

FAKE NEWS AND SOCIAL MEDIA: THE IMPACT OF EMOTIONAL LEXICON  
ON INTERACTIVE BEHAVIORS

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation [Proposal] Presented in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

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## ABSTRACT

As issues with fake news continue to increase, so does the need to understand better the motivation for interacting with these types of articles. Social media has become a primary source for finding news. Individuals within social media have the option to share, like, and comment on new articles. Interventions such as fake checkers, rater comments, and other types of warnings have been proven helpful in slowing the believability and interactive behaviors of fake news articles on social media sites. This qualitative, phenomenological study interviewed five participants to gain insight into how individuals experience the negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles and interact with these articles on social media. A modified Van Kaam analysis method found that the sample population does not interact (like, share, or comment) on fake news articles regardless of the language used. The study's findings also found that individuals feel compelled to discuss the topic in face-to-face settings, highlighting the importance of information sharing while avoiding digital platforms as the mechanism for achieving the goal.

*Keywords:* Social media, fake news, emotions, emotional lexicon, interactions, behaviors, psychology, social psychology

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## **Dedication**

To my dissertation chair, who provided guidance and patience during a long, challenging road. To the committee member who provided valuable insights and questions to help facilitate my growth and understanding of how to present information in a dissertation. To my children, who have been supportive and understanding of the long nights. Finally, to my wife, who has been patient, taken on extra roles when needed, and provided me the opportunity to complete this process.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

### **Introduction**

The concept of fake news has been around for a while but was brought more forcibly to public attention during the 2016 election (Garrett, 2019). Claims of fake news became a common issue on television news shows and social media. As misinformation becomes more problematic, much research has been conducted to understand the nature of the news and why individuals are willing to spread the fake news (Brady et al., 2020; Greenstein & Franklin, 2020). There is an increasing need to understand additional factors influencing believability and interactive behaviors. As more individuals become increasingly exposed to multiple news articles using social media (Chauhan et al., 2021), understanding the impact of the emotional lexicon within the article is needed to understand the spread of fake news better.

Previous research has found that fear-based and negative emotional lexicons impact the spread of fake news (Axt et al., 2020; Bakir & McStay, 2018; de los Santo & Nabi, 2019; Ermolaev et al., 2020). However, most people do not pay attention to the articles and often respond based on the headlines alone (Calvillo & Harris, 2022; Horner et al., 2021; Martel et al., 2020). Headlines are often the first thing an individual sees when receiving news from online sources. Individuals are potentially impacted by headlines alone, and this has a significant impact on individual's interactive behaviors. (Horner et al., 2021).

Little research has been conducted to understand how individuals respond to fake news articles if they read the information instead of relying on the headlines alone (Calvillo & Harris, 2022; Horner et al., 2021; Martel et al., 2020). Little research has

been conducted on emotions beyond fear-based messages (de los Santo & Nabi, 2019). This gap has been identified by de los Santo and Nabi (2019), who posit that there is still a need to understand how emotional states beyond fear and anger impact the interactive behaviors of social media users exposed to fake news.

### **Background**

Social Media and the misinformation crises are currently receiving much research (Chauhan et al., 2021; Clayton et al., 2019; Colliander, 2019; Pennycook & Rand, 2021; Talwar et al., 2019). From 2005 to 2019, social media use has risen by 5%, with over 72% of adults reporting regular use (Chauhan et al., 2021). The use of social media and information sharing through various platforms has recently been given more attention due to the 2016 election (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Garrett, 2019) and the COVID-19 epidemic (Constantinou et al., 2021; Ermolaev et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020; Laato et al., 2020). Greene and Murphy (2021) explore the effects of social media use, fake information, and behaviors and report that "research presupposes the grave consequences of fake news exposure, and it is often assumed that online misinformation must be harmful to democracy or public health... widespread disinformation campaigns can also have demonstrable effects on health behaviors" (p. 2).

These disinformation campaigns highlight the significant impact of misguided information on individuals' behaviors and potential responses to conflicting news (Greene & Murphy, 2021). The study results concluded that misinformation compared to validated information did alter individuals' willingness to comply with requests that could impact their risk of trusting the requests related to COVID-19 behaviors (Greene & Murphy, 2021).

Addressing the impact of fake news and perception is a complex issue. For the purposes of this research, the definition of disinformation is the provision of false or misleading information with the intent for it to be purposely spread and deceive those who read it (Colliander, 2019). Fake news is then a combination of disinformation and deceitful pieces of information to discredit vital information that is presented in a more reputable way (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

The 2016 election was one of the critical incidents that led to misinformation research. The amount of reported misinformation was alarming to journalists and scientists and impacted that election. The research results by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) purport that more than 62% of adults obtain their news from social media and that as many as thirty-eight million fake news posts were seen regarding the 2016 elections. The amount of misinformation is understood to impact the election (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Garrett, 2019). The same evidence supports how the public responded to the COVID-19 pandemic based on the presented information (Greene & Murphy, 2021; Kim et al., 2020; Laato et al., 2020). These misinformation articles or "fake news" often incite fear and require appropriate correction.

As misinformation and fake news continue to spread, there is a growing need to understand the impact of emotions on behaviors (de los Santos & Nabi, 2019). In addition to understanding the impact of emotions, there is an additional need to understand how individuals interact with these articles on social media (de los Santos & Nabi, 2019). More specifically, the impact of fear-based messages on interactive behaviors is a significant factor to understand better (de los Santo & Nabi, 2019). As the spread of fake news continues, much work has been done to understand ways to combat the spread,



including raters (Kim et al., 2019) and fact-checking warnings (Chung & Kim, 2021). Even with the development of these deterrents, there is still a need to understand further the motivations for why individuals interact with the articles in the manner they do.

### **Problem Statement**

The increased concern with social media use and misinformation has caused individuals to be misled or distrust factual news, even with evidence from reliable sources. The current study sought to explore how individuals on social media platforms experience the emotional lexicon found in fake news articles. Based on the complex nature of fake news, increased use of social media, and fear, this research argues that individuals' interactive behaviors differ depending on whether the fake news presents with positive or negative emotional lexicon.

Previous research has shown that fake news alters behaviors, results in negative cognitions, and impacts health (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Constantinou et al., 2021; de los Santos & Nabi, 2019). The negative consequences of fear are also well known, and fear typically impacts how individuals approach societal issues and life situations. Some approaches and responses may be positive for social changes and resolving problems. In contrast, at other times, these responses may hinder individuals and negatively alter their worldview.

Social media and the internet increased the availability of more news (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Chauhan et al., 2021). Individuals on social media can share posts about current events, but the information may not be from trusted sources. Firsthand accounts, propaganda pages, and manipulation techniques are more prevalent and easier to spread than ever (Duffy et al., 2020).

Understanding how the general public perceives news is vital (Wolton, 2019). A well-established news source's impact on individuals' behaviors is critical in receiving and responding to messages. However, if the material unveiled or released maliciously goes against what is supportive of the population prevails, then getting important information out to the public may be hindered (Saling et al., 2021). Although this may not be problematic daily, fundamental issues such as local crime, the impact on policymaking, public order, and even the most recent pandemic rules may be undermined, causing undue harm and delay to the public (Bronstein et al., 2019).

The current study sought to address the gap identified in research by de los Santos & Nabi (2019), who state, "future research would also be well-served by considering other emotional states commonly evoked by news content, including sadness and compassion, as well as blended emotions in and across news content" (p. 55). Fake news stories' impact on an individual's mental health is also critical to explore. As more negativity is received, it may also negatively impact mental health (Tunney et al., 2021). Although this is not always the case, Hunter (2021;2020) postulates that fear results in adverse reactions such as paranoia, isolation, and other undesirable effects. The impact of fake news on mental health must also garner research to understand the effects better. Understanding the impact of perceptions after exposure to fake news articles will hopefully allow for a more robust understanding of mental health and the behaviors associated with negative, misinformation news that is becoming more popular. Currently, it is not known how individuals experience the negative emotional lexicon found within fake news articles and the way individuals interact with these articles on social media platforms.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore how individuals on social media platforms experience the emotional lexicon found in fake news articles. A qualitative research method was chosen instead of quantitative methods to understand better the phenomenon's complexities and underlying motivation, opinions, and behaviors associated with the topic (Loraine et al., 2020; Rowley, 2012). Using qualitative research also allows for a more specific target population to participate in the project, which ensures exposure or experience with the phenomenon under investigation (Acharyya et al., 2019).

### **Research Questions**

#### **Research Questions**

The current research sought to understand how individuals on social media platforms experience the emotional lexicon found in fake news articles.

RQ 1: How do individuals on social media platforms experience the negative emotional lexicon found in fake news articles?

### **Assumptions and Limitations of the Study**

The concept of fake news continues to become problematic, which increases research and exposure. With the amount of conflicting news regarding topics such as the 2016 election and COVID-19, one major limitation is whether the research participants can distinguish between fact-based news and fake news articles. The complication in distinguishing between news types will potentially complicate whether individuals feel they share fake news.

Previous research shows that political beliefs and other factors potentially impact how individuals perceive real versus fake news (Bronstein et al., 2019). Understanding what different demographics understand as fake news potentially complicates the study. Additionally, due to the self-report nature of the research and individual interviews, individuals may interpret the concept of fake news in ways that fit their narrative.

### **Assumptions**

The concept of assumptions in qualitative research guides the researcher in making purposeful meaning out of the research findings (Adler, 2022). A qualitative phenomenological study is believed to provide deep, rich content (Adler, 2022; Rowley, 2012), exploring how participants experience the emotional lexicon of fake news articles in social media. While previous studies show that certain emotions, such as anger and fear, influence how individuals interact with fake news articles (de los Santos & Nabi, 2019), the number of search studies utilizing a qualitative approach is lower than anticipated (Duffy et al., 2020).

