THIRD PERSON PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE ABILITY TO DETECT FAKE NEWS: THE ROLE OF MEDIA DIET AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

NICOLETA CORBU
RALUCA BUTUROIU
DENISA-ADRIANA OPREA

Multiple forms of disinformation have proliferated on digital media platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic, when news consumption increased considerably. In this specific context, this paper investigates the way media diet influences the third person perceptions about people's ability to detect fake news. We focus here on some understudied predictors of third person perception about fake news detection, such as diversity of media diet and belief in conspiracy theories. By means of a national survey (N=1006) conducted in Romania in October 2020, we test this effect for close and distant others, and the role both mainstream and online media play in this context. Main findings show that frequency of news consumption, trust in the media, and belief in conspiracy theories decrease the perceptual gap between self and others, while education and the diversity of the media diet intensifies it.

***Keywords**: third person effect; media diet; news consumption; conspiracy theories; COVID-19.*

INTRODUCTION

In the last years, the academic and public discussion about disinformation effects has flourished to an unprecedented extent. In this context, fact-checking has become one of the solutions proposed to limit the phenomenon, even though there is no clear evidence about its effectiveness among the general population. It has been argued that fact-checking might prove efficient among more educated people (Nyhan and Reifler 2015), who would allegedly be more aware of the risks

Address of the corresponding authors: Nicoleta Corbu, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA), Bd. Expoziţiei, nr. 30 A, sector 1, Bucharest, Romania; e-mail: nicoleta.corbu@comunicare.ro (ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9606-9827); **Raluca Buturoiu**, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA), Bd. Expoziţiei, nr. 30 A, sector 1, Bucharest, Romania; e-mail: raluca.buturoiu@comunicare.ro (ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9841-0929); **Denisa-Adriana Oprea**, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA), Bd. Expoziţiei, nr. 30 A, sector 1, Bucharest, Romania; e-mail: denisa.oprea@comunicare.ro (ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7089-2126).

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associated with the wide circulation of misleading information, especially in the context of digital media platforms. However, such studies largely ignore the fact that more informed, educated people are also self-confident and subject to strong third person perceptions about their ability to detect fake news (Corbu *et al.* 2020) or possible effects of fake news (Jang and Kim 2018) than less educated ones.

To address this issue, we need to understand the main predictors of third person perceptions about fake news detection and effects, in order to propose viable solutions. Prior studies have shown that education, perceived incidence of fake news, confirmation bias, and social media dependency are significant predictors in this respect (Corbu *et al.* 2020; Liu and Huang 2020). However, although different aspects of media consumption, such as information literacy (Jang and Kim 2018) have already been studied in relationship with fake news detection, little is still known about how diversity of media diet and belief in conspiracy theories influence the third person perceptions about people's ability to detect fake news. Therefore, the novelty of this study consists in focusing on these two specific predictors.

The current information environment is characterised, among others, by the diversity of information sources. Notwithstanding this, media diversity does not necessarily correlate with the quality of the information (Valera-Ordaz *et al.* 2022). Different media consumption behaviour might stem, with individuals tending to favour the information on their prior exposure (Zhao *et al.* 2020) or to actively seek information that is not congruent with their own beliefs, opinions, or attitudes on key public issues (Goel *et al.* 2012). In this study, we look for evidence about how the diversity of the media diet (mostly in the sense of how open or rather closed to opposed views people are) might affect third person perceptions about detection of disinformation. This, in turn, could offer insights into the complicated mechanisms that might influence people's willingness to ultimately check the information they come across.

Given that health crisis situations, such as the COVID-19 one, come with high uncertainty levels, people's habits of news consumption, and implicitly disinformation, might suffer as a result. One prominent element related to this particular context is the unprecedented circulation of misleading narratives (or conspiracy theories) (Allington *et al.* 2021; Uscinski *et al.* 2020, etc.). One could argue that people who believe in such narratives are more vulnerable to disinformation about the pandemic. But, at the same time, not believing could make people subject to stronger third person perceptions about their ability to detect fake news. This could prove equally dangerous in terms of not actually verifying counterfeit information, as only others could be fooled, but not them.

