

UNDERSTANDING THE ALLURE AND DANGER OF FAKE NEWS IN SOCIAL MEDIA
ENVIRONMENTS

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ABSTRACT

Judith Jackson May, Advisor

In 1785, Thomas Jefferson wrote, “The most effectual engines for [pacifying a nation] are the public papers... [A despotic] government always [keeps] a kind of standing army of news writers who, without any regard to truth or to what should be like truth, [invent] and put into the papers whatever might serve the ministers. This suffices with the mass of the people who have no means of distinguishing the false from the true paragraphs of a newspaper” (Sec.51). Jefferson’s views are as salient today as they were in 1785. Some 232 years later, a “mass of people” struggle to distinguish between news that is real and news that is false. The largest context for this struggle to date was the 2016 United States presidential election (Pew Center, 2016c). For some, the “fake news” found on social media has become a harbinger for the emergence of a despotic government (Pew Center).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the phenomenon of fake news through the lived experience of graduate students in the United States. The prospective student participants were pursuing advanced degrees in higher education. This research study utilized the uses and gratifications theory (UGT) approach to analyze how and why people used social media during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. In light of the influence of fake news on the 2016 presidential election, this study also aimed to investigate the reasons why people believed that fake news were appealing.

The thematic analysis revealed people were gratified by the use of social media for connecting with friends and family, gathering and sharing information, and as a vehicle of expression. Participants found a significant amount of fake news stories on social media during

the 2016 U.S. presidential election. They tried to identify and differentiate between fake news and real news using the fact-checking websites and major news sources. However, the two significant themes that emerged during the interviews illustrated that the participants felt that fake news on social media were ideologically polarizing the society and affecting their personal relationships. Upgrade in public policies related to social media were recommended in this study.

For my wife, who convinced me I could do this.

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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

Fake news is defined as deliberately misleading news produced for monetary gain (Silverman, 2016b; Spohr, 2017) that spreads on social media platforms due to the lack of effective entry barriers to media production and distribution (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). To introduce and illustrate the phenomenon known as fake news, a fictional story is presented below. The purpose of this story is not only to introduce the phenomenon with clarity but also to avoid any confusion with other types of misleading news stories on social media like propaganda and satire. Details about other types of misleading news stories are presented later in the chapter.

Introduction to the Phenomenon of Fake News

Having finished the last load of laundry for the day, Patricia Wilkins sat down for just a few minutes at her kitchen table in Stillwater, Oklahoma to catch up with her Facebook friends and family. After checking for the October 14 birthdays, she scrolled past slow cooker recipes and homecoming videos until she came to a picture of Hillary Clinton standing arm-in-arm with billionaire George Soros atop the headline “Hillary and George pay thousands to illegal immigrants in massive voter-fraud scheme” (www.abc.com.co). She had heard about this the other night at her card club. Janice Beaker, a university professor, had told everyone at the euchre table that it had come across her online feed the other day. Wanting to find out more, Patricia clicked on the headline. The article was short and to the point. Soros had offered \$550,000 to Hillary in an effort to capture Florida’s 29 electoral votes. The Federal Election Commission had not discovered the fraud; one of her campaign staff had reported it out of a grave sense of duty to the country. Shaking her head in dismay, Patricia returned to her Facebook timeline and hearted the story’s hyperlink from www.abc.com.co.

Meanwhile, in the small town of Veles in the Republic of Macedonia, a landlocked

Balkan nation north of Greece, nineteen-year-old Andrik opened his laptop and typed “Hillary Clinton” and “Snoop Dog” in the Google search window. Instantly, ten different stories appeared. In two minutes and twenty-two seconds, he had copied and pasted four paragraphs from three different web pages into a Microsoft Word document. He uploaded the content from the document to his website www.abc.com.co and waited for the clicks (clickbait) to begin.

What Patricia and Janice did not know was that the Hillary-Soros story was not true. However, because it appeared multiple times on their Facebook feed, they began to curiously explore the story. Each time Janice, Patricia, and every other person clicked on the story to read more about it, their beliefs about Hillary Clinton were confirmed. As the story appeared in more and more social media feeds, Andrik made more and more money.

Veles, Macedonia is a place known for decades of financial instability. Andrik is a teenager who earns an average of \$5,000 USD per month (approximately 262,261.75 Macedonian Denar [MKD]/month) from posting fake news on social media. He uses Google AdSense to post the fake news stories, on many social media sites and collects money from Clickbait. For every 1,000 clicks on his stories, he earns anywhere between \$1 to \$3 USD. The amount of money increases with the increase in the number of people who follow and subscribe to his web page. For example, for 100,000 clicks on a particular story in one day, he could earn about \$300 USD per day. His income varies based on the number of fake stories he creates and the number of click those stories receive. This is attractive to Andrik because in addition to making money he does not have to work for anyone else, and his financial status in Veles is among the richest. Kirby (2016) named the phenomenon illustrated in this scenario as, ‘A digital gold rush.’ This fictional story presented herein is to introduce and illustrate the phenomenon known as fake news.

Silverman and Alexander (2016) assert, fake story writers purposely slant their stories to exploit readers' implicit and expressed biases. Fake news writers spend abundant time on social media networks to gather knowledge about political and social events (Mustafaraj & Metaxas, 2017; Silverman & Alexander, 2016). They meticulously read the comments that people post on the pages of real stories. The research of social media users' comments is the rich fodder that is used by the writers to exploit the implicit and explicit biases of the social media users (Mustafaraj & Metaxas, 2017). A chain of events in which users try to verify and confirm their biases leads to mass sharing of fake news and opinions thinly veiled as news (Mustafaraj & Metaxas, 2017; Silverman & Alexander, 2016). It is through this pandering to biases and subsequent mass sharing of information that social media fake news writers earn money, which they capitalized on during the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Bakir & McStay, 2017; Silverman & Alexander, 2016).

Fake news has continuously grown after the 2016 U.S. presidential election and shows no signs of decline (Bakir & McStay, 2017). Social media giants like Facebook and Twitter are frequently held under the microscope for their lack of progress in defining the policies that would help avoid the mass sharing of fake news (Pogue, 2017). As indicated in the scenario and social media trends, the proliferation of fake news is a significant issue. Examination of the use of social media over the last decade demonstrates its utilization as useful in capitalizing on and perpetuating personal biases, fears, and opinions. As evidenced in the 2016 U.S. presidential election year through the lens of social media, the proliferation of biases, fears, and opinions serve to validate biases and create divisiveness. Thus, understanding the lived experience of the fake news phenomenon will add to our understanding of how to support educating the masses to avoid being manipulated by fake news (NPR, 2016b).

In an era of 140-character tweets on Twitter and image sharing on Instagram, the credibility and utility of more traditional media outlets such as radio, newspaper, and television have dramatically declined. In addition to the emergence of interactive media, the perceived political proclivities of traditional media have also caused record-low levels of public confidence (Gronke & Cook, 2007; Pew Center, 2012; Stroud, 2011; Turcotte, York, Irving, Scholl, & Pingree, 2015). The Pew Center's (2017) "Social networking fact sheet" also illustrates that the interactive ability of social media makes it more attractive to the users compared to traditional media outlets where one cannot express personal opinions. According to many authors, including Silverman and Singer-Vine (2016), this near abandonment of traditional news sources coupled with the attraction of interactivity and bias confirmation constitutes a danger to humanity. Evidence of national polarization into perceived good and bad sides was very clear during the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Silverman, 2016a; Spohr, 2017). Milbank (2016) and former President Barack Obama (2016) contend this exploitation of bias using fake news as a silent killer of democracy and threatens a global armistice. Left unchecked, social media giants like Facebook, Twitter and Google may be willing to build their fortune while ignoring the potential horrors of post-truth social media (Dorf & Tarrow, 2017; Shahani, 2016). While many people receive their news on social media networks, they also create a personalized and polarized echo-chamber for themselves that they refer to for all their gratifications (Bakir & McStay, 2017; Mitchell & Holcomb, 2016; Mustafaraj & Metaxas, 2017; Spohr, 2017).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding of the phenomenon of fake news through the lived experience of doctoral graduate students in the United States. This study utilized a phenomenological approach and in-depth interviews to provide a platform to

allow the participants to describe their lived experiences of social media from the lens of fake news. The questions guiding the research included:

1. How do social media users describe the purpose of their media use during the 2016 U.S. presidential election?
2. How did social media users identify and manage political fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential election?
3. What do participants believe are the effects of political fake news occurring on social media?

Infrequent Readers vs. Frequent Readers

While groups of unprofessional writers from as far away as Macedonia patch together bits of information to create stories that sell (NPR, 2016b), “infrequent readers” also contribute to the phenomenon by liking, sharing, and commenting on fake news which jeopardizes the quality of social media interactions (Otero, 2016; Spohr, 2017; Swire, Berinsky, Lewandowsky, & Ecker, 2017). For this study, “infrequent readers” are defined as people who do not like to read long news stories, books, or novels and prefer short and easy to understand headlines. Liking, sharing and commenting are the common attributes on most social media websites that help users to reply and forward information and entertainment effortlessly. Because infrequent readers do not like to read lengthy articles, these readers tend to like, share, and comment only on short and easily understood pieces such as pictures, videos, charts, and memes (Otero, 2016; Silverman & Singer-Vine, 2016). Amongst the most used social media platforms, each month Facebook is accessed by 156 million active users, and Twitter is accessed by 65 million monthly active users in the U.S. (The Statistical Portal, 2016). In a study conducted on social media clicks, it was found that 59 percent of the users studied, liked and shared stories by just reading

the title (Gabiolkov, Ramachandran, Chaintreau, & Legout, 2016).

On the other hand, frequent readers are the people who like reading on a day-to-day basis and are critical thinkers. Critical thinking is at the heart of the education system where students are prepared for critical reading and critical thinking (Wilson, 2016). For this study, “frequent readers” are defined as people who like to read long stories, books, novels, or educational material. It is assumed that the frequent readers are involved in critical reading and critical thinking of the text they read on social media. Davies and Barnett (2015) point out that education provides students skills of reasoned argument and analysis, the ability to develop a ‘critical character,’ and to act responsibly and ethically. Critical thinking also helps students become aware of the powerful social forces at work in the world which serve to silence and marginalize others, restricting human freedom (Davies & Barnett, 2015). As all the participants of this study are doctoral students, it is considered that they engage in any text with high reading standards and think critically in the process.

“Echo Chamber” of Fake News

Pogue (2017) points out that social media users create a customized echo-chamber for themselves. They choose to add like-minded friends on Facebook and follow on Twitter. In both cases, they make a conscious decision to follow or add people (Swire et al., 2017). The problem with fake news begins with the metaphysical decisions of the social media users (Mustafaraj & Metaxas, 2017). People use social media as an echo-chamber to raise their voices for social issues, and the fake news writers exploit the echo-chambers’ chaos to slant fake stories for their monetary gain (Levitin, 2016). The wordy arguments in the echo-chambers are appealing because they help fuel the personal biases and generate curiosities (Pogue, 2017; Spohr, 2017).

The echo-chamber analysis reveals that social media users drift away from the facts.

Williamson (2016) points out that the echo-chambers on social media websites are similar to the evolution and transmission of infectious diseases, and to avoid the widespread misinformation there is a need for detailed analysis of transmissions. Fake news is spreading like wildfire, hurting the democracy, and sowing confusion amongst people (Dorf & Tarrow, 2017; Pew Center, 2016c). As evidenced during the last few years, fake news is deeply problematic because it may have affected the presidential election results; it has also become fodder for ugly partisan warfare on social media (Pogue, 2017). Hence, there is a need to analyze the types of gratifications that people receive from fake news and explore how people experience fake news to understand the dynamics of untrue news. This exploratory study also establishes a foundation for future research in understanding the fake news phenomenon.

Fake News and Fact-Checking

Researchers are now examining the effects of fake news on the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Combating the proliferation of fake news is a difficult but important task. Also, the obvious solution of fact-checking has proven ineffective in the past (Rutenberg, 2016). Identifying the truth is complicated as it is often mixed with the real news in a way where a few facts are altered or omitted (Pogue, 2017). For example, in January 2016, billionaire George Soros predicted a landslide win in popular votes for Hillary Clinton. However, eight months later, the fake news creators altered the news story and reported that, “Democrat mega-donor George Soros openly admits that GOP presidential nominee Donald Trump will win the popular vote in a ‘landslide,’ but says a President Hillary Clinton is already a ‘done deal’” (Emery, 2016). There are hundreds of fake stories trolling on social media networks at any given time, and users do not have enough time nor the interest to fact-check every single news story. The factual flaws contained in the fake news stories make them more lucrative because people

like to talk about rumors and gossip (Pogue, 2017). Therefore, it is important to critically think before clicking on any story and sharing them without proper investigation.

Influence of Social Media

Social media is altering the equilibrium of influence, dynamics of communication, and it is a very prevalent platform to seek news in today's world. The Pew Research Center for Journalism (2016a) and James L. Knight Foundation surveyed 4,654 Americans and found that 62% receive news updates from social media networks. Receiving news on social media is very common across ages, races, genders, and incomes (Pew Research Center, 2016a). The 2008–2012 U.S. presidential election launched what has now become the new norm of relating directly to the news source instead of the involvement of a third-party source. Since Facebook's birth on February 4, 2004, the number of users has risen exponentially. According to The Statistical Portal (2016), there are currently 1.86 billion Facebook users worldwide. This distribution closely mirrors the 156 million Facebook users and 65 million Twitter users that represent 78% of the population in the United States. Social media is a very useful tool to reach the masses. This social media platform allows quick and effective ways to receive and share information. People with similar interests locate, organize, share, and coordinate various types of information. The method of communication between people has changed dramatically with the ascent of social media (Budak & El Abbadi, 2011).

According to the Pew Research Center (2014), more Americans are following social media to receive daily news. Conversely, cable news viewership has decreased by 8% in 2015 including Fox News, MSNBC, and CNN (Pew Center, 2016). Americans like to follow politicians on social media and to be the first to hear the news (Pew Center, 2014). Moreover, the popularity of print newspapers is also dropping consistently. The circulation of newspapers in

the U.S. has decreased by 3%, Sunday circulation declined by 1%, and newspaper's weekly circulations have dropped a massive 19% in last decade (Pew Center, 2016).

The Polarizing Potential of Fake News on Social Media

The right to freedom of expression is at the foundation of American democracy but is endangered by the irresponsible practice of promoting fake news on social media websites. In recent years, social media environments have displayed symptoms of ideological polarization (Spohr, 2017). 'Fake News' on social media remains the centerpiece of the world news since the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Fake stories are shared twice as often on Facebook, as compared to any real stories by mainstream news sources. Pogue (2017) illustrated that the top 20 fake stories were circulated more than the top 20 real news stories during the final weeks of the 2016 presidential election. Similarly, according to a survey of 3,000 adult participants in America, 75% were tricked into believing fake news stories on social media (Silverman & Singer-Vine, 2016). Conversely, social media giants like Facebook, Twitter, and Google are experiencing the sharper side of the proverbial double-edged sword as social media followers look more and more to social media networks for up-to-date information and news (Rutenberg, 2016).

Impact and Purposes of Fake News Proliferation in a Democratic Society

Fake news proliferates social media channels on a daily basis, and Rutenberg (2016) points out that fake news is shared more often than real news on social media. Fabricated news stories are destructive to democracy and have the potential to generate functional issues in modern-day society (Rutenberg, 2016). If people in the society are unable to agree on basic facts and cannot distinguish the difference between fake and real news, the functioning of the democracy is automatically outmoded (Rutenberg, 2016). Thus, understanding the social

function of news sharing is vital for comprehending individuals' irrational behaviors like partisan warfare, and opinionated blame on social media (Pogue, 2017). The news is not just shared to inform or even to convince others; news is a way to proclaim your association to the social media assemblage (Rutenberg, 2016). People automatically associate an individual with the type of news they like, share, or provide comments on (Pogue, 2017). Regardless of the facts or the reasons behind the persons' motivation to share the story, their friends and followers might associate them with the topic. Furthermore, people with common interests and views align with the story because of their presumptions that the primary sharer supports the issue.

Since people share and follow the stories that confirm their internal and external biases, it is certainly a part of personal gratifications as they fulfill their needs (Weaver Lariscy, Tinkham, & Sweetser, 2011). The uses and gratifications theory (UGT) is based on the principle that people seek out media to fulfill their internal needs. When their individual needs like seeking information, passing time, entertainment, relaxation, using media for communication and convenience, expression of opinions, and surveillance are satisfied, it leads to ultimate gratification (Weaver Lariscy et al., 2011). Thus, the UGT can be used as an integral part of developing measurements that will help in understanding how and why people use social media (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Previously, the uses and gratifications theory has been used extensively to disseminate the political messages and an overall understanding of people's persuasion of the messages (Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1979).

During the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections, President Barack Obama pioneered the process, adopted, and successfully utilized social media for his political campaigns in the U.S. (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). The 2016 U.S. presidential election was no different. On the one hand, politicians used social media extensively for communicating political agendas and

commentaries. On the other hand, people used social media not only for receiving information but also for sharing their opinions, thoughts, beliefs, judgments, agreements, and disagreements. While the political news liking, sharing, and commenting was a part of the day-to-day routine of the life of millions of Americans, researchers found that the fake news writers sitting far and near observed the passion and controversies that stirred up the people because of their mass sharing of news (Verstraete, Bambauer, & Bambauer, 2017). Therefore, they began slanting the fake news stories about politicians that people expected to hear. Since social media users were unaware and did not expect the proliferation of something known as ‘fake news’ during the elections, they clicked on the stories considering them real; fake news writers exploited the phenomenon of Clickbait to gain personal wealth (Silverman, 2016b). The 2016 U.S. presidential election was considered one of the most controversial elections in the history of the country and fake news on social media is at the base of those controversies.

Fake news is spreading widely on social media websites and appears to serve multiple purposes for social media consumers (Howard, Bolsover, Kollanyi, Bradshaw, & Neudert, 2017). The current state of fake news assumes that the facts are mutable as people only want to hear what they expect (Pogue, 2017). Journalists strive to comprehend and report the truth, but fake news stories are capturing people’s curiosities and may serve needs yet unknown (Howard et al., 2017). However, when curiosities lead to misinformation, it is the responsibility of the society to ensure that the people understand the difference between the real and the fake news (Spohr, 2017).

Recently, teachers, researchers, and political leaders have expressed concerns about the increasing presence of fake news. For this study, “fake news” is defined as deliberately misleading news produced for monetary gain and written by writers who are not professional

journalists. The news may be completely, or partially untrue, intentional propaganda or commentary presented as real news to the public.

Links Between Fake News, Clicks, and Bias

Fake news aims to fabricate and intends to deceive the readers (Verstraete et al., 2017) and people are fairly ineffective in dissecting the deception (DePaulo, Charlton, Cooper, Lindsay, & Muhlenbruck, 1997). Also, factors like readers' inherent truth-bias and believing in everything they read can influence their scrutinizing ability (Rubin, Conroy, Chen, & Cornwell, 2016). Some readers also exhibit "general gullibility," which means they tend to believe in things they do not fully understand and are easily swayed (Pennycook, Cheyne, Barr, Koehler, & Fugelsang, 2015). Most importantly, confirmation-biased people tend to believe only what they want to believe (LaMarre, Landreville, & Beam, 2009). Quattrocioni, Scala, and Sunstein (2016) illustrate that confirmation bias is interpreting news content that validates a person's existing beliefs. Given the factors, truth bias, general gullibility, and confirmation-biased readers are stirred up with the content on social media. Gabielkov et al. (2016) assert that 59 percent of the readers like, click, and share content on social media without much knowledge. Fake news writers present the opportunity of clicking on the stories to the readers with the sole motivation of personal financial gain.

Visual Matrix to Organize Misleading News on Social Media

This study uses a table to organize different types of possibly misleading news seen on social media. The defining features of misleading news are 1) whether the news is written by a professional writer, 2) whether it has a financial motive, 3) whether it has a political motive, 4) whether it is created with the intention of deceiving the readers, 5) whether it is produced with the intention of entertainment (humor, passing time), and 6) whether it is composed with the

intention of transforming social messages.

Verstraete et al. (2017) emphasizes that rigid distinction between the types of misleading news is unworkable. They also point out that authors produce news with multiple intentions and motivations simultaneously that builds definitional grey areas. This study introduces the most relevant rationale for different types of misleading news based on their motives and intentions. These definitions are used to derive a matrix that could help in further discussions.

Fake News

Fake news is written by unprofessional writers who are not a journalist or do not have professional journalistic media knowledge (NPR, 2016b). They write fake news stories with a motive to deceive the readers and make financial gains from the clicks on social media (Silverman, 2016b; Spohr, 2017). They do not care about the politics while writing political news and do not worry about the social harm when writing fake news (Bakir & McStay, 2017). They also do not intend to entertain the readers with their content. However, they write the content to generate curiosity in the readers and to ensure clicks from the masses. As mentioned earlier, fake news is defined as deliberately misleading news produced for monetary gain written by writers who are not professional journalists (NPR, 2016b). As such, the news story may be completely or partially untrue, intentional propaganda or commentary presented as real news.

Satire

Satire is a work of untrue fictional content created for entertainment, critique, or commentaries about the society and issues (Verstraete et al., 2017). Satire is created with financial motivations, but satirical stories do not intend political motivations and are not created to deceive the readers (Rashkin, Choi, Jang, Volkova, & Choi, 2017; Verstraete et al., 2017). Satire is created by professional writers in contrast to the aforementioned fake news and

propaganda; satire stories are particularly different from the true news stories with the intention of helping readers differentiate between the truth and humor (Rashkin et al., 2017). Some paradigmatic examples of satire writing agencies are The Onion, The Borowitz Report, and Clickhole (Rashkin et al., 2017; Verstraete et al., 2017). Conclusively, satire is the mimicking of real news but giving a clue to the readers that it is not a real news story (Rashkin et al., 2017). An example of a satire news story is shown below.



Figure 1. Screenshot—Example of a political satire news story. *The Onion*. Retrieved from. <https://politics.theonion.com/>.

Propaganda

Propaganda is news purposefully created to promote political and social motives. It has politically or socially biased content to deceive the readers from the truth (Rashkin et al., 2017; Verstraete et al., 2017). Propaganda is written by professional writers but is not financially motivated (Verstraete et al., 2017). Propaganda is content that is not made with the intention of entertainment. However, it can be perceived as entertainment by the readers. Propaganda frequently lead the readers to ambiguity because of the nature of the writing (Rashkin et al.,

2017). Some of the classic examples of propaganda news writing can be found from agencies such as The Natural News, and Activist Report (Rashkin et al., 2017). An example is provided below.



Figure 2. Screenshot—Example of propaganda: Activist post—Propaganda for peace, love, and liberty. Retrieved from: <https://www.activistpost.com/2017/03/obama-awarded-jfk-medal-courage-8-years-drone-bombings.html>.

With regards to the above-mentioned scripts about different types of misleading news stories on social media, the researcher formulated a matrix to organize and differentiate a variety of news stories into categories. The table below illustrates three different categories of fake stories with their defining features in the left column.

Table 1.*Visual Matrix of Misleading News on Social Media*

	Fake	Satire	Propaganda
Written by Professional Writers	No	Maybe	Maybe
Financial Motive	Yes	Maybe	No
Political Motive	No	No	Yes
Intention of Deception	Yes	No	Yes
Intention of Entertainment	No	Yes	No
Intention of Transforming Social Messages	No	No	Yes

Researcher's Inspiration for the Study

The researcher's interest in social media and news developed from the excitement of experiencing the impact of social media during the 2016 presidential election. The presidential campaigns during the primaries gathered much attention on social media websites. The previous presidential elections of 2008 and 2012 had already seen the prodigious impact of social media (Miller, 2013). President Barack Obama was a pioneer in using social media platforms to gain the attention of the masses and especially attracting millennials (Miller, 2013). The millennial generation are those born after 1980 and the first generation to come of age in the new millennium (Pew Center, 2017). The researcher's interest in the topic galvanized when numerous fake news stories trolled on social media and people seemed to believe stories that were fake and those that came from fake sources. One such example was when then-candidate Donald J. Trump was allegedly endorsed by Pope Francis (Silverman, 2016a). People saw this news story reported on *WTOE 5 news* which is a fake news website (Silverman, 2016a). The researcher found many interesting articles and conversations on social media networks about this particular fake news story.