It was also assumed that a purposive sample population method would result in adequate participants (Acharyya et al., 2019). Additionally, the population age group was assumed to represent the public adequately. The appropriate age group for the proposed research was between the ages of 18 and 35. Using a purposive sampling technique also assumed that the population met the criterion (Acharyya et al., 2019) and was aware of fake news.

In addition to the population sample, there were assumptions underlying the received information. It was assumed that individuals answered the questions honestly (Rasinski et al., 2005). Qualitative research methods are meant to understand the deeper

mechanism guiding interactions with fake news. It was also assumed that the participants did not fact-check the article before the interview process to avoid skewed answers.

Finally, it was assumed that research questions are adequate and help to understand the unique nature of the currently proposed research (Rowley, 2012). The open-ended questions allowed individuals to explore different aspects of fake news articles without leading them or causing single-word answers. The interview guided the participants to help keep the conversation on track while also meeting the goals of exploring different components underlying the behaviors (Rowley, 2012).

### **Limitations**

One limitation of the current study was the short-term nature of the research. Repeated measures or longitudinal studies may provide insight that will be found within the current nature. The current research was completed after one interview with each participant and no follow-ups. Additionally, the current study has a limitation of application.

Due to the small sample size and location barriers, the research project's findings are limited in generalizability. There was a chance for diversity within the project; however, there were limited participants from a certain location. The assumption was that the population would be diverse to some degree and could be limited to one geographical location based on the response to the call for participation. Due to the one article being used in the proposed research, the generalization of the findings may be limited. Additionally, the target population for sample participants is individuals attending college and graduates. It is important to account for the education level of the participants as their

exposure to fake news may differ from other populations, and their critical thinking skills may also differ.

A potential challenge for consideration was the recruitment of participants. No incentives were offered, which was a potential cause for the lack of participation. Another consideration was the time in which data collection may occur. Schools may have lower attendance rates or be on a break depending on the time of year. Navigating the time data collection occurs was critical for successful completion.

A final limitation that the current project faced was not achieving the original sample size. It was originally proposed that the sample size be composed of 6-12 participants. The current study was able to recruit 5 participants, which was just under the original recommended amount. However, the information collected during the five interviews met data saturation requirements and formed apparent patterns. The lack of participation is a significant consideration when understanding the potential impact of the findings.

### **Theoretical Foundations of the Study**

The impact of behavioral influences remains one of the central components under investigation for social psychology. Many theories have attempted better to understand human behaviors toward authority and social norms. Foundational work by Asch (1956), Deutsch & Gerard (1955), and Milgram (1963) have provided valuable insight into the ways that individuals respond to perceived authority while striving to meet societal norms. Asch's studies paved the way for Milgram and other researchers to explore conformity and obedience.

The project by Solomon Asch (1956) established an individual's willingness to comply with incorrect answers when there is a fear of judgment in groups. Asch's critical findings regarding conformity were established using one participant in a group of 7-9 research assistants. Results of the Asch experiment found that one-third of the population was willing to comply with the majority, regardless of the appropriateness of the answers. Additionally, the more extreme the majority was, the more extreme the individual was willing to err (Asch, 1956). These findings help understand the impact of social norms and expectations on individuals while paving the way for the Milgram (1963) experiments.

Milgram (1963) sought to understand the impact of authority on individual behaviors, even if the actions are uncomfortable. In his seminal research project, Milgram brought 40 males into the lab at Yale University. The males were under the impression that they would be administering shocks to another participant during a learning exercise. The participants knew the right to discontinue the study at any point. However, the findings proved astonishing, with all the participants willing to administer the 300-volt shock simply by Milgram reassuring them it was okay to continue doing it (Milgram, 1963). Milgram's foundational work in the lab paved the way for helping to understand that most individuals will obey rules or orders even if they are uncomfortable.

Almost 50 years after the original study by Milgram was done, another research team found similar results. Doliński et al. (2015) replicated the foundations of the original by Milgram. The current version used 80 participant pairs to induce the same shock. The obedience rate within the Doliński et al. study resulted in 90% of the individuals obeying the research team's orders to continue administering shocks.

However, eight individuals refused to comply and withdrew from the study (Doliński et al., 2015).

Building on the work of Asch and other influential social psychologists, Deutsch and Gerard (1955) sought to understand better the normative and informational social norms that impacted behaviors. The results of the study by Deutsch & Gerard support previous findings by Asch while expanding on the information. Findings of the Deutsch & Gerard project found that over half of the participants felt obligated to conform with the majority. The group's influence was significant in both face-to-face and anonymous interactions (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955).

The findings of Asch (1956), Milgram (1963), and Deutsch & Gerard (1955) help to establish a foundation for understanding the ways that individuals may be easily swayed by others regardless of the correctness of the information. While the previous studies were completed in a lab and during a time without technology, the multiple factors of reassurance from perceived authority and wanting to fit in provide a unique insight into an individual's desire to belong. Individuals' willingness to comply with authority or groups for approval is critical to better understanding why individuals are willing to interact with fake news articles. In addition to the theoretical foundations guiding the current project, there are also Biblical foundations that provide additional understanding to the impact of deceit on human behavior.

### **Biblical Foundations**

While the previous theoretical foundations provide a firm understanding of the impact of authority and conformity on social norms and behaviors, the scriptures offer guidance on the dangers of deceit. 2 Corinthians 11:13 (*King James Bible, 1769/2022*)



warns Christians that individuals will attempt to deceive humanity while claiming to be apostles. In Colossians 3:9 (*King James Bible*, 1769/2022), the people are reminded about the importance of being honest with one another instead of lying and deceiving the world. These warnings are necessary due to the impact that the deceit played regarding the fall of humanity from the perfect relationship with God.

The Devil used a snake-like tongue to convince Adam and Even that the dangers associated with the Tree of Knowledge were just ways to keep humans from being equivalent to God (*King James Bible*, 1769/2022, Genesis 3:1-6). Since this initial false story was created, humanity has been faced with false news and “prophets.” The Biblical implications of spreading fake news result in a judgment for disobedience to God (*King James Bible*, 1769/2022, Ephesians 5:6).

In using words to deceive humanity, the Devil laid the path for false authority figures to achieve power. Matthew 24:24 (*King James Bible*, 1769/2022) warns about false prophets attempting to lead individuals away from the truth of God. Hamori (2010) further expounds on the topic of false authority causing disorder among individuals. Additionally, Hamori explains that falsehood is so significant that it is addressed multiple times throughout the Bible. As the world becomes more complex, fake news is an ever-growing danger that Christians must grapple with.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following is a list of definitions of terms that are used in this study.

**Emotional Lexicon** – Emotional Lexicon is defined as the emotional resources or words incorporated into an individual’s vocabulary (Ghanem et al., 2020).

**Fake News** – Pennycook et al. (2018) defined fake news as “news stories that were fabricated (but presented as if from legitimate sources) and promoted on social media to deceive the public for ideological and/or financial gain” (p. 1865).

**Social media** – Social media is defined as “dynamic online tools that facilitate the gathering, communication, and collaboration among individuals and communities” (Tutelman et al., 2018, p. 290).

### **Significance of the Study**

Previous research continues to find various contributing factors regarding how individuals perceive and interact with fake news stories (Pennycook & Rand, 2021; Struyf et al., 2017). Pennycook and Rand (2021) report that prior exposure, issues distinguishing between news types, and even political beliefs are a few factors contributing to individuals falling for and interacting with fake news. However, understanding the deeper connection between the emotional lexicon and interactive behaviors still requires further research.

Beyond understanding additional factors that potentially contribute to how individuals interact with fake news articles, the current research may provide another factor in combatting the fake news issue. Exploring how the emotional lexicon in articles potentially influences reactions from readers provides further insight into how to warn individuals that the news being viewed is inaccurate and fake. As more interventions and knowledge are found regarding this issue, there is a potential to decrease the spread of fake news while enabling the public to understand why articles are so impactful to them.

While much work has been focused on fake news, much of the research relies on the impact of headlines alone (de los Santos & Nabi, 2019; Ghanem et al., 2020; Horner

et al., 2021; Martel et al., 2020). Ghanem et al. (2020) report that emotional words and states help detect fake news stories but emphasize the importance of exploring the emotional flow within the articles' context. Individuals may be unaware of the interactions between emotions and interactions with fake news; however, the current research supports a strong interaction between emotions and interactive behaviors of fake news stories. Previous research has highlighted the impact of emotions such as hope and fear, but the impact of other emotions still requires more research (de los Santos & Nabi, 2019).

Research continues to grapple with the impact of fake news and ways to combat the spread of these articles (Aoun Barakat et al., 2021; Axt et al., 2020; Bakir & McStay, 2018; de los Santos & Nabi, 2019; Ghanem et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2019). The current study aims to strengthen the current knowledge in ways that potentially help with establishing additional methods for decreasing the spread of fake news articles on social media platforms. Horner et al. (2021) report that a negative emotional lexicon appears to influence sharing behaviors, but these findings were limited to headline exposure.

Furthermore, an individual's reliance on and belief in fake appears to be impacted by the emotional nature that the articles invoke within the readers (Martel et al., 2020). The foundations of these studies and others within the field continue to highlight the need to understand better why individuals are willing to share or interact with news articles that lack validity and truth.