In this study, we aim at providing arguments about how media content and the way people consume it could largely influence them via third person effect. We also make recommendations to stakeholders, to better address the issue.

THE "FAKE NEWS ERA"

Far from being a new concept or a new journalistic practice, fake news is receiving much more attention than before, fueled mainly by the advent of digital media platforms (Preston *et al.* 2021). The "fake news era" (Albright 2017) we live in has culminated during the current COVID-19 pandemic, when a massive amount of fake news-related phenomena flooded on social networking sites and on instant messaging platforms (Allington *et al.* 2021; Uscinski *et al.* 2020).

Despite its overwhelming presence in the current media ecosystem, there is no single, generally accepted definition of fake news. For the purpose of this study, we understand it as a species of disinformation; more precisely, fake news is the deliberate presentation of false or misleading content as news (Gelfert 2018), with the intent to mislead recipients into treating this fallacious content as mere facts or into doubting provable facts.

As numerous studies show, this phenomenon has proliferated during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly on digital media platforms (Apuke and Omar 2021; Pennycook *et al.* 2020). Its typology has ranged from conspiracy theories about the virus to misleading or false news stories, rumors, hoaxes, claims about remedies and preventive cures, etc. It has negatively impacted people's attitudes and behavior, causing anxiety, disturbance, and fear, leading to uncertainty and uncontrolled alarmism, and affecting media credibility (Fernández-Torres, Almansa-Martínez, and Chamizo-Sánchez 2021).

Fake news has already been studied in relationship with the third person effect, a media theory which states that people tend to overrate the extent to which others are affected both perceptually and behaviorally by media messages (Davison 1983). For example, Corbu *et al.* (2020) have approached individuals' self-perceived ability to detect misleading information, while Talwar *et al.* (2020) have explored people's support for corrective or restrictive actions. Our paper's main contribution will be to shed light on the relationship between fake news and the perceptual third person effect from less explored perspectives, such as people's media diet and conspiracy beliefs, which might play an important role especially in a health crisis context.

THE THIRD PERSON EFFECT AND THE INFORMATION POLLUTION

The third person effect is a well-established research field within communication studies. Its origins are to be found in the groundbreaking work of Davison (1983), who was the first to show that people tend to overestimate the extent to which others are affected by media messages. Davison (1983) introduces the two components of the third person effect, *i.e.*, the perceptual and the behavioral. The perceptual aspect, which is the focus of our paper, posits that, with reference to presumed media effects, people generally consider that others are more

likely to be influenced by media messages, particularly in (the) case of negative or controversial topics. This first component of the third person effect is solidly documented in the literature, providing empirical support for issues such as advertisements (Eisend 2017), political communication (Golan, Banning, and Lundy 2008), news in the traditional media (Price, Huang, and Tewksbury 1997), or (on) Facebook (Schweisberger, Billinson, and Chock 2014).

Different factors might influence the perceptual third person effect, among which the social distance, or the subjective similarity between different groups. According to the social distance corollary, people tend to believe that those socially distant from them (*distant others*) are more likely to be influenced by media messages than those closest to them (*close others*) (Eveland *et al.* 1999). In what concerns individuals' perception about their vulnerability to fake news or their self-perceived ability to detect fake news, several recent studies put forward a significant third person effect in light of the social distance corollary (Lee, Johnson, and Sturm Wilkerson 2022; Yoo and Kim 2022). Jang and Kim (2018) and Ștefăniță, Corbu, and Buturoiu (2018) found that individuals tend to overestimate their self-perceived ability to disclose fake news and to consider that in general digital disinformation affects others to a greater extent than themselves. More specifically, in research approaching the digital disinformation about COVID-19, Liu and Huang (2020) showed that individuals consider (both close and distant) others as being more vulnerable than themselves to the impact of COVID-19-related fake news.

Therefore, we posit here our first hypothesis:

H1. People perceived themselves as better equipped to detect fake news than others (both close and distant others).

