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Does fake news lead to more engaging effects on social media? Evidence from Romania

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Abstract: This study examines the potential of fake news to produce effects on social media engagement as well as the moderating role of education and government approval. We report on a 2x2x2 online experiment conducted in Romania (N=813), in which we manipulated the level of facticity of a news story, its valence, and intention to deceive. Results show that ideologically driven news with a negative valence (rather than fabricated news or other genres, such as satire and parody) have a greater virality potential. However, neither the level of education nor government approval moderate this effect. Additionally, both positive and negative ideologically driven news stories enhance the probability that people will sign a document to support the government (i. e., potential for political engagement on social media). These latter effects are moderated by government approval: Lower levels of government approval lead to less support for the government on social media, as a consequence of fake news exposure.

Keywords: fake news, ideologically driven news, viralization, social media engagement, political engagement, moderators of fake news effects

1 Introduction

Highly visible during and in the aftermath of the 2016 US presidential campaign, the term fake news has a long and reputed history, dating back to ancient communication practices and very early journalism routines (McGonagle, 2017; for an

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