### **Summary**

As issues with social media and fake news continue to be problematic, there is an increasing need to understand the motivation influencing the spread of these fake news

articles. Attention to various aspects of fake news has been central to previous work, including the impact of positive and negative emotional language within the articles. However, there continues to be a need to explore fake news as the information continues to spread in problematic ways.

A qualitative, phenomenological approach was utilized to explore the impact of the emotional lexicon on social media behaviors. Interviewing participants provided deeper insight into individuals' interactive behaviors (liking, commenting, or sharing) based on how fake news taps into emotions. Using a purposive sampling technique was the main recruitment method, with a snowballing technique as a secondary form of recruitment.

The major assumption for the proposed research was that the sample size adequately and meaningfully represents the general public. Additionally, the participants are assumed to have provided truthful and adequate answers during the interview.

Potential limitations for consideration included the issues with generalizability, time frame for completing the interviews, and getting enough participants due to lack of compensation. The current research's major delimitations included English as the primary language, age constraints (ages 18-35), and active social media use. This study sought to address the gap identified in research by de los Santos & Nabi (2019), who state that exploring additional emotional states within fake news articles will provide a deeper understanding of the impact of emotions on interactive behaviors.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview

As individuals become more active on social media, there is an increase in the probability that one may be exposed to fake news articles (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Fake news is not a new concept but is one that continues to become alarming. Research on social media increased in 2016 due to its influence on the election (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017) and increased in concern due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Greene & Murphy, 2021). Much of the current research has been quantitative and aimed at identifying ways to combat and reduce the spread of these articles (Bago et al., 2020; Calvillo & Harris, 2022; Pennycook et al., 2020).

With the intent of fake news being to deceive individuals purposely (Colliander, 2019), understanding the components underlying the spread of fake news has become increasingly important. Identifying methods to slow the spread of social media is beneficial but lacks a deeper understanding of the impact of content within the articles. Current findings show that variables such as politics and religion (Bronstein et al., 2019), anger (Greenstein et al., 2020), and fear (Klemm et al., 2019; McGonagle, 2017; Tunney et al., 2021) have impacts on an individual's susceptibility to fake news. However, most current research focuses more on the headlines than the deeper content of the articles themselves (Calvillo & Harris, 2022; Horner et al., 2021; Martel et al., 2020). This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to fill the gap noted by de los Santos & Nabi (2019) by exploring additional negative emotions within the articles and ways individuals interact on social media platforms.

### **Description of Search Strategy**

APA PsychNET was used to collect appropriate articles. Terms used to find appropriate material included “fake news,” “social media,” “psychology,” “spread,” and “emotional impact.” Results were filtered to narrow the search to articles submitted within the last five years. Only peer-reviewed articles were used for the analysis of the literature.

Dissertations were viewed to help with gaining a better understanding of current techniques and methods being used to explore the topic. Additionally, the use of Google Scholar helped identify specific articles to view. Finally, viewing sources that cited articles of interest and those cited with selected references were used to find similar studies appropriate to the current research.

Regarding Biblical application, scriptures on falsehoods and rumors were explored for relevant issues. The Bible version chosen for the currently proposed research was the King James version. Popular Biblical scholars were explored to provide additional materials to help develop a strong Biblical application of information. Scripture on authority, deceit, and lies was used better to understand the connection between psychology and Christian theology.

### **Review of Literature**

Fake news and misinformation are intended to disrupt the provision of quality, reliable information (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). With the problematic use of social media on the rise, there is a growing problem with accessing inaccurate or misleading information (Monsees, 2020). Individuals risk potential exposure to multiple conflicting stories, resulting in difficulties discerning real versus fake stories. The use of social

media also allows individuals to see news from multiple outlets without knowing the validity of the information. As these challenges continue to arise, it becomes critical to understand what fake news is and what constitutes social media.

### **Understanding Fake News and Social Media**

Addressing the impact of fake news and perception is a complex issue. Fake news is then a combination of disinformation and deceitful pieces of information to discredit vital information that is presented in a more reputable way (Colliander, 2019). For the current research, the definition of disinformation is the use of providing false or misleading information with the intent for it to be purposely spread and deceive those who read it (Colliander, 2019). Zannettou et al. (2019) posit that fake news is presented in eight formats: fabricated stories, propaganda, conspiracies, hoaxes, biased information, rumors, clickbait, and satire. The eight different forms of fake news do not have to be separate from one another but instead may overlap in various ways.

The 2016 election was one of the critical incidents that led to misinformation research. The amount of reported misinformation was alarming to journalists and scientists and impacted that election. The results of recent research by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) purport that more than 62% of adults obtain their news from social media and that as many as thirty-eight million fake news posts were seen regarding the 2016 elections. The amount of misinformation is understood as impacting the election. The same evidence supports how the public responded to the COVID-19 pandemic based on the presented information. These misinformation articles or "fake news" often incite fear and require appropriate correction.

While fake news is intentionally meant to mislead individuals, the articles are also meant to be ideological or allow for financial gain (Tandoc et al., 2018). To achieve this goal, creators of fake news content go to great lengths to make the medium of presentation look legitimate and to avoid questionability (Tandoc et al., 2018). When individuals begin to believe the information, it spreads in the intended ways. Additionally, individuals are more willing to click on links or read information based on the feel of the information alone.

Social media is itself a complex system that takes on many forms. However, Tutelman et al. (2018) define social media as "dynamic online tools that facilitate the gathering, communication, and collaboration among individuals and communities" (p. 29). The common feature of these social media networks is that individuals can freely and quickly connect with friends, family members, and professionals in their fields and even follow celebrities. In 2018, Facebook had a reported 1.86 billion users, and Twitter had 303 million active users (Tutelman et al., 2018). These high numbers mean that information sharing can occur in ways that were unheard of years ago. Social media also allows individuals from urban areas more access to news and even different generations to communicate and read the news. All this ease of communication and flow of information would seem helpful, yet it may not be the case.

The use of social media can be positive or negative. Social media allows individuals to connect in ways that were not possible before. The ability to instantly know what is occurring led to a unique consequence known as the fear of missing out (Blachnio & Przepiorka, 2018). Blachnio and Przepiorka (2018) report that the fear of missing out is categorized as constantly keeping up with social relationships for fear of



missing out on some significant event. This connection also leads to the free exchange of information. The ease with which information is available changes how individuals perceive the news.

### **Factors Impacting Belief in Fake News**

The various demographics on social media allow for various information to be explored. Because fake news can seem legitimate, there is no knowing how individuals will respond to articles that populate their "feed." Pennycook and Rand (2020) postulate that headlines, cognitive processing mechanisms, and faith can impact one's susceptibility to fake news articles. Repetition is another key factor determining the likelihood of believing in fake news.

Research by Bago et al. (2020) explored the impact of political beliefs and deliberation on individuals' susceptibility to fake news. A sample of 1,012 participants with different political views were recruited to gain a better understanding (Bago et al., 2020). Participants were exposed to 16 different headlines that favored both Republicans and Democrats. Findings from the research by Bago et al. found that when individuals took time to deliberate on the headings, their ability to distinguish between headlines increased. A within-subject analysis determined no significant effect between political affiliation, response, and headline strength (Bago et al., 2020). However, Bago et al. found a significant effect of political affiliation on headline veracity, with more individuals accurately identifying factual versus fake news.

The findings by Bago et al. (2020) show the challenges in getting politically challenging articles to resonate with the political party presenting misleading information. When individuals are willing to spend time evaluating the information, there

is a good chance of recognizing the falsehood of the article. Stanley et al. (2022) provide additional support for the impact of bias and source on an individual's willingness to quickly believe information, regardless of the truthfulness of the information.

Understanding the importance of critical thinking in evaluating headlines alone helps provide potential interventions for fake news spread but does not account for the impact of emotional bias.

Pehlivanoglu et al. (2021) recruited 717 undergraduate students to further their understanding of analytical thinking on fake news detection. A 2x2 mixed design method was used to evaluate the impact of critical thinking, the ability to determine the difference between fake and real news, and the intensity of the article headline. Results from the project by Pehlivanoglu et al. found that higher analytical reasons resulted in greater accuracy in identifying fake news ( $z = 4.53, p < 0.001$ ) (Pehlivanoglu et al., 2021). There was no influence from the credibility of the news source on fake news detection. However, individuals have more credibility in real news than in fake news (Pehlivanoglu et al., 2021). One key takeaway from the study is that analyzing the articles' rationale improves the chances of identifying true versus fake news stories.

### **Previous Exposure**

It is critical to evaluate and understand how previous exposure guides susceptibility in examining the impact of fake news on perceptions and susceptibility to the news. Current research by Pennycook et al. (2018) has shown evidence that even prior exposure to one fake news story raises the chance of individuals believing in future fake news functions even when a label states that the source has been disproven as accurate. To better understand the extent to which previous exposure to fake news affects

individuals, Pennycook et al. completed three studies that assessed people's identification of fake news compared to accurate news and the impact of previous exposure. The second and third studies focused more on prior exposure than on study one.

The second research study investigated by Pennycook et al. (2018) comprised 500 randomly selected participants. The second and third research is most relevant to understanding the impact of fake news and previous exposure. In the second study, the participants completed three stages that exposed them to fake and real news articles. The final part of the research assessed people's views of the articles for accurately identifying fake or real fake news. A 2x2x2 ANOVA analysis of results showed a significant main effect of previous exposure on identifying fake versus real news (Pennycook et al., 2018). Prior exposure also had a positive main effect on better identifying false versus true news (Pennycook et al., 2018).