As many studies have demonstrated (e.g., Lu *et al.* 2021; van der Weerd *et al.* 2011), traditional and new media are consistently reported among the most common information sources during pandemics. However, individuals' own information behaviour plays an important role in their self-perceived ability to navigate the often overwhelming and controversial amount of information that media convey in the case of a pandemic. From a general perspective, people are prone to a confirmation bias, *i.e.*, they tend to search for information that confirms their prior beliefs or attitudes and resist changing their convictions (Zhao and Chen 2020). This might translate into a selective exposure, *i.e.*, consuming and sharing only information consonant with their own point of view, which gives little room to opinion diversity (Jamieson and Cappella 2008). At the opposite end, exposure diversity (Napoli 2011; van derWurff 2011) involves consuming and sharing content that stems from different sources and conveys multiple points of view. As Napoli (1999) emphasizes, *idea diversity* (referring particularly to political ideas expressed in media but supporting further extension to other domains of the social life) is an important condition for well-informed decision-making.

Furthermore, as demonstrated by previous studies, during health crises, individuals are prone to a third person effect: they consider others to be more likely to be influenced by news about the respective crisis (Liu and Lo 2014; Wei, Lo, and Lu 2007, 2008). In the case of COVID-19 pandemic, this equation is even more complicated because of the spread of fake news, prevalent on social media (Ayoub, Yang, and Zhou 2021; Shahi, Dirkson, and Majchrzak 2021). The abovementioned studies generally measure the correlation between media exposure during a health crisis, the perceived personal impact and the third person effect. To our knowledge, no research explores the role media diet plays in the third person effect about fake news detection. We expect a positive correlation between media diet and the perceived third person effect. In other words, we hypothesize that people who gather their information from different sources and, implicitly, have a more fine-grained perspective with regard to the respective matter – might believe others are more gullible and also more vulnerable to fake news than they are. In line with this reasoning, we state that:

H2. The more diverse the information diet of a person (different information sources, different viewpoints), the stronger the TPE about the ability to detect fake news.

In times of crisis, conspiracy theories are running rampant, in connection with factors such as anxiety, uncertainty (van Prooijen 2020), or powerlessness (Abalakina-Paap *et al.* 1999). Conspiracy theories flourish during COVID-19 pandemic (Allington *et al.* 2021; Uscinski *et al.* 2020, etc.). As shown in previous studies (Douglas and Sutton 2008; Landrum and Olshanky 2020), conspiratorial thinking might be correlated with a third person effect, i.e., people tend to believe that others are more prone to be affected by conspiracy theories. Additionally, there is evidence that the greater one's knowledge about news media, the less vulnerable one will be to conspiracy theories (Craft, Ashley, and Maksl 2017). To date, no study investigates, to our knowledge, the possibility that being skeptic about conspiracy theories might enhance the third person perceptions about being able to detect misleading information. In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, people who tend not to believe in conspiracy theories about the virus might perceive that others could be fooled by such narratives and hence by misleading information. In line with this reasoning, we posit here that:

H3. The less people believe in conspiracy theories about COVID-19, the stronger the TPE about the ability to detect fake news

News consumption is another positive predictor of both third person effect (Salwen 1998) and third person effect in relationship with fake news (Ștefăniță, Corbu, and Buturoiu 2018). Increased information consumption makes people more confident in their superior knowledge relative to other people, while an

increased exposure to fake news leads to a stronger third person effect (Ștefăniță, Corbu, and Buturoiu 2018). In times of health crisis, people tend to consume more news and more frequently (Masip *et al.* 2020), in order to cope with the unknown. In such cases, higher knowledge and news exposure correlates negatively with a third person effect about effects of the pandemic, as consuming more information about the crisis gives individuals a more realistic perspective on such news' influence on both themselves and others (Liu and Lo 2014; Wei *et al.* 2008). Even though there is no study to date to prove it, we believe the argument could also be valid in case of fake news. More specifically, the more people access information about a specific issue, the more they believe others do the same, particularly in a crisis situation, so the less they perceive a distance between themselves and the others from the point of view of their ability to disentangle truth from falsehood. A possible explanation might be that people tend to consider that keeping up to date with current events increases their knowledge about specific phenomena and therefore their ability to detect fake news about them. Thus, we advance the following hypothesis:

H4. The more people consume news from mainstream media/ online media, the weaker their TPE about ability to detect fake news.