As more and more reports confirmed the impact of fake news, it was observed that they proliferate on social media rapidly and people trust them in the absence of evidence. However,

the phenomenon of fake news on social media networks has recently developed (Berghel, 2017). Researchers across the globe are trying to understand the phenomenon and its impact on the world as social media is widely used by the masses (Berghel, 2017). Since this topic was novel and under-researched, the researcher decided to investigate fake news and its impact in more detail.

Summary

This chapter introduced the phenomenon of fake news with the illustration of a fictional story followed by a discussion of infrequent and frequent readers, social media echo-chamber, and fake news fact-checking to illustrate the gaps in understanding the phenomenon. This study demonstrates the potential impact of fake news on the democratic society to exemplify the extent of the problem of fake news on social media. Moreover, a critical link between fake news, clicks, and biases were introduced. Lastly, the chapter introduced a visual matrix of all the types of misleading news on social media with their defining features. Chapter 2 establishes the details of fake news, history of fake news, its impact on United States' politics, and the theoretical framework of uses and gratification theory.

Definition of Terms

Unique terms utilized in the study are defined as follows

Apps/Applications: Apps are software that are designed to run either on a web browser or offline. Social media apps can only be used when connected to the internet. These applications are designed to access all the information and content on social media.

Biased news: News that is partisan towards a particular person or group. These types of news are particularly used to swing the voter's point of views towards political candidates.

Clickbait: It is a term used to denote the use of advertisements and news to generate

clicks on the internet. Clickbaits are quantified for calculating the money a person or a company makes by gaining an 'x' number of clicks on the internet.

Commentary presented as news: Opinions presented as real news. These opinions may be provided by a person or a group, but they are presented as news.

Echo-chamber: Social media users can voice their point of views and opinions on using the vehicle. These views, opinions, and beliefs troll on social media widely and create a massive spread of news. This phenomenon is known as echo-chamber in the social media world.

Facebook: It is a famous social networking website that allows the users to create Facebook profiles, share photographs and videos, update their status, send messages, and keep in touch with the world's events. This social networking site helps people to remain in touch with colleagues, friends, family and professional connections. Facebook is available in 37 different languages.

Fake news: Intentionally made fictional stories for deceiving people and making money from the clickbait.

False news: These stories are genuine mistakes of professional journalists. They are not created to make money or achieve political gain.

Infrequent readers: People who do not like to read long news stories, books or novels and prefer short and easy to understand headlines. They do not spend time reading on a regular basis and may not be up-to-date on various social and political issues.

Instagram: A popular social media platform (application) for sharing photos, small videos, and stories. Developed by Facebook.

Propaganda: Propaganda is defined as an umbrella term used to describe information, news, story, or a commentary that is biased or misleading.

Social media giants: Companies like Facebook, Google, and Twitter who own and operate some of the well-known social media apps and websites.

Social networking sites (SNS or Social media or Platforms): SNS or social media is a medium to build social networks among people who segment similar interests, activities, backgrounds or real-life connections. A social network service consists of a representative of each user, his or her social links, and a variety of supplementary services such as career services.

Twitter: Twitter is another popular social networking website which has similar features as Facebook but is different. It is widely famous for its instant messaging and micro-blogging features. Followers are the people who follow someone and receive other people's updates.

Untrue news: News that does not have any reality base (research) attached to the story. These types of untrue news are made intentionally and used for the sole purpose of making money, gaining political ends, or transforming social messages.

Uses and gratifications theory platform: The UGT is a method in which the reasons why and how people use different media to satisfy their needs is examined.

CHAPTER II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Change in media vehicles is not new to American democracy. From the beginning of the 17th century to date, Americans have shifted from print media to radio, to television, to the internet, and to social media (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). To position the current study within the theoretical conversation, the researcher investigates the phenomenon of fake news using the theoretical framework of uses and gratifications theory.

In a ground-breaking study conducted by Craig Silverman and BuzzFeed, researchers found that those who cited “Facebook as a major source of news [were] more likely to view fake news headlines as accurate than those who rely less on the platform for news” (Silverman & Singer-Vine, 2016, para. 2). Additionally, Silverman and Singer-Vine reported that this is further complicated as Americans are unable to identify false stories 75% of the time. In a study conducted by the Pew Research Center (2016c), 88% of Americans admitted that they were confused to some extent by fake news and nearly a quarter of Americans have knowingly or unknowingly shared fake news on social media. To illustrate the mass extent to which fake news are shared and clicked, Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) reported, “the upper end of previously reported statistics for the ratio of page visits shares of stories on social media would suggest that the 38 million shares of fake news in our database translates into 760 million instances of a user clicking through and reading fake news story, or about three stories read per American adult.” (p. 212).

Fake News

According to Silverman (2017), for news to be fake it “has to be 100 percent false. It has to be purposefully created as false, and it has to be financially motivated” (para. 9). The intention

of writing fake news must be driven by the motivation of financial gain and must not intend to deceive the readers or gain political ends. Another study on fake news expanded that definition to include “present[ing] commentary as news product...incorporating unsafe generalizations and other logical fallacies” (Howard et al., 2017, p. 3). Howard and colleagues (2017) clarify that the commentaries made by social media users are also presented as fake news by the individuals who write fake stories.

Online sites such as Facebook, Google, Twitter, and Instagram serve as hosts transferring billions of bytes of fiction to devices all over the world. The lines between the professional news media and unprofessional information creation and sharing are increasingly becoming blurred in the online social media environment (Berkowitz & Schwartz, 2015). Fake news stories are created with the intention of making money from clickbait, and each click on the news story translates into a dollar amount (Mitchell & Holcomb, 2016). The Interactive Advertising Bureau (2016) reported an increase of 19% in the revenue generated through clicks during the first quarter of 2016 (during the U.S. presidential election campaigns) with a total revenue of \$59.6 billion in the U.S. compared to 49.5 billion in 2015. Economic incentives serve as a primary motivation for the social media intruders to create and spread the fake news on social media networks (Silverman, 2017). Smith and Banic (2016) reported how teens in Macedonia earned as much as \$60,000 USD during the last six months of the 2016 U.S. presidential election just by publishing lies on the Internet. In another incident, two Canadian teenagers earned 10,000 Canadian dollars per month after their first fake story about Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau went viral on social media (Silverman, 2016). The creators tactically make fake websites that are remarkably similar to real websites which increases the reader’s difficulty in differentiating fake news from credible news sources. These examples demonstrate the need to

investigate the phenomenon of fake news on social media networks.

Silverman (2017) explained that fake news creators make fake news websites that remarkably resemble real news websites. They change the actual names of well-known news sources slightly, which can easily be misread. One such example of this is the fake website abcnews.com.co which closely resembles the legitimate news website abcnews.go.com. Figure 3 shows a fake abc news source and Figure 4 shows the legitimate *ABC News* source. Silverman points out that the fake news websites looks real until they are closely examined for details like the difference in the font style used on the news websites and the author's names. Also, most of the fake news stories do not have any partisan origins, they do not have any ideological motives, and they exist only for causing trouble (Silverman, 2017). As previously mentioned, the fake news stories described herein should not be confused with the partisan origin websites. Hence, social media intruders make money by exploiting the reliance of people on social media and their emotional gratifications (Silverman, 2017).

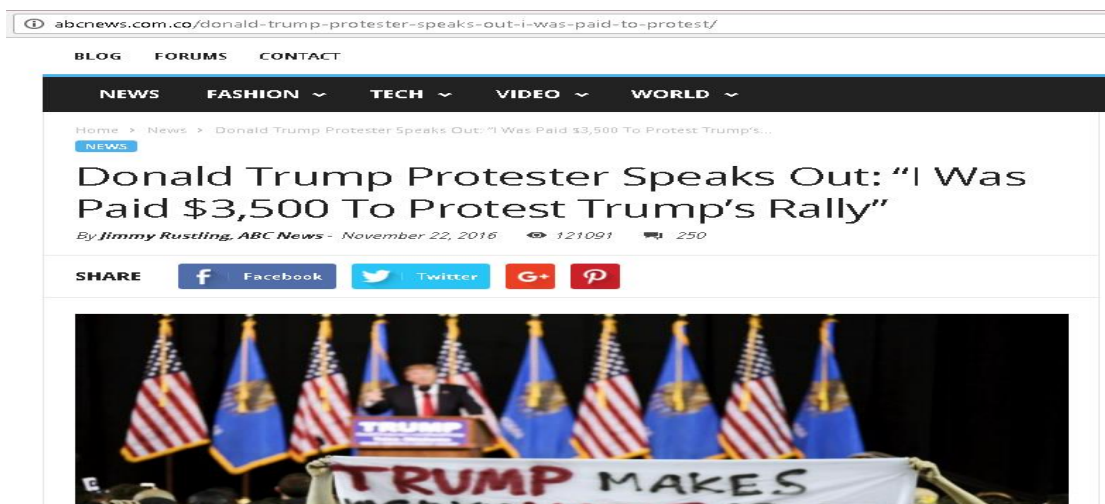


Figure 3. Fake news website URL abcnews.com.co. Headline: Donald Trump protester speaks out: "I was paid \$3,500 to protest Trump's rally." Retrieved from <http://abcnews.com.co/donald-trump-protester-speaks-out-i-was-paid-to-protest/>.

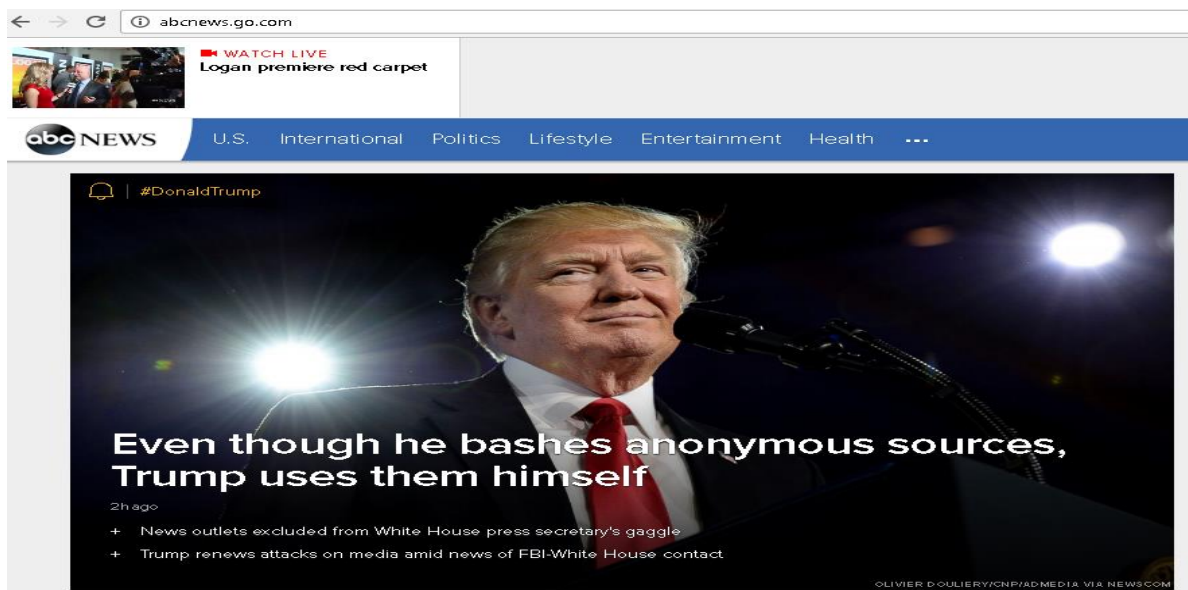


Figure 4. Legitimate ABC News source with website URL: [www.abcnews.go.com](http://www.abcnews.go.com/Politics/bashes-anonymous-sources-trump/story?id=45715113&cid=clicksource_4380645_1_hero_headlines_bsq_image). Retrieved from http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/bashes-anonymous-sources-trump/story?id=45715113&cid=clicksource_4380645_1_hero_headlines_bsq_image.

Similarly, fake news creators are exploiting the political views of both liberals and conservatives (Neiman Foundation, 2017). BuzzFeed (2017) found that two fake websites, Liberal Society and Conservative 101, are owned by the same parent company named American News LLC of Miami. Both Liberal Society and Conservative 101 shared a story with a minute change in the words. For example, Liberal Society published a story about Kellyanne Conway's alleged television ban with the headline "White House finally gives Kellyanne Conway the boot, are you glad?" While Conservative 101 published the story with a completely different spectrum with the headline, "White House just gave Conway the boot, prepare to be infuriated." Figure 5 below shows the minor difference in the words presented by the two fake news websites.

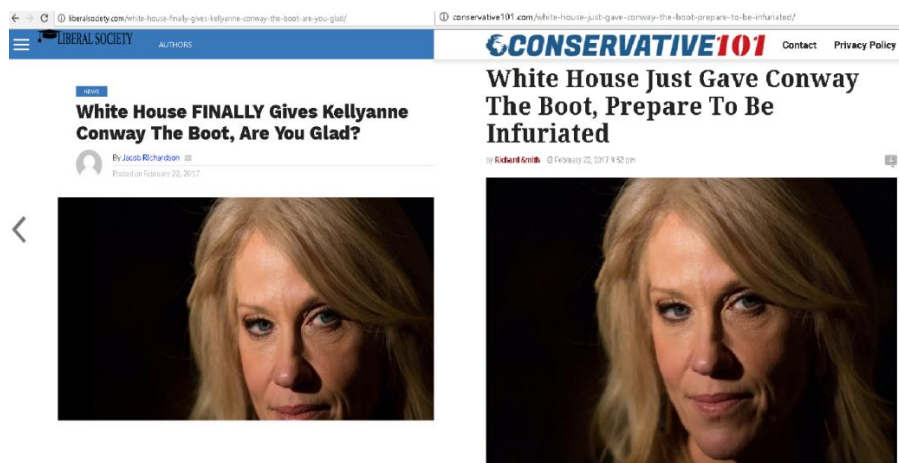


Figure 5. Fake stories reported by Liberal Society and Conservative 101. Minor change in words to attract the respective audiences. Retrieved from: <http://liberalsociety.com/white-house-finally-gives-kellyanne-conway-the-boot-are-you-glad/>, <http://conservative101.com/white-house-just-gave-conway-the-boot-prepare-to-be-infuriated/>.

The two fake news websites published fake news about Kellyanne Conway, in which the fake news writers wanted to deceive the readers from the reality by exploiting reader's partisan views. In an analysis of fake websites by BuzzFeed (2017), they concluded that these websites “reap massive engagement on Facebook with aggressively partisan stories and memes that frequently demonize the other side's point of view, often at the expense of facts” (para. 4). Here the massive engagement of Facebook users denotes the number of clicks, likes, shares, and comments. After receiving the intentional clicks from the deceived readers, these stories are deleted, and they do not remain active on web pages (Buzzfeed, 2017). Thus, it is necessary to explore the ‘epidemic of fake news’ on social media networks to understand the nexus between real and fictional news.

Types of Fake News

Silverman (2016c) classified top-performing fake news stories as political fake news, crime fake news, and fake news followed by real news. Silverman found that one of the top fake political news stories on Facebook in 2016 was “Obama signs executive orders banning the

pledge of allegiance in schools nationwide” created by the fake news website abcnews.com.co (see Figure 6). This fake post generated 2,177,000 Facebook comments, shares, and reactions. Silverman adds that the top-performing political fake news was found on Facebook and “fake news about U.S. politics accounted for 10.6 million of the 21.5 million total shares, reactions, and comments these English-language stories generated on Facebook this year, according to the analysis” (para. 2). Examples of these types of fake news stories (political, crime, and fake news follows real news) reported by fake news websites are provided next.

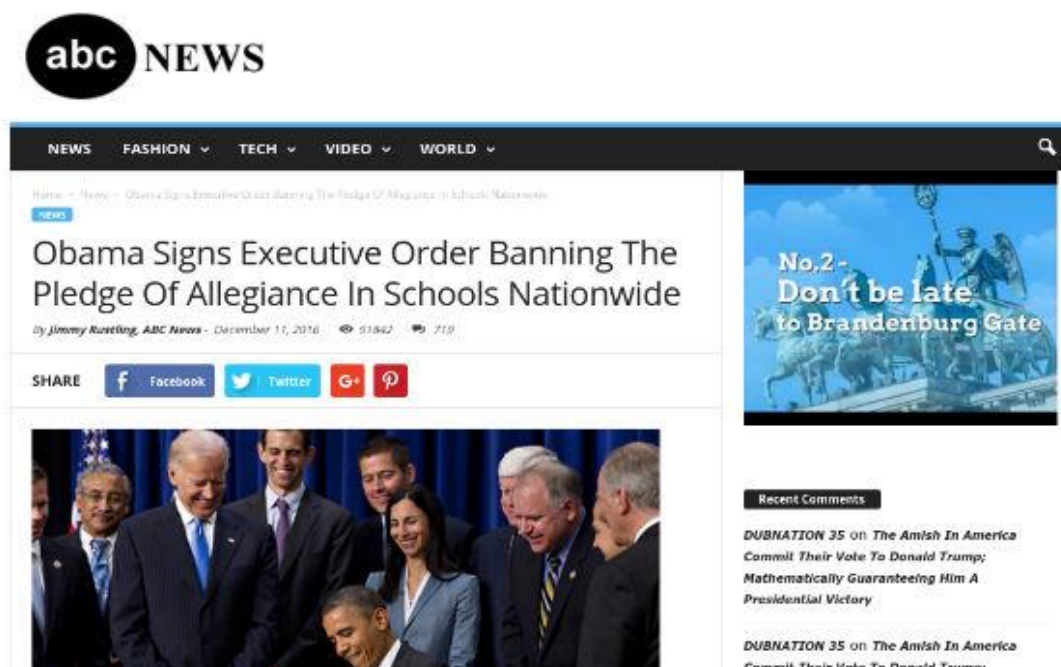


Figure 6. Types of fake news stories (political, crime, and fake news follow real news) reported by fake news websites abcnews.com.co, thevalleyreport.com, nationalreport.net, and now8news.com. Screenshot of fake news website abcnews.com.co (political). Retrieved from <http://abcnews.com.co/obama-executive-order-bans-pledge-of-allegiance-in-schools/>.

A top fake crime news story in 2016 that generated 1,765,000 Facebook comments, shares and reactions was “Woman arrested for defecating on boss’ desk after winning the lottery” was created by a fake website named thevalleyreport.com (Silverman, 2016). In an interview with NPR (2016a), a fake news creator from California revealed that they only create

fake stories that people want to read to attract more clicks. Jestin Coler, the CEO of a fake news firm named “Disinfomedia,” wrote his first fake story on a fake website called nationalreport.net in 2014 on how customers used food stamps to buy marijuana in Colorado (Shahani, 2016; Sydell, 2016). The story was completely fictional, however, the fake story was consumed as real news. The Colorado state representatives proposed a public policy change in the state, to prevent people from purchasing marijuana using food stamps (Shahani, 2016).



Figure 7. Screenshot of fake news website thevalleyreport.com (crime). Retrieved from <https://thevalleyreport.com/2016/04/25/woman-arrested-for-defecating-on-boss-desk-after-winning-the-lottery/>.



Figure 8. Screenshot of fake news website nationalreport.net (crime). Retrieved from <http://nationalreport.net/colorado-pot-shop-accept-food-stamps-taxpayer-funded-marijuana/>.

Apart from fake political news and crime news, the fake news creators exploit the echo-chamber of real news to slant fake news stories. The fear of the crimes mentioned in real news helps the fake news writers to exploit the available social media echo-chamber of the real news (Humphrey, 2017). One such example was stories of creepy clowns when they were in focus all over the U.S. (see Figure 9). The fake news created many fake creepy clown stories to exploit the fear from real news. A top story on a fake news website named *mediaguru.com* generated 26,000 clicks with the headline “Clown kills two kids in West Warwick” (Daro, 2016). The real news helps provide a fodder for the fake news stories. The fake stories created using the background of the real stories help the fake news writers to earn money emanating from people’s fears and curiosities (Silverman, 2016c).



Figure 9. Screenshot from fake news website www.now8news.com (fake news follows real news). Retrieved from <http://now8news.com/creepy-clown-arrested-haunted-house-massacre-18-people-dead/>.

The Attraction (Allure) for Fake News Writers

There is no clear evidence of the numbers of people, groups, or small organizations running fake news websites (NPR, 2016b). However, research by Craig Silverman's web-based research company for studying fake news revealed that fake news websites are at a peak in the small town of Veles in Macedonia (Silverman & Alexander, 2016). The Republic of Macedonia is a small country in the Balkan Peninsula. It is a landlocked nation in Southeast Europe. Some of the most popular fake news stories during the 2016 U.S. presidential election were "Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President," and "FBI Agent Suspected in Hillary Email Leaks Found Dead of Apparent Murder-Suicide." These stories came from teenagers who created fake news in Macedonia (Pogue, 2017). These fake news stories created click bait and generated money for the teenagers. During the 2016 U.S. presidential elections, Silverman's research group found at least 140 fake political websites that came out of Macedonia, and the fake news creators were not creating fake news with any political intentions; they created fake news to earn a living (Silverman & Alexander, 2016). Macedonian teens writing fake news is one example of the many examples of fake news writers across the globe, who are not yet accounted for in any research.

The Balkans region has been financially unstable for decades (Larrabee, 1990). Kadiu's (2015) economic overview shows that the Balkan countries suffered a significant negative impact from the Great Depression of 1929. Following the depression period, the region was heavily impacted by the European wars and financial recessions. The recession of 2008-2009 and the recent economic turmoil in the European Union are also responsible for the financial trouble in the region. The effects continue to rattle the financial structure and societal formations. The financial problems and the lack of economic development in the region have resulted in a

significant increase in unemployment and decline in the gross domestic profit (GDP) of the countries (Kadiu, 2015).

Also, the foreign domestic investment (FDI) of Macedonia has decreased by 20 percent, and consumer price inflation has been negatively impacted because of the recession in 2008 (Kadiu, 2015). To survive the weak economy, some of the citizens of the Republic of Macedonia look for creative ways to make money (Silverman & Alexander, 2016). Google AdSense and social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter provide a lucrative opportunity for digital advertisement money for the younger generations in Macedonia (Silverman, 2016b). Thus, some teenagers in Macedonia write fake news stories to earn a living. Silverman and Alexander (2016) reported “several teens and young men who run these sites told BuzzFeed News that they learned the best way to generate traffic is to get their politics stories to spread on Facebook — and the best way to generate shares on Facebook is to publish sensationalist and often false content that caters to Trump supporters” (para. 6). Figure below show the two most famous fake news stories during the 2016 U.S. presidential election that were published by teens in Macedonia (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017; Silverman, 2016)

WTOE 5 NEWS
YOUR LOCAL NEWS NOW

TOP STORIES COMMUNITY ENTERTAINMENT SPORTS LIFE ABOUT LATEST NEWS VIDEOS/PHOTOS WEATHER

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HOME US ELECTION

Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President, Releases Statement

TOPICS: Pope Francis Endorses Donald Trump

photo by Jeffrey Bruno / CC BY-SA 2.0 / cropped & photo by Gage Skidmore / CC BY-SA 3.0 / cropped

photo by Jeffrey Bruno / CC BY-SA 2.0 / cropped & photo by Gage Skidmore / CC BY-SA 3.0 / cropped

Share:  97.6k

VATICAN CITY - News outlets around the world are reporting on the news that Pope Francis has made the unprecedented decision to endorse a US presidential candidate. His statement in support of Donald

Figure 10. Fake news on a fake website named WTOE 5 NEWS “Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President.” Retrieved from

<https://web.archive.org/web/20161115024211/http://wtoe5news.com/us-election/pope-francis-shocks-world-endorse-donald-trump-for-president-releases-statement/>.

