

Sharing Lies: A Socio-Technical Review on False Information Dissemination

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Abstract

This paper provides a comprehensive review of false information dissemination, focusing on factors influencing its spread in the context of social media and information systems. The study synthesizes recent literature to identify and categorize 30 influence factors into eight main categories: demographic, personality-related, psychological, policy- and values-based, informational, media consumption-related, motivational, and preventive factors. Key findings indicate that low education, high extraversion, and conservative values significantly increase false information dissemination. Additionally, social media usage, emotional responses, and information overload play critical roles in promoting its dissemination. Preventive strategies, such as labeling content and training in false information recognition, are also examined. This review aims to improve understanding of the dynamics of false information dissemination and proposes strategies to mitigate its impact.

Keywords: Social media, Fake news, Misinformation, Disinformation, Deepfake

1. Introduction

Advancements in the media and technology sectors have created numerous new opportunities to influence public perception. The extensive use of social media platforms has drastically lowered the costs of spreading information (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). The impact of sharing and spreading false information (FI) is profound, affecting both individuals and society as a whole. While the concept of FI is not new, it has recently become recognized as a significant issue (Osmundsen et al., 2021). Moreover, in today's interconnected communication landscape, journalists do not always serve as the "gatekeepers" of accurate information, unlike their role in traditional media (Torre, 2022). The risk of being subconsciously influenced by fake information escalates with the advancement of artificial intelligence (Bastick, 2021).

To effectively combat all forms of FI, it is essential to understand the factors that make people susceptible to it, as well as what drives them to believe and disseminate false and misleading content (Pennycook & Rand, 2021). The research community is increasingly questioning the relationship between the belief in FI and the spread of FI. More credible news is more likely to be shared online (D'Errico et al., 2022). However, there are discrepancies between the belief in FI and its dissemination on social media (Pennycook & Rand, 2021).

In the realm of FI, multiple definitions and terms exist, each with distinct nuances. Disinformation involves the dissemination of inaccurate or misleading information with the objective or aim of deliberately deceiving others about the truth (Fetzer, 2004). In contrast, misinformation is when false information is shared, but no harm is meant (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). A frequently used term in this context is "fake news", which is defined as false or misleading information masquerading as legitimate news (Allen et al., 2020). These terms are linked to specific attributes, including the intention to mislead and the style of presentation, as documented in the literature. In this paper, however, we employ the more inclusive term "false information" (FI). We define FI as *untrue information that does not correspond to verifiable facts or reality*. This definition also encompasses fabricated content, such as deep fakes, since it pertains to information that lacks a basis in reality.

Previous literature reviews focusing on the dissemination of fake news (Arayankalam & Krishnan, 2022) and misinformation on social media show a strong increase in scientific literature dealing with this topic over the years (S. Chen et al., 2023). However, the last few years from 2021 onwards, with the strong presence of artificial intelligence and the associated risk of false information, have not been taken into account in previous literature reviews on this topic. The landscape of social media and technology is constantly evolving. New platforms and technologies, such as AI-driven content creation and deepfakes, continue to emerge, necessitating updated research on how these advancements impact the spread of FI. In this paper, we use the terms

‘dissemination’ and ‘spreading’ synonymously and consider the sharing of FI to be a major cause.

A recent comprehensive literature review and systematization of primary and high quality studies regarding influence factors of FI dissemination is pending. This gap is addressed by the present paper with a comprehensive literature review, which is based on the framework from vom Brocke et al. (2009). This literature review deals with the following research question: “Which factors contribute to the spread of false information?” The objective of this review is to identify and categorize the most relevant influence factors that drive the spread of FI. Moreover, preventive strategies are being explored. In the next sections, we outline our method (2.), our findings (3.), and we discuss the findings, outline the limitations of this study and the implications for research and practice (4.).

2. Methodology

This literature review is based on the framework from vom Brocke et al. (2009), which consists of five phases: definition of scope, conceptualization, literature search, analysis and synthesis, and research agenda. The scope of our literature review can be systematized referring to the taxonomy of Cooper (1988) as recommended by vom Brocke et al. (2009). Cooper (1988) subdivides literature reviews into six characteristics: focus, goal, perspective, coverage, organization, and audience of the paper which are further divided into categories (Table 1). This paper focuses on research outcomes. The primary goal is to integrate existing research findings on the spread of FI. The secondary goal is to highlight central issues in this research area. A neutral perspective is adopted for the literature review, analysis, and synthesis of results. The literature coverage is representative, and the organization of the papers is conceptual. The target audiences include specialized scholars, general scholars, and practitioners (Table 1).