In today's world, media scepticism is a well-established phenomenon. This might translate, for example, into searching for alternative sources of information or developing a more critical approach of news and its sources. As different studies emphasize (Dutton and Shepherd 2006; Tsfati and Peri 2006), at the beginning of the internet era, the alternative to mainstream media was online information sources, whose "credibility grew precisely inresponse to the crisis of confidence between audiences and mainstream journalism" (Tsfati and Peri 2006, 167). But given the lack of professional gatekeepers, digital environment, and particularly digital media platforms rapidly became a fertile ground for the diffusion of fake news-related phenomena (Tambuscio *et al.* 2015). Furthermore, media credibility might engender a third person effect. This means that individuals who approach media message more cautiously tend to believe that they are better equipped than others to discern between quality news and pseudo-news and also that false content, irrespective of its source, affects others to a greater extent than themselves (Wagner and Boczkowski 2019). Additionally, in what particularly concerns social media, which are more exposed to fake news circulation (Martens *et al.* 2018), Chung and Kim (2021) found that exposure to fake news with fact-checking information engendered a third person effect.

In this respect, we state here the following hypothesis:

H5. The less people trust both online and mainstream media, the stronger the TPE about the ability to detect fake news.

The literature analyzes socio-demographic predictors of the third person effect, such as gender and race (David *et al.* 2002; Lo and Wei 2002), religiosity (Golan 2002), education (Peiser and Peter 2000), etc. In what concerns education, Rucinski and Salmon (1990) advance that educated people are more inclined to develop feelings of superiority and to distance themselves from others in self-flattering ways. Therefore, as demonstrated by Peiser and Peter (2000) or Salwen (1998), they tend to approach media messages more cautiously and to perceive others as more affected by an undesirable information consumption behaviour. Additionally, the third person effect is stronger if the others are perceived as less educated. As shown in the Introduction, education also proved to be a significant predictor in case of people's self-perceived ability to detect fake news (Corbu *et al.* 2020). We thus advance that:

H6. More educated people are prone to stronger TPE about the ability to detect fake news than less educated people.

METHOD

For the purpose of this research, we conducted a national survey using an online panel (N=1006), using quota for gender, age, and region. The survey was conducted on October, 13–25, 2020, by QUESTIA, a national polling organization. The mean age in the sample was 40.94 years (SD=13.48; with the following distribution: 14.5% people aged 18-24; 21.0% people aged 25–34; 24.6% people aged 35–44; 18.7% people aged 45–54; 19.5% people aged 55–64; and 1.8% people aged over 65). The sample comprises 50% women, and 50% men. Urban residents represent 90.5% of the sample and university graduates represent 54.8% of the sample.

Measurements

Third person effect regarding people's ability to detect fake news was measured using three items as follows: "How confident or not are you that you/ your friends and family/ people in general are able to identify news or information that misrepresent reality or is even false?". The exact wording regarding self-perceived ability to identify fake news can be found in Q3 of the Flash Eurobarometer 464. In line with other previous research (Liu and Huang 2020), two variables measuring the intensity of the third person effect were computed by subtracting the scores on "close others" and "distant others" from the "self-assessment" variable.

Diversity of information diet was developed in order to assess the extent to which people believe their information diet is rather diverse or not (in terms of exposure to different information sources and viewpoints). In this respect, we

adapted a 7-point Likert scale of five items (Dubois and Blank 2018), ranging from 1 (*very rarely*) to 7 (*very often*). The items loaded on one factor, with loadings ranging from .578 to .860 (α=.830, *M*=4.83, *SD*=1.30).

Belief in conspiracy theories about COVID-19 was measured with a composite scale of seven items, ranging from 1 (*believe to be completely false*) to 7 (*believe to be completely true*). We opted to ask about specific conspiracy theories as in many prior studies (Douglas, Sutton, and Cichocka 2017), since the pandemic gave way to many such issue-specific narratives (see *Appendix*) The items loaded on one factor, with loadings ranging from .677 to .851 (α=.877, *M*=3.44, *SD*=1.61).