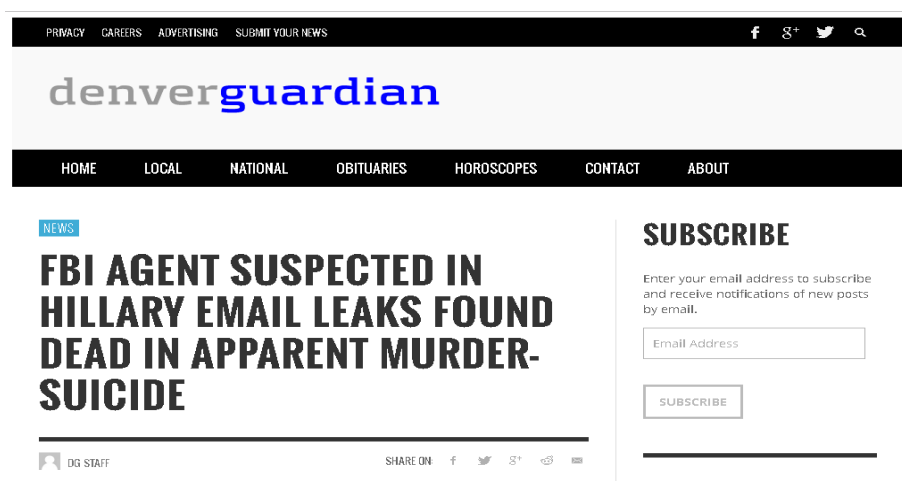


Figure 11. Fake news on a fake website named denverguardian “FBI Agent Suspected in Hillary Email Leaks Found Dead of Apparent Murder-Suicide.” Retrieved from <http://alexanderhiggins.com/fbi-agent-behind-hillary-email-leaks-found-dead-murder-suicide/>.

Historical Snapshot of Fake News Presence and Persistence

Fake news is not new; it has its origins in 44 BC when Octavian’s fictional narrative helped him to win the battle over Mark Antony (Kaminska, 2017). Octavian’s campaign used sharp comments and slogans, written on coins in the style of archaic tweets (Kaminska, 2017). The falsified themes that Octavian used in the narrative were that Mark Antony was unfit to hold the office, a womanizer, corrupt, and a leader from a foreign land (Kaminska, 2017). The power struggle led to the Battle of Actium in 31 BC and opened the doors for Octavian to reinvent himself as Augustus after the win (Kaminska, 2017). Historian Syme (2002) illustrated in his book that the rhetoric by Octavian had no factual background and was completely falsified to win the information war over Mark Antony. Therefore, history shows that the fake news seeds were sown by Octavian who became the first emperor of Rome. The 2016 U.S. presidential election saw similar rhetoric in the generation of fake news stories, where the news stories had

no factual background.

In the early 19th century, a series of articles claiming discovery of life and civilization on the moon were published by *The Sun*, a New York newspaper. These articles were later named “The Great Moon Hoax.” The articles were reprinted by the *Edinburgh Journal of Science*, which boosted the sales of the *New York Sun* newspaper in 1835 (History, 2009). The reprinted articles in the *Edinburgh Journal of Science* even tricked Yale University scientists who traveled to New York in search of the articles only to be sent back to New Haven and unknowingly fooled (History, 2009). Later in the year, the *New York Sun* admitted that the news was completely fake. However, “The Great Moon Hoax” articles helped the newly started New York newspaper gain sales because of the curiosity they generated in people’s mind (History, 2009). At the turn of the 19th-century, fake news began to turn into journalistically falsified stories widely used in the newspapers to promote sales. These falsified journalistic stories during the 19th century should not be confused with the modern-day fake stories on social media today.

Commercialized media is responsible for the tabloidization of news in the 21st century (Esser, 1999). Tabloidization of news is meticulously related to the ‘salability’ of the news and the information (Wiener, 1988). Kurtz’s (1994) definition analyzes tabloidization from three aspects: (1) decrease in journalistic standards, (2) decrease in real news and increases in the soft news like scandals, sensation, and entertainment, and (3) broadening of media to provide information about political candidate’s fitness to hold public offices. Consequently, tabloid news has changed the world’s reasons for seeking news and adds to the dimension of reader’s entertainment and gratifications. News reader’s interest in the tabloid news has opened the doors for seeking news on social media networks in expanding forms, such as short stories, memes, photographs, and videos.

Audience Targeting

Effective targeting of audiences is a key component for fake news writers who are trying to receive financial benefits from the click-bait facility available on social media (Silverman, 2016a). The millennial generation, those born between 1980 and 2000 (Pew Center, 2017), were previously interested in receiving news via traditional news sources (Mindich, 2005). However, they have lost their interest in receiving news via television and newspaper subscriptions (Mindich, 2005). They turn to social media sites to receive instant updates about global news (Marchi, 2012). Millennials receive their news from non-traditional media outlets and are informed about numerous topics due to their use of social media networks (Singer, Clark, & Monserrate, 2009). On the other hand, even the Baby Boomers (births between 1946 and 1964), Gen X (births between 1965 and 1978), and Gen Y (between the ages 18 to 34) are also following the trend of using social media for seeking news (Pew Center, 2017). Therefore, news sources have changed drastically for all the generations in the last decade and opened the doors for social media intruders to introduce fake news using the newest available mass communication platform to make a fortune for themselves.

The fake news appears to enjoy an enduring quality, and some fake news stories never seem to die. Some of the most common hoax stories shared include, “Facebook wants you to post a privacy notice; ATM’s have panic codes that are activated when you reverse type your pin; Planetary alignment decreases gravity, and Red Bull contains bull’s semen” (Snopes, n.d.). The Facebook privacy notice may be a ploy to create a panic in the users and gain clicks. Referencing ATM’s may target the social media user’s attention; thus, they may click on the story to ensure receiving important information. The planetary alignment and Red Bull stories may be targeting the fears of the social media audiences to obtain more clicks. As the examples

demonstrate, there are many reasons why social media users fall prey to the fake stories (Gabiello et al., 2016). As highlighted in the historical snapshot, the phenomenon of fake news is not a new concept. However, the increasingly dynamic use of social media networks has propelled its presence to pervade the daily lives of so many across a multitude of societal cross-sections. Perhaps the 2016 presidential election illustrated, like few other historical events, the significance, power, and relevance of fake news in a democratic society.

The Social Media Phenomenon

Thomas Jefferson wrote in a letter on June 14, 1807, to John Norvell that, “Nothing can now be believed which is seen in a newspaper. Truth itself becomes suspicious by being put into that polluted vehicle” (Founders Constitution. n.d., para. 1). Jefferson’s views about the media are relevant even in the 21st century. With the rise in popularity of the internet in the last decade, news outlets have turned to social media for reaching out to the masses. Simultaneously, print journalism has been challenged to adapt to the cultural changes and move to the online world (Pavlik, 2000). Scholars illustrate that consumers have a wide choice of media where they can receive news, so they are shifting away from the traditional media sources like television, newspaper, and radio (Stroud, 2011). Furthermore, mainstream media is facing credibility issues and losing the public’s trust (Gronke & Cook, 2007). Some of the reasons given in the Pew Research Center’s studies (1998, 1999) were that people believe that the mainstream media does not remain truthful, are biased, cover up their mistakes, and generally do not care about their audiences. The Pew Center (2012) asserts that the credibility ratings of all the broadcast news have drastically dropped in the last decade due to the possible reasons mentioned above.

Online media has also witnessed a surge in non-traditional news sources such as blogs, vlogs, independent news outlets, and social awareness websites (Downie & Schudson, 2009).

However, these non-traditional news sources are operated by many amateur writers who pen the news story in the form of satire, propaganda, biased, opinionated, misguided, and unverified information (Chen, Conroy, & Rubin, 2015). On the other hand, social media has emerged as a new sociological phenomenon because it helps in monopolizing user's time into primary or secondary activities. Primary and secondary activities are the activities people engage in a day for the most amount of time. Social media is the world's most common environment for human social interaction in the twenty-first century (Wright & Hinson, 2010). The Pew Research Center (2017) reported that the number of people using social media is consistently rising whereas sixty-nine percent of the adults in America use social media and Facebook is the most popular social media platform. Social media allows users to come together and exchange thoughts, discuss ideas, and most importantly connect with each other, regardless of the geographical distances (Ryan, 2016).

Solis and Breakenridge (2009) define social media in the simplest way, stating that social media is anything that facilitates conversations using the internet. Social media is the digital format for connecting users who wish to communicate and exchange thoughts, videos, messages, photographs and even documents. Social media and social networks are often used interchangeably. However, social media are subsets of social networks (Sago, 2010). Social media are websites that provide digital and virtual communities for people with similar interests to join the online communities and connect (Sago, 2010).

The history of social media dates back to when Web 1.0 was published. Tools to create websites and online journalism began with the Web 1.0, which was the beginning of what we know today as social media (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). Web 1.0 was the world's first world wide web version. Social media allows people to interact globally and generate content on the

web. The interaction between the web users is necessary for the satisfaction of members engaged in virtual communities, and fulfilling gratifications (Urista, Dong, & Day, 2009).

Social media members create networks and communicate with people from existing communities (Urista et al., 2009). People access the internet, join social media platforms, and become members of websites and networks for a variety of reasons and different levels of motivation. Individuals use the internet to socialize with other members and bring vastly different objectives (Urista et al., 2009). What, when and how people use or “click” within the internet is used by companies such as Google and Facebook to generate usage algorithms. These algorithms, or patterns of usage, are defined by sets of keywords and create the “magnets” that draw “news” feeds to an individual’s social media view. Because these algorithms are searchable by both legitimate and fake news, social media websites are able to generate real and fake news websites. For example, if a user clicks on and reads a legitimate news story from a legitimate source in the “news” feed, the Facebook algorithms start searching for the keywords from the legitimate news source, and any other news whether real or fake is shown in the news feed section. Therefore, the legitimate news is mixed with the fake news on social media, confusing the social media users which further reduces the ability to discern fact from fiction. This process of social media viewing and sourcing highlights the critical need for media consumers of all ages to be media literate.

Social Media Use and Media Literacy

Collins and Halverson (2009) define social media as a phenomenon of the 21st century that plays a vital role in educating the students in schools and colleges. Therefore, they recommend a detailed analysis of the phenomenon for the future of the educational system. The proliferation and popularity of social media and independent news outlets have transformed the

manner in which everyday citizens access and consume information. Although these digital sites challenge hierarchical journalistic gatekeeping practices, they promote the rapid dissemination of information across vast geographical spaces even though not all news stories are accurate, truthful, or ethical (Hermida, Fletcher, Korell, & Logan, 2012). Many scholars, educational organizations, and political leaders are raising concerns about the rising occurrence and acceptance of fake news (Kucharski, 2016). Recognizing the proliferation of fake news, and the need to address policy changes in the educational system are two important factors to empower the students with the knowledge and critical thinking skills needed to debunk fake news. Media literacy will help the students and adults to access, identify, and evaluate potentially problematic digital news stories (Alvermann, Moon, Hagwood, & Hagood, 2018).

Fake News and the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

The social media platforms have opened gates for individuals to display their feelings towards a particular person or an issue publicly. People use social media to receive various information and knowledge about people, places, and news in general. It has become easier for social media users to directly connect with their favorite leaders, movie stars, celebrities, and influential personalities. However, the presidential election showed how social media could be used as a stage to display partisan views. Social media users publicly shame each other on the platforms and jeopardize the right to freedom of expression (Dorf & Tarrow, 2017). To clarify how the freedom of expression is affected, Dorf and Tarrow provide multiple examples of ‘citizen journalist.’ Citizen journalist are anyone who writes ‘opinionated content’ about the social issues and post them on social media platforms. These opinionated scripts (or small write-ups) engage with the audiences on social media where the audiences expect the “right to know culture.” However, reading the opinionated content leads to the possibility of consuming the

opinions as real news, which eventually leads into transformation from fake to reality with the help of technology (Dorf & Tarrow, 2017). Also, users promote their biases to spread and attract like-minded social media users to form groups of people with similar views (Silverman & Alexander, 2016). Partisan beliefs are at the heart of the fake news spread during the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Dorf & Tarrow, 2017).

Apart from partisanship, the sectarianism (excessive attachment) towards a particular political candidate and news related to their issues was a major problem during the primaries of the U.S. presidential campaigning of 2016 (Dorf & Tarrow, 2017). People's attachment to the political candidates led to consumption of news with serious implications. However, partisanship rhetoric escalated during the presidential campaign. Social media seized the opportunity to utilize strong sectarian and political views to exacerbate fake news (Dorf & Tarrow, 2017). Social media fake news postings were overlooked and were not considered as an immediate threat to the presidential election (Dorf & Tarrow, 2017). According to Dorf and Tarrow (2017), the "right to know" culture, constitutional law, and the rise in technological innovations is the root cause of the fake news endemic. This surge assisted in the emergence of fake news websites during the 2016 election. The intentions of these websites were not to engage in the journalistic and media war of the election cycle; rather, it was to exploit the presidential election's media war, slant the fake stories, and gain money from Clickbait (Howard et al., 2017). People used social media to gain knowledge and satisfy their immense curiosity about the presidential election. Concurrently, fake news creators were fueled by the partisan views of the American people on social media and effectively used them as news stories on their newly created fake websites.

American politics have always been in the limelight for the world media (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). In particular, the U.S. presidential elections garnered the interest of the masses

around the world. Together with television, radio, and newspapers, the world receives news via the internet. Smartphones, tablets, laptops, and computers are used on a large scale globally. What was different in the 2016 U.S. presidential election was that the fake news creators tapped into the political views of the Americans using modern technology like never before (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Hence, the information about the presidential elections and the viewpoints of the American people laid the stepping-stone for the social media fake news stories.

Theoretical Framework

Uses and Gratifications Theory

Having its roots in the field of mass communication, the gratifications theory and its contexts have evolved as a result of technological advances. From Palmgreen and Rayburn's (1979) research on the role of television in meeting people's needs to Papacharissi and Rubin's (2000) exploration of why and how people seek out internet-based resources to satisfy their needs, the gratifications theory is now at work via social media. The uses and gratifications theory (UGT) has precise significance to social media. However, the marketing and social media research have not afforded the theory much prominence (Whiting & Williams, 2013). In this study, the researcher planned to incorporate the uses and gratifications theoretical framework to study: (a) how social media users describe their thought patterns (or chain of events) in managing (or disseminating) media received, and (b) how social media users describe the purposes of their media use.

The historical beginning of the UGT can be traced back to communications research where audiences were tested for the types of content on the radio that satisfied their needs (Cantril, 1941). In this early research by Cantril, participants were asked to narrate their gratifications received from listening to radio. Other media effects research elaborated on the

motives and selection patterns of audiences when using radio and television (Cantril, 1941; Ruggiero, 2000), resulting in studies formulating lists of functions by which the audiences were gratified. Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974) found that gratification related to the following: “To match one’s wits against others, to get information and advice for daily living, to provide a framework for one’s day, to prepare oneself culturally for the demands of upward mobility, or to be reassured about the dignity and usefulness of one’s role” (p. 20).

Wimmer and Dominick (2013) proposed that the UGT has its origin in the 1940s when it was used to seek information on user behavior relative to listening to the radio and reading the newspaper. However, others contradict the theory’s origination and credit the uses and gratifications perspective to Schramm who proposed an immediate and delayed reward model of gratifications in 1949 (Rice, 1984). Regardless, the UGT primarily focuses on seeking a process to classify the responses of the media users into meaningful categories (Berelson, 1949).

While the medium has changed, this researcher utilizes the theoretical base of the UGT to evaluate the premise of how and why people seek information from social media. Whiting and Williams (2013) asserted that the relevance of UGT rests in its origins in the communication literature. Because of the social nature of human beings, the connection with people automatically leads to information seeking, passing the time, sharing, and using the medium as a communicatory utility. The fulfillment of basic human needs demonstrates the premise of UGT (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Previous studies have shown that gratifications are appropriate predictors of recurring media usage (Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1979).

For this current study, the researcher considered three of the available frameworks in the literature. Palmgreen and Rayburn (1979) were among the UGT pioneers for the study of television viewing habits. Since television is similar to social media regarding nature and

technology, the researcher decided to utilize the guidelines in the scale developed by Palmgreen and Rayburn. Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) offer components that examined the gratification theory with regards to the use of the internet. Whiting and Williams (2013) utilized the UGT to categorize and describe reasons users access social media platforms. Building upon themes developed by Palmgreen and Rayburn, Papacharissi and Rubin, and Whiting and Williams, this researcher identified ten concepts that will be engaged to guide the current social media use gratification study. The ten concepts of the uses and gratification theory are as follows:

Information seeking and self-education. Followers use social media to seek information and educate themselves on various topics. In an earlier incarnation of the construct, Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) defined self-education for seeking the internet usage, while Korgaonker and Wolin (1999) called it “information motivation.” Social media users who access social media for this purpose find it convenient for information on a variety of topics such as product reviews, community events, or service recommendations. For this research, information seeking and self-education are categorized under the same category.

For example. Social media users seek information and self-educate themselves using social media for day-to-day needs. One basic example is when people receive information about simple things like sports (results of games) from their friends on social media. Self-education can be related to receiving food recipes from friends, followers or DIY (do it yourself) videos on social media.

Entertainment. Identified as escapism by Korgaonkar and Wolin (1999), this theme addresses social media use for pleasure, fun, and enjoyment. Palmgreen and Rayburn (1979) and Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) defined entertainment as an experience because of the medium like radio, newspaper, television, and the internet. Social media is a form of medium used in

today's world, and it can be associated with both escapism and enjoyment. Entertainment has always been a part of human nature and remains as one of the sources of escapism from routine life.

For example. Social media is used as a medium for escapism. People use social media to receive and share photographs and stories, watch videos and news, play games, solve quizzes, and chat with friends and followers. All these activities can be grouped under the category of entertainment.

Integration and social interaction. Palmgreen and Rayburn (1979) used the term “companionship” to describe the need to communicate and interact with others, and Korgaonker and Wolin (1999) described it as “social motivation.” In the early decades of the internet, Ko, Cho, and Roberts (2005) explored the theme in their research on the duration of website engagement and interaction motivation. The scale of the items they included was, “meet people with my interest” and “keep up with what’s going on.” For this research, integration and social interaction is connected to social media users spending time using social media with likeminded people for a variety of activities.

For example. Virtual socialization may include meeting and following people with similar interests. Spending time on social media with people of similar views is quite common in the virtual community.

Pass time. Whiting and Williams (2013) extend Palmgreen and Rayburn’s (1979) work in television exposure to include the use of social media to pass the time and relieve boredom. Palmgreen and Rayburn titled the theme in their research when they observed the audiences spending elongated time in front of the television sets. It was an era when people had newly discovered the use of technology to watch something that would not only occupy time but

relieved boredom. Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) used the scale statements, “use the Internet when I have nothing to do” and “to occupy my time.” Similarly, for this study, the construct is used to analyze the participant’s responses to understand how social media occupies their daily time.

For example. On average, people spent 135 minutes daily on social media in 2017, which has increased by nine minutes (126 minutes) from 2016 (The Statistical Portal, 2017). The amount of time spent on social media automatically represents that people spend enough time to relieve boredom (Whiting & Williams, 2013).

Relaxation. As opposed to using media to relieve boredom, users seek relaxation and access social media to relieve stress. Writing that entertainment is more focused on enjoyment, Whiting and Williams (2013) illustrate that relaxation activities provide relief from stress-related tasks. It must not be confused with entertainment as entertainments focuses on enjoyment, fun, and pleasure.

For example. An analysis of 1,801 Americans indicates that people who use social media are less stressed. Particularly women find social media engaging more than men, and it helps them relieve stress (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Communicatory utility. In 1979, Palmgreen and Rayburn identified television’s contribution to social discourse. Their study helped to understand the notion of how people gather and communicate with each other. Whiting and Williams (2013) described social media as both a communication facilitator and source of information, as a result of respondents’ reporting their use of Facebook as a conversation starter. Korgaonkar and Wolin (1999) used a similar label and called it socialization motivation on the internet. They added that the internet was used as a medium for interpersonal communication and had a conversational value. For this study,

communicatory utility is concentrated on the facilitation of communication.

For example. People use social media to send and receive messages, communicate and coordinate, provide vital information about safety during natural calamities by marking safe on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Convenience utility. Whiting and Williams (2013) noted respondents' appreciation for social media's ubiquitous presence. They can access it anywhere at any time and on any number of electronic devices. Korgaonkar and Wolin (1999) used the scale item such as, "enjoy the convenience of shopping on the web." The basic premise of convenience utility is that the medium can be used by multiple users from multiple places at the same time.

For example. People use social media throughout the world with different devices like smartphones, tablets, computers, and smartwatches. These devices provide access to social media regardless of the location of the users as long as they have access to the iInternet.

Information sharing. At the time of their study, Whiting and Williams (2013) were the first communications researchers to use this theme, even though it has been used in marketing studies. The users share information about themselves with others, such as photographs, videos, and travel experiences. For this study, information seeking and information sharing are used in conjunction to illustrate the gratifications of the study participants.

For example. People share personal stories on Facebook and Instagram. They share pictures, updates, check-ins at places they travel to, and also information that they receive and like to share with their friends and followers.

Expression of opinions. Respondents in Whiting and Williams' (2013) study reported that they were gratified by expressing their thoughts and opinions either through "liking" photographs or others' comments or via their own posts. Whiting and Williams used the scale

statements, “vent out my opinions,” and “to vent” for expression of opinions.

For example. People like to share their opinions, beliefs, judgments, agreements, and disagreements on social media during the elections.

Surveillance/knowledge of others. Originating from Kaye and Johnson’s (2002) study on the use of the internet for political purposes, Whiting and Williams (2013) identified the gratification that users receive when they access social media to find out what others are doing, either as “friends” or as anonymous voyeurs. Whiting and Williams used scale statements like “nosey,” “spy on people,” “creep on people,” “spy on their kids,” and “look at stuff about others without them knowing about it.” They also found that social media users like to know what other people are doing and keep track of them.

For example. People use fake social media accounts (for anonymity purposes) to spy on kids, exes, and friends to know more about their lives and keep track of routine updates.

Summary

This chapter began with the introduction of change in information-seeking platforms by the American society. Further, the researcher provided fake news definitions illustrated by other researchers and added the operational definition of fake news that is used in this study. The chapter added various types of fake news with illustrative examples in the form of screenshots taken from the related websites. An example of fake news writers from Macedonia was presented to show one of the origins of the fake news industry. Also, a detailed history of fake news and its mediums were presented to demonstrate that fake news is not new. Details about social media and fake news in the 2016 U.S. presidential election were offered to establish a systematic agenda of the phenomenon. Finally, the theoretical framework of the uses and gratifications theory with multiple examples illustrate experiences of the phenomenon. This

study investigates fake news through the lived experiences of graduate students and its implications using the aforementioned theoretical framework. The following chapter outlines the methodology, participant selection, data collection, and analytical procedures of this qualitative inquiry.

CHAPTER III. METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This research utilized a qualitative thematic analysis approach to explore the phenomenon of fake news on social media. Creswell (2007) defines qualitative research as an activity in the world defined by various characteristics in which a researcher tries to make sense in its natural setting by interpreting the representations from field notes, interviews, observations, photographs, conversations, and memos. Creswell presented characteristics of qualitative research using various introductory qualitative research books. The characteristics include a natural setting, the researcher as a key instrument, multiple sources of data, inductive data analysis, participants' meanings, emergent design, theoretical lens, interpretive inquiry, and a holistic account (pp. 37-39).

To study the fake news phenomenon, the researcher used the phenomenological approach. Phenomenological research, as explained by Creswell (2007) “describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 57). Further, Patton (1990) purports that phenomenological research is based on:

...the assumption that there is an essence or essences to shared experience. These essences are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced. The experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to the identity of the essences of the phenomenon, for example, the essences of loneliness, the essence of being a mother, the essence of being a participant in a particular program. The assumption of essence, like the ethnographer's assumption that culture exists and is important, becomes the defining characteristic of a purely phenomenological study. [p.70]

Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding of the phenomenon of fake news through the lived experiences of graduate students in the United States. The graduate students were selected with a purpose to understand their perspective of fake news on social

media since they have an educational background in reading and writing critically. Also, this inquiry utilized the uses and gratifications theory (UGT) approach as cited by Palmgreen and Rayburn (1979), Papacharissi and Rubin (2000), and Whiting and Williams (2013). The 2016 U.S. presidential election presented an appropriate milieu given the attention fake news garnered. In light of the influence of fake news on the 2016 presidential elections, this study also sought to investigate the reasons as to how social media users identified and managed fake news and described the purpose of their use.

Guiding Questions

The researcher used the following questions to guide this study.

Guiding Question 1. How do social media users describe the purpose of their media use during the 2016 U.S. presidential elections?

Guiding Question 2. How did social media users identify and manage political fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential elections?

Guiding Question 3. What do participants believe are the effects of political fake news occurring on social media?