Table 1. Positioning of this paper within the taxonomy of Cooper (1988).

	Categories			
Focus	Research outcomes	Research methods	Theories	Practices or applications
Goal	Integration		Criticism	Central issues
Perspect.	Neutral representation		Espousal of position	
Coverage	Exhaustive	Selective	Representative	Central or pivotal
Organizat.	Historical		Conceptual	Methodological
Audience	Specialized scholars	General scholars	Practitioners	General public

The conceptualization (vom Brocke et al., 2009) is based on previous research results in the field of FI and was primarily used to identify dimensions and relevant search terms to answer the research question. The literature search consisted of techniques of keyword search, backward and forward search in different sources. The literature search utilized citation indexing services, publications, and databases such as Business Source Ultimate, APA PsycInfo, Applied Science & Technology Source, Sociology Source Ultimate, and ACM Digital Library. The search was restricted to peer-reviewed literature published in academic journals. It included primary studies with medium to high levels of evidence, excluding studies like single case observations and expert opinions. Search terms included “fake news”, “misinformation”, “disinformation”, “rumor”, “spread*”, “distribut*” and “shar*”.

Table 2. Categories of influence factors.

Extensively examined	↑↑↑	Consistent results in at least 3 and in more than 75% of the studies
Moderately examined	↑↑	Consistent results in at least 2 studies without contrary results
Predominant tendency	↑	Studies that prove an impact predominate
Contradictory results	↔	The study results up to now show no clear direction of influence

The penultimate phase involved analyzing and synthesizing the retrieved literature using a concept matrix approach (Salipante et al., 1982; Webster & Watson, 2002). The identified influence factors were organized into four distinct categories (Table 2): *extensively examined*, *moderately examined*, *predominant tendency*, and *contradictory results*. This systematization of the literature is based on consistency of the study results, and the amount of studies supporting the influence. In the last phase, the analysis and synthesis of the literature results into a research agenda.

3. Findings

In the analysis and synthesis of this literature review, 30 influence factors were identified, which can be assigned to the following eight main categories: demographic, personality-related, psychological, policy- and values-based, informational, media consumption-related, motivational, and preventive factors. A scientific consensus on their influence (extensively examined) was found for 16 factors concerning the spread of FI. We present the findings of this review successively based on the eight main categories.

Among the demographic factors, only the influence of educational level studied is scientifically undisputed. Individuals with a low educational level are more likely to spread false information. Additionally, there seems to be a small tendency for older people to spread false information. However, there are just as many study results that show no influence of age. Regarding gender, there seems to be no clear direction of influence. The majority of studies show that less favored people are more likely to share FI (Table 3).

Table 3. Demographic factors.

Effect	Literature
Age ↔	
Young (2)	Ahmed & Rasul, 2022; Rahmanian & Esfidani, 2022
Old (4)	J. P. Baptista et al., 2021a; Duffy et al., 2020; Guess et al., 2019; Pop & Ene, 2019
No effect (4)	Abraham & Mandalaparthi, 2021; Apuke & Omar, 2020; Buchanan & Kempley, 2021; Koch et al., 2023
Gender ↔	
Women (1)	X. Chen et al., 2015;
Men (2)	Buchanan, 2020; Humprecht et al., 2021
No effect (3)	Apuke & Omar, 2020; Buchanan & Kempley, 2021; X. Chen & Sin, 2013
Education	
Low education (5) ↑↑↑	Apuke & Omar, 2020; J. P. Baptista et al., 2021a; Koch et al., 2023; Pop & Ene, 2019; Rampersad & Althiyabi, 2020
No effect (1)	Buchanan & Kempley, 2021
Economic situation	
Less favored (2) ↑	Faragó et al., 2020; Pan et al., 2021
More favored (1)	Buchanan & Kempley, 2021
No effect (1)	Greenhill & Oppenheim, 2017

Table 4 provides an aggregated summary of the results related to personality-related factors. In addition to the big five personality traits, the analyzed literature frequently discussed altruism and analytical thinking. *Extroverts* appear to be more likely to spread FI than introverts. Three out of five studies conclude that *openness* has a positive influence on the spread of FI. There is a tendency for individuals with high levels of *neuroticism* to spread FI more readily. The influence of the personality trait *agreeableness* on the spread of FI is disputed. Four publications arrive at three different conclusions. Two out of four conclude that low agreeableness contributes to a higher likelihood of sharing FI. People with *low conscientiousness* are more likely to spread FI.