The third study evaluated, used a population of 1,000 participants selected randomly from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (Pennycook et al., 2018). Study three was a replication of study two with additional questions involved. The results of study three were analyzed using a 2x2x2 ANOVA to assess an individual's success in identifying fake news articles. The results of study two were similar to study one, and a significant interaction was found in identifying the accuracy of fake news articles. Unlike study two, study three found no significant main effect of warnings attached to news articles in helping to identify real versus fake news articles. The findings of the Pennycook et al. (2018) study help recognize the extent and impact of identifying fake news based on prior exposure to similar articles and attaching certain identifiers to the articles themselves.

Calvillo and Harris (2022) completed additional research on the impact that headlines can have on people's perceptions and potential susceptibility to fake news stories. A sample of 244 randomly selected participants was shown multiple article headlines. A total of 30 headlines were shown half true and half fake. Additionally, the participants were exposed to headlines phrased as questions and others phrased as statements (Calvillo & Harris, 2022). A two-way repeated measures ANOVA found a main effect regarding prior exposure to fake news articles and an individual's ability to accurately identify true versus false articles. (Calvillo & Harris, 2022). A second follow-up study by Calvillo & Harris found similar findings with a different sample population of 262 participants.

This raises the question of what characteristics or traits make individuals less likely to fall for fake news, even when the articles look legitimate. One of the strongest determinates regarding susceptibility to fake news is analytic thinking (Ross et al., 2021). In the current research, Ross et al. (2021) found a positive correlation between those who could analyze and think logically about the articles and their ability to identify potentially misleading reports. Questioning the reality of news and noticing that something may not be true is just one component of individuals identifying fake news and avoiding the influence it tends to have.

### **Fear and Susceptibility**

The previously mentioned fear of missing out phenomena has led to an interesting connection with believing in fake news. Fear of missing out (FoMo) has been proven to cause negative emotional features in individuals, including increased depressive symptoms, weariness, and desolation (Pundir et al., 2021). FoMo can help predict the

online behaviors of individuals as it relates to what they search. Although the individual intentionally seeks out some news, there are instances where news is found unintentionally, either while searching for some (Möller et al., 2020) or stumbling across it through other means, such as Facebook. This unintentional finding of information may lead to an increase in susceptibility and acceptance of fake news.

FoMo and social media connectivity also lead individuals to conform or fit in with others, like school peer pressure. However, the connection and conformity are different. As many researchers understand, conformity intends to match behavioral factors and responses to other individuals even when the results contradict the individual's conventions (Colliander, 2019). Social media takes a different form than before, where others may dress a certain way or even perform challenging rituals to be part of the "in crowd." In the digital age and social media, conformity is often done through sharing posts, commenting on a favorable opinion on a public forum, and responding to different topics to gain peer approval (Colliander, 2019). Individuals may overlook the fear component of the message they are reading initially and instead share the information. As a result, the individual then perpetuates the spreading of fake news and subsequently spreads messages of fear.

FoMo is one just component primarily associated with social media interactions while also helping to understand the impact of fear in general. A great deal of research has been dedicated to the impact of social fears and fears-based messages in social media (Bakir & McStay, 2018; de los Santo and Nabi., 2019; Ermolaev et al., 2020; Ghanem et al., 2020; Hase et al., 2020; Horner et al., 2021; Hunter 2021;2020; Klemm et al., 2019; Martel et al., 2020; Möller et al., 2020; Pundir et al., 2021; Struyf et al., 2017). Research

on fear has typically relied on quantitative research and self-report measures to understand better the impact of headlines and emotions on the interactive behaviors of social media users. Current research shows that fear significantly impacts an individual's responses to news articles.

Fear drives the individual to respond negatively (Klemm et al., 2019). Although the news intends to deliver facts and current situations, the reporter(s) often expound on the situations with bias (Wolton, 2019). The media reports want their opinions (most associated with political viewpoints) to be understood. In doing so, fear may be the mechanism for driving behaviors in a certain way. The fear often drives change or responses, although it also impacts other components of the viewer's receptivity. The fear mechanism works to influence individuals beyond just a behavioral component.

When fear is the context in which messages are delivered, negative perceptions and motions are often the response. Research by de los Santos & Nabi (2019) found that fear-based messages cause individuals in the community to be more aware of societal impact, resulting in higher negative attitudes towards offenders. When news is delivered via television or video, emotional base cues are easier to recognize, and the underlying message is well understood. Yet, internet-based news may leave vital context out or over/under-emphasize points that potentially impact the perceptions of the individual reader. However, the research does not provide a clear understanding of how multiple exposures to fake news, with the differentiation between trust versus untrusted sources, may impact the behaviors of individuals.

One of the most profound examples of the impact was individuals' responses to fear-based news about the recent pandemic. Research by Kim et al. (2020) found that an

overwhelming amount of COVID-19-related fake news resulted in individuals not seeking out accurate information or thoughtfully being able to evaluate the accuracy of the news. Ermolaev et al. (2020) explore the effect of long-term exposure to social fears. The findings support that when individuals experience the same message over a prolonged period, they are more likely to struggle with obtaining their goals. Prolonging the exposure also results in other negative effects, such as increased distress levels, inability to assess the situation properly, decreased attention level, and other psychophysiological struggles (Ermolaev et al., 2020). Individuals' ability to think analytically about messages read in the news increases their susceptibility to fake news. This decrease in analytic thinking is one of the key things the news media sometimes relies upon.

Although the news articles that media companies present are meant to convey truth, they are often fear-driven or have a component of fear that helps get the point across (Hase et al., 2020). Research findings revealed that in 15,487 articles across 28 years (from 1990 to 2017), 83.22% of all articles had a fear-driven message behind them (Hase et al., 2020). The implications of this research show that news relies on the fear of the public to be more effective in delivering its message. The main messages of fear are central to "'Individual Fears & Phobias' and 'Religion'" (Hase et al., 2020, p. 1397) and relate to topics such as terrorism, health, and crime, and fear-inducing topics.

Additionally, analytic thinking may indicate the ability to decipher valid news from fake news (Ross et al., 2021), but additional factors contributing to being more preceptive to fake news should be understood. Current research has shown that common factors in individuals with higher susceptibility to fake news include dogmatism,

fundamental religious beliefs, and delusion thinking (Bronstein et al., 2019). According to the study by Bronstein et al. (2019), the fundamental beliefs individuals rely on appear to play a vital role. The religious beliefs are found in Scripture, as well as the truth that God presents humanity. News that goes against what is righteous, just, and within the worldview of a fundamentalist is hard to acknowledge. It becomes even more problematic when the information is anti-religious or uses religious premises to incite fear (such as focusing on church shootings).

### **Impact of Fear**

One of the deeper issues with fake news is the justification of fear. Is the fear perception accurate, and what purpose does it serve? Fake news has systematically impacted past political events such as the Cold War, hoaxes such as Pizzagate, and other various "events" where disinformation impacted the events (McGonagle, 2017). The damage that fake news causes can be destructive and detrimental to the progression of social issues. Individuals may question authority, fail to abide by law and order, or even riot because an article is misleading. However, individuals may become more aware of their surroundings and more suspicious of events around them. How individuals seek out or find news may be identifiable. Humans follow a set of behaviors after the behavior has been reinforced. Research appears to show that human behavior can explain how individuals engage with fake news (Aoun Barakat et al., 2021; Colliander, 2019; de los Santos & Nabi, 2019).

The responses to fake news and individuals' willingness to explore the articles provide a unique juxtaposition. Tunney et al. (2021) purport that "people can follow a news topic to some degree and simultaneously avoid immersing themselves intensely



and/or habitually in the coverage. A fear-inducing news topic is likely one people both 'follow' and 'avoid'" (p. 614). Individuals may at first read the message for the essential information. The perceptual response after reading will guide the individual to seek further information for clarity or avoid the topic altogether due to emotional overload. Even if the individual chooses to share the information, they may not want to hear anything more about it. The unique consequence may be a lack of confirmational information or even clarity regarding the topic.

Beyond fear-based messages, understanding who falls for fake news is also an ongoing issue. Some research tries to implicate the Republican party as one of the foremost perpetrators of fake news sharing and use the 2016 election to justify this claim (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). However, this does not necessarily reflect who may fall for and believe fake news. Pennycook and Rand (2020) explore this issue and report that when individuals were given political articles, the person's ideology did not weaken their susceptibility to fake news, which is a core challenge with fake news. It is hard to know who will or will not believe the fake news, although there may be factors that help determine an individual's belief against fake news.

Axt et al. (2020) conducted research that provides additional insight into the potential impact of political ideology on belief. A series of quantitative studies were completed by Axt et al., which focused on the need for personal structure and media bias. The results of the four studies found that structure was positively associated with perceptions of media bias and conservatism (Axt et al., 2020). Media bias was also found to be important in both Democrats and Conservatives when examined independently (Axt et al., 2020). The Axt et al. research results align with other studies that find

conservatives more trusting in fake news stories than their Democratic counterparts (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Pennycook & Rand, 2020).

A recent study by Ermolaev et al. (2020) examining the impact of monitoring news feeds associated with COVID-19 found that when exposed to negative but trustworthy news, individuals experience increased negative symptoms such as slow thinking, decreased memory and attention, and altered perception processing. This type of research allows a more robust understanding of news's impact on perceptions, health, and behaviors. Ermolaev et al. found that fear of failure, defeat, rejection, and suppression positively affected individuals' active involvement in spreading fake news with COVID-19. The negative feelings that fake news headlines tend to cause others to share the information (Ermolaev et al., 2020). Ermolaev et al. further posit that social fears increase interaction with fake news articles.