Trust in online media was measured using four items (official websites, general websites, social networking sites, and instant messaging platforms) on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*totally distrust*) to 7 (*totally trust*). The items loaded on one factor, with loadings ranging from .508 to .911 (α=.801, *M*=3.71, *SD*=1.39). *Trust in mainstream media* was measured using three items (newspapers, radio, and television) on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*totally distrust*) to 7 (*totally trust*). The items loaded on one factor, with loadings ranging from .894 to .917 (α=.888, *M*=3.78, *SD*=1.58).

*Consumption of COVID-19–related news from online media (*frequency of use) was measured using four items (official websites, general websites, social networking sites, and instant messaging platforms) on a scale from 0 (*never*) to 7 (*daily*), approximating the number of days in the last week that people consume news from online media. The items loaded on one factor, with loadings ranging from .731 to .854 (α=.814, *M*=3.41, *SD*=2.06). *Consumption of COVID-19–related news from mainstream media* (frequency of use) was measured using three items (newspapers, radio, and television) on a scale from 0 (*never*) to 7 (*daily*), approximating the number of days in the last week that people consume news from mainstream media. The items loaded on one factor, with loadings ranging from .758 to .782 (α=.651, *M*=3.41, *SD*=1.94).

Education was measured on an 8-point ordinal scale from 1 (*no education at all*) to 8 (*graduate studies*) (*M*=6.15, *SD*=1.37).

Findings

Main findings reveal that people perceived themselves as being better equipped to detect fake news than both close and distant others, providing support for H1. Consistent with Davison's (1983) TPE hypothesis, with reference to negative or less socially desirable content (in this particular case, fake news), the perceptual discrepancy is strengthened, in the sense that people tend to perceive themselves as more capable to detect potential fake news than others, and particularly than distant others (see *Table no. 1*).

Table no. 1

Third person effect perceptions about people's ability to detect fake news

	Self	Close others	Distant others
Mean	4.99	4.27	3.38
Std. Deviation	1.63	1.60	1.64
T test		T(1005)=-14.256	T(1005)=-31.088

Note: T tests significant at $p<.01$.

In order to analyze the main predictors of the TPE perception about people's ability to detect fake news, we constructed four linear regression models, two for close and two for distant others, measuring both mainstream and online media consumption and trust (see *Table no. 2*).

Table no. 2

Linear regression models predicting TPE perceptions of close and distant others

	Model 1 (*N*=988) (TPE close others)			**Model 2 (*N*=987) (TPE close others)**			**Model 3 (*N*=988) (TPE distant others)**			**Model 4 (*N*=987) (TPE distant others)**		
	B	SE	**β**	B	SE	**β**	B	SE	**β**	B	SE	**β**
(Constant)	.703	.355		.700	.356		2.009	.404		1.952	.407	
Education[a]	.120	.038	**.098****	.125	.038	**.103****	.135	.044	**.094****	.144	.044	**.100****
Diversity of information diet[b]	.099	.045	**.075***	.087	.045	**.066**†**	.194	.051	**.125*****	.168	.051	**.109****
Belief in conspiracy theories about COVID-19[c]	-.194	.033	**-.187*****	-.209	.033	**-.201*****	-.301	.038	**-.246*****	-.338	.038	**-.276*****
Trust in online media[d]	-.072	.041	**-.060**†**				-.227	.046	**-.161*****			
Consumption of COVID-19–related news from online media[e]	-.073	.029	**-.090***				-.081	.033	**-.085***			
Trust in mainstream media[f]				-.058	.036	**-.054**				-.169	.041	**-.136*****
Consumption of COVID-19–related news from mainstream media[g]				-.065	.031	**-.075***				-.067	.035	**-.066**†**
Adj R^2	.067			.065			.126			.116		

The reported β weights are final β weights.
†$p< .1$,*$p< .05$, **$p< .01$, ***$p < .001$
[a] Coded from 1=low to 8=high; [b] Coded from 1=low to 7=high; [c] Coded from 1=low to 7=high; [d] Coded from 1=low to 7=high; [e] Coded from 1=low to 7=high; [f] Coded from 1=low to 7=high; [g] Coded from 0=low to 7=high.