In qualitative research, it is vital for the researcher to report their personal biases, opinions, and judgments (Creswell, 2007). Also, Moustakas (1994) indicates that the researcher should engage in bracketing while conducting a phenomenological research study. Bracketing is a process in which the researcher sets aside his/her personal point of view about the phenomenon and tries to understand the phenomenon from the participants' point of view (Moustakas, 1994). Through this method, the researcher evaluates the fake news phenomenon from the participant's standpoint. Creswell (2007) advises the researchers to acknowledge the ontology (multiple realities), epistemology (researchers' knowledge), and axiology (role of researchers' values).

For this study, the researcher planned the following actions to bracket biases and reduce the interference in the data collection process:

1. The researcher wrote memos of his understandings, preconceived notions, experiences, and perceptions before the formal data collection procedures;
2. Wrote memos at every step documenting the reactions and reflections of the participants to avoid any interference with the data collections and analysis procedures;
3. Used color-coding in the multiple stages of transcription reviewing sessions;
4. Used exact words of the participants to keep the change in the meaning of the findings from diversions.

Researcher's Positionality

A qualitative researcher comes into the study with a set of biases and judgments, and must clearly state that in the report (Creswell, 2007). As the researcher prepared to conduct interviews with graduate students at a prominent mid-western university, he sought to engage in a frank discussion with the participants regarding their experiences on social media and with fake news. As an investigator, he wrote memos of his preconceived notions about the way he thought the participants would react to the questions. Positionality is determined by where one stands in relation to others (Merriam et al., 2001). It is the responsibility of the researcher to memo personal standpoints and to avoid them to intersect with the participants while interviewing. As point out by Van Manen (2003), one's own experiences are also the possible experiences of others," and the researchers' experience is at the starting point of the study. Hence to conclude the statement of positionality, the researcher identifies himself with the notion that Bourke (2014), states "my positionality meets the positionality of participants, and they do not rest in juxtaposition to each other. The research in which I engage is shaped by who I am, and as long

as I remain reflective throughout the process, I will be shaped by it, and by those with whom I interact” (p. 7).

Methodology

Van Manen (1990) illustrates six novel research activities in a phenomenological study.

These activities include:

1. Turning to a phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world;
2. Investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
3. Reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
4. Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
5. Maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;
6. Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole. (pp. 30-31)

The researcher used these research activities as a guideline to understanding the phenomenon of fake news on social media. Each of these research activities is described next.

Turning to a Phenomenon

As a social media enthusiast, I often experience the fake news phenomenon and readily relate to the discussion of the events in day-to-day life. As a researcher, I have my own experience with fake news, and I live with the experience and its effects. Van Manen (2003) explains “one’s own experiences are also the possible experiences of others”(p. 30). Therefore, I used my experience of the fake news phenomenon as a starting point, which guided me to understand the experience of the participants in this study. Van Manen notes “lived experience is the starting point and end point of phenomenological research”(p.47). In addition, Van Manen explains that one’s experience of a phenomenon can never exhaust the possibility of adding a richer or even a deeper interpretation of the same phenomenon. Hence, it is important for the

researcher to consider the personal experience of a phenomenon as a starting point and add to the essence by interviewing the participants and analyzing the experience as a whole. To understand the phenomenon, Van Manen urges the researcher to ask, “what is it” type of questions.

Therefore, the question asked was: What was it like to see fake news on your news feed on social media and what and how did you respond/comment/share/refute it?

Investigating Experience as we Live it Rather Than as we Conceptualize it

The phenomenological research aims to understand and establish a renewed contact with the experience once again to gain complete and deeper knowledge. The researcher experienced the phenomenon before he decided to begin this study. After the decision was made to investigate the fake news phenomenon as a researcher, he renewed contact with the fake news phenomenon to experience a new understanding in the form of an “experiment.” It was necessary to understand the phenomenon from the researcher’s standpoint. This experiment was utilized to gain a more thorough understanding of the phenomenon.

As a researcher, I described my personal experiences of fake news on social media in terms of the UGT concepts. For example: when I spent time on social media on a daily basis to get away from boredom, I wrote down in the memos that; to get away from boredom I spent time (certain amount) on social media, which in terms of UGT is called “pass time.” The renewed contact with the experience is called turning to the original experience. Even though I experienced the fake news phenomenon, I allowed the participants to explain their perspective of the phenomenon without conceptualizing it with my knowledge base. It is vital to allow the participants to share their knowledge and understanding while maintaining the researcher’s knowledge as an experimental starting point. This experimental start point helped me in the analysis of the data as I knew how to code them because of the previous memos. Van Manen

(2003) illustrates that the researchers need to “search everywhere in the lifeworld for lived-experiences material that, upon reflective examination, might yield something of its fundamental nature” (p. 53).

Reflecting on the Essential Themes

Van Manen (2003) explains, “The purpose of phenomenological reflection is to try to grasp the essential meaning of something” (p. 77). Phenomenological research is not as straightforward as it appears and at the same time, it is not very difficult either (Van Manen, 1990). In a phenomenon, the researcher needs to identify the most important themes that determine the experience as a whole as compared to all the experimental themes that accompany the phenomenon. For this study, when the researcher wrote the memos, he gathered the information of his own experiences in using social media. The researcher found that there were several themes in the whole text (memos). Van Manen (2003) says “phenomenological themes may be understood as the structures of experiences” (p. 79). Thus, when the researcher analyzed the phenomenon, he tried to determine the themes, which were the experiential structures that made up the experience. Van Manen (2003) asserts that themes are not generalizations of the phenomenon; rather they are “the stars that make up the universe of meaning we live through. By the light of these themes, we can navigate and explore such universes” (p. 77).

Describing the Phenomenon Through the Art of Writing and Rewriting

Van Manen (2003) describes hermeneutic research as a writing activity. In a phenomenological research, it is important for the researchers to think and write in a language that will make a story of a phenomenon. It is not just writing, but it is writing and re-writing of the phenomenon on a consistent basis to emerge with a story that is essentially an essence of the phenomenon. Van Manen points out that phenomenology is the application of language and

thoughtfulness to the aspect of the lived experience of the phenomenon. To precisely define it in Heidegger's (1962) words, "to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself" (p. 58).

For this study, the researcher wrote several memos about his experiences on social media. The written contexts and themes during the experiment were forming an idea of what needs to be a theme and what cannot be a theme. When the study was conducted, the researcher wrote an analysis to form themes and cross-checked with the memos. After cross-checking, the researcher found that he had many emerging themes that could possibly be used for the study. However, after re-analyzing the data, only those themes were chosen that would add to the essence of the participants' lived experiences. Some of the themes not used were 'surveillance of others' and 'future of fake news.' Van Manen advises that it is necessary for the researchers to fall in love with the writing as it may feel like labor work if one does not enjoy writing. However, according to Van Manen, the emerging themes will provide the necessary junction of writing in the language while the researcher is only thinking about the story.

Maintaining Relation to the Phenomenon

Van Manen (1990) illustrates that the researcher needs to maintain a strong relationship with the phenomenon. There will be various instances where the researcher may be tempted to change the direction of the phenomenon, but it is necessary to preserve the experience of the phenomenon from the participants' point of view. Also, it is not always necessary to connect the essence to the theories unless they naturally assert the same, but instead to keep the experiences relative to the phenomenon of human sense. For this study, the researcher used the background of UGT. However, when the study was conducted, the researcher found that when asked about social media the participants were responding about their gratifications in their use. But when

asked about fake news they were expressing a form of anger and distress. The researcher took notes and did not attempt to stop the participants from expressing what they perceived about fake news. Also, while analyzing, the researcher did not try to connect the experience to the UGT forcefully. Rather, the researcher kept the uses and gratifications as part of the themes and also added other emerging themes.

Van Manen (1990) points out that “To be oriented with an object means we are animated by the object in full and human sense” (p. 33). Van Manen advises that the researchers should not settle for falsities, superficialities, and should not have an attitude of so-called scientific disinterestedness. Rather, the researchers should have a pedagogic orientation that will help the being of the phenomenon for those whom we are responsible (Van Manen, 2003).

Balancing the Research

Balancing the research requires keeping the fundamental questions of the research constantly in view to maintain the themes legitimate to the guiding questions (Van Manen, 2003). For example, in this research, the lived experiences (emotions, feelings, ideological perceptions) on social media from the lens of fake news is the necessary theme as compared to what is fake news as per the participant’s viewpoint. The researcher concentrated on the responses of the participants to gain an understanding of their lived experiences. The guiding questions were posed to understand the phenomenon from the participants’ point of view and the researcher maintained the structure by not answering other questions like what is fake news. What are the implications/significance of the lived experience as compared to how fake news exists on social media? Balancing the phenomenological research and keeping the themes congruent to the guiding questions is the real trick in telling a compelling phenomenological story.

Procedures

Data Collection

To understand and gain deeper and richer knowledge of the fake news phenomenon, the researcher used in-depth one-on-one interviews with the selected participants. Van Manen (1990) specified two purposes of phenomenological interviews: (1) interview narrative that may serve as a richer and deeper understanding of a phenomenon, and (2) the interview used as a mode to develop a relationship with the participants to make meaning of an experience (p. 66). One-on-one interviews allow the researcher to more fully observe and engage the mannerisms, gestures, and reactions of the participants. Also, the possibility of interview termination in one-on-one meetings is very low compared to the online and phone surveys. There are two types of one-on-one interviews: structured and semi-structured. Structured interviews are designed to elicit the responses to the questions the researcher is examining, and semi-structured interviews are more in-depth and conversational as they try to gain an understanding of the participant's point of view about the topic.

The researcher asked semi-structured open-ended questions and built a conversational relationship with the participants. Each interview lasted for approximately 45-60 minutes in length and helped in gaining a deeper and richer understanding of the participant's experiences and point of view. A conversational relationship with the participants assisted in building a rapport between the researcher and the participants (Seidman, 1991). In-depth semi-structured interviews provide a wealth of details to understand and analyze the phenomenology of the events (Seidman, 1991).

Participants

This study's prospective participants included graduate students at the Bowling Green

State University (BGSU). Purposive sampling was utilized upon securing approval from the Bowling Green State University's Institutional Review Board. According to Creswell (2007), "A purposive sample, often used in qualitative research, is defined as a type of non-probability sampling in which the units to be observed are selected by the researcher's judgment of which ones will be most useful or representative" (p. 184). This study began with a broader convenience sample because of the availability of the study participants in the immediate access of the researcher. The focus was on the graduate students because of their interest in the literature and critical thinking skills, which provides them a unique perception of the fake news phenomenon on social media.

For this study, the researcher identified and selected individuals who were well-informed about the phenomenon of fake news. Purposive sampling is also known as judgment sampling, and the researcher judged that the graduate students were highly educated. It was an important aspect because researchers argue that the fake news phenomenon flourished because people who were infrequent readers expected short articles, headlines, memes, and pictures as compared to long and detailed articles. In addition to knowledge and experience, these students were easily available and willing to participate, and they had the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner. This sampling technique helped the researcher to select the participants who met the established criteria, which included having at least one social media account and being a graduate student. Since the researcher was also a graduate student at the university, the potential participants were known to the researcher.

Creswell (2007) asserts that one of the most important goals of a researcher is to select participants with whom they have or can establish the most productive relationships. The relationships help to answer the guiding questions. The researcher had collegial relationships

with the potential participants. Creswell also points out that an established relationship with the potential participant most likely helps in getting candid responses since the potential candidates may have already experienced the phenomenon and may exhibit similar interests. Hence, the researcher sent a questionnaire using Qualtrics (an online survey software) to gather the prerequisites for participation in the study (Appendix A) to all the prospective students at BGSU. Prerequisites for the study were that all participants should be at least 18 years or older and have at least one social media account (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter). Also, demographic questions like ethnic origin, educational level, gender and email address were collected in the questionnaire.

Seidman (1991) offers two important criteria to select the number of participants for the study. “The first is sufficiency. Are there sufficient numbers to reflect the range of participants and sites that make up the population so that others outside the sample might have a chance to connect to the experiences of those in it?” (p. 55). “The other criterion is saturation of information” (p. 55). The participant selection process is described in the next section.

Participant Selection

After gaining the approval from BGSU’s Institutional Review Board, the researcher began sending emails to the participants via the university email system. This email communication directed the participants to the Qualtrics survey link to answer a few demographic and prerequisite questions. Participants were provided a week’s time to respond to the email. A follow-up reminder email was also sent after one week. The researcher monitored the surveys for two weeks and analyzed them for the prerequisites and demographic questions. Then the researcher began recruiting the participants based on the established criteria of age and having a social media account. As per the guideline provided by Seidman (1991), the researcher

aimed to gain seven to eight participants for this study to avoid saturation of information. Eight eligible participants responded to the survey. Hence, all the eight participants were selected for an in-depth interview.

Participants were chosen by a random (stratified) selection approach based on the time it took to respond to the survey. The researcher monitored the surveys, checked the responses, and contacted the eligible participants via the provided email address in the survey. The email communication thanked the respondents for participating in the demographic survey and invited them to participate in the 45-60 minute in-depth semi-structured interviews as per the convenient timing for both the researcher and the respondents. The researcher first recruited two participants for a pilot study and then followed-up with the rest of the participants on a later date.

Pilot Study

Seidman (1991) urges the researchers to perform a pilot study to ensure the anticipated outcome of the interviews:

I urge all interviewing researchers to build into their proposal a pilot venture in which they try out their interviewing design with a small number of participants. They will learn whether their research structure is appropriate for the study they envision. They will come to grips with some of the practical aspects of establishing access, making contact, and conducting the interview. The pilot can alert them to elements of their own interview techniques that support the objectives of the study and to those that detract from those objectives (p. 39).

Following the suggestions from Seidman (1991), the researcher administered a pilot study with two students to eliminate the weaknesses in the instrument and gain a deeper understanding of the interview technique. Some of the weaknesses that can be determined with the help of the information obtained from the pilot studies include researcher's bias, question frames, background information, and adopting to the research procedures (Creswell, 2007). Out of the total of eight eligible participants, the first two were selected on a random basis for the

pilot study. The researcher followed the interview protocol to ensure the dependability of the interview questions. A verbal consent was obtained from each participant before beginning the interviews. Any problems, questions, or clarifications needed by the participants in the pilot study was used as a learning experience to modify and replace the errors in the actual study. The researcher modified the structure of two interview questions to make them open-ended questions instead of close-ended questions. Open-ended questions help build on the conversations with the participants as compared to close-ended questions.

Data Analysis Process

All the interviews were audio-recorded. The researcher carefully transcribed each recorded interview with complete confidentiality. Following the transcription process, each recording was re-checked along with the handwritten notes taken during the actual interviews to ensure accuracy and precision. Any corrections needed were confirmed by repeatedly listening to the audio recordings and comparing the texts. Expressions, verbal pauses, and gestures were given equal importance to warrant the transcribed text and avoid any loss of data.

Thematic Analysis

To identify, analyze, and, report themes in the dataset, the researcher followed qualitative thematic analysis procedures. Qualitative thematic analysis is used when researchers are trying to understand the meaning of the entire dataset (set of interviews) as compared to a single interview. Braun and Clarke (2006) introduced six phases of conducting thematic analysis which include: (1) familiarizing with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; (6) producing the report (pp. 16-23); all of which the researcher used for this study. Van Manen (2003) states that the three most important approaches in a thematic analysis are: (1) the wholistic approach, (2) the selective approach, and

(3) the detailed approach. In the wholistic approach, the researcher approaches the text and asks, what are the moralistic phrases that captures the overall meaning of lived experience of the participants? In the selective approach, the researcher approaches the data with finding the highlights of the phenomenon by selecting particular phrases as revealed by the study participants. In the detailed approach, the researcher reads each sentence of the data in a very thorough manner to understand the data and its relevance to the overall phenomenon. For this study, the researcher used a mix of all three thematic approaches to understand the phenomenon. The process of thematic analysis required the researcher to constantly refer to the guiding questions and stick to the phenomenology of fake news on social media and the gratifications received by users. Writing and re-writing was essential to get the stories connected to the themes and phenomenon under study that had the significance of what, why, and how fake news stories on social media impacted individuals' day-to-day experiences.

Validity

Creswell (2007) states that trustworthiness in a qualitative study is determined by its transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Also, the strengths of qualitative research are based on determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers of an account. This study checked the accuracy of the findings and employed certain procedures as follows.

Member checking. Creswell (2007) illustrates the importance of member checking for accuracy, transparency, and trustworthiness. The researcher shared the written transcripts (descriptions) of the interview via email with the participants to check the accuracy of the qualitative findings. The participants read the transcripts provided and responded to the researcher via emails like, *"This looks good and accurate,"* and *"looks great."* This helped in

validation of the participant's responses, accuracy of the text, and increases the trustworthiness of the study.

Use a rich, thick description to convey the findings. The researcher also provided a rich, thick description of the findings to improve the credibility of the study (Creswell, 2007).

Spend prolonged time in the field. The researcher developed an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study. After the researcher chose to study the fake news phenomenon for his dissertation, he spent an average 20 minutes each day on social media to critically understand the phenomenon of fake news and receive first-hand experience. The prolonged time spent in the field helped convey details about the site and the people which lends credibility to the narrative account.

Qualitative Reliability

Qualitative reliability is an approach that helps to keep the consistency with previous researchers and different projects (Gibbs, 2007). The researcher checked the transcripts multiple times for any possible errors in the translations and writing. Also, cross-checking of all the definitions and codes was given extreme importance for increasing the reliability of the study (Gibbs, 2007). All the definitions mentioned in the study were constantly cross-checked to ensure they were consistent with the scholarly materials available. According to Gibbs (2007), the value of qualitative research lies in the particular description of the themes developed, and particularity holds utmost importance in a qualitative study. The particular description of each theme in details were provided to ensure the reliability of each theme. The detailed descriptions are found in the next chapter.

Summary

This chapter presented the research methodology, applicable research activities and

procedures, definitions and descriptions of the proposed phenomenological study. As outlined in this chapter, the six novel research activities as illustrated by Van Manen (1990) were used as a guideline to understand the phenomenon of fake news on social media. The researcher's involvement, biases, and positionality were also discussed. Lastly, the research procedures for this study were discussed which include the selection of potential participants, pilot study, thematic analysis, validity, and qualitative reliability. In the next chapter, the emergent themes that speak to the phenomenon of fake news are rendered and crafted through the writing and rewriting strategy.

CHAPTER IV. FINDINGS

Study Overview

This chapter presents findings based on the thematic analysis of the semi-structured in-depth interviews with eight doctoral students. Study participants were queried to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of fake news from their lived experiences. The theoretical framework upon which the interview data were analyzed was the uses and gratifications theory (UGT). The UGT supposes that people use media for information seeking and expect certain types of gratifications. Scholars have studied various forms of media, to analyze why people engage with these media outlets such as television, radio, and internet-based resources (Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1979; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). In this study, the researcher used the UGT as a framework for exploring why people use social media and how are they gratified. In light of the influence of fake news on the 2016 presidential elections, this study also sought to investigate the reasons as to how social media users identified and managed fake news and described the purpose of their use.

This phenomenological inquiry was guided by the following questions:

Guiding Question 1. How do social media users describe the purpose of their media use during the 2016 U.S. presidential elections?

Guiding Question 2. How did social media users identify and manage political fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential elections?

Guiding Question 3. What do participants believe are the effects of political fake news occurring on social media?

As illustrated in Table 2 below, demographic data and social media habits were gathered from the study participants, which assisted in providing a snapshot. As typical of

phenomenological studies, participants were assigned pseudonyms and engaged in face-to-face interviews, leading with the same questions at a mutually agreed upon location.

Table 2.

Demographic Information of Participants

Pseudonym of the Participant	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Preferred Social Media Websites	Brief Introduction
Charlotte	50-65	Female	White/Caucasian	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram	Doctoral student and former School Principal
Rob	35-50	Male	African/American	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat	Doctoral student and Pastor
Andy	18-34	Male	White/Caucasian	Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn	Doctoral student and Assistant Athletic Director
Catherine	18-34	Female	White/Caucasian	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat	Doctoral student and Academic Advisor
Gigi	35-50	Female	White/Caucasian	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram	Doctoral student and High School Teacher
Tom	35-50	Male	White/Caucasian	Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn	Doctoral student, City Councilman, and Instructor
Hazel	35-50	Female	White/Caucasian	Facebook	Doctoral student and School Teacher
Macy	35-50	Female	White/Caucasian	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, YouTube	Doctoral student and Marketing Manager

As reported by study participants, Figures 12 and 13 below illustrate their most preferred social media platforms and the approximate daily time spent in social media use.

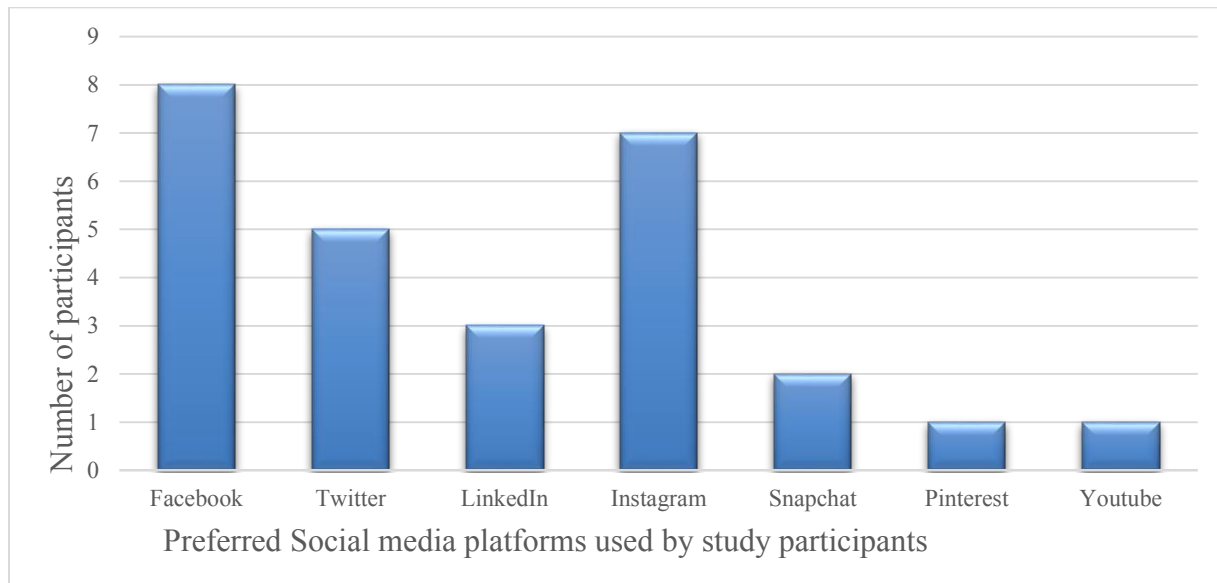


Figure 12. Preferred social media platforms used by participants.

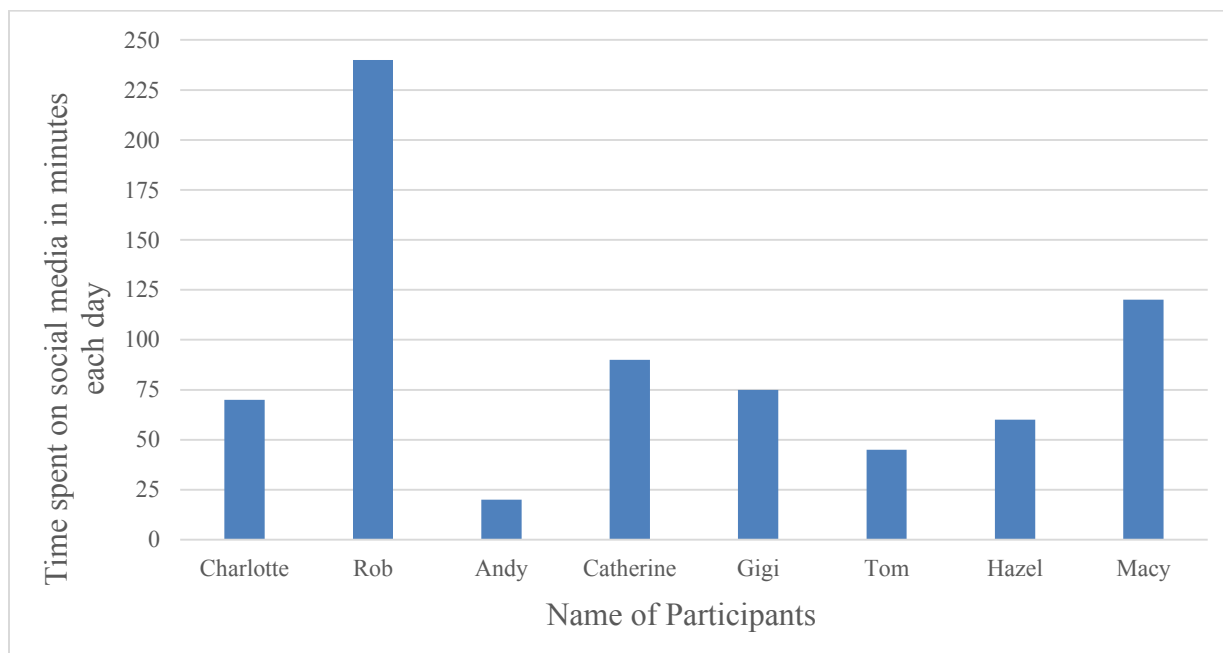


Figure 13. Approximate time spent by participants on social media each day in minutes.