### **The Spread of Fake News on Social Media**

The issue of fake news is complex and extends beyond understanding why people believe these articles. With social media being a popular form of information sharing, it is important to understand just how problematic fake news on social media is (Aoun Barakat et al., 2021; Bago et al., 2020; Dhir et al., 2019; Guess et al., 2019; Vosoughi et al., 2018). How individuals behave in a digital world, and the impact of others helps to understand how widespread and far-reaching fake news can become. Additionally, understanding the extent to which individuals are willing to share information on social media (regardless of the truthfulness) also comes under critical evaluation.

Different social platforms can influence the spread of information through various means. Dhir et al. (2019) explain that Facebook users have a greater influence on

spreading content and interaction with articles by clicking the "like" button. Along with "liking" comments, Facebook users tend to share or comment on articles, with the potential to tag friends to bring attention to the articles (Dhir et al., 2019). Dhir et al. recruited 728 junior and senior high school students to explore motivation and reason for "liking" behaviors on Facebook.

A structural equation statistical analysis model found a direct effect of social presence, self-efficacy, habits, and primary influence, with no significant effect on hedonic motivation and reciprocal benefits (Dhir et al., 2019). The implications of the findings show that perceived benefits from "liking" relationships and interactions with others are often enough to encourage interacting with the content that friends post (Dhir et al., 2019). Individuals are motivated by the sense that their intentions will be received in a manner that returns recognition. Although this study does not focus on the reasons for interacting with fake news, it helps understand general social media platform actions.

Vosoughi et al. (2018) aimed to view the extent that fake news was spread using Twitter as the only platform under investigation. Vosoughi and his team sampled 126,000 articles that were independently checked for factuality. A Komogorvo-Smirnov test was utilized to explore the difference in the spread of the article. The project findings found that fake news was more likely to be shared than factual news, with increases occurring between 2012 and 2016 (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Fake political news was the number one type of news to be spread. The findings also showed that individuals who shared fake news articles were less active on Twitter (K-S test = 0.054,  $P \sim 0.0$ ), had fewer followers (and followed fewer groups), and were often unverified by Twitter (K-S test = 0.125,  $P \sim 0.0$ ) (Vosoughi et al., 2018). The results imply that unverified sources share enough false

information to spread fake news, which is 70% more likely than factual news when running a Wald chi-square test (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

Other factors identified in spreading fake news articles include political agenda, attempts at gaining attention from others, and reaction to the nature of the headline alone (Pennycook & Rand, 2021). Individuals respond to emotionally impactful headlines, leading to issues distinguishing whether the news is factual or fake (Pennycook & Rand, 2021). Previous research exploring the impact of emotions on news-sharing behaviors determined that article headlines that produced emotions such as fear or hate impacted the emotional state of individuals viewing the articles and increased the chances of the article being shared (Pennycook & Rand, 2021).

Different cultures also appeared to be impacted differently by fake news. Hsu et al. (2021) explored the difference in twitter behaviors between Americans and Japanese. A sample of 523,810 tweets was sampled from a total of 4,056 individuals. A within-culture comparison found that Americans post more positive content (Hsu et al., 2021), with Japanese individuals having similar findings. When evaluating the content that Japanese users share, approximately 55.53% of all content produced low arousal content (Hsu et al., 2021). Hsu et al. further analyzed the between-culture comparison results and found that US users were likelier to post high positive arousal content tweets. This study is one of the few studies that help understand how other cultures respond to emotionally heavy articles and finds (dis)similarities in how cultures respond to different articles.

Gimpel et al. (2021) posit that an additional factor accounting for the spread of fake news relies on social norms. A sample of 320 active social media users found a significant effect of social norms (and warning attachments) on the spread of fake news

(Gimpel et al., 2021). A 2x2 between-subject ANOVA test found that when social norms are attached to fake news articles, there is a 96 percent increase in reporting fake news. The findings of the Gimpel et al. study emphasize the impact people have on each other regarding the spread of fake news.

Additional factors beyond social norms have been identified in the spread of fake news. A qualitative study by Rodrigo et al. (2022) aimed to understand better why individuals share fake news. Rodrigo et al. interviewed 22 individuals to help better understand some of the reasons for sharing fake news on social media sites. Common factors identified in the Rodrigo et al. study include motive for sharing (accidental or purposeful), platform fears (such as clickbait and information overload), the credibility of the source, and how relatable the article's content is. These findings are important as they highlight individuals' willingness to share false information without regard for its truthfulness and become overwhelmed by the vast amount of conflicting news (Rodrigo et al., 2022).

Aspects of the Rodrigo et al. (2022) study had similarities to a study by Shirsat et al. (2022). Shirsat et al. utilized a qualitative research approach to interviewing eight participants regarding new behaviors in social media. The results found that information overload and identification of fake news impacted how people interact with fake news (Shirsat et al., 2022). The study also found that individuals fall into four categories of behaviors: individuals seeking out only legitimate news, individuals with low levels of interaction with fake news, those with high levels of interaction, and those who choose to lack interaction with credible news (Shirsat et al., 2022). The findings of the Rodrigo et

al. study and the Shirsat et al. study are some of the few projects that have attempted to focus on the deeper psychological reasons for interacting with fake news articles.

Duffy et al. (2020) took a qualitative approach to explore the spread and sharing of fake news on social media by interviewing 88 individuals in focus groups. Group sizes comprised 12 participants and aimed to explore some motivations behind sharing behaviors. The Duffy et al. study found that motivation for sharing included keeping up with friends, confirming personal biases, and accepting the stories without fake checking. Additionally, older generations of individuals appear to share more and check less in an attempt to appear wise and encouraging (Duffy et al., 2020). The current findings highlight the need for and importance of exploring additional motivation and the impact of fake news articles.

### **Way to Slow the Spread**

Current research does propose possible methods for reversing the impact of fake news and even the believability of the news. In a study exploring possible interventions for spreading fake news, Pennycook et al. (2020) pose that one possible solution is attaching warnings to the articles, such as "verification through a third-party source" or other means of identifying the news as fake. Immediacy in providing these labels and fact-checking articles has been proven vital in addressing the fake news issue. Basol et al. (2020) explore ways to combat fake news articles by trialing the significance of fact-checking. A recent study by Brashier et al. (2021) stated:

timing of fact-checks matters: "True" and "false" tags that appeared immediately after headlines (debunking) reduced misclassification of headlines 1 wk later by 25.3%, compared to an 8.6% reduction when tags appeared during exposure

(labeling), and a 6.6% increase (Experiment 1) or 5.7% reduction (Experiment 2) when tags appeared beforehand (prebunking) (p. 3).

These finds are significant factors in understanding the impact of fake news and perceptions on an individual's thinking. The findings of this research allude to the possibility of having ways to shift individuals' perceptions concerning the news being read.

The results of the Brashier et al. (2021) study are further evidence of other research regarding this issue. In a follow-up study to research by Pennycook and Rand in 2017, Clayton et al. (2019) found results similar to those of the later investigation by Basol et al. (2020). Clayton et al. found a moderate decrease in fake news belief by attaching the words "disputed" or "rated false" to articles. These labels and the labels from the Basol et al. study were influential, allowing individuals to become more aware of the fake news and attempt to interfere with the continual spread of false and misleading information.

Research by Gimpel et al. (2021) finds additional support for the effectiveness of perceived social norms in how individuals interact with fake news articles. Findings from Gimpel et al. use a regression analysis model to explore the impact of injunctive social norm messages, descriptive messages, and the impact of combining the two interventions. A regression analysis found that injunctive messages increase fake news reporting by 96 percent, whereas descriptive messages increase the chances by 58 percent (Gimpel et al., 2021). The study's findings highlight the impact of perceived acceptable behaviors on an individual's interactive behaviors.

The findings by Gimpel et al. (2021) help strengthen previous studies' findings that show others' behaviors impact each other. Goldenberg and Gross (2020) posit that emotional contagion extends beyond the physical world and is just as prevalent in the digital environment. Understanding how individuals mimic each other's emotions and evaluate social appraisal of their behaviors and responses is critical to better-understanding individuals' impact on one another (Goldenberg & Gross, 2020). The need to be accepted and able to relate to others drives emotional contagion both in face-to-face and digital interactions.

In addition, finding ways to slow the spread and highlighting fake news are counterproductive ways of slowing the spread. Susmann and Wegener (2022) report that attempting to retract fake news may inadvertently increase the belief in the news. In a sample of 192 undergraduate students, a significant main effect was found on discomfort in belief after a retraction of a news article was completed (Susmann & Wegener, 2022). The study's findings also highlight the importance of stopping the spread of fake news instead of correcting the articles after publication.

Up to this point, the main focus has been on social media and fake news, yet the individual's perceptions are one of the main components of how the news is interpreted. The individual's perceptions also guide behavior and can influence the ways in which individuals interact on social media sites (Struyf et al., 2017). Struyf et al. explore how fears generalize to other components of an individual's life. In their research, Struyf et al. find that after exposure to a fear-inducing incident, individuals are more regularly stimulated when misperception occurs, increasing the fear response.



## Understanding Perception

It becomes crucial to understand perceptions to understand better why perceptions impact an individual's well-being and health. Perceptions can be a response to physical elements or mental struggles. Merriam-Webster (n.d) defines perception as "awareness of the elements of environment through physical sensations // color perceptions" and more in alignment with the current study as "physical sensation interpreted in the light of experience." The physical sensations are the issues more prone to be expressed as anxious behaviors or negatively impacting the individual (Strufy et al., 2017). The perceptual response is usually quick, short-term, cognitively driven, and requires a specific comprehension capacity (Merriam-Webster, n.d). Perceptions are, therefore, how individuals understand the messages or experiences within their lives and the impact they have.