General findings reveal that TPE perception about the ability to detect fake news is correlated with belief in conspiracy theories about COVID-19, diversity of information diet, news consumption on COVID-19 topics, trust in the media, and education. The incremental R^2 values are significantly higher for the predictors of TPE perception of people in general (distant others), revealing that such variables can better predict the variation of TPE perception on distant than close others.

A significant predictor of the third person perception about people's ability to detect fake news is the diversity of one's information diet. Results show that the more diverse the information diet of a person, the stronger the TPE perception about (both close and distant) others' ability to detect fake news, offering support for H2. This happens probably because of the fact that people who consume news from different sources tend to believe that others do not check multiple sources of information and do not come across different viewpoints; thus, they perceive stronger TPE about other people's ability to detect fake news.

With reference to belief in conspiracy theories about COVID-19, findings reveal that a lower tendency to believe in conspiracy theories about COVID-19 is correlated with stronger TPE perception about (both close and distant) others' ability to detect fake news, offering support for H3. In other words, those who tend to believe more in different conspiracy theories about COVID-19 are less inclined to suspect that others are not well equipped to spot fake news.

Findings reveal that lower levels of (both online and mainstream) news consumption on COVID-19–related topics are associated with stronger TPE perception about others' ability to detect fake news, supporting H4. These findings are in line with previous research (Liu and Lo 2014) stating that, due to higher media consumption during health crisis periods, individuals are more likely to acknowledge strong effects of news media on themselves, leading to reduced TPE perceptions.

At the same time, trust in the media (irrespective of its form) proves to be a significant predictor of the third person perception about the ability to detect fake news. Main results show that the less people trust the media (online or mainstream), the stronger the TPE about others' ability to detect fake news, offering support for H5. Finally, education proved to be a significant predictor of the TPE perception about people's ability to detect fake news. Findings reveal that higher education levels are correlated with stronger TPE perception about (both close and distant) others' ability to detect fake news, providing support for H6. A possible explanation is that more educated people develop self-flattering tendencies, therefore, they tend to perceive themselves as more aware and capable of spotting fake news compared with others (family, friends, or people in general).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study sheds light on understudied aspects related to third person perceptions about people's ability to detect fake news. Previous studies have already shown that the intensity of these perceptions might be influenced by different variables, such as education, perceived incidence of fake news, confirmation bias, and social media dependency (Corbu *et al.* 2020; Liu and Huang 2020). We add to the literature insights about the role the media play in the process. Our study shows that there are four distinct ways in which media could influence the intensity of the third person effect: (frequency of) news consumption and trust in the media, as well as belief in conspiracy theories circulating in the media decrease the intensity of the effect, while the diversity of the media diet and education intensifies the perception of the gap between self and others.

Previous studies (Porto 2007) consider idea diversity as the most important factor enabling individuals to make real-life political choices, while emphasizing that diversity may also contribute to fragmentation of audiences and society (McQuail 2005). In this study, we evaluate the impact of the diversity of the media diet on perceptions about people's ability to detect fake news. We make the case that the more diverse people's media diet, the more likely it is they perceive a wider gap between themselves and others, in terms of evaluating the credibility of the news. This is important especially in the pandemic context, as the media landscape is polarized to an unprecedented extent (Faris *et al.* 2020), and this could have implications for the way people might act, if they do not fact-check the information they encounter.

At the same time, studies analyzing conspiracy narratives during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that toxic or misleading narratives play a negative role on trust in institutions (Pummerer *et al.* 2022), or in relation to pro-social behaviours, such as compliance with restrictive measures (Bierwiaczonek, Kunst, and Pich 2020). In this study, we add to the literature of effects, showing that they also influence how people perceive the gap between themselves and others, as related to their capacity to detect misleading or outright false information.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, news consumption has increased (Kantar, 2020). This might lead people to perceive that others consume news to a similar extent as they do, which could lead to different perceptions among heavy and light users. On the one hand, people who believe that both themselves and others do not follow the news constantly might estimate that others could be easily fooled by misleading news, as they are not used to easily screen through the huge amount of information circulating in the media. On the other hand, people who believe that both themselves and others are frequently exposed to news about the pandemic might estimate that others are better equipped to distinguish real from fake news.