The reviewed literature that examines *altruism* conclude that altruism contributes to the spread of FI. Apuke & Omar report effect sizes ranging from $\beta=0.44$ (2021a) to $\beta=0.59$ (2021c) with $p<0.001$. Balakrishnan et al. (2021) report an effect size of $\beta=0.333$ with $p<0.001$. Additionally, it was found that

concern has a particular influence on the altruistic motivation to spread fake news (Tan & Hsu, 2023). Table 4 includes results on cognitive reflection, typically measured using a cognitive reflection test (CRT), categorized in the dimension of analytical thinking. There is a clear tendency for *low cognitive reflection* to lead to a higher likelihood of FI spreading.

Table 4. Personality-related factors.

Effect	Literature
Extraversion	
High extraversion (5) ↑↑↑	Ahmed & Rasul, 2022; Buchanan, 2020; X. Chen & Sin, 2013; Lawson & Kakkar, 2022; Sampat & Raj, 2022
Low extraversion (1)	Indu et al., 2021
Openness	
High openness (3) ↑	Ahmed & Tan, 2022; X. Chen, 2016; Sampat & Raj, 2022
Low openness (1)	Indu et al., 2021
No effect (1)	Buchanan, 2020
Neuroticism	
High neuroticism (3) ↑	Ahmed & Tan, 2022; Sampat & Raj, 2022; Srinivas et al., 2022
Low neuroticism (1)	X. Chen, 2016
No effect (1)	Buchanan, 2020
Agreeableness	
High agreeableness (1)	Indu et al., 2021
Low agreeableness (2) ↑	Buchanan, 2020; Sampat & Raj, 2022
No effect (1)	Buchanan & Kempley, 2021
Conscientiousness	
Low conscient. (4) ↑↑↑	Ahmed & Rasul, 2022; X. Chen & Sin, 2013; Lawson & Kakkar, 2022; Sampat & Raj, 2022
No effect (1)	Buchanan, 2020
Altruism	
High altruism (5) ↑↑↑	Apuke & Omar, 2021a, 2021c; Balakrishnan et al., 2021; Omar et al., 2023; Tan & Hsu, 2023
Analytical thinking	
Low cognitive reflexion (8) ↑	Ahmed, 2022; Ahmed & Rasul, 2022; Ahmed & Tan, 2022; Apuke et al., 2022; J. Baptista et al., 2021; Koch et al., 2023; Nurse et al., 2022; Pennycook et al., 2020
No effect (3)	Buchanan & Kempley, 2021; Rahmanian & Esfidani, 2022; Ross et al., 2021

Table 5 examines the influence of *emotion, fear, exposure and repetition*, and the *confirmation bias* on spreading FI. It shows that all considered factors are positively correlated with FI spreading. Emotional reactions are linked to behavioral responses to fake news and, depending on the emotional intensity, influence the spread of fake news (Horner et al., 2021). *Fears* positively influence the spread of FI. The analyzed literature examined fear of missing out (FoMO), fears of anti-vaxxers, and general health-related fears. Two publications confirm the positive

influence that *exposure and repetition* have on the spread of FI. Another psychological effect discussed and investigated in the relevant research is confirmation bias. Confirmation bias suggests that people are more likely to believe information that aligns with their pre-existing opinions (Housholder & LaMarre, 2014). All analyzed studies confirm that confirmation bias is a factor influencing FI spreading.

Table 5. Psychological factors.

Effect	Literature
Emotion	
Positive correl. (5) ↑↑↑	Bonnin & Sinno, 2022; D'Errico et al., 2022; Horner et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022; Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013
Fear	
Positive correl. (5) ↑↑↑	Ahmed, 2022; Ali et al., 2022; Freiling et al., 2023; Talwar et al., 2019; Talwar et al., 2020
No effect (1)	Balakrishnan et al., 2021
Exposition and repetition	
Positive correl. (2) ↑↑	Ahmed, 2021; Halpern et al., 2019
Confirmation bias	
Positive correl. (4) ↑↑↑	Buchanan, 2020; Kim et al., 2019; Koch et al., 2023; Morosoli et al., 2022

Alignment with political orientation has a positive effect on susceptibility to FI spreading in all studied cases. Two studies confirm this effect. All analyzed studies consider people with *conservative* values to be more likely to spread FI. Additionally, the literature analyzed concludes that *right-leaning* individuals are more likely to spread FI.

Table 6. Policy- and value-based factors.