Conversations and interactions with the participants allowed the researcher to delve into the phenomenon and examine the meaning of lived experience through the emergent themes in the guiding questions. The researcher approached the data with a thematic analysis method provided by Van Manen (2003): (1) the wholistic approach, (2) the selective approach, and (3)

the detailed approach. As detailed in Chapter 3, responses were analyzed utilizing the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), leading to the emergent themes.

Table 3.

Summary of Emergent Themes

Themes	Summary
Gather and share information	Participants explained the purpose of their social media uses on a day-to-day basis. As indicated in the literature review, the phenomenon of fake news is deeply connected with the UGT, and the constructs in the theory overlap with each other. While this theme is primarily concentrating on gathering and sharing information, some of the other constructs from the uses and gratification theory that overlap are entertainment, pass time, and communicatory utility.
Platform for expressing	Participants described how they value social media as a medium of expression. They specified how and why they value social media as a platform for freedom of expression.
Fake news is fake news	Participants provided details on how they came across many fake news stories in their social media feed. All the participants experienced significant amounts of fake news on social media during the 2016 U.S. presidential election.
Differentiate between real and fake news	Participants justified how they managed fake news and what websites they preferred to debunk fake news. They explained the process of how they used various news sources to differentiate fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential election.
Polarization of society	Participants shared their point of views about how fake news and social media is dividing people.
Make-or-break relationships	Participants shared numerous personal stories of broken friendships and relationships because of differences in political views while using social media. Many relationships were jeopardized because of the conflicts over disagreement in the validity of the news, political opinions, and disbelief in the source of news during the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

As reported in Chapter 4, the qualitative transcripts were member-checked for maintaining the validity of the collected data and were analyzed using guidelines by Palmgreen

and Rayburn (1979), Papacharissi and Rubin (2000), and Whiting and Williams (2013). The next step was listing the comments and sorted them into the concept groups and articulating the following themes which represent the deeper meaning of the participants' lived experience. Subsequently, the researcher arranged the data in the sequence of the guiding questions. Each question revealed two emergent themes which are discussed one by one under each heading of the guiding question. All the selected themes have a response rate of 100 percent. In other words, all the eight participants reported similar experiences for each of the emergent themes. Each guiding question and the themes associated with them are discussed next.

Guiding Question 1. How do social media users describe the purpose of their media use during the 2016 U.S. presidential elections?

Purpose of Social Media Use

The first guiding question asked how social media users described the purpose of their media use. In response to question one, the analysis revealed two dominant themes: 1) Gather and Share Information and 2) Platform for Expression. (See Table 4).

Table 4.

Summary of Themes for Guiding Question 1.

Themes	Summary
Gather and share information	Participants explained the purpose of their social media uses on a day-to-day basis. As indicated in the literature review, the phenomenon of fake news is deeply connected with the UGT, and the constructs in the theory overlap with each other. While this theme is primarily concentrating on gathering and sharing information, some of the other constructs from the uses and gratification theory that overlap are entertainment, pass time, and communicatory utility. Some of the primary reasons why participants used social media were: -Connecting with friends and family and receiving information about life events.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Receiving news (political, social, sports, and others). -Connecting with the community. -Sharing general information about personal life like photographs, memes, and life events. -Sharing information about the public policies and issues of interest.
Platform for expression	<p>Participants described how they value social media as a medium of expression. They specified how and why they value social media as a platform for freedom of expression. Some of the key reasons participants preferred using social media as a platform for expression were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Expressing views about public policies or issues of interest. -Expressing views and opinions about the 2016 U.S. presidential election process, candidates, and political issues.

Gather and Share Information

Information seeking and information sharing are two different constructs reported in the uses and gratifications theory. However, social media is a medium where information can be received and shared at the same time. While two different constructs were mentioned in the uses and gratification theory, the researcher merged them together for reporting the gratifications of using social media under one umbrella. This theme was shared by all respondents and reflected participants' need to receive information about friends and family, share information and content that they felt was important, connect to the community, and receive news about the happenings in the world. When participants were asked to explain the purpose of their social media use, all of them said they used it to either connect with friends and family, receive news, connect with the community, and share content including pictures, memes, videos, and articles of interest.

Each participant used Facebook as a primary social media platform coupled with either Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Snapchat, YouTube, or Pinterest. All the participants reported the

use of at least two social media platforms daily. The participants reported experiencing gratification through social media use. They believed that having the liberty of using social media, connecting to the world, and easy access to social life on the social media applications as part of their happy life which is referred as gratifications.

As stated earlier, the researcher used guidelines by Palmgreen and Rayburn (1979), Papacharissi and Rubin (2000), and Whiting and Williams (2013) to analyze the gratifications of the participants. The participants illustrated in their interviews that their day begins with checking what is new on social media and throughout the day they check the social media applications for momentary updates. Also, they constantly pondered about things they saw on social media during the day and look forward to updates from their social media friends, family, and followers. Also, they look forward to sharing their personal good, bad, and routine moments with their friends and followers on social media. Hence, it has become an integral part of their lives.

Charlotte described her social media use based on the platforms she uses and the specific features she used:

“I used both Facebook and Twitter as primary news sources during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Because it was immediate, it was quick, and it was what other people were reading. Apart from that, I use Facebook to keep track of family events, things that are happening in my family, their lives, and to interact in that way. Twitter, I use really as an information source. I use that for following world news and follow bloggers. Also, I have a social media Instagram account which I use to follow my kids.”

Rob described how he thinks social media keeps him connected to the world:

“I use social media primarily to see what's going on in the world. See what my friends or

those that I follow do to see what's going on in their lives. Generally, I would go to social media when I am not doing much just to see what is going on in the social lives of people and the world news. I also scroll down on social media websites and see news and things that people post on Twitter or find out something that is going on. If I see a particular news that I am interested in then I will go and pull it up on my tablet or laptop to see the details and also to verify.”

Andy believed that community engagement is an important aspect of his social media use.

However, he also likes using social media for various other purposes:

“I use Facebook for community engagement. I like to share information about the things I do for work and also if there are things that will help develop my community. Instagram is more on the personal side. That’s the vehicle I use to keep in touch with friends and family...people that you may not have time to connect with on a personal basis and make a phone call once in a week. Instagram helps to have online conversations with those friends and family members. But I use the Instagram messaging feature as well, where we have threaded conversations. We send a message back and forth and poke fun at each other to stay in close contact with friends and family on a regular basis.”

Catherine reported using social media for her academic work and especially noted that social media helps her connect on a personal level with her students:

“Staying in contact with friends and family is really important. Most of them are on Facebook. Because of the geographical distance, Facebook really helps us connect together. We love to share photos, videos, and chat with each other and stay connected which is the most important part for me particularly. Apart from that, I use social media for my work. As an academic advisor for a lot of my students when they see Snapchat and

Twitter it helps them feel more connected to me and understand me as a person and relate to me. So, when they come to me for academic advising, they share with me stuff that may be impacting their school performance and my social media presence helps them feel comfortable to share that information with me.”

Gigi appreciated used social media as a communication utility, and she used it to share information about her personal life with her friends and followers on social media:

“Mostly to catch up on my friends and what they are doing. I also from time to time will click on things that I like and see what it has to offer. If it’s interesting, I keep digging deeper. A lot of people will post pictures like, “Hey, I am here in Alaska, and this is so cool.” That’s mostly what I do. I do sometimes catch newscasts. For example, last night there was a newscast about my student, so it was fun to watch a newscast about my student. Then I will also post things with what’s going on in my life. What’s new with me? What is new with my family? I will post and share pictures, videos. If there is an interesting news article that I like to read, I will post that on my profile and share it.”

For Tom, social media is a primary source of information:

“I like to keep up with what friends are doing and then also a primary source for getting news for what is going around the world. I supplement that with other news platforms if I need to. Keeping in communication with friends and family about their lives. For receiving that first level of national news, I subscribe to different groups so that I get information that I need on different issues. That way it’s totally unfiltered. I share pictures, videos, and comment on the things that I like or care about. Most of the times, I comment or post about things that I read on the news, and I want to rant about and express my opinion to make sure people hear about it. Especially political news.”

Hazel uses social media for mostly staying in touch and news:

“Get notifications and news. On Facebook specifically, I like to know about stuff that's going around the world. Special things that I like and then politics. Apart from that, I like posting pictures, liking, sharing, and staying in touch with people and connecting, reading news articles.”

Macy uses social media as a hobby, personal planner, and for professional purposes:

“Keep up with family and friends. Stay connected, hobby and community engagement, organize events; it's also like my personal planner. I follow crafters and blogs. See what competitors are doing in terms of my professional use. I like that I see what other people are doing and what is going on in their life. I also follow people with my similar interest so that I know what is going on in the field of crafts. It is very difficult for me to give up using Facebook because in the past when I skipped using social media for some time, I missed to wish birthdays of my loved ones. I missed two things at my kid's school. I depend a lot on Facebook. I keep all my family pictures on Instagram just so that I have them all in one place. It's just so much fun. For me, it's important to look at all the pictures at the same time. I like to follow all the crafters and blogs. I don't like to read all the blogs, but the pictures on the blogs are fun to see. I use LinkedIn for professional purposes. I check it every day for my professional growth. To see what my competitors are doing. I do use Facebook as a primary source to get news.”

After reading all the transcripts, interview notes, and researcher's memos, the researcher began coding the texts. As outlined in Chapter 3, a mix of three approaches was used: (1) the wholistic approach, (2) the selective approach, and (3) the detailed approach (Van Manen, 2003). In the wholistic approach, the researcher approached to the text and asked what phrases captured

the overall meaning of lived experiences of the participants. For example, all the participants stated that they used social media for staying in touch with family and friends. However, they did not immediately state what features of social media they exactly used to stay in touch with family and friends. Therefore, the researcher had to first learn that staying in touch with family and friends was an overall meaning, but the deeper connections and features were revealed when the researcher used the selective approach.

In the selective approach, the researcher approached the data with finding the highlights of the phenomenon by selecting particular phrases as revealed by the study participants. Continuing with the above-mentioned example in this phase, the researcher searched the entire dataset to find out what were the other aspects of social media that helped the participants to stay connected with family and friends. One of the participants shared that he used the Instagram chat feature to stay in contact with family and friends while another participant shared that she only used Facebook to stay in touch with family and friends and used Twitter to stay connected for her news. This information provided by the participants helped the researcher to deeply understand the exact reasons for the gratifications of the participants' social media use.

The detailed approach required the researcher to read each sentence of the data in a very thorough manner to understand the data and its relevance to the overall phenomenon. As mentioned above, to deeply understand the gratification of staying in touch with family and friends, the researcher examined all the text to understand the overall gratification of staying in touch with family and friends. For example, when the researcher found statements like, *"I keep all my family pictures on Instagram just so that I have them all in one place. It's just so much fun. For me, it's important to look at all the pictures at the same time,"* he took notes and coded them in the appropriate theme.

While using the three approaches mentioned above, the researcher constantly referred to the guiding questions to ensure the relevance to phenomenology of fake news on social media and the gratifications received. Writing and re-writing was essential to get the stories connected to the themes and make a phenomenon that had the significance of what, why, and how fake news on social media impacted individuals' day-to-day experiences. While studying all the aspects of this theme, the researcher found that the participants also used social media for entertainment and communicatory utility. These gratifications overlapped with the main theme, so the entire theme was named as gathering and sharing of information and the other gratifications entertainment, and communicatory utility remained a part of the theme.

As illustrated by Korgoankar and Wolin (1999), gratifications via entertainment are related to pleasure, fun, and enjoyment. When the participants stated that they used social media to collect their pictures together in one place for fun, it was coded as entertainment. When the participants mentioned using social media to chat and connect, it was coded as communicatory utility as per the assertion of Whiting and Williams (2013). However, all of these themes were deeply connected to gathering and sharing of information in some form, thus the overall theme was named as gathering and sharing information.

Findings further reveal that students truly enjoyed using social media on a daily basis, however, each student's reason to use social media and the variety of features they used varied from time to time. Social media allowed the participants to be interactive and offered a sense of involvement with each other. The sense of involvement with social media friends, family, various groups, and pages allowed them to express their personal opinions on the platform which is found in the next theme, *Platform for Expression*.

Platform for Expression

As stated by Whiting and William (2013), expressing thoughts and opinions through the liking of photographs, commenting on posts, and expressing via status is a form of expression using social media. This theme reflects participants' need to express their opinions about issues on social media. In response to the question of whether they value social media as a tool for expressing views, participants said they like and appreciate that they can communicate their views on social media. All of them believed that giving voice to issues they stand by is important, and social media is a vehicle which supports the concept. However, all of them agreed that the platform is a modern way to connect and communicate their opinions and views with the world. Charlotte shared:

“Social media helps me to express my own opinions and thoughts about different things. I do like the idea of also being able to edit my thoughts. I think that's an important part right there.”

Rob compared the social media platform with a local newspaper:

“Social media helps you present your own viewpoint. It's easy. You don't have to go through a lot of screening. Like last time, I wanted to post something in the local newspaper. I had to pay money to get something in the newspaper. But on social media, you get yourself a profile. You can use a fake name if you want to. You can put whatever you want up there. And if you get enough people to share it, you could get surpass the viewership of a local newspaper because you are not just designated into the local area. Social media platform is global. So, people in Asia, Africa, Europe, and Australia can read what someone wrote in the United States. So, it's easy to post your own information. And then you get to hear what others are talking about and what they think on certain

policies or issues.”

Andy specifically talked about using the social media platform for human development and support:

“Social media does give people a voice to express their opinions. If it is used in a good way. Like, take for example, if somebody is using their power for LGBTQ support, development, and equality. Also, I hear people talk about it all the time, and I believe that the platform is valuable.”

Catherine was excited about the use of social media to show her support:

“I love the way social media helps me get my voice out. Importantly, it also helps me show support for something.”

Gigi, Tom, and Hazel agreed that social media helps in getting their voice out:

“I think it is very valuable as a tool of expression. You get to say what you want without any restrictions.”

Tom shared:

“I do appreciate social media as my voice gets heard. Most of the times, I comment or post about things that I read on the news, and I want to rant about and express my opinion to make sure people hear about it. Especially political news.”

While Hazel replied:

“I do value social media as a tool for expressing my feelings. Like I get to say what I think about a particular issue for instance. I do not have to think about how I am going to word it. I believe in something I write, and I move on.”

Macy felt that people judge you for your opinions, but she still appreciates the power of social media:

“I like that social media helps me put my opinion out there. When I stand on a particular issue which I really believe in, I will post my opinions on social media. I don't like when people judge you for having an opinion. I don't care in that case what people think about me, but that's a part of social media.”

First, the researcher approached the transcripts in a wholistic manner to find the moralistic phrases. The researcher found that the participants were consistently reporting about how they used social media during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The two-way communication and the expression of opinions and views was crucial for the participants. They enjoyed that they had access to a platform like social media which was different from the other existing outlets like television, radio, and newspaper where they would have to pay for expressing their personal views and opinions. This was a unique opportunity for the researcher to name this as a completely different theme as it was an important aspect of the phenomenon of fake news on social media during the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Second, the researcher looked for selective sentences where the participants were only talking about the expression of their personal opinions and thoughts. When the participants mentioned that they commented on other people's feeds or they shared their views on the pictures/memes of the other social media users, the researcher coded them under the umbrella of platform for expressions of views. While analyzing each sentence during a detailed approach, the researcher found that all the participants were reporting the use of social media as a platform for expression for political news, public policies or issues, and the subjects related to their personal interests. It was clear from the results that all the participants appreciated the interactive functionality of social media platforms in that it allows them to share their personal opinions and views while they also learn the opinions expressed by their friends, family, and all the other

social media users who are connected with them or follow them.

Guiding Question 2. How did social media users identify and manage political fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential elections?

How Social Media Users Identified and Managed Fake News

The second guiding question asked how social media users identify and manage fake news. The findings indicate that the participants were able to detect the difference between fake news and real news stories. Hence the themes: *Fake News is Fake News* and *Differentiate Between Real and Fake News*. A summary of the themes for Guiding Question 2 is presented in Table 5.

Table 5.

Summary of Themes for Guiding Question 2.

Themes	Summary
Fake news is fake news	Participants provided details on how they came across many fake news stories in their social media feed. All the participants experienced significant amounts of fake news on social media during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Political fake news was heavily experienced by the participants. They reported that political fake news stories were trying to sway people from one end of the political spectrum to the other end. They also added that the motivations of the fake news writers were financial. Also, when they made a decision that a particular story was fake, they could not stop themselves from clicking on the story because it was very alluring. Hence, the name of this study received the word “Allure” of fake news.
Differentiate between real and fake news	Participants justified how they managed fake news and what websites they preferred to debunk fake news stories. They explained the process of how they used various news sources to differentiate fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. However, the findings reveal that the participants used their critical thinking ability to first decide if they thought a news story was fake and if it needed to be debunked.

Fake News is Fake News

The theme of identifying fake news on social media was amplified at the beginning of the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaigning season and continues today. When asked about seeing fake news on social media, and how they identify them, participants reflected with illustrations about their interaction with fake news. They provided information about how they identified several fake news stories on social media and also provided examples. The common reporting of this theme was that the participants experienced fake news on social media as a phenomenon in their day-to-day life. Charlotte offered information on how much of fake news she consumed during the 2016 U.S. presidential election and how she felt the need to investigate the reality to keep her friends from falling prey to fake news:

“So, for me the term fake news means that any news that isn’t from a legitimate news organization like Washington Post, New York Times, and others. Somebody that writes news that really don’t care about the reality. You know, just something that completely isn’t true. There were a lot of fake news stories about Hillary Clinton during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. So, this one particular story about Hillary Clinton caught the eyes of my pastor’s wife. She saw on Facebook pictures of aborted fetuses. And she was like I cannot get that out of my head. I said to her it is not real. It’s made using Photoshop. However, she could not keep those pictures out of her mind. So, my reaction seeing fake news was one disgust, great disgust. I don’t want to hear fake news about either the people I like, or I dislike. But I have a human reaction to any fake news. When I see it, I have to click it so that I could go and investigate the reality. I want to know the reality so even when I know from the look of it that it is a fake news, I go ahead and click

it just so I know what is going on and find the real story so that I can tell others about the real stories and keep them away from fake news essentially.”

Rob, on the other hand, encouraged his friends to remove the fake news stories from their profiles:

“There are a lot of fake news stories that are on Facebook all the time. During the 2016 election, some of them were so preposterous. I can’t tell you the types of stories that came along my feed. I mean there was not even an ounce of truth in the stories, and people were sharing them thinking it was real news. I would call them out if I saw them to take that down. It wasn’t true, and that did not happen. I mean if it was true the national leading sites would have reported it if that was the case. It is just crap, it is not true.”

Andy described the essential technique of the fake news writers. He said that fake news writers lure social media users by using attractive headlines to convert the clicks for money:

“From my prospective, fake news tends to be taglines or headlines that are used to entice people to get clickbait and then the article is not even about what the title was or its loosely associated just like an embellished story to get people to click on them. Or it's just wrong information. Maybe certain news reporters who says that they have knowledge of something that they read a blog or something and then people share and re-share, and before you know it’s almost like common knowledge, which is not actually knowledge at all. It is most frequently shared wrong information. I recall remembering so many stories that were sensationalized. There were too many stories during the elections that came out. I can’t remember any particulars, but they were related to the two political candidates at the end. But I remember that the stories were so catchy that they suckered me in and I wanted to click on them. I personally feel like I know a fake story when I see

it, but I can't resist clicking it."

Catherine was certain that the fake news stories were targeting the two presidential nominees of the major parties:

"I saw misrepresentations of both Senator Clinton and then-candidate Mr. Donald Trump on social media. I still see a lot of fake stories. Like there is this algorithm that will follow you when you click on particular stories. I think when you see outlandish claims they are fake news."

On the one hand, Gigi's experience with fake news made her feel that they were placed on social media by then-presidential candidate Donald Trump to garner attention. On the other hand, Tom's lived experience with fake news led to his conclusion that journalists are writing fake news because they are in constant pressure to compete with other media channels and they write them in a rush to be the first one to publish the news:

Gigi said,

"There was a lot going on from what we are finding out. Russian bots on Facebook and many other fake news articles God knows from where. And there were probably more than several fake news stories I clicked on about our now President Donald Trump to find out more information about him. It seemed like there were a lot of them on Facebook. It seemed like they were planted by Donald Trump just to get attention. I bet some of that information that I read was fake news because I never heard about it anywhere else but Facebook."

Tom replied,

"From what I understand, Fake news is basically news that is put out without any verification. Since we are in the 24-hour news system all the time, the journalists are in a

rush to take all the news and post it on their websites before somebody else does. They do not verify the news properly before they post the news out for the first time. They don't do fact-checking. They share a lot of rumors out there and spread them as soon as they hear about them. And then they retract it later. I think there was a lot about Trump during the election. Different allegations here and there and you would hear about Hillary Clinton's conspiracy with her organization like how much she rigged the election. How Bernie Sanders lost out because of her. None of this news was actually substantiated. It's all been thrown out there to get free clicks."

Nonetheless, Hazel felt really sad about the spreading of fake news on social media. She is in constant disbelief that social media users trust stories that have no relevance in real life:

"There are fake news websites, and they disseminate them on Facebook and what I see is a lot of times is that people would say oh this article is fake. Check this on Snopes. I know that people would be duped by it. And it would only be after a while that someone would find out that it is fake. I remember seeing this news that, "Pope endorsed Donald Trump for the president of United States" and people believed it. I was like these people are crazy. It made me really very sad."

Macy's encounter with fake news is not just on a personal level but also at the professional level. She has to understand the implications of fake news for her job, her hobby related social media pages, and personal use:

"I know about fake news from a personal standpoint and a professional standpoint. In my professional world, I have to deal with fake stories about the products that various competitors of my company make, and we have to know about it. In the political world, I have heard and seen a lot about fake news, especially coming from my mother because

there are things that me and my mother do not agree on. She will post something on Facebook and say did you see this thing. And when you click on it and read it, you immediately find out that it is not a real story. You see grammatical mistakes; you see things that you know are directly pointing out that it is not true.

I know for instance Trump-related fake news. My mom would 'like' the story because of the headline, just because she likes it. But she wouldn't read everything. Since she also watched Fox news, which is known as a more conservative news channel, she bases her viewpoints on the things that she sees on Fox. So, when she would post something on Facebook, I would tell her to click on it, and then I showed her that there are going to be grammar mistakes and the essence of the story is completely fake. Then I would ask her, do you think that the New York Times would have somebody putting out something in their name with misspells. Then she would be like, "Oh, I did not think about it in that way." So, then I would explain to her about the stories like Melania didn't save the world, or Hillary didn't have 17 boyfriends. Older people don't understand social media a lot, and I talk to her about it a lot of times. I understand that she is a conservative Republican which is great, but sometimes she would share something on Facebook that she felt was true just by reading the headline. But then when you get into the article, you know that it is categorically fake."