Trust in both mainstream and traditional media diminishes the third person effect, as people who distrust the media are more prone to estimate a bigger gap between others and themselves. This is particularly important, as trust in the media is associated with compliance with restrictions during the pandemic (Niu *et al.* 2021). Therefore, distrusting the media has more than one negative outcome: people become less likely to obey rules during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and they also become overconfident about their capacity to detect misleading information, which could make them victims of disinformation about the effectiveness of the measures.

The implications of these findings are intrinsically related to understanding the mechanisms of the third person perception about the ability to detect misleading information in the media. They could help creating policy strategies to make fact-checking more effective in reducing potentially harmful effects of disinformation. We argue here that the third person effect about the ability to detect fake news is particularly important. It actually might make people less likely to fact-check the information they encounter in the media, since they are convinced that others, and not themselves, are vulnerable and exposed to such misleading narratives. This could make fact-checkers irrelevant in fighting disinformation, in the absence of a coherent and plausible awareness campaign about the crucial need for constantly questioning media content. Such campaigns should target people who are most confident in themselves, as they might become easy prey of disinformation. Such a profile, our study shows, has much to do with the way people interact with the media. Those who consume news constantly, distrust the media, have a diverse media diet, do not believe in conspiracy theories, and are educated become overconfident. Therefore, potential awareness campaigns should not only target, as one might think, the people less informed and who tend to consume information that confirm their own beliefs, but also people who are apparently better equipped to navigate the "infodemic". In a similar vein, media literacy should be strategically directed toward both less and well-informed people, as the former are unaware and unused to screening the information they encounter in their rare interactions with the media, while the latter are often overconfident and could become victims of their own knowledge.

The limits of this study should be acknowledged. The results are contextually bound to the Romanian context and the COVID-19 pandemic, and should be carefully generalized outside this particular background. Additionally, future research could test to what extent people with the profile we identify in this study do fact-check the news they consume. We also acknowledge the representativeness of the sample, slightly skewed toward urban areas and highly educated people. We add that the study does not test causality, and therefore some of the correlations could be interpreted in both directions.

To conclude, this study adds to the literature on third person effect, investigating the role the media play in third person perceptions about people's ability to detect misleading information.

Appendix

Diversity of information diet

On a scale from 1 (*very rarely*) to 7 (*very often*), when searching for political or public interest news, how often do you…

1. read/ see things you disagree with.
2. check news sources that are different from what you normally read/ see.
3. try to confirm the information you found by searching online for other sources.
4. try to confirm the information by checking a major offline news medium.
5. have discovered something that changed your opinion about a political or public interest issue.

Belief in conspiracy theories about COVID-19

On a scale from 1 (*believe to be completely false*) to 7 (*believe to be completely true*), to what extent do you believe that the following claims about COVID-19 are true or false?

1. The virus was created to stop the aging process.
2. The virus was created to trigger a worldwide economic crisis.
3. The virus was created to impose mandatory vaccination.
4. The virus was manufactured in a lab from China.
5. The virus was manufactured in a lab from the USA.
6. 5G spreads the virus.
7. There are miracle cures useful for the COVID-19 prevention and treatment.

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Platformele media digitale au favorizat apariția unor forme multiple de dezinformare în timpul pandemiei de COVID-19, atunci când consumul de știri a crescut considerabil. În acest context, prezenta lucrare investighează modul în care dieta (agenda!!) media influențează percepțiile oamenilor cu privire capacitatea lor și a celor din jur de a detecta știri false (percepția celei de-a treia persoane; en. third person perception). Sunt analizați predictori ai acestei percepții, precum diversitatea dietei (agendei) media și credința în teoriile conspirației. Prin intermediul unui sondaj național (N=1006) realizat în România în octombrie 2020, este analizat efectul celei de-a treia persoane și rolul pe care mass-media mainstream și cea online îl joacă în acest context. Principalele rezultate arată faptul că frecvența consumului de știri, încrederea în mass-media și credința în teoriile conspirației scad decalajul perceptiv dintre sine și ceilalți, în timp ce educația și diversitatea dietei mass-media îl intensifică.

***Cuvinte-cheie**: efectul celei de-a treia persoane; dieta media; consum de știri; teorii ale conspirației; COVID-19.*

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