Effect	Literature
Alignment with political orientation	
Positive correlation (2) ↑↑	Steinfeld, 2022; Turel & Osatuyi, 2021
Value-based	
Conservative (4) ↑↑↑	Buchanan, 2020; D'Errico et al., 2022; Guess et al., 2019; Lawson & Kakkar, 2022
Political orientation	
Right-wing (5) ↑↑↑	J. P. Baptista et al., 2021a, 2021b; Chadwick et al., 2022; Dourado & Salgado, 2021; Gaumont et al., 2018
Left-wing (1)	Koch et al., 2023

The analyzed literature frequently includes results on news consumption on social media, and social media usage. Table 7 provides an overview of the evaluation of the study results. There are no definitive results indicating that the *usage of social media* makes individuals more likely to spread FI. There are only tendencies suggesting this might be the case. Zhao et al. (2022) find that both the least active and the most active social media users tend to spread

misinformation. The influence of *news consumption in social media* on FI spreading is confirmed by two studies.

Table 7. Media consumption-related factors.

Effect	Literature
Usage of social media	
Positive correlation (2) ↑	Humprecht et al., 2021; Morosoli et al., 2022
No effect (1)	Buchanan & Kempley, 2021
News consumption in social media	
Positive correlation (2) ↑↑	Ahmed, 2022; Ahmed & Rasul, 2022

Based on the *motivational factors* for spreading information on social media (Table 8), some studies investigated the applicability to the spread of FI. Three out of four studies examined confirmed *status-seeking* as an influence factor of FI spreading. The analyzed literature agrees that the desire for *self-presentation* contributes to the spread of FI. Examples of effect sizes (β) include $\beta=0.28$ at $p<0.05$ (Apuke & Omar, 2021c), $\beta=0.214$ at $p<0.05$ (Apuke & Omar, 2021b) and $\beta=0.17$ at $p<0.01$ (Islam et al., 2020). It is not clear whether entertainment is a motivating factor for the spread of FI. An example of effect sizes (β) include 0.139 at $p<0.001$ (Balakrishnan et al., 2021). *Sociability* has been confirmed as an influencing factor for the spread of FI by five studies. Examples of effect sizes (β) include 0.28 at $p<0.001$ (Apuke & Omar, 2021a) and 0.32 at $p<0.01$ (Apuke & Omar, 2021c). Two out of three study results confirm that *passing time* can be a motivator for the spread of FI. An example of an effect size (β) is 0.22 at $p<0.05$ (Apuke & Omar, 2021a).

Table 8. Motivational factors.

Effect	Literature
Status seeking	
Positive correlation (3) ↑↑↑	Apuke & Omar, 2021b; X. Chen, 2016; Omar et al., 2023
No effect (1)	Apuke & Omar, 2020
Self-promotion and -expression	
Positive correlation (4) ↑↑↑	Apuke & Omar, 2021b, 2021c; X. Chen et al., 2015; Islam et al., 2020
Entertainment	
Positive correlation (3) ↑	Balakrishnan et al., 2021; X. Chen, 2016; Islam et al., 2020
No effect (2)	Apuke & Omar, 2021a, 2021c
Sociability / Socializing	
Positive correlation (5) ↑↑↑	Apuke & Omar, 2021a, 2021c; X. Chen, 2016; X. Chen et al., 2015; Omar et al., 2023
Pass time	
Positive correlation (2) ↑	Apuke & Omar, 2021a; Sampat & Raj, 2022
No effect (1)	Balakrishnan et al., 2021

A positive correlation between the *credibility* of FI and the willingness to share it is supported by numerous studies (Table 9). However, some of the cited authors point out that there are factors beyond credibility that motivate users to share FI. Four studies show that *information overload* has an impact on the spread of FI.

Table 9. Informational factors.

Effect	Literature
Credibility	
Credible FI (7) ↑↑↑	Ahmed, 2021; Altay et al., 2022; Buchanan, 2020; X. Chen, 2016; D'Errico et al., 2022; Halpern et al., 2019; Pereira et al., 2023
No effect (1)	Leeder, 2019
Information volume	
Information overload (4) ↑↑↑	Apuke & Omar, 2021b; Apuke et al., 2022; Bermes, 2021; Laato et al., 2020

In the context of susceptibility to and spreading FI, preventive factors are examined. Commonly studied preventive factors include labeling FI, prompting individuals to think about the correctness of the information, and knowledge or training. When a factor proved effective, the absence of this factor was considered. All preventive factors showed an effect. The consolidated results are presented in Table 10.

Table 10. Preventive factors.