Some of these perceptual bases are inherent in our five senses. This can cause a difference in how individuals perceive different events. Jonason and Sherman (2020) posit that a combination of objective qualities (like the texture of an object or temperature) and subjective qualities impact how an individual perceives an event. When an individual becomes aware of different information, social interactions and personal evaluation of the situation are active, guiding the individual's perception of the event (Jonason & Sherman, 2020).

News presenters face these challenges as they attempt to convey what information they feel is important, while also attempting to recount the events. Individual reporters may not have all the event(s) information. Furthermore, Wolton (2019) reports that much of the news is heavily influenced by political bias. Although there are credible news

sources, news reporters often use presentation bias or omission to emphasize the message the news companies feel meets their political alignment (Wolton, 2019). This leads to many aspects of the situation, potentially impacting the news presentation. However, does this mean that one news story is fake because it does not have the same information as another? This is why understanding fake news can be challenging. The real challenge is when news from reliable sources becomes "fake news" because the one-story challenges the rest or does not provide information that the rest do.

### **Negative Emotions, Fake News, and Social Media**

With an increasing interest in combating fake news, there has also been work on identifying specific concepts that influence the spreading of the news. Much work has been dedicated to understanding the impact of fear and other negative emotions mentioned in new headlines (de los Santos & Nabi, 2019; Ghanem et al., 2020; Horner et al., 2021; Martel et al., 2020). The work completed so far has identified common factors, including anger and anxiety (Martel et al., 2020), sadness and disgust (Ghanem et al., 2020), and desire (Horner et al., 2021). Horner et al. (2021) utilized the *Discrete Emotions Questionnaire* to identify validated negative and positive emotions.

In examining the impact of fears (and other negative emotions such as anger) on an individual's responses to fake news, Horner et al. (2021) sought to explore how article headlines could influence participants. Horner et al. recruited 879 participants using Mechanical Turk to complete the research. Participants varied in different demographics, including their political beliefs. Horner et al. assessed anger, disgust, fear, anxiety, sadness, desire, relaxation, and happiness against each other. A repeated ANOVA analysis found a significant difference between a significant main effect in all

comparisons except for anxiety and sadness, anxiety and relaxation, and disgust and fear. (Horner et al., 2021).

Additionally, Horner et al. (2021) found a main effect between the headline and political party was found after a MANCOVA was conducted ( $F_{98, 2943} = 1.483, p < .002$ ). A final component of the research by Horner et al. focused on the interaction between emotional reactivity and emotional unaffectionate on the individual's sharing behaviors. The ANOVA results found that individuals who were higher in the emotionally reactive group were more likely to share the articles or help spread the news than those who felt unaffected by the headlines.

The research by Horner et al. (2021) focused mainly on political articles and solely on the impact of the article headlines on individuals' social media behaviors. The research results were significant in better understanding the impact of emotions on behaviors but did not include an analysis of the content within the articles. Horner et al. identify that further reach is needed to understand other aspects of emotions that may have social media and fake news behaviors due to the complex nature of the issues.

Martel et al. (2020) further explored the impact of emotions and headlines on the spread of fake news articles. Martel et al. aim to add the additional component of understanding how political beliefs potentially impact headline perception. A sample of 409 randomly selected participants were shown 20 headlines from articles that had appeared on social media sites to explore potential interactions between emotions, headlines, and political beliefs (Martel et al., 2020). Half of the articles were true, half were false, and the articles were split between Republican and Democratic favoring.

After exposure to the articles, participants answered a questionnaire assessing the perceived accuracy of the articles. A two-factor analysis was used to evaluate the results of the study. Findings from the research by Martel et al. (2020) supported the hypothesis that emotionality impacts an individual's belief in fake news. Both positive and negative emotions impacted believability in fake news headlines. Furthermore, the findings suggested that political opinions were less influential in fake news susceptibility than emotions (Martel et al., 2020). The studies found no significant impact of the political nature of the articles on believability of the articles (Martel et al., 2020).

Additional research by de los Santos & Nabi (2019) explored the impact of key emotions such as anger, fear, and hope within fake news articles and the way individuals interact with these articles. De los Santos & Nabi utilized a qualitative, self-report methodology comprised of 452 undergraduate students to identify the impact of emotions. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 26 and encouraged to participate by being offered extra credit in class (de los Santos & Nabi, 2019).

Individuals were exposed to a news website and a specific stimulus to gather information (de los Santos & Nabi, 2019). Individuals completed two self-report assessments that explored how they felt regarding policies proposed during the assessment and an emotional manipulation scale to determine which emotions were being witnessed while reading different articles (de los Santos & Nabi, 2019). De los Santos & Nabi also used software to track how often different articles were clicked and the amount of time spent on each article by the participants.

De los Santos & Nabi (2019) provide additional insight into the interconnectivity of emotions in interactions with fake news behaviors. A 4x2x2 ANOVA found that anger

emotional states in articles had a more significant impact on participants than hope, fear, and other emotions (de los Santos & Nabi, 2019). There were additional significant findings in the individuals having hope when reading hope-based messages. The research by de los Santos & Nabi identifies the gap: "future research should examine how emotions influence other online news activities, including watching related video clips, participating in online polls, and news story sharing. Future research would also be well-served by considering other emotional states commonly evoked by news content." (p. 55). The current study sought to understand how individuals on social media platforms experience the emotional lexicon found in fake news articles.

### **Biblical Foundations of the Study**

The Bible provides a variety of considerations when understanding the secular world and the deception found within. In Romans 12:2 (*King James Bible*, 1769/2022), the author reminds Christians that conformity to this world is antagonistic to the purpose we aim to achieve; the transformation through the Holy Spirit brings us closer to God and allows for discernment. The initial spread of fake news can ultimately be seen in the Devil deceiving Eve in Genesis 2-3 when Eve chooses to believe the fake news from the Devil that the fruit from the tree would not be problematic. From then on, deception has been a noticeable struggle in human history. Fear has driven individuals to do horrible things to resolve distressing feelings. The greatest of all examples of fear was Jesus' crucifixion on the cross.

Jesus was a man of honor and sought to preach truth to the world. However, when his message went against what the priests found reliable, a plan was set to discredit Jesus, ultimately leading to his true sacrifice on the cross. During this decision, the priests were

led by fear and could not see past the perception of what the coming Savior would look like. The priest had the glorious image of Jesus, as described in Revelation, and in being unable to see anything else, the priest felt that Jesus was spreading fake news. Much of the public at the time also felt the same. However, before, after, and even during Jesus' trials, God and the prophets of the Bible encourage handling fake news and fear.

The psalmist in Psalms 112:7 (*King James Bible, 1769/2022*) encourages individuals not to fear bad news but to stand strong in their trust in the Lord. Although fear is a problem in this World, God is with individuals to provide comfort and guidance. Again in 2 Thessalonians 2:2 (*King James Bible, 1769/2022*), the people receive a reminder that although the news or words that may be spoken of this are fearful at times, we are not to be shaken. The Lord is with us through it all and provides a source of strength.

Scriptures also warn that spirits and deceit are intentionally meant to mislead Christians (Hamori, 2010). Hamori (2010) explains many instances in which deception is meant to pit people against one another. Individuals then use fake news and falsehoods to break up alliances and sway readers to view inaccurate opinions. The prophets of the Old Testament often fought against the deceit of false idols and laws to provide the people with the truth of God (Hamori, 2010). It takes strength to navigate the various news sources and identify fake from real news.

This message of strength is seen multiple times as God is with his people through all challenges. However, as believers in faith, Christians receive instruction that knowledge and news are important. Proverbs 25:25 (*King James Bible, 1769/2022*) instructs Christians to understand the news of faraway countries and know what is

happening. Regarding reliability, the news allows Christians to be aware of the current trials of this world. If Christianity's goal is to comfort the hurting, then one of the ways to achieve that goal is to know where individuals are hurting, even if the news is scary. Those who are hurting need the message the most, yet the fear often inhibits Christians from seeking those in dangerous situations out. Although this is against the Biblical message of courage, strength, and reliance on God, it is understandable from different perceptions of individuals.

Perceptions result from beliefs, worldviews, and different occurrences in one life. Although it is not the sole reason for negative perceptions of the news, politics plays a role in what news individuals follow and to what extent it may impact them (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). This same basis to certain news sources allows the messages to be spread according to whether an individual trusts the source and is willing to validate the claim. Yet this fails to address how multiple exposures to many articles impact perceptions.

### **Perceptions and Biblical Understanding**

Another key component to perceptions is how truth in the Bible guides Christians and the answer within regarding such topics as fear and belief in the news of the secular world. The Bible provides a variety of considerations when understanding the secular world and the deception found within. In Romans 12:2 (King James Bible, 1769/2022), the author reminds Christians that conformity to this world is antagonistic to the purpose we aim to achieve; the transformation through the Holy Spirit brings us closer to God and allows for discernment. The initial spread of fake news can ultimately be seen in the Devil Deceiving Eve in Genesis 2-3 (King James Bible, 1769/2022) when Eve chooses to

believe the fake news from the Devil that the fruit from the tree would not be problematic. From then on, deception has been a noticeable struggle in human history. Fear has driven individuals to do horrible things to resolve distressing feelings. The greatest of all examples of fear was Jesus' crucifixion on the cross.

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Perceptions result from beliefs, worldviews, and different occurrences in one life. Although it is not the sole reason for negative perceptions of the news, politics plays a role in what news individuals follow and to what extent it may impact them (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). The political implications and the deceit that results from humanity's fall provide a unique challenge in combating and understanding why individuals are willing to interact with unverified information.