When analyzing this theme, the researcher reviewed the transcripts, interview notes, and handwritten memos to find the overall meaning of experiencing the fake news phenomenon. For example, when the participants stated that they experienced a lot of fake news on social media, it became the overall meaning of the theme. Selectively, the researcher looked at the important sentences where he found remarks about fake news. For example, when the participants

mentioned, *"I saw misrepresentations of both Senator Clinton and then-candidate Mr. Donald Trump on social media,"* it was selectively categorized into the theme. A detailed approach of reading sentence by sentence was required to read statements like, *"it's just wrong information."*

All the student participants reported seeing fake news on social media during the 2016 U.S. presidential election; the researcher felt a sense of disappointment and anger from the students when asked about their reactions to fake news. The participants reported that political fake news stories were trying to sway people from one end of the political spectrum to the other end. They also added that the motivations of the fake news writers were financial. In addition, when they made a decision that a particular story was fake, they could not stop themselves from clicking on the story because it was very alluring. This sense of attraction was one of the most important factors of the fake news phenomenon. This attraction pulled the social media users to click on the stories regardless of their intentions. Some clicked the story with the intention of find out the truth; others clicked the story because it was fun to read stories like these, and some really thought they were fake news stories. However, the fake news writers were making money for every click they received on their intentionally-written content for clickbaits.

Since all the participants were graduate students, the researcher consider them as critical thinkers. These participants consistently mentioned that they did not believe in any fake news stories they saw on social media. Rather, all of them shared some type of prominent reaction like rolling of eyes in distress, sighs, and deep breathing in anxiety when they talked about fake news. These reactions were observed and noted by the researcher during the course of the interviews. One of the participants even mentioned how stressful it was for her to see fake news all the time and the feelings of anguish it bought to her routine life. Another participant mentioned that she even thought of deleting Facebook to keep away from all the negative and

derogatory remarks from her friends and family about the election. One participant actually stated that she did not do as much with fake news and was just ignoring all the news that she felt was misinformation. Nevertheless, all the participants were positive that they saw fake news in a mass amount during the election. They also described how they were able to verify the difference between the real and fake news. Hence the next theme, *Differentiate Between the Fake News and Real News*.

Differentiate Between the Fake News and Real News

This theme provides information about the second part of the guiding question regarding how participants managed fake news. What were the actions they took to avoid being misled by fake news? Many participants described how they tried to help their social media friends and family by offering information about the valid news identifying media outlets. Although most of them could not keep themselves from clicking the fake news articles, they knew they were clicking to obtain more information about the story. Charlotte contributed details about how the fake websites looked almost real and how she differentiated between them by identifying the URLs of the websites:

“First, I blocked the site myself and told my family not to go on those websites. However, if I saw some of my Facebook friends doing that or sharing stories from this website I would write to them something like “in the interest of truth-please check this out and then I would give them a link of Snopes or some debunking site to check.” I do remember websites that looked like the real ones. However, they had usually one or two letters off like the real news website. It looked real, and anyone could immediately fall for it. But I knew they were not real. Like instead of dot com it was dot ru, dot ca but not dot net or dot org at the end. Which obviously showed that it was a fake news site. So even after

trying very hard to tell people not to follow particular sites and sharing the debunking sites, I still continued to see fake news all over social media. But they were from the same people you know; it wasn't like some other people started to share fake news all of sudden. It was the same people. Like my aunt and the other friends also kept sharing throughout. But I did not see crossover. Like if I had friends who didn't share fake news. It did not look like my friends were influenced by people sharing fake news. Like my friend in California kept sharing news from reputable sources. I didn't see friends like that moved to sharing fake news. But people who wanted to make a conservative case shared fake news more often as I see it. People who shared fake news once would always share fake news."

Rob was concerned about the valid news sources, so he confirmed every news post with his trusted media outlets before commenting on social media:

"I scroll down on social media websites and see news and things that people post on Twitter or find out something that is going on. If I see a particular news that I am interested in, then I will go and pull it up on my tablet or laptop to see the details and also to verify. You know there are so many different real, fake, and satirical websites. So, I have to make sure of what I am reading. So, before I comment on the posts of my Facebook or Twitter friends, I want to make sure I check the news is valid and then I go back to Facebook or Twitter wherever that is and comment on the post on what I think about the news."

Andy admitted that he knew that the stories were fake, but it was very tempting for him to click on them to check out what they were saying. He also said that he clicked on many fake stories just for a laugh:

“I have seen so many fake news stories. I don’t believe in a lot of them. I know half of the times that the stories are fake and are made for clickbait, but they still suckered me in, and I click them just to check out what they are writing. I know that the stories are bogus, but there is something about me like I have to know about what they are talking about. The headlines are so catchy that they just make me click and read it. Many people fail to validate the stories, and they will just read and share it without thinking much about it. If I look at something say like a website which is not a reputable website, I will go and validate the information against the reputable website. And if I don’t find the information on the reputable site, my guess is, one it is either made up or two the other websites are not caught up yet but at some point, the other websites will report the story.”

Catherine was very particular about how she verified fake news stories and how she tried helping her friends and family. The researcher felt it was interesting that Catherine only wanted to let her very close friends know about fake news and did not care if others apart from her close circle shared fake news.

“I think, number one, that what I do is to verify it is a fake news. Like I saw a website that bluntly reported that it is fake news. So that I can show other people that it is a fake news. And then I also consider how well I know the person that shared fake news on social media. If there is someone whom I know and trust, then I have a dialogue with them. I would send them a messenger message to say, “Hey do you know that's fake?” Other things that I see a lot on social media is that people share old stories like from 2014. Well then, it’s not accurate anymore. Because I don't like to call them out straight on Facebook comments as everyone else will see that you called them out. That’s not my goal. My goal is just to let them know that it is fake. So, I would rather do that privately.

Just a general comment section is calling them to the carpet. I don't want to do that."

Gigi offered more information about the type of questions she asked when she saw any news, not in the mainstream and posts that appeared to provide numerical facts and figures:

"I think some of the fake news may have pulled me in. But when you read it completely, you find out that's not the right source. It definitely depends upon the source of information. You know, if it's a newspaper or something I am intrigued to read more about it, like the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, even the BG independent news or Central Tribune. I might open it and read it if it is from one of these sources. But if it is something like Fox news I am going to immediately unfollow it and delete them. It is possible that I will click on a story that I am interested in. But I like to know information about where it is coming from, especially if people are throwing in facts and figures. I like to know where those facts and figures are coming from. You know if they are saying oh the majority. Where are you getting that number from? Where is the source or amount of majority coming from? Who did your poll? You can't just throw around the word majority without backing it up."

Tom was comfortable checking all the news that he thought was fake against the mainstream news channels he trusted the most:

"Various organizations or people post fake news which I see in the news feed of my Facebook. I will go to some of the bigger news outlets like the CNN or Fox News to see if anything has been mentioned about the things. If I see it on a major news site, then I can go there to see if there is something to this story that might garner more digging in. I always look at the news and ways to support the validity."

Hazel connected the news shared with the people associated with them. She thought that her

perception of the people would change when she saw them sharing, particularly fake news.

“I think when I use Facebook, I look at the story and then maybe look at the person that is posting it. I consider how truthful they are and how much they would be skeptical or know to be skeptical about that. And then I read some of the comments and maybe someone would already have commented that this is fake or check, The Onion or check whatever other source that they thought would validate or disprove the story. But I don't know that I would actually spend the time to get on there and just say don't do this or don't post this, it is not real.”

Macy stated that fact-checking information was important for her instead of just believing them at face value, unlike those in her close circle:

“I fact check news when I see something that I think looks like fake news. Other people see fake news like my mom, and they will just take it at face value. I will always fact check with the websites that I think are trustworthy like The New York Times, Washington Post, and NPR.”

The wholistic approach revealed that all the participants were interested in finding out the difference between fake news and real news. However, the selective approach helped the researcher to find that the participants used a process to distinguish between fake news and real news. They looked at websites like snopes.com to find the difference between real news and fake news. However, it was not until the researcher used the detailed approach, and found that the decision to flag a news story as fake news was because of the critical thinking ability of the participants. Statements like, *“But I like to know information about where it is coming from, especially if people are throwing in facts and figures. I like to know where those facts and figures are coming from. You know if they are saying oh the majority”* illustrate that the participants had

the critical-thinking ability to evaluate the difference between real news and fake news.

All the participants used a range of different news outlets like television, newspapers, websites, social media sites, and radio to differentiate between the real and fake news. *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, MSNBC, CNN, and NBC were trusted by two or more participants. Nonetheless, *The New York Times* and CNN secured the top position in participants' trust. Figure 14 shows detailed information about the number of participants who referred to the more trusted media outlets when searching for the difference between fake news stories and real news stories.

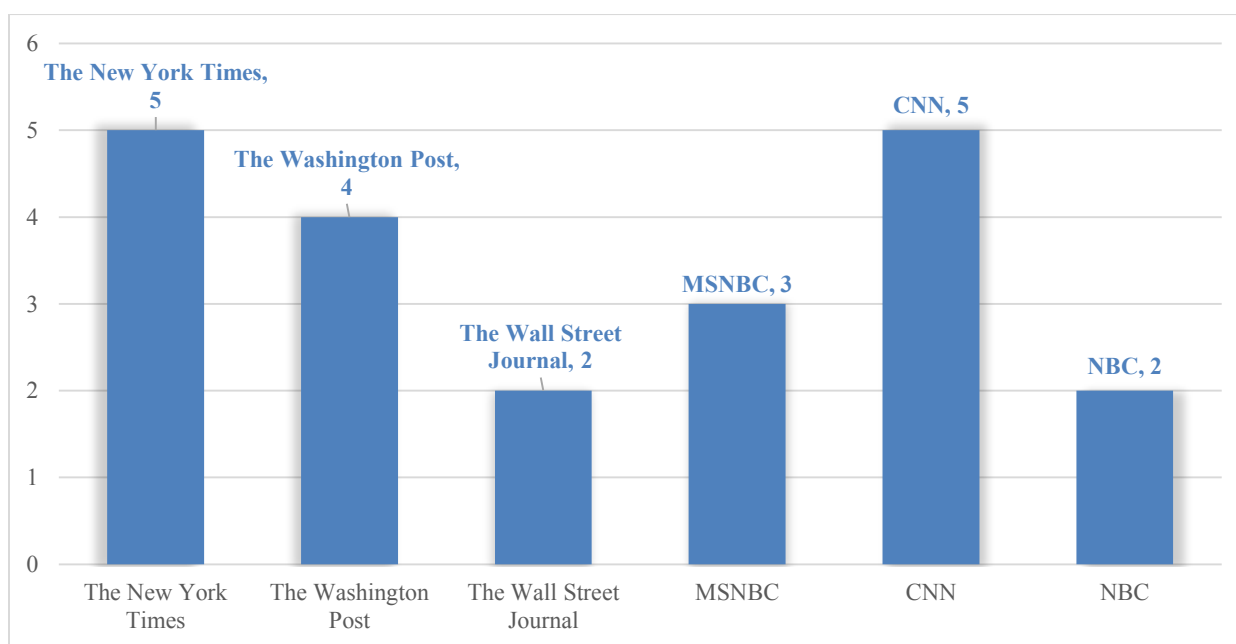


Figure 14. Number of participants who trusted the news source.

Guiding Question 3. What do participants believe are the effects of political fake news occurring on social media?

Fake News has Real World Consequences

The third guiding question explored the effects of political fake news occurring on social media. The two most important themes, *Polarization of People* and *Make-or-Break*

Relationships, may be related to one another. Table 6 presents a detailed summary of the themes.

Table 6.

Summary of Themes for Guiding Question 3.

Themes	Summary
Polarization of society	Participants shared their point of views about how fake news and social media are dividing people. The participants shared that social media users do not believe in the truth. They only wanted their personal beliefs to be validated. The findings illustrate that the participants believe that it is a danger for the society to behave in this manner. Statements like, “in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the compass lost its true north” and “social media shapes how we think, it shapes how we operate, and it shapes how we act. Social media has a lot of value. But it is the dangerous part of it because now you are vulnerable if you do not have the skill set to verify between the real and fake; then you frame your world with what you read and see” are prominent examples, which shows how participants perceive the fake news is polarizing the society. This is the “Danger” that the study was named after.
Make-or-break relationships	Participants shared numerous personal stories of broken friendships and relationships because of differences in political views while using social media. Many relationships were jeopardized because of the conflicts over disagreement in the validity of the news, political opinions, and disbelief in the source of news during the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Polarization of Society

As stated earlier, when asked about fake news, the participants shared some type of prominent reaction like rolling of eyes in distress, sighs, and deep breathing in anxiety when they talked about experiencing fake news stories. The researcher took notes of these reactions.

Considering the statements of the participants in the study and the notes of the researcher, it can be determined that the participants felt distress, anger, and anxiety when reacting to fake news.

Essentially, they felt that to some extent, fake news on social media was responsible for the way people behaved on social media during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Charlotte expressed how she felt about the reluctance of people to change their views about fake news:

“Fake news had a clear motive to change minds. To make a point or to justify. Even in the interaction in the conversations that I had with them on Facebook, I could see what was going on. We were five people going back and forth on one issue and the interaction on that Facebook page was like very much civil, but it was very clear that the people want to be right. They wanted to move people from opposite party to their party. What I was surprised by was the reluctance of people that it was really fake. People did not want to believe. They were firm on their own beliefs. In the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the compass lost its true north.”

Rob stated an overall frame of how social media shapes everything we do in our lives.

“Social media shapes how we think, it shapes how we operate, and it shapes how we act. It also shapes our ability to know information before we used to know it in the past. I can look at social media before many news channels report it. I can ascertain the real and fake but other people can't. I don't have to go home and watch the 6 o'clock news. I can pull up Facebook and find out what's going on. I don't have to wait for the news channels to verify a news story because I can see it live with my own eyes due to features like Facebook live. I have a live video in front of me, and it works as an authentic information for me. Social media has a lot of value. But it is the dangerous part of it because now you are vulnerable if you do not have the skill set to verify between the real and fake; then you frame your world with what you read and see. Now your vision and ideas can be diminished, can be tainted based on what you saw on Facebook. It may not be true.

Humans are already divided among race, money, and class. Social media further brings out our divisions. It further exposes what's already being divided.”

Andy also commented in a similar manner:

“If social media users see a story that aligns with their thoughts, they will just share it without thinking or verifying much about it. Then that piece of wrongful information reaches thousand and millions within minutes. That can potentially sway people’s thinking about the person who is sharing the news. It’s the power of reinforcement. You know something that if you see it repeatedly, you start believing in it.”

Catherine offered an example from her professional experience:

“I know fake news is really bad. I had experience with it as an academic advisor. I had a situation where a student had come into my office and said that there is something circulating on Twitter virally about another student. That they had seen a KKK (Ku Klux Klan). That they were holding this meeting on campus. And it caused this huge firestorm. As they began investigating it spread like wildfire. So, they began investigating the students and the photographs of what she shared of the supposedly Klan or whatever it is in a rally meeting of it on our campus. And how offensive it was. When the investigation was done, they found that it was a projector and it had a cover on it. And the cover over top the projector was white and that in fact, the classroom had no people. No KKK rally; it was a projector. Then what came along was a student who posted the picture, made the claim that the students were coming after this young woman, that this caused all sorts of derogatory remarks for lack of intelligence to identify the difference. I think it was all negative. There wasn’t a positive thing to take away from this. So, for me, when I think about fake news, it’s like eww. I would love to hear about a fake news which would have

a positive impact on the community. So, like most of the time and the outcome that it produces is most of the time negative.”

Gigi shared her viewpoints about people and their reactions:

“I think people shared a lot of fake news stories and other people took them as political jabs and took them seriously. I don’t really understand the point behind sharing something so stupid. Fake news is speaking to them. And fake news is aligned with their thinking, and so they are using them to kind of perpetuate what they were already thinking. For instance, people would comment something like, “See I was right; even the news is saying the same thing what I said about so and so person.” So, they go ahead and share them even if it is not true. It seemed like a lot of conversations took an ugly turn. It was a weird election.”

Tom added,

“Fake news is written for a political purpose. To make the other side look bad. I think most of it is just the push to take a news and get it out as soon as you can to get the most clicks. And people believe in everything that is on the internet. If the internet said it, it has to be true. I saw it on Facebook it got to be true, is the way people take it.”

Hazel provided her experience:

“Nobody is critically thinking. People are just thinking of themselves. They just believe everything that is on social media. They don’t try to verify if it is garbage or not. They accept it and spill it back out and just perpetuate (continue) this nonsense.”

Macy offered a pseudo-example of the entire process:

“People believe in everything they see on social media. For instance, if I like a picture of a Unicorn, people will imagine that I believe that they are real, and they exist. I can

create a group, and a bunch of people will like the picture. Then they will share it because that is what they believe and within no time it would be shared by the masses that Unicorns are real. But all I did was to like a picture to make my six-year-old daughter happy and just for fun as it looks really cute. But here we are, some people just want to be a part of a group, find friends, and they can do anything for that. They will share their views about how they saw a unicorn and others would promote them because they don't want to be left out. You have people like me who don't agree with things, but I am not going to tell because I don't want to ridicule my friends and spoil our relationships. The same happens with fake news, its entertainment for everyone."

The findings of this theme are key to this study. The researcher found several statements of the participants that were considered to be moralistic stems of this theme. Statements like, *"They were firm on their own beliefs. In the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the compass lost its true north,"* and *"Social media further brings out our divisions. It further exposes what's already being divided"* help tie the overall construct of the wholistic theme. Then the researcher found selective sentences that tied along the wholistic theme. Statements like, *"They accept it and spill it back out and just perpetuate (continue) this non-sense,"* *"fake news is aligned with their thinking, and so they are using them to kind of perpetuate what they were already thinking"* illustrate the way of polarization. Finally, the detailed approach found statements like, *"Fake news is speaking to them,"* and *"I would love to hear about a fake news which would have a positive impact on the community"* help understand the importance of fake news and the polarization it is bringing to the society.

The findings here also illustrated that the participants believe that social media users were considering self-validation as their primary motive of using social media during the 2016 U.S.

presidential election. This is important because the echo-chamber of fake news had selective exposure. Selective exposure is a theory where individuals favor information that caters to their pre-existing belief system. However, the findings illustrate that the exposure and validation through the medium of social media helped perpetuate the proliferation of fake news, which eventually serves as a root cause of societal polarization.

Tied to the theme of polarization of society, another theme emerged while analyzing the data. The researcher found that participants were also pointing to the effects they saw in their relationships with their friends and family members. The responses were interwoven but adequately distinctive on their own. Hence the next theme: *Make-or-Break Relationships*.

Make-or-Break Relationships

All the participants agreed that there was a lot of illogical behavior seen and experienced on social media during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Some of the friends and followers on social media were motivating or influencing people to vote for a certain presidential candidate and indulged in furious conversations about politics on social media, and continual denial of the facts. Participants expressed their views about how difficult it was for them to see the people they trusted for many years leave them, have unreasonable conversations, and blindly trust the stories they saw on social media. Some participants' descriptions revealed the basic reasoning for why and how social media fake news is affecting their relationships. Charlotte spoke about losing her friendship of more than fifteen years:

“During the 2012 presidential election when Barack Obama was running, I had gone to see him at one of his rallies near my hometown. I was wearing the t-shirt which had his name, and one of my friends took a picture of all of us with him in the crowd. My friend posted that picture on Facebook; this was in the middle of the week on Monday or

Tuesday. Next Sunday, when I went to the church, one of my dearest friends, and we have been friends for at least 15 years...he came up to me and said to me, "I'm very disappointed in you." First, I didn't understand, and then he goes "I saw your pictures on Facebook, and I don't believe that you went to see Obama. You have just gone down the list in terms of respect. Way down on my list." I just kept standing there devastated. I felt like I was judged by the people in my own hometown. My church is my second home. I didn't say anything at the time and kept quiet. I forgave. But when the 2016 presidential election came, he wanted to make a case for Trump. He was pro-Trump and wanted to engage with everyone. He started sending me fake news articles and everything on Facebook. I don't know where he got all that misinformation. Probably Breitbart, because he is a huge fan of Breitbart. He wanted to engage with me in this conversation about being in support of Trump. Finally, I just told him, I'm not doing this with you. And then I told him about what my perceptions were during the 2012 U.S. presidential election, and he just emailed back saying, "okay sorry." That was it. There was no, I'm sorry I made you feel like this. I didn't mean to hurt you. It was just two words, okay sorry. We haven't spoken with each other since."

Rob recalled an incidence about how he had to justify his point of view to his own friends and family members on social media:

"I remember getting into an unwanted conversation on Facebook. Somebody made a comment on a post written by my friend about me. Because they have a tendency to quote a scripture, I took the scripture and twisted the scripture on my Facebook profile because I knew that they would just find a pole end. A friend of mine said "omg what are the evangelicals going to do." I was like they will be praying somewhere for the sweet baby

Jesus to come because the scripture says, "even so come, lord Jesus." So that's what the evangelicals value; that's what they will say when something goes wrong. So, one of my friends went and posted on her Facebook that I said something and disrespected the culture and the scripture. So, I went back to my Facebook profile and wrote why I said what I said. And I mentioned if someone has any questions they should come straight to me instead of writing on Facebook. Of course, they didn't come because I can be combative if I want to. So since then I have restricted myself from saying something on Facebook and made my voice subtle and friendlier.

We simulate to people like our beliefs. I like to be with people who think like me. I embrace other people's thoughts though. But I will go and see what other people like about me and then follow them and couple it with what other people are saying outside the box just to be able to get some context."

Andy responded with his real-life experience:

"I honestly think that people are super bored. They want a channel to connect with other people. So, I think that they are trying to get information. Social media is like pop culture. I am bored, and I don't have anything to do, and I am addicted. So, once I get on it, I am hooked. I can't get off. I think everyone uses social media because they are bored, and they have a need to connect. They want to personify themselves in a light that they want the world to see. They are not what they portray. Most of the time, fake news like most news on social media accounts are fake. People share them just like they share how awesome their relationships are and how perfect their lives are. Most times, it is not the case. That creates a lot of issues. People watching believe that the other person's life is perfect and starts to question their own lives. It makes them feel negative and impacts

their mental and physical disorders. It creates all types of relationship issues because people are so absorbed in what other people think of them. In a way, people try to get a validation of themselves from other person's eyes. Be it political news or whatever; they want a validation from the other person. And it's impacting how and what they are doing. In my personal relationship, I found my partner using social media as a clutch for escaping from real life and problems to the extent that she only cared about her social media presence and what other people thought about her opinions. I had to give her an ultimatum in our relationship to not use social media. It was that we are going to completely remove ourselves from social media or we have a problem, and she was not willing to give up social media. She felt like it wasn't creating a rift. She was just addicted to social media."

Catherine shared her lived experience:

"Sometimes people on social media are promoting themselves. Look at me, my happy life, my happy marriage, my perfect family, and really the reality is they are struggling to pay the bills. So, people use social media as a means to project an image. Why wouldn't news media do anything any differently? It is still generated by people. I read the article about a man and a woman who got divorced because they couldn't agree on whom they wanted to vote for in the election. So, they felt like there was no way to stay together and they have to divorce. I read it on social media and also in a local newspaper. I think people allow fake news and social media to impact their personal lives. I am glad that social media didn't exist when I was younger and dating in college because I would have allowed it to weigh more than I do now. I am older, and I know who I am, and I am very secure in my relationships, so I feel like I am able to block that out and keep it at bay. I

focus on my life and keep moving forward. But I think a lot of people are not able to do that. They get really upset with what they see on social media.”

Gigi referred to things that happened during a local mayoral election:

“I am not following the friends who posted fake news anymore. I remember about things that were happening locally. It was actually the mayoral race in my town. And one of the candidates kept spreading rumors through Facebook. And my close friends were all talking about it. This is crazy; this is silly, why would they do that? And a lot of it doesn't seem to be true. Because it was local, I could check some local sources and find out. Our local sources told us that a lot of this information that the candidate is spreading is fake stuff and there is nothing to it. Unfortunately, not only did I unfollow the friends, but we are no longer friends.”

Tom talked about the political spectrum:

“We are so divided in this country right now. The whole art of compromise is not even in the vocabulary. It's either this end or the other end. So, if there is a think positive for one side, the other side is going to be upset. And anything that is positive for the other side the first side is going to be angry about it. When Trump came up with the idea of the wall on the Mexican border, there was so much backlash from the Hispanic community. I remember people going nuts about it. I believe that as long as people are civil while talking to each other on social media, it's okay. But when it gets beyond that, it is uncultured, and it breaks relationships with your friends.”

Hazel offered her observations:

“People were fighting tooth and nail on Facebook, and it was so intense. I know many friends of mine who don't talk to each other after the fight they had on Facebook during

the election. For me, it is like how politics can be so dividing.

