypothesis, that individuals need pseudo-positive information to maintain optimism, which is the basis of pseudo-positive disinfodemia during a pandemic, has been confirmed.

References

Cerase, A., Santoro, C. (2018). From racial hoaxes to media hypes: Fake news' real consequences. In P. Vasterman (ed.), *From Media Hype to Twitter Storm*, 333–354. Amsterdam University Press.

Chesney, R., Citron, D. (2018, December 11). *Deepfakes & the New Disinformation War*. Foreign Affairs. Available at: https://fam.ag/364AOAM.

Dewey, C. (2016, November 17). *Facebook fake-news writer: I think Donald Trump is in the White House because of me*. The Washington Post. Available at: https://wapo.st/3qzGP25.

Egelhofer, J. L., Lecheler, S. (2019). Fake news as a two-dimensional phenomenon: a framework and research agenda. *Annals of the International Communication Association, 43*(2), 97–116.

Fazio, L. K., Brashier, N. M., Keith Payne, B., Marsh, E. J. (2015). Knowledge does not protect against illusory truth. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General, 144*(5), 993–1002.

Fredrickson, B. L. (2009). *Positivity*. Harmony.

Gentzkow, M., Shapiro, J. M. (2006). Media bias & reputation. *Journal of Political Economy, 114*(2), 280–316.

Hasher, L., Goldstein, D., Toppino, T. (1977). Frequency & the conference of referential validity. *Journal of Verbal Learning & Verbal Behavior, 16*(1), 107–112.

Lambert, N. M., Gwinn, A. M., Baumeister, R. F., Strachman, A., Washburn, I. J., Gable, S. L., et al. (2012). A boost of positive affect. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 30*(1), 24–43.

Larsen, R. J., Mercer, K. A., Balota, D. A., Strube, M. J. (2008). Not all negative words slow down lexical decision and naming speed: Importance of word arousal. *Emotion, 8*(4), 445–452.

MacDonald, E. (2017, January 13). *The fake news that sealed the fate of Antony and Cleopatra*. The Conversation. Available at: https://bit.ly/3x972qv.

Murphy, D. (2017). *Fake News 101: How to recognize fake news & avoid being fooled by it*. Independently Published.

Newhoff, D. (2018, August 6). *Why do we share fake news?* The Illusion of More. Available at: https://bit.ly/3h69SHt.

O'Connor, C., & Murphy, M. (2020). Going viral: Doctors must tackle fake news in the COVID-19 pandemic. *BMJ*, m1587.

Pennycook, G., McPhetres, J., Zhang, Y., Lu, J. G., & Rand, D. G. (2020). Fighting COVID-19 Misinformation on Social Media: Experimental Evidence for a Scalable Accuracy-Nudge Intervention. *Psychological Science, 31*(7), 770–780.

Pulido, C. M., Villarejo-Carballido, B., Redondo-Sama, G., & Gómez, A. (2020). COVID-19 infodemic: More retweets for science-based information on coronavirus than for false information. *International Sociology, 35*(4), 377–392.

Rajkumar, R. P. (2020, August). COVID-19 and mental health: A review of the existing literature. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry, 52*, Article 102066.

Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. Free Press.

Shimizu, K. (2020). 2019-nCoV, fake news, and racism. *The Lancet, 395*(10225), 685–686.

Silverman, C. (2016 December 30). *Here Are 50 Of the Biggest Fake News Hits on Facebook From 2016*. Buzzfeed News. Available at: https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/top-fake-news-of-2016.

Talwar, S., Dhir, A., Kaur, P., Zafar, N., & Alrasheedy, M. (2019). Why do people share fake news? Associations between the dark side of social media use and fake news sharing behavior. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services, 51*, 72–82.

Trevors, G., & Kendeou, P. (2020). The effects of positive and negative emotional text content on knowledge revision. *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology, 174702182091381*.

Utz, S., Tanis, M., Vermeulen, I. (2012). It is all about being popular: the effects of need for popularity on social network site use. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 15*(1), 37–42.

Wang, C., Pan, R., Wan, X., Tan, Y., Xu, L., Ho, C. S. (2020). Immediate psychological responses and associated factors during the initial stage of the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) epidemic among the general population in China. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 17*(5), 1729.