### **Summary**

Current research has highlighted significant interactions between components of fake news articles and social media behaviors. Fear (Klemm et al., 2019; McGonagle, 2017; Tunney et al., 2021), previous exposure (Pennycook et al., 2018), and political affiliation (Bago et al., 2020) are a few of the components that underlie an individual's willingness to believe fake news articles. Individuals tend to believe articles in line with personal beliefs, which does not always allow for the analytical application of the information being read (Pehlivanoglu et al., 2021). These findings have been critical in helping to explore ways to slow the spread of fake news.

Current findings have identified multiple interventions that help bring awareness to the truthfulness of articles and help to slow the spread of fake news. Interventions currently relying on identifying fake news are most effective before individuals read the content of the messages (Brashier et al., 2021; Clayton et al., 2019; Pennycook et al., 2020). Techniques appear to help slow the spread of fake news but fail to identify how individuals' perceptions and motivations to spread fake news are impacted by emotional content.

This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to explore how individuals on social media platforms experience the emotional lexicon found in fake news articles. Using quantitative methodology, the methods for establishing and identifying fake news and exploring factors may provide more generalizable results but do not focus on the emotional lexicon interaction's personal aspects. Using an interview approach to qualitative research provided a more intimate look at motivations and impacts from articles that extend beyond general concepts. Additionally, using a purposive sampling technique helped to ensure that participants have had exposure to fake news and knowingly interacted with the articles in some way.

## CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHOD

### Overview

This qualitative phenomenological study sought to explore how individuals on social media platforms experience the emotional lexicon found in fake news articles. Research by de los Santos & Nabi (2019) identified the need to explore additional behaviors and emotions that fake news articles may invoke in readers. The researcher used one-on-one interviews to gain insight into the motivation behind the continued spread of fake news articles based on emotional impact. A phenomenological methodology provided deep insight into how individuals experience emotions and perceptions that lead them to help spread fake news. It also provided insight into the potential external influences (i.e., family and friends) on the individual's behaviors.

Seventy-two percent of adults report regular social media use (Chauhan et al., 2021), and more than 62% of adults receive their news from social media (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), there becomes an increasing opportunity for individuals to be exposed to fake news. Fake news has existed for some time but gained traction because of the 2016 presidential election (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Garrett, 2019). Much of the research has focused on headlines' impact (de los Santos & Nabi, 2019; Ghanem et al., 2020; Horner et al., 2021; Martel et al., 2020) and are quantitative in nature. Previous research has found impacts from anger and fear-based headlines. Still, it has not viewed the deeper issues of understanding how the emotional lexicon of the article itself may be impacting individuals. This study sought to describe how the negative lexicon influences

an individual's interactive behaviors and motivations to perpetuate the spread of the articles.

Understanding the impact of attention-grabbing headlines continues to be critical in combating fake news; however, it does not always halt individuals from looking at the deeper context of the article. Prior research exploring emotions beyond fear and anger did not seek an understanding of additional impacts resulting from fake news articles. The terms identified by the EmoLex were used by the participants in describing their experiences with social media and fake news (Mohammad & Turney, 2010).

### **Research Questions**

#### **Research Questions**

The current research sought to understand how individuals on social media platforms experience the emotional lexicon found in fake news articles.

RQ 1: How do individuals on social media platforms experience the negative emotional lexicon found in fake news articles?

### **Research Design**

A qualitative descriptive phenomenological study provided deeper insight into the emotional lexicon's impact on online behaviors. Loraine et al. (2020) explain that qualitative research is useful when the self-report measures do not adequately understand the topic under investigation. Data collection occurs in one of four ways using qualitative research: documenting study, observation, interviews, and focus groups (Loraine et al.,

2020). While each method is effective, the nature of the current research required the interview method to gain insight into how people interact with fake news articles.

Document analysis type of studies rely on analyzing a case or situation, whereas observational methods attempt to witness behaviors more naturally (Loraine et al., 2020). A focus group approach to information gathering is similar to interview methods, with multiple people exploring the topic simultaneously (Loraine et al., 2020). Using an interview approach allows for subjective information and motivational insight (Loraine et al., 2020) without unneeded influence from other participants. Due to the more personal nature of an interview, written responses are typically not a part of the data collection (Loraine et al., 2020).

Using an interview approach required verifying the accuracy of the statements made by participants and summarizing the information meaningfully (Loraine et al., 2020). Unifying themes were identified to help better understand various components of the topic under investigation. Relevant quotations were important during the analysis and reporting phase to help emphasize central components impacting an individual's behaviors. Using qualitative methods allowed for exploring potentially unseen complexities of individual behaviors (Adler, 2022).

Much of the previous research regarding fake news and social media behaviors focused on self-report measures. While previous studies have identified common reasons for the behaviors, the study's focus has not been understanding how individuals react positively or negatively. Although much of the work has been quantitative, research by Rodrigo et al. (2022) and Shirsat et al. (2022) utilized a semi-structured interview approach to better understand potential motivators and emotions associated with

spreading fake news. Duffy et al. (2020) took a different approach to qualitative research, using focus groups to explore similar challenges and highlight the complexities of fake news behaviors and their impact. Rowley (2012) posits that interviews allow the researcher to gain insight into participants' experiences, opinions, and behaviors associated with the topic under investigation. Semi-structured interviews allowed for open dialogue with the participants while also helping to guide the conversation.

### **Participants**

The researcher sought to gather a population sample of 6-12 participants. The population sample size was developed after reviewing the work of Rodrigo et al. (2022), who interviewed 21 participants, and Shirsat et al. (2022), who used 8 participants to achieve the goal. All participants were volunteers, and initial contact was made through Liberty University. The minimum requirement for participants was to be between 18 and 35 years old and use social media at least four hours weekly. Appropriate ages for participation in the research were between 18-35. All participants were required to speak fluent English. Individuals received a study information sheet stating that their information would be confidential and that no identifying information would be a part of the final review. Individuals were provided a chance to decline participation and could withdraw at any time without incurring harm.

Participant selection occurred through the use of purposive sampling. According to Acharyya et al. (2019), purposive sampling targets individuals who meet certain requirements and removes randomization from the process. Criterion sampling, a sub-category of purposive sampling, requires that individuals meet specific stipulations to be considered an appropriate fit for the research (Acharyya et al., 2019). The ultimate goal

of purposive sampling is to help narrow the participant pool, including only individuals with experience with the phenomenon under investigation. Shirsat et al. (2022) use a purposive sampling technique as it allows the selected participants to be able to provide more detailed insights from the participants.

Snowball sampling was considered a second recruitment type if purposive sampling did not meet the need. Acharrya et al. (2019) posit that snowball sampling occurs when selected participants can refer other individuals to a part of the study due to similar characteristics. Rodrigo et al. (2022) used snowball sampling to help recruit appropriate participants and found participants who did not feel pressured to complete the study. Potential challenges with snowball sampling include losing track of the referral chain or gaining too many participants (Acharrya et al., 2019), which is why it was considered a secondary recruitment form.

Other sampling techniques that were not considered for use include probability, convenience, and quota (Acharrya et al., 2019). Probability sampling involves the chance that participants have a fair chance of being selected but may not be a good candidate for the research (Acharrya et al., 2019). Convenience sampling involves the recruitment of participants based on the ease of access to participants (Acharrya et al., 2019). Quota sampling is a non-randomly selected-based technique that is meant to ensure a broad range of demographics are part of the research (Acharrya et al., 2019). While these techniques may be appropriate in some settings, the nature of this research required that individuals meet specific criteria.

As quantitative research relies on a large number of participants for data analysis, qualitative research focuses on the more intimate aspects of a smaller sample population

(Accarrya et al., 2019; Malterud et al., 2021). Malterud et al. report that there are no direct guidelines regarding proper sample size for qualitative research but instead highlight factors for consideration. One key consideration for population sample size was that the research must gather enough data from the participants who participated in the research project to result in data saturation and yield meaningful findings in the form of sub-themes and an overarching theme (Accarrya et al., 2019; Malterud et al., 2021). This research sought to achieve a population size of 6 to 12 individuals, which is within the ranges utilized by researchers such as Duffy et al. (2019), Rodrigo et al. (2022), and Shirsat et al. (2022).

### **Research Procedures**

Participant selection was first completed through an email sent to Liberty University detailing basics about the nature of the project, participation requirements, and how to contact the researcher. Due to the targeted nature of the study, individuals had to meet specific criteria to participate. Individuals responded to the invitation to participate through email. Upon initial contact, participants completed a basic survey to determine the research's appropriateness (see Appendix A). Basic information included the participant's name, gender, race, age, and amount of self-reported social media usage every week. The survey was conducted using Google Forms, which allowed individuals to complete the information at their convenience.

Once individuals were selected, they received a study information sheet (see Appendix B) outlining the nature of the study. Participants were then required to coordinate with the researcher to establish an appropriate day and time for one-on-one interviews. Participants viewed a fake news article (see Appendix C) one week before the



interview. The researcher selected the article to ensure it meets the criteria of being fact-checked and proven false. Individuals received the news article as a PDF sent to their email for viewing. Participants did not know the article's truthfulness to avoid any bias during the interview. The article was selected from snopes.com to verify it is fake.

Participants made initial contact with the researcher via email to ensure information is properly tracked. Individuals completed the demographic survey using SurveyMonkey. The individuals were also sent a study information sheet after being deemed appropriate for the study. Finally, the participants received a PDF email of the news article being viewed for research purposes. When individuals could not access a PDF, a JPEG version of the article was made available. Individuals were instructed to read the article prior to the interviews as it was the central point for starting the discussion.