Macy described difficulties her family is facing because of what is happening on social media and the reactions of her family member to them:

“It is hard for me and my family to keep up with all that goes on social media, and our views do not match. Our viewpoints clash so much that we spend days trying to understand each other’s views. We try to keep an unsaid boundary when we talk about the things that are happening on social media. We don’t follow each other on social media when we don’t like each other’s posts. Now, even after doing that, I know many of my family members have not even seen each other since the last election because of how they went behind each other with the issues of their candidates. The Trump supporters and the Hillary supporters just kept fights on in their personal lives, and it is sad. They don’t follow each other, they don’t go out to eat, they just completely ignore each other. They can’t really go to eat because any type of political conversation makes them really feel uncomfortable. They really cannot separate. They come for Thanksgiving together, but they don’t talk politics at all since the 2016 presidential election. Because we have too many people on extreme sides and Facebook has become a sort of platform where people take their political fights. I think social media has become a part of our lives. Hence everybody is expressing more. Part of it is its these two extreme candidates, and part of it is social media is in every part of our lives.”

Through the wholistic approach, the researcher found that fake news stories spreading on social media are influencing the personal relationships of the social media users. While analyzing data using the selective approach, the researcher found that people are fighting with their friends, followers, and relatives to impose their beliefs on them. The detailed approach illustrates that

they are not only fighting but they are also breaking their relationships with their loved ones in the process of belief validation. This breaking of relationship is not only aligning them with their beliefs but also pushing them closer to like-minded people. While the phenomenon of fake news might be helping the fake news writers to make money across the globe, it is also helping to build walls between the personal relationships of the users. As all participants illustrated a deep concern about the effects on their relationships, one participant stated hope by saying, *“I believe that at some point common sense will prevail.”* In general, this theme reveals that social media and associated fake news have impacted the relationships of the participants of this study. While it may not be generalized to a larger population, this preliminary finding could help future research in the field.

Summary of Findings

Political spins and misinformation are not new to political elections in social media settings, but the exponential discharge of fake news on social media was new to many in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The themes presented in this chapter revealed the lived experiences of the eight participants and their perceptions of social media and fake news. The findings revealed that the participants enjoyed using social media for socializing and connecting to the world. They agreed that freedom of expression is valuable, and they enjoyed voicing their views and opinions on social media platforms. They experienced many examples of fake news stories circulating during the election and tried to verify the news stories in their own way. The most thought-provoking part of the phenomenon was the responses that the participants provided to the third guiding question. They asserted that social media is dividing people and also affecting their relationships. In the next chapter, the researcher discusses the findings from this sample of doctoral students, possible implications, and limitations of the study.

CHAPTER V. THEME EXPLORATION, THEORETICAL MODEL DEVELOPMENT, POLICY IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

The primary purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand both the allure and danger of fake news in social media environments. Social media proved to be a remarkably fertile ground for the proliferation of fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential election and a rich opportunity to investigate the combination of receiving and sharing of fake news stories and its effect on the lives of this study's participants. This study draws on the research of theorists exploring how and why people seek sources to satisfy their needs. Uses and gratification theorists assert that people experience gratification when they use social media outlets to find desired information, gain personal education, interact with others sharing common interests, express personal views, and attitudes, and survey and observe the lives of others (Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1979; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). While suitable for cursory explanation, the gratifications theory may lack the depth of meaning required for understanding the current social media-driven phenomenon of fake news. Through analyses of the qualitative data on the use of social media during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the researcher extends the uses and gratifications theory to build a deeper understanding of the inputs, outputs, and sources of satisfaction of the fake news phenomenon.

The six themes that emerged from interviews with the eight study participants were connected to uses and gratifications theory. The themes include gather and share information, platform for expression, fake news is fake news, differentiate between real news and fake news, polarization of society, and make-or-break relationships. While the uses and gratifications theory specifically addressed only the themes of gathering and sharing information and platforms for expression of views, the remaining themes are inextricably connected to these constructs and

their resulting gratifications. This chapter discusses each study construct and includes the relationship of confirmation bias and behavior of social media users in the echo-chamber. The researcher also offers a new theory to explain the phenomenon. The study contributes to burgeoning policy discussions and provides recommendations for both purveyors of social media and public policymakers.

Gather and Share Information

While in uses and gratification theory, the theme of gather and share information included the constructs of entertainment, pass time, communicatory utility, information seeking, and information sharing, developmental research on the framework was based largely on the use of one-way media which permitted only the reception of information. Currently, information can be received and shared simultaneously on social media. As previously discussed, two different theoretical constructs (information sharing and information receiving) were merged to form an over-arching uses and gratification theory, which provided a means for discussing social media gratification usage.

On social media platforms, users find fulfillment and satisfy their desire for information and entertainment. From the uses and gratifications perspective, the general purpose of receiving information on social media for users in this study was undoubtedly to stay connected with friends and family. The student participants reported receiving information about birthdays, life events, health-related well-being, and family news. Participants also used social media to receive information and instruction about day-to-day activities and household chores via do-it-yourself (DIY) videos. Also, they used social media platforms to gain knowledge about a variety of businesses, merchandise, and products they planned to use in their routine lives. Similar findings were described by Papacharissi and Rubin (2000).

During the 2016 U.S. presidential election, participants also used social media for locating up-to-date information about favorite leaders, political news, political issues, and public policies. Analysis of interview data indicates that while the participants used social media for receiving information, they moved beyond receiving one-way communication to sharing received information with their social media friends and followers. This use of social media to share information is identified as a source of gratification for the users. Satisfaction is evoked when users find, receive, and share information from social media feeds, as well as when they provide that information to their friends and followers (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000).

A key finding of this study and a break from uses and gratifications theory was the differentiation in users' reported gratification experienced while receiving and sharing personal information and news from reputable outlets, and those experienced when receiving fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Charlotte shared that she felt disgusted when she saw fake news being shared on social media. Macy reported being tired of fake news because she had to convince her clientele at work that the fake product advertisements on social media had nothing to do with her company's products. Catherine shared similar reactions to her experience of fake news on social media using words like 'eww' to express her disgust. Receiving news that is displeasing was unexpected on social media and interrupted the experience of general informational feeds on social media accounts. The displeasing news was often ultimately found to be fake. This interruption dissatisfied the users and tarnished their social media experience. The feelings of dissatisfaction associated with the reception of fake news information were also found to be connected to polarization of society and make-or-break relations, which is discussed in later sections of this chapter.

Entertainment

Study participants also found social media to be a source of entertainment in their daily lives. Participants reported using social media for watching videos, photographs, comedic memes, and educational documentaries. To feel entertained, they mentioned using media for learning about people's social lives, community engagement, receiving and sharing various types of information, photographs, jokes, videos, and chatting. Catherine shared that she cherished using social media each day because she had access to a variety of information that facilitated her work and daily life. Educational materials, information on inventions in the field of science and technology, and videos about household ideas were important to her. She spent a significant block of time during her day to gather this information, which was also a form of enjoyment for her. Macy loved that she could view photographs of her family and friends' posts, which was an important form of 'fun' in her daily life. Gigi enjoyed browsing social media because she could find information related to her work as a science teacher, as well as information about her students. Andy received enjoyment through his use of social media for community engagement purposes. These examples demonstrate the participants' appreciation of social media for entertainment purposes. All of them reported that they used social media for a considerable amount of time each day for entertainment.

Availability of portable devices like smartphones and tablets tempt users to check social media applications (apps) frequently throughout the day whether or not they are at work or are otherwise engaged. Korgaonkar and Wolin (1999) defined social media apps as fun, enjoyable, pleasurable activities. The researcher found that ready availability of entertainment enticed users to constantly stay connected to social media apps, which lead to increased gratification. The continual use of the apps also increased users' exposure to news stories in their feeds. The

pursuit of entertainment led to increased attention to the news feed and eventually to the proliferation of fake news. What may have begun as entertainment led the way to the phenomenon now known as fake news on social media.

Pass Time

The uses and gratifications theory asserts that pass time activities relieve boredom and occupy time. Given participants' descriptions of why and how much they use social media, this study's findings confirms that the use of social media fulfills these needs. All participants reported that they checked social media during the day when they had a moment away from either work, chores, or any routine activity. Pass time examples include time spent browsing social media in free moments, spending time to seek information on social media, and constantly checking notifications in anticipation of feeds. Gigi explained that she routinely checked social media when she had a free moment. This included free moments between work, household chores, and downtime in daily life. As such, the checking of social media for notifications led to more browsing time on social media, which occupied her time.

Rob reported spending approximately four to five hours a day on social media. He shared that he is attached to the nature of social media and enjoys his time using it. Macy shared that she spends an average of two hours per day on social media; she reported that it relieves boredom and is a large part of her life. Again, based on these reports, increased engagement with social media led to increased viewing of feeds and the opening of floodgates of news, both real and fake.

Communicatory Utility

All the participants used social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn for communicatory purposes such as chatting, engaging in longer conversations,

and sharing pictures to communicate well-being. Andy reported that he used Facebook to keep in touch with his friends and followers and used Instagram's messaging service to conduct threaded conversations. Gigi reported that she used Facebook to find photographs and messages of her family members who were traveling as a form of communicating well-being. Macy communicates with her followers using social media pages with photographs, comments, and chats about her craft work. Communication was important for the participants in this study, and they used social media exclusively to communicate with their family, friends and followers. Communicating on social media provided them satisfaction and a sense of connection. The use of social media for communicating and personal gratification also keeps the gate open for incoming information and connects the social media users to the fake news feeds.

Platform for Expression

Social media's interactive platform is commonly accepted as one of the most appealing features for users. Whiting and Williams (2013) describe the venting of opinions, liking pictures, and commenting on posts on social media as different forms of expression. The participants in this study reported that they enjoyed expressing their own views and opinions on social media. When Rob shared his opinions and views about political news on social media, he wanted to receive comments from other social media users. He used these comments as reference points to compare his personal political views with family, friends, and followers and reflect upon their differences. Tom, on the other hand, shared that he liked to 'rant' about the political news stories that he reads so that other social media users hear about his opinions. Only two of the participants were found to be interested in obtaining other's views and opinions on social media. This form of two-way communications assisted them in comparing individual political standpoints while maintaining affiliation with the social media groups. However, Tom's

experience exemplified the use of social media to reinforce and share personal bias within an echo-chamber of like-minded friends, family, and followers. It is in this echo-chamber that fake news thrust itself. Confirmation bias and the implications of echo-chamber on social media are further discussed later in the chapter. The important contribution of this theme is the direct connection of the platform of expression of views in uses and gratifications theory to the social media echo-chamber. Through their use of platforms for expression and their intentionally interconnected structure, social media echo-chambers then acted much like epidemiological hosts, not spreading disease, but facilitating the mass spread of fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Fake News is Fake News

The existence of fake news stories on social media presents a new dynamic not previously explained by the uses and gratifications theory. Through its purpose and function to exploit the gratifications experienced during social media use, fake news acted as a major disruptor of the theory. What now seemed to gratify some, appeared to repulse others. A critical nuance in this dichotomy was the identification of affected parties. Even as users (participants' family, friends and followers) consumed and shared news that was demonstrably fake, and were ostensibly gratified by that process, they did not perceive themselves to have been exploited. Further, they were often able to describe the exploitive process but were less able to see themselves as affected by it. This experience and its effect became fake news for the social media users.

Through observation of conversations among their friends and followers, study participants believed that fake news sowed confusion, deteriorated the value of real news, created misunderstandings, and disturbed civil discourse on social media. Macy reported that her

mother had trouble understanding social media and how false information spreads. Her mother was confused about the news she received from her television media outlets and what she received in her social media news feeds. She was not aware of the difference between news that was reported truthfully and news that was reported with a false intention. Macy shared that she believed older generations were confused because they did not know that fake news is published on social media for the purpose of clickbaits. The clickbait-oriented news sows confusion for users who do not understand the social media technology.

Participants also suggested that the presence of fake news deteriorated the perceived value of real news. For example, Charlotte shared that she saw so many fake news stories constantly added and repeated in her social media feed that it made her feel that there was a lack of real news stories. She believed that repetition of fake news may have made other social media users consider them to be true news. As fake news spread widely due to user sharing and the nature of social media platforms, social media users began to trust them more than real news, deteriorating the value of authentic news stories. What people ‘wanted’ to believe became their reality and truth. This is further discussed in the confirmation bias section of this chapter.

Andy further explained the phenomenon using the phrase, “power of reinforcement,” to describe how the continual repetition of fake news stories created an echo-chamber that exploited individuals’ partisan beliefs to convince them of the stories’ veracity. Andy described this use of social media as “irresponsible” and indicated that it is a huge problem. He shared that it is the responsibility of the social media users to ensure that any given story is fact-checked. The use of social media in both responsible and irresponsible manners are discussed later in this chapter.

Fake news that exploited users' search for gratification often led social media users to engage in anti-social discourse. Hazel reported that social media users among her followers were fighting 'tooth and nail' because of their partisan beliefs. Their comments, opinions, reiterations, and confrontations about political news disturbed social discourse on social media. Hazel did not feel comfortable nor happy using social media because browsing news feeds instantly exposed her to fights about politics, the source of which was often fake news.

Charlotte, Andy, Macy, Catherine, and Gigi further shared that constantly receiving fake news on social media feeds made using social media on a day-to-day basis uncomfortable. To avoid this discomfoting situation, they tried to confront the fake news sharing among friends and followers. Statements such as, "*I would call them (friends and followers) out if I saw them (sharing fake news) to take it down,*" illustrated participants' attempts to stop the spread of fake news. Although participants attempted to confront their friends and followers who shared fake news repeatedly, their attempts remained largely unsuccessful. The continued sharing of fake news demoralized their efforts, and eventually, they gave up confronting them. Hence, this study found that the phenomenon of sharing news for personal gratification was not a very comforting experience for the users on the receiving end.

Without exception, all the participants claimed they experienced a significant number of fake news stories on social media during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Some participants associated fake news with the two presidential candidates, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, while others associated fake news stories with what they perceived as propaganda presented by mainstream news channels like CNN, MSNBC, FOX News, and others. Nevertheless, Charlotte, Andy, and Rob asserted that fake news stories were written by unknown people who were financially motivated. Charlotte said that fake news writers writing about the U.S. presidential

election were located throughout the world. Andy stated that many fake news writers were writing news for clickbait purposes, and Rob suggested that the fake news writer's motivation was to gain people's attention and spread fake news for money. Hence, this study found that social media users were aware of the financial motivation of the fake news writers.

Differentiation Between Real and Fake News

From a review of the research, this study appears to be the first to discuss how participants responded to fake news. Participants stated up front that not all people shared fake news and not all tried to confront others who were sharing fake news or rectify the problem in other ways. All the participants described their own constructs of fake news and shared ways to differentiate between the real and fake news. Consistent attempts by the participants to confront other social media users about fake news indicated that participants had the ability to use the technology to differentiate between real news and fake news and people knew fake news was spreading on social media platforms. Charlotte shared that when she saw fake news, she blocked the sites immediately and advised her immediate family members to do the same. Also, when she saw her Facebook friends sharing fake news, she would write, "*in the interest of truth, please check the link of Snopes or some debunking site to check.*" This illustrated that she had the tools to find the difference between real and fake news and she used it to the best of her ability to prevent people from falling prey to fake news stories.

Andy reported that if there was a particular news story seen on social media and not reported on the mainstream television news channels like CNN, MSNBC, or BBC, then the news was possibly fake. He shared that he sometimes used fact-checking websites like Snopes, but for the most part, trusted television news channel reporting. On the other hand, Gigi was always focused on the source of information about any news reported on social media. She added that

people randomly reported facts and figures about political news, but they failed to mention where they received the facts and figures and who conducted the studies to report that information. In such cases, she believed that news media such as *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *BG Independent*, and *Central Tribune* were some of the reputable media outlets that she would use to verify news seen on social media. Charlotte's ability to find news debunking websites, Andy's ability to differentiate news reported on mainstream news channels and news that scrolled through social media feeds, and Gigi's ability to focus on facts and figures and their sources represented responsible social media use and demonstrated these participants' critical-thinking abilities. These behavioral characteristics are discussed later in this chapter.

Polarization of Society

The 'danger' in the title of this study is derived from this emerging theme. Participants stated that they felt that fake news is polarizing society. Refusing to engage in civil discourse on social media, reporting and aggressively pushing information without facts and reputable sources, demonstrating partisan beliefs and opinions, and trying to sway people's opinions towards personal biases are some of the characteristics of polarization (Garimella, Morales, Gionis, & Mathioudakis, 2018; Pogue, 2017; Spohr, 2017; Swire et al., 2017). Charlotte reported that many of her social media friends aggressively tried to sway her opinions, thoughts, and her voting decisions during the 2016 U.S. presidential election without providing any factual information. This was disturbing for her, and she idiomatically said that "*in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the compass lost its true north.*" She provided an example of her friend who was closed-minded about any information opposing his political beliefs. When she tried to provide facts about any political fake news, he did not accept the facts and found ways to validate his partisan beliefs. The difference between open-minded and closed-minded social

media users is discussed further in the study. However, here it is clear that people used social media to sway voting decisions and attract users to specific personal beliefs.

In another example, Charlotte talked about her aunt who consistently posted fake news and knew that the possibility of the news being true were slim, yet still wanted to share the news noting, “it may be true, who knows.” Both the examples provided by Charlotte illustrates that social media users pushed partisan beliefs, tried to sway voting decisions of other social media users, and aggressively shared news without factual information. Details of partisan and non-partisan beliefs are discussed further in the chapter.

Participants clearly recognized the complexity of the problem of fake news. As Rob stated, “*social media shapes how we think, it shapes how we operate, and it shapes how we act. Social media has a lot of value. But it is the dangerous part of it because now you are vulnerable if you do not have the skill set to verify between the real and fake; then you frame your world with what you read and see; it seemed like lot of conversations took an ugly turn.*” He shared that many of his friends and followers were not equipped with necessary skills, such as using debunking websites to find the difference between real and fake news and critically thinking about stories before sharing them. The lack of skills and critical-thinking ability resulted in their participation in the social media echo-chamber. As previously discussed, echo-chambers are formed when like-minded users share personal opinions and beliefs with one another. The echo-chamber affords even more vulnerability to unfiltered information based on users’ views and opinions. Further, when the users’ biases were confirmed, they followed the same procedure to sway the decisions of other social media users. This cycle of finding, trusting, sharing, and pressuring others to believe fake news was the process by which social media helped produce ideological polarization during the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

These findings indicate that a lack of skill sets to differentiate between real and fake news, partisan beliefs, and closed-minded attitudes are some of the reasons for the ideological polarization of social media users. While the 2016 U.S. presidential election was the first time in which these social media effects were experienced, the future of U.S. presidential elections can only be different if social media users have skill sets like those of the study participants. A key recommendation to promote social media literacy through education is discussed in the policy section.

Make-or-Break Relationships

Relationships are delicate affairs, and issues related to them are equally delicate, however, people like to talk to each other about their personal relationships and issues (Jensen, Rauer, Rodriguez, and Brimhall, 2018). Similarly, participants in this study were quite open about their relationships with their family and friends. In a unique finding, participants openly discussed relationships broken because of fake news on social media. While the purpose of this study was not to ascertain if fake news had any impact on the social media user's personal relationships, it became an emergent theme through conversations with study participants. From the moment the researcher asked questions about fake news, indications of personal problems in relationships began to appear. The researcher allowed the conversation to build and asked more questions about the participant's relationships in order to further investigate the nascent theme. Charlotte provided an example of how she lost a friendship of more than fifteen years, Rob was reminded of an awkward conversation with his friends on social media, Andy stated that he had problems with his partner because of the use of social media, and Catherine was reminded of a situation of divorce because a husband and wife could not agree on 2016 voting decisions. Catherine further shared that she was glad she did not date in today's era where social media

played such a great role in personal relationships. Gigi broke off several friendships because of social media fake news, and Macy mentioned clashes among her family members. These examples clearly illustrate how relationships were broken because of the availability of fake news on social media. While fake news contributed to ideological polarization in social media user groups, it also broke personal relationships. The findings from this study indicate a need to further study fake news on social media and its effects on human relationships.

Because the phenomenon is relatively new with both depth and breadth, which could not be addressed in one study, it is important that future studies of fake news on social media are conducted with greater numbers of participants from different demographic groups. Based on the themes in this current study, the researcher has gained a new perspective about the phenomenon resulting in observations regarding confirmation bias and the proposal of a new theory of social media use.

Confirmation Bias

Quattrociocchi, Scala, and Sunstein (2016) define confirmation bias as seeking news content that validates a person's existing beliefs. During the 2016 U.S presidential election, social media users were very often tempted to promote their favorite narrative which, in turn, promoted the creation of polarized groups. The findings of this study indicate that confirmation bias played an important role in the proliferation of fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Confirmation bias was an underlying factor in the illustrative short story of Patricia and Janice previously relayed in chapter one. The story is a composite picture of the phenomenon as reported by the participants. The reader will recall: Janice happened to mention to Patricia that she read a story about a huge fraud perpetrated by Hillary Clinton's campaign to capture the Florida's electoral votes on social media. Patricia remembered the story and next day the same

story appeared in her social media feed. Knowing the partial background of the story, she clicked the story and read all the details. After reading the entire story, she was utterly disappointed that Hillary Clinton's campaign was involved in a fraud to capture votes in Florida. What Patricia did not know was that Janice had read the story because she had already been looking for similar stories. Neither of the women knew that the story was not true. However, their belief was confirmed about Hillary Clinton because they saw the story repeatedly in their social media feeds.

Confirmation bias and the themes previously discussed interconnect and overlap. The participants' responses suggested that social media users tried to promote their favorite narratives, often without factual information and sources. Charlotte consistently reported that when participants used social media, they were constantly trying to find information that pleased them. When they found their pleasing information, they "liked" the stories, which automatically added them to the social media echo-chambers. When users became part of the echo-chambers, they repeatedly received information that validated their personal biases as explained in the case of Janice and Patricia. Rob commented on this occurrence when he said that "users had pre-conceived notions in their minds and when they saw fake stories relating to their pre-conceived notions, they immediately jumped to the conclusion that it was a real news." Also, users turned away from news which did not please them and summarily rejected the information.

As discussed earlier, social media users showed a tendency to seek out and receive information that reinforced their existing beliefs and reject information that they perceived as undermining it. The researcher emphasizes that the findings of this study are for this particular study and larger and broader studies are required to generalize the claims. However, it is clear that social media users created enclaves of like-minded people, which supported the proliferation

of fake news stories circulating on the internet during the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Theory of Truth-telling on Social Media (TTSM)

The findings of this study guided the researcher to build a theoretical model that illustrates the fake news phenomenon. The model attempts to define types of study participants' responses to fake news illustrated in this study. Social media users make conscious decisions to behave in a particular manner on social media. The model focuses on behaviors within the fake news echo-chambers hosted by social media environments. The behaviors are specifically described solely in relation to fake news phenomenon on social media and not necessarily to the social media use in general. Based on participant responses as well as research regarding the proliferation of fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential election (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Dorf & Tarrow, 2017), behaviors are roughly categorized in to responsible and irresponsible responses to fake news. The table below shows the different behaviors of social media use by the participants.

Table 7.

Definitions of Responsible and Irresponsible Responses

Responsible responses	Irresponsible responses
Participants recognize fake news	Participants share fake news
Participants publicly refute fake news	Participants add partisan beliefs to their sharing of fake news
Participants do not share fake news	Participants question the veracity of real news

The theoretical model is designed around the echo-chamber of social media. According to participants' responses, social media users make conscious decisions in the echo-chamber to

add/delete friends, and to click on news stories of interest/issues, and other social media features.