Effect	Literature
Labeling of false information	
Lack of labeling (6) ↑↑↑	Gwebu et al., 2022; Jahanbakhsh et al., 2021; Koch et al., 2023; Leicht et al., 2022; Mena, 2020; Pennycook et al., 2018
Thinking about correctness	
Lack of reflection (3) ↑↑↑	Jost, 2020; Pennycook et al., 2020; Roozenbeek et al., 2021
Knowledge and training	
Lack of knowledge in FI recognition (2) ↑↑	Apuke et al., 2023; Lutzke et al., 2019

The effectiveness of *labeling* FI has been confirmed in previous research. Spreading of FI can be reduced with a warning label on the information. A total of six studies confirm this effect. Individuals who *reflect* on the correctness of information (e.g., after a prior general warning about FI) are less likely to spread FI, which is confirmed by a total of three studies. Individuals who know how to recognize FI are less likely to spread FI than those without this *knowledge*. This knowledge may have been acquired through targeted training in FI recognition. A total of two studies have dealt with the knowledge of FI recognition.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This comprehensive review has examined the multifaceted nature of FI dissemination, particularly within the context of social media and information systems. Through an analysis and synthesis of recent literature, 30 influence factors were identified, falling into eight main categories: demographic, personality-related, psychological, policy- and values-based, informational, motivational, media consumption-related, and preventive factors.

One significant finding is the influence of demographic factors, particularly education. Lower educational levels correlate with a higher likelihood of spreading FI, suggesting that targeted educational interventions could be a key strategy in mitigating the spread of FI. Additionally, while gender appears to have a mixed influence, with no clear direction, economic status also plays a role, with less favored economic situations contributing to FI dissemination. Personality traits also play a crucial role. High extraversion and low conscientiousness are associated with the dissemination of FI, while traits such as openness and neuroticism show varying degrees of influence. Extroverts, due to their sociable nature, are more likely to engage with and spread FI. Individuals with low conscientiousness, who may lack carefulness and thoroughness, are similarly prone to spreading FI. These insights underline the importance of considering individual personality profiles when designing interventions.

Psychological factors, including emotional reactions and fear, significantly contribute to the spread of FI. Emotional intensity can drive individuals to share FI without verification. Fear, particularly fear of missing out (FoMO) and health-related fears, also enhances susceptibility and sharing behavior. The confirmation bias effect suggests that individuals are more likely to share information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs and opinions. Enhancing psychological resilience and promoting critical thinking might be helpful to counter these influences. Policy- and values-based factors reveal that individuals with conservative values and right-leaning political orientations are more susceptible to spread FI. This is consistent with findings that show a higher tendency among these groups to share FI, possibly due to ideological motivations. Understanding these value-based influences is crucial for developing targeted interventions that address specific ideological predispositions.

The role of social media platforms is pivotal, as their algorithms often prioritize engaging content, which can include misleading information. Both high and low levels of social media activity are associated

with increased FI dissemination. News consumption patterns also play a role, with users who consume news primarily through social media being more prone to sharing FI. Motivators for spreading FI include status-seeking, self-promotion, entertainment, sociability, and passing time. These motivations highlight the social and psychological benefits individuals derive from sharing information, even if it is false. For instance, the desire for social recognition and the need to maintain social connections could drive individuals to share engaging but false content.

Preventive strategies such as labeling FI, promoting analytical thinking, and increasing knowledge and training have been shown to reduce the spread of FI. Labeling FI effectively warns users and reduces the likelihood of sharing. Encouraging individuals to reflect on the correctness of information before sharing can mitigate impulsive sharing. Educational initiatives that enhance FI recognition skills could be crucial in building a more discerning public. The characteristics of the information itself also influence its spread. Credible FI, which appears plausible, is more likely to be shared. Additionally, information overload, where users are bombarded with excessive information, can lead to the spread of FI due to reduced ability to critically evaluate content.

This review has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Despite the high total number of analyzed results, individual factors sometimes have low result counts due to the wide range of factors and limited studies on specific sub-areas. The use of snowball sampling for part of the literature search may have introduced an imbalance in the research areas covered. The analyzed studies often emphasize significant core findings, while factors that do not show significance are sometimes overlooked or only briefly mentioned. This selective reporting can lead to publication bias, making some factors appear more important than they truly are. Future research could yield more meaningful results by focusing on individual factors with a higher hit rate. Further exploration of these factors is necessary, especially considering the rapid evolution of technology and media landscapes.

The interplay between technological advancements, such as AI-driven content creation and deepfakes, and the spread of FI warrants ongoing investigation. Longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into how the spread of FI change over time and with different interventions. Additionally, cross-cultural studies could reveal how different societal contexts impact the spread of FI, aiding in the development of culturally and societally tailored interventions.

In conclusion, the dissemination of FI is a complex phenomenon, influenced by a combination of demographic, psychological, informational and other factors. Effective countermeasures require a holistic approach, integrating educational initiatives, personality-tailored interventions, and robust policy measures. Social media platforms must also play a proactive role in combating FI by implementing better content moderation and user education strategies.

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