The researcher differentiates the social media users in two categories: responsible and irresponsible users. In the current phenomenon of the proliferation of fake news, it is the responsible nature of the social media users which is at stake. The researcher introduces a theoretical model in the figure below:

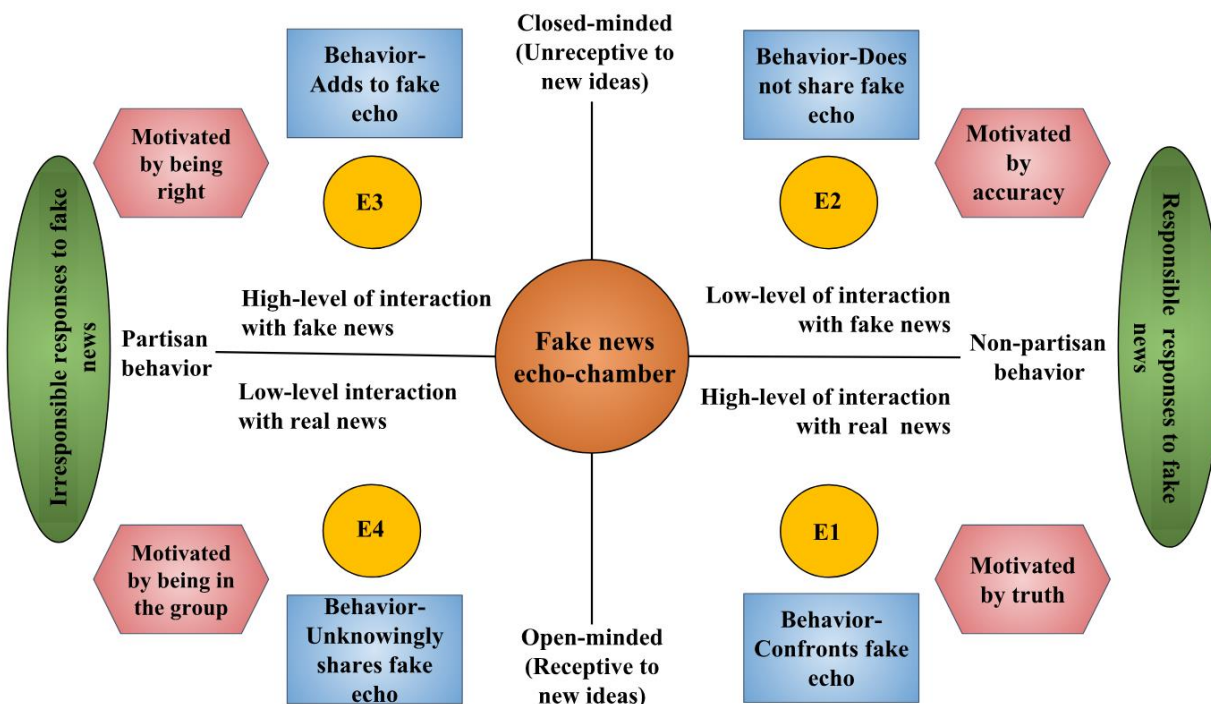


Figure 15. Theoretical model of truth-telling on social media.

There are four poles of the model. The north-south pole consists of close-minded social media users and open-minded social media users; while the east-west pole consists of partisan beliefs and non-partisan beliefs. Users demonstrated closed mindedness in that they did not accept new ideas while the open-minded users receptive to new ideas. The users whose beliefs are partial towards a particular group, news, or politics are defined as social media users with partisan beliefs. Social media users who do not have partisan beliefs towards particular groups,

news, or politics are named as non-partisan social media users. In Table 7 below, different types of social media behaviors are coded as E1, E2, E3, and E4 and are defined.

Table 8.

Definitions of the Behaviors in Social Media Fake News Eco-Chamber.

Social media behavior in echo-chamber	Definitions
E1	These users have high-levels of interaction with real news; they only follow legitimate news media and are constantly looking out for the ‘truth.’ They like to critique the news and only strive for the truthful news and demonstrate non-partisan behaviors in social media. Their response to fake news reflects concerns for truth.
E2	These users have low-levels of interaction with fake news; they only follow the news stories that they believe are real news stories. They trust the real news stories and discard the interaction with fake news and demonstrate non-partisan behavior. These users dismiss out-of-hand news coming from sources they mistrust.
E3	These users have a high-level of interaction with fake news; they only follow the news stories that validates their personal biases. They have bias towards their self-perceived news and they demonstrate partisan behavior that reflect their personal biases and even added their own spin to their sharing of fake news.
E4	These users have low-levels of interaction with real news; they mainly follow the news stories shared by their friends and followers. They have a substantial amount of trust in the closed group they follow and demonstrate partisan behaviors that reflect the biases of the group. They always remain loyal to their groups. If informed that a news is fake they do not further proliferate fake news.

E1: These users have high levels of interaction with real news and only follow legitimate news media and are constantly looking out for the ‘truth.’ They like to critique the news, only strive for the truthful news, and have non-partisan beliefs. In this study, while describing what she did when she saw fake news, Charlotte replied, *“First, I blocked the site myself and told my family not to go on those websites. However, if I saw some of my Facebook friends doing that or sharing stories from this website, I would write to them something like “in the interest of*

truth, please check this out and then I would give them a link of some debunking site to check. I do remember websites that looked like real ones. However, they had usually one or two letters off like the real news website. It looked real, and anyone could immediately fall for it. But I knew they were not real. Like instead of dot com it was dot ru, dot ca, but not dot net or dot org at the end, which obviously showed that it was a fake news site.” In this statement, Charlotte clearly defined that she was always interested in finding the ‘truth’ of the story. She took the necessary steps to keep herself on the track of ‘truth.’ She blocked the fake news spreading site and did not hold herself from expressing it to her Facebook friends. She even clarified the difference between the website URL. At the same time, she tried her best to alert her social media friends about the fake websites. These are the real characteristics of a responsible social media user.

Another description that illustrates E1 behavior was provided by Rob who said, *“I scroll down on social media websites and see news and things that people post on Twitter or find out something that is going on. If I see a particular news story that I am interested in (while using cellphone), then I will go and pull it up on my tablet or laptop to see the details and also to verify. You know there are so many different real, fake, and satirical websites. So, I have to make sure what I am reading.”* Rob was also very particular about what he wanted to see and read on social media. He took time to move from cellphone to a tablet or a laptop to ensure that he could verify the news in a way that was convenient to him. As a responsible social media user, he was interested in the truth and showed the characteristics of taking time to find the real news.

E2: These users have low-levels of interaction with fake news. They only follow news stories that they believe are real news stories. They trust the real news stories, discard the interaction with fake news, and have non-partisan beliefs. In this study, Gigi said, *“I think some of the fake news may have pulled me in. But when you read it completely, you find out that’s not*

the right source. It definitely depends upon the source of information. You know, if it's a newspaper or something I am intrigued to read more about it like The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, even the BG independent news or Central Tribune, I might open it and read it if it is from one of these sources. Also, there is so much negativity in the news and you see that and I really don't want to be part of that. So, if I have a friend who tend to post negative things on social media I tend to unfollow them from my Facebook. Gigi showed the characteristics of a responsible social media user. She first acknowledged that she may have accessed fake news. However, she discovered after reading them that they were fake. She mentioned the news media outlets that she thinks are legitimate and shared that she was intrigued to read more from those media links. These are the characteristics of a responsible social media user in an E2 behavioral category.

E3: These users have a high level of interaction with fake news. They only follow the news stories that validate their personal biases. They have bias towards their self-perceived news and have partisan beliefs that leans only towards their personal biases. In this study, when talking about fake news, Tom stated, *"From what I understand, fake news is basically news that is put out without any verification. Since we are in the 24-hour news system all the time, the journalists, newspapers, and TV reporters are in a rush to take all the news and post it on their websites before somebody else does. They do not verify the news properly before they post the news out for the first time. They don't do fact-checking. They share a lot of rumors out there and spread them as soon as they hear about them. I think there was a lot about Trump during the election. Even in the last minutes of the election, there was so much flung at Trump. And you just saw so much slung at him and sticking. I mean, you hear that he had done this and that with Miss America, you know, and then this one that it was a 'locker room talk' and stuff like this.*

Those were the ones (fake news) that stuck out to me. But yet again, I never heard anybody ever say that this really happened.” While talking about the most trusted news channels, Tom said, *“When I see something on Facebook, I immediately double-check with other big media channels like AP, CNN, Fox News and The Drudge Report. I like Drudge Report because Matt Drudge will take news and then he will actually go and find different news outlets, and it’s kind of gathering of those. I will check what Fox and other news channels are saying, but more often than not I will check Drudge Report.”*

After careful observation, the researcher found that Tom was actually stating that journalists were writing fake news because they were in a hurry to post news before their competitors. In general, journalist, newspaper, and television anchors follow a strict guideline on what is reported, and that does not permit them to report fake news. On the other hand, he stated that there was a significant amount of fake news stories about Trump. Specifically, he talked about a news event which was claimed by then-presidential candidate Donald Trump as a ‘locker room talk’ in relation to a videotape that was reported on all the mainstream news channels. It was not a fake news story. However, Tom specifically shared that he did not find anywhere that it was a real story. These are clear indications of partisan beliefs. Tom does not consider real news ‘truthful.’ He also shared that he liked the Drudge Report, which is reportedly a conservative news website. These characteristics reported by Tom showed that his characteristics relate to the E3 category and he is an irresponsible social media user.

E4: These users have low levels of interaction with real news. They mainly follow the news stories shared by their family, friends and followers. They have a substantial amount of trust in the closed groups they follow and have partisan beliefs leaning towards the beliefs of the groups. They always remain loyal to their groups. In this study, Macy talked about how she saw

fake news shared by her mother, *“In the political world, I have heard and seen a lot of fake news, especially coming from my mother, because there are things that me and my mother do not agree on. She will post something on Facebook and say ‘did you see this thing.’ And when you click on it and read, you immediately find out that it is not a real story. You see grammatical mistakes; you see things that you know are directly pointing out that it is not true. I know for instance Trump related fake news. My mom would ‘like’ the story because of the headline, just because she likes it. But she wouldn’t read everything. Since she also watched Fox news, which is known as a more conservative news channel, she bases her viewpoints on things that she sees on Fox. So, when she would post something on Facebook, I would tell her to click on it, and then I showed her that there are going to be grammar mistakes and the essence of the story is completely fake. Then I would ask her, ‘do you think that The New York Times would have somebody putting out something in their name with misspellings.’ Then she would be like, ‘Oh, I did not think about it in that way.’ So, then I would explain to her about the stories like Melania didn’t save the world, or Hillary didn’t have 17 boyfriends. Older people don’t understand social media a lot, and I talk to her about it a lot of times. I understand that she is a conservative Republican which is great, but sometimes she would share something on Facebook that she felt was true and because somebody on her Facebook had shared that with her. But then when you get into the article, you know that it is categorically fake.”*

What Macy shared are true characteristics of an E4 social media user. As she reported, her mother believes in the stories that are shared by her friends and followers. Her beliefs were formed via Fox news and then confirmed on social media because of her Facebook friends. Macy illustrated that it was not one time but several times that she had to tell her mom not to believe in the headlines on social media. This means that her mom wanted to remain loyal to the group that

she followed and did not try to move out. These characteristics illustrate the use of social media as an irresponsible user.

Given the above themes, discussions, and TTSM model, the researcher has a perspective about the policy implications that would help to smooth the transformation of the social media users in online social media environments. The policy implications section discusses three important modifications via extensive research, media literacy in education, and value of truth and justice, that may allow users to manage the phenomenon of fake news with ease and possibly bring some civil discourse on social media.

Policy Implications

More than two billion people use social media on a daily basis, and massive amounts of information are transferred quickly and uninterrupted by filter or fact-checking. The ability to connect with others and share information instantaneously has resulted in instant gratification but has also led to negative consequences. At a time when social media users spend an increasing amount of time on their preferred platforms, it is important to understand the nature, function, and transformation of *virtual* social media environments and their effect on *very real* individuals, cultures, and societies.

Value of Truth and Justice

Justice is one of the cultural values Americans hold most dear. Establishing justice was cited as one of the motivations for declaring independence from Great Britain and justice for all is part of the closing statement of the Pledge of Allegiance to the country's flag. Justice is, however, dependent upon truth. As Benjamin Disraeli (1851) wrote, "Justice is truth in action" (p. 321). As corporate members of diverse cultures around the world, social media giants like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Google, have a responsibility to promote truth and

should be held accountable for the proliferation of fake and misleading content. Current political authorities in the U.S. and Europe are exploring dramatic modifications of the social media usage policies. However, it is not clear if either of these governmental bodies or social media companies have clear insights on the issues surrounding fake news. While governmental bodies are discussing various measures compelling social media giants to control fake news, they might also consider holding social media users equally responsible for spreading fake news. For example, stricter measures should be used to regulate individual user accounts that spread fake news.

Truth and justice are also critical components of democratic societal structures. While both social media companies and users should play an active role in dismantling the negative societal effects of fake news, social media giants will have to play a hybrid role with the help of governmental bodies (Spohr, 2017) to sustain democratic structures. Collaboration with governmental bodies and detailed insights are necessary for effective policies. However, as student participant Rob appropriately stated, “the use of social media is shaping how we operate, think, and act in society.” Polarization is leading to a fracturing of society as people use social media to build informational and ideological silos and nowhere is that more apparent than in government. Governmental entities in both the executive and legislative branches will need to cross-divide in order to dismantle silos, promote unity, and sustain democratic norms. While this study provides preliminary qualitative data regarding the formation of social media echo-chambers fueled by fake news, larger scale studies are critical for gathering data necessary for all parties to find consensus on effective social media public policies. The review of literature and outline of the current impact of fake news calls for social media policy alterations with a sense of urgency. It is extremely important to discuss further impacts and possible solutions to the fake

news phenomenon. With diverse international forces waging informational wars, an educated and strong social media policy counter-attack may be the best defense.

Extensive Research

The researcher's first recommendation is to comprehensively investigate this phenomenon. Zuiderveen et al. (2016) asserted that a policy cannot be decided without comprehensive insight into the issue. Institutions of higher learning and governments around the world should devote time and resources to further investigate these effects and develop well-designed curricula and policies that protect individual users, cultural values, and societal structures.

Several participants related that they had experienced negative personal effects of the proliferation of fake effects of social media. Broken relationships and avoidance of contact were two of the cited personal impacts of interacting with friends and family caught in political echo-chambers during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Mental health professionals should team up with social media developers to address how platforms and algorithms can be adapted to help individuals appropriately process the massive amount of information that rushes through feeds like water flowing through fire hoses. These teams could also address ways in which users can discuss critical issues of the day in productive ways that invite dialog, deepen understanding, and build common ground.

Media Literacy Education

The development of media literacy is another tool that will help to foster improved information processing. In classrooms from pre-kindergarten through higher education, students should receive high-quality instruction in how to use social media. Norris (2013) suggested that the platforms themselves could be used as a teaching tool that helps teachers build relationships

with 21st-century learners. Currently, social media is not recognized as an instructional tool of any significance, which automatically makes the students less aware about how the medium should be appropriately used. Educational administrators would be wise to re-visit social media as a learning instrument and develop new strategies for using it for both in-class and real-world instruction.

Silverman (2016) pointed out the necessity of media literacy in today's high-tech society. He added that given the continuous, rapidly changing, volatile, and progressive nature of social media, academics should prioritize policies to inculcate media literacy in the curriculum from primary school through all education levels. As noted throughout the discussion of this study's emergent themes, participants were able to differentiate between fake news and real news because they had the ability to find fake news debunking websites. Critical-thinking skills, knowledge of information process tools, such as debunking sites and verification of news stories, are all outcomes of media literacy. However, educational administrators are reluctant to formalize guidelines to use and teach social media (Khaddage & Knezek, 2013). Consequently, many universities currently use outdated and remodeled versions of Internet User Policies for using social media. The findings of this study indicate that media literacy in education could play an important role in helping individuals shape social media platforms as personally enriching and helpful tools.

Limitations

The researcher made every attempt to maintain ethical standards. At the same time, the researcher collected and analyzed all the data using a systematic process. The researcher made every effort to recognize and manage personal biases and assumptions and only report the lived experiences of the participants in their own words. Nevertheless, as researchers' point out, every

study comes with inevitable limitations.

First, the researcher understands and acknowledges that this is a small-scale exploratory study and only includes eight participants representing a specific demographic. Therefore, the findings of the study should not be generalized to larger populations outside this particular study. The sampling method was purposive, and participants were selected based on the criteria they met in relation to their personal and lived experiences. Also, to keep the data manageable, the researcher strictly followed the given interview time frame of 45-60 minutes per participant. Each interview produced at least nine to ten pages of single-spaced transcribed text. Hence, the in-depth interviews with each participant and rich dialogue about the lived experiences of fake news on social media should be considered in combination with other research in this area.

Second, the researcher asked the students to recall the information on social media and fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Students were trying to recall information about fake news anywhere within the last 30 months. A person's natural ability to recall information about certain events and experiences is limited. At certain points, the participants said that they could not recall the details of the stories they saw on social media. However, each participant answered all the questions that were presented to them and tried their best to recollect the experiences.

Third, the researcher wanted to include diversity in the participant population, however, only eight participants responded to the interview invitation. Seven out of eight participants identified themselves as White/Caucasians while only one participant was Black/African American. The ratio is not necessarily surprising given that, of the 18 participants contacted for an interview, 14 were White/Caucasians and four from other ethnicities.

Directions for Future Research

The proliferation of fake news in recent years has not gone unnoticed. Nonetheless, the questions that future researchers could delve into include what exactly is the nature of this fake news phenomenon? How are people adapting to new types of media feeds? And what are the driving forces? The purpose of this research was to understand the lived experiences of the people who are using social media extensively on day-to-day basis. However, researchers are still in the process of evaluating the real meaning and impact of fake news. Arguably, there are no clear lines defining the different forms of misleading news like propaganda, satire, and false news. The scope of future research is vast and should target a clear understanding of the nature, existence, and consistency of the phenomenon.

While this study was designed to understand the lived experiences of doctoral graduate students, future researchers could expand the population sample of the study to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Finding and interviewing broader populations will open new opportunities and challenges. Although this study used a qualitative research approach, another way of understanding the phenomenon of fake news is using a quantitative or mixed methods lens. Quantitative research can ask a series of questions to evaluate the understanding and identifying frequency of fake news while a mixed method study could assist in bringing the loose ends of fake news and real news to a clear definition.

This exploratory study established the foundation to expand research in the area of social media use and fake news. Future researchers could concentrate on topics like emotional expression/suppression in the interaction with fake news. Asking questions such as: how do social media users describe the pattern of emotional expression/suppression in their interaction with fake news? What are the long-term effects of emotional expression/suppression on the

social media user? Psychological effects of fake news on social media should also be queried. It would also be interesting to evaluate if the social media users' pattern of expressions with fake news changes in different scenarios. While the 2016 U.S. presidential election stood out to be different from the viewpoint of fake news on social media, future researchers can study the future trends that may possibly impact the 2020 U.S. presidential election.

Summary

The 2016 U.S. presidential election showed a new iteration of fake news stories. It appeared to be financial profit-driven news creation from people who are not professional journalists. Various solutions are proposed by researchers, government analysts, and critics. Nevertheless, each of them face a common challenge of mass implementation. The two billion and rising social media users throughout the world is a root cause of the trouble. Hence, the researcher suggests focus on policy regulations in media use, media literacy in education, and civil discourse on social media users to avoid the proliferation of fake news.

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APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire is for a university research study that is trying to understand the lived experiences of the fake news phenomenon on social media. The questionnaire allows you to express more about yourself and your experience with fake news stories. The information you provide in this survey will be completely confidential. Please answer the questions below to the best of your ability. You reserve the right to refuse any or all the questions in the survey. Your completion and return of the survey will be considered as your consent and agreement to participate in this research study. Eligible participants will be requested to join a one-on-one in-depth interview with the researcher which will last for approximately 45-60 minutes. Thank you in advance for your time and participation.

Directions: Please answer the questions below to the best of your ability. If you are unsure or do not wish to answer any question, please type n/a or leave it blank.

1. What is your age?

18-34 35-50 50-65 65+

2. What is your gender?

Male Female Other

3. Which ethnicity best describes you?

Asian
African American
American Indian
Hispanic
Multiracial
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
White/Caucasian
Other

4. Do you have a social media account (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, Google-plus, Reddit, Linked-In, Flickr, etcetera)?

Yes
No

5. Which is/are your preferred social media websites?

6. Please provide a valid email address where you can be reached.

APPENDIX B: IRB LETTERS



BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY

School of Educational Foundations, Leadership and Policy

Date

Dear Participant:

My name is Abhijeet Shirsat and I am earning my degree in the Leadership Studies Doctoral Program at Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio. The purpose of my dissertation is to examine how and why people use social media and their perceptions of “fake news.” Fake news is defined as deliberately misleading news produced for monetary gain and written by writers who are not professional journalists.

I am writing to invite you for a short survey questionnaire to understand your demographics and social media usage. The purpose of these demographic questionnaire is selection for an in-depth 45-60 minutes interview. You will be asked 5 questions in an online survey requesting demographic information (age, gender, ethnicity, and social media use). Any participant who answers all the questions in the survey, is 18 years of age or older, and has a social media account will be considered as eligible for the study. Selection of the participants will be done in the order of the demographic surveys received and aforementioned eligibility. The interview will be scheduled per your convenience. Following the interview, I will ask you to review a typed transcript to ensure the interview was appropriately captured.

Your participation is voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time, and your relationship with your institution will not be affected in any way. There are no more risks associated with this research than what would be encountered in your daily life.

I am very passionate about this study and believe your experiences are invaluable in bridging the empirical research literature gap relative to the phenomenon of fake news on social media. I want to thank you for your time and consideration of this request. Please sign the consent below indicating that you have been informed of the purposes, procedures, risks, and benefits of this study. Please do not hesitate to contact me at shirsaa@bgsu.edu if you have any questions about my research or your participation. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Judith Jackson May at judyjac@bgsu.edu or office phone (419-372-7373). Additionally, if you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, you may also contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board at Bowling Green State University (419-372-7716) or email ocr@bgsu.edu. Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Abhijeet Shirsat
Leadership Studies Doctoral Program
Bowling Green State University

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EXPIRES 02/20/2019

550 Education
Bowling Green, OH 43403-0246

Telephone: 419-372-7350
Fax: 419-372-8448



DATE: March 16, 2018

TO: Abhijeet Shirsat

FROM: Bowling Green State University Institutional Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [1147174-3] WHEN TRUTH CHALLENGES IDEOLOGY: UNPACKING THE POLARIZATION OF DEMOCRACY THROUGH A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXAMINATION OF FAKE NEWS

SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision

ACTION: ACKNOWLEDGED

Thank you for submitting the Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Institutional Review Board has ACKNOWLEDGED your submission and your submission has been assigned for review.

If your project is receiving an exempt or expedited review, you should receive a determination within two weeks. If your project is receiving a full Board review, you should receive a determination within two days after the next regularly scheduled meeting.

The following items are acknowledged in this submission:

- Advertisement - Recruitment Email 03152018.docx (UPDATED: 03/16/2018)
- Application Form - IRB FORM 03152018.docx (UPDATED: 03/16/2018)
- Consent Form - Consent Letter for Survey Questionnaire 03152018.doc (UPDATED: 03/16/2018)
- Consent Form - Consent Letter 03152018.doc (UPDATED: 03/16/2018)
- Cover Sheet - Cover Letter 03152018.docx (UPDATED: 03/16/2018)

If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or orc@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Institutional Review Board's records.



BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY

Office of Research Compliance

DATE: March 16, 2018

TO: Abhijeet Shirsat

FROM: Bowling Green State University Institutional Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [1147174-3] WHEN TRUTH CHALLENGES IDEOLOGY: UNPACKING THE POLARIZATION OF DEMOCRACY THROUGH A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXAMINATION OF FAKE NEWS

SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: March 16, 2018

EXPIRATION DATE: February 20, 2019

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Institutional Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the [Review Details page](#). You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the IRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on February 20, 2019. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or orc@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

APPENDIX C**IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. What have you experienced in terms of fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential election?
2. What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences about the phenomenon?
3. Explain why you used social media during the 2016 U.S. presidential election.
4. Explain how social media played a role in your political activities during the 2016 U.S. presidential election.
5. What did it feel like when you first came across fake news on social media?
6. What drew and motivated you to read the news?
7. Did you expect it to be fake in the first place? Did you fact check? What was your immediate reaction?
8. How do you view your experience of fake news on social media and relation to the friends and followers on social media?
9. What do you think are the effects of the political fake news on social media?
10. How do you manage watching different news story on social media?
11. Are there any particular media streams that you follow while you use social media?
12. Do you try to influence the decision of other social media users to watch and follow certain media streams?
13. In the future, do you think you will still follow the same news media?
14. If you see other social media users following fake news, what will be your reaction on social media?