Interviews were conducted through Zoom, allowing for recording and transcription. The process started with an introduction and explanation of the research. Participants then explored the impact of the article sent out, ways they usually interact with articles of similar nature, and reasons for interacting in certain ways. The interview process was semi-formal, which allowed participants to explore aspects of the articles that may have been previously unconsidered. Each interview lasted between 35 minutes to 1 hour, depending on how much information the participant disclosed (Rowley, 2012). The recommended time frame followed examples by Rodrigo et al. (2022) and Shirsat et al. (2022) and helped deal with data saturation.

Data saturation is defined by LaDonna et al. (2021) as “the point in data collection where interviews are either no longer generating new information or when

researchers determine that they have ‘heard it all’” (pp. 607). Appropriate sample size and length of time for conducting the interviews are relevant for achieving saturation (LaDonna et al., 2021; Rowley, 2012). Having interviews limited to a maximum of one hour provided the participants enough time to explore the nature of the questions without becoming redundant. Due to time constraints, the participants were only interviewed once.

### **Interview Requirements**

Lorraine et al. (2020) posit that semi-structured interviews help with gaining insight by using open-ended questions to guide the direction of the conversation. Question lists are meant to be a guide for the research but should be able to accommodate participants in instances where they are unwilling or unable to answer a question (Lorraine et al., 2020). Rowley (2012) provides guidance on how long an interview should last, noting aspects of consideration, including researcher time and participant time constraints. There are no definitive lengths of time for interviews, but it is recommended that twelve participants spend thirty minutes in the interview (Rowley, 2021). Researchers such as Duffy et al. (2020) and Shirsat et al. (2022) completed interviews within a maximum of an hour. Following the guidance and recommendations from previous researchers, an appropriate time for conducting the interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 60 minutes (Duffy et al., 2020; Rowley, 2021; Shirsat et al., 2022).

While some participants may be hesitant about using technology due to privacy concerns or limitations, face-to-face interviews are important for better interpretation and connection with the individual (Rowley, 2012). One of the inclusion requirements for individuals to participate was a willingness and capability to use the requested

technology. The requirements were clearly outlined in the study information sheet. Individuals unable to meet the request were offered a chance to meet in person (if they were within the local area). Individuals not within the local area and unwilling to meet the video conferencing requirement were unable to participate in the research.

### **Technological Considerations**

The use of technology for conducting social science research is small (Archibald et al., 2019). Important advantages and disadvantages of using programs such as Zoom require consideration. The benefits of using Zoom or similar programs include real-time interactions, face-to-face communication, and the ability to conduct research with individuals not in the immediate area (Archibald et al., 2019). Zoom offers the additional benefits of having secured recordings and safe handling of the transcripts/recordings (Archibald et al., 2019). However, the disadvantages of technology require the most attention.

Archibald et al. (2019) posit several potential issues that may arise when using internet-based communication programs. Previous studies have found that some programs face stable connectivity issues, including dropped calls, poor audio and visual quality, and issues with the researcher reading verbal clues (Archibald et al., 2019). The importance of accurately transcribing and interpreting the results of the interviews relies on a stable connection with clear audio. Therefore, the researcher needed to outline the technical requirements from the Zoom site for participants.

Cooper (2016) posits that safeguarding participants is a critical research component. Researchers are ethically required to take significant steps to protect participants' confidentiality regardless of where or how the research is conducted

(Cooper, 2016). To safeguard the participant's identity and information, Cooper proposes utilizing techniques such as assigning a unique identification number to each participant, keeping the information in separate folders, using up-to-date encryption, firewall, and hard-to-figure-out passwords, and getting rid of identifying information as soon as possible. Achieving this standard required the researcher to ensure that all technology was appropriately updated and maintained.

### **Instrumentation and Measurement**

Individual demographics that were identified for the research included age, gender, ethnicity, and political affiliation. The age range for the research was 18-35. This study was meant to identify the impact that "fake news" encountered via social media has on individuals' interactive behaviors on social media sites (i.e., sharing, liking, and committing). Individuals received an article for reading before the interview and be used as a reference for data collection.

Participants received the study information sheet through their email before receiving the article. Participants established a mutually agreed upon date and time to complete the interview. Participants received the news article through email no sooner than one week before the interview day. The potential issue with receiving the article as a PDF was the potential limitations with opening the file type. Participants were instructed that if they had problems accessing the PDF, a picture of the articles could be sent. If individuals could not open either means, the participants were instructed to provide the researcher with an option they could access.

Due to the nature of the project, the participants needed not to receive the article too far out from the interview. Early viewing of the article could potentially influence the

participants' opinions; however, each person must read the article. To verify that individuals had read the article, they were asked to provide a summary of the information at the start of the interview. If it was determined that the participants had not read the article before the interview, they were offered 5 minutes to review the article before continuing.

The NRC Word-Emotion Association Lexicon (EmoLex) created by Mohammad & Turney (2010) was critical in selecting an article that had empirically supported a negative tone. The EmoLex contains a database of 14,182 words that fall within ten categories (Mohammad & Turney, 2010). The word list was compiled using Mechanical Turk to explore words associated with each other and compile a list of words that fall within each category. The EmoLex is free for commercial use, including research purposes. While the EmoLex was developed and published in 2010, no revisions to the initial lists have been made since then. According to the publisher's website, the only changes that have been made to the EmoLex were the Readme section and some of the translations. Due to the limited/non-significant changes to the lists, the original version met the requirements of this proposed research.

Due to the interview nature of the study, individuals needed to be able to access the internet. Individuals received a verified fake news article that was the central point of discussion during the interview. The article for viewing had been pre-selected by the researcher, who verified the article's accuracy using Snopes.com. Additionally, participants needed a device compatible with Zoom (must have a camera and microphone) as this was the primary form of communication for the interviews. Zoom served as a recording opportunity, and a backup device was chosen to avoid the loss of

transcripts due to technical issues. The backup device was an iPad Pro (12.9-inch) (3rd generation) (model #MTFR2LL/A).

Archibald et al. (2019) report that Zoom is the most reliable video conferencing platform compared to others, such as Facetime and Skype. However, technology is not always reliable and has the possibility of losing connection, having audio issues, and being reliant on the device it is operating on (Archibald et al., 2019). While it is a requirement that the individual had access to a zoom-compatible device, a phone was acceptable only as a backup method. The phone call method potentially impacted the rapport part of the interview (Archibald et al., 2019) and allowed the individuals to engage in activities that distracted them from the interview. Participants were made aware of the importance of resolving the connection issue and how a phone call may result in misinterpreting data due to missing certain facial cues.

Participants were sent a study information sheet at the same time they scheduled a meeting day and time with the researcher through a Google Forms email (see appendix E).

The article selected for the project was originally reported by CNN and proved false by snopes.com. For the current project, the article used focused on alleged dangers that may occur if an individual comes in contact with fentanyl. One of the key lines from the report that meets the criteria is when it states, “Green, who had worn gloves while searching the suspects’ car, collapsed on the floor. Police believe he was experiencing an overdose” (CNN, 2017). According to the EmoLex, the word “overdose” met the criteria

to be classified as a negative word (Mohammad & Turney, 2010). The overall article has a fear-based and negative tone to and is proven to be fake news.

After agreeing on a date, the participants received an email to schedule their time and a Zoom link. Participants were informed that the interview was being recorded to ensure the accuracy of transcripts, how their information will remain confidential, and that the recordings would be deleted after three years, per IRB recommendations. In accordance with recommendations by Rowley (2012), the interview started with a basic introduction and talks that helped the participants feel more comfortable about the process. Once a level of rapport was established, the researcher began with questions about fake news exposure in general, which led to specific questions regarding the article sent for review.

Due to potential challenges with technology (disconnections, audio challenges, etc.), participants needed to provide a phone number to be contacted in case of emergency. In line with guidance from Stahl & King (2020), participants were offered a chance to review the finalized transcript of their session to ensure accuracy and clarity. At the bottom of the transcripts were two boxes where their participants were able to identify either having reviewed the transcript or declining to do so.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis comprised two main components: an analysis of the interview transcripts and the development of themes to better understand the phenomenon under investigation better (Nowell et al., 2017). The primary method for transcription was the recording feature on Zoom. According to Singh et al. (2022), using Zoom's transcription services serves two critical functions: time effectiveness and providing the researcher a

chance to review the information in a secondary component. However, being able to see the pre-developed transcription does not ensure the accuracy of the interviews. The audio recordings were replayed and matched up to the transcripts manually to ensure the accuracy of the information and account for errors such as incorrect grammar or periods where audio was inconsistent.

Participants were made aware of the requirement to record the meeting to ensure the statement's accuracy. Individuals were also allowed to correct any errors or clarify a portion of their statements if needed. An iPad Pro (12.9-inch) (3rd generation) (model #MTFR2LL/A) was a secondary form of data collection to account for the potential of having a technical issue with audio transcription.

Member checking provided participants with a copy of the transcripts to provide feedback (Adler, 2022; Stahl & King, 2020). Another benefit of member checking is that the researcher gets a second opinion regarding the interpretation of the results and helps validate the results (Adler, 2022). To consider the participant's time, this researcher provided the participants with the summary transcripts and was sent the full transcript in case of discrepancies (Loraine et al., 2020).

This qualitative phenomenological study sought to explore how individuals on social media platforms experience the emotional lexicon found in fake news articles. To strengthen the field of understanding regarding this challenge, the identification of themes was important. Nowell et al. (2017) posit that thematic analysis is a core component of qualitative research as it helps better define and categorize commonalities among the research participants. Developing themes helped coding and categorizing the information into meaningful accounts (Nowell et al., 2017). Key phrases or sentences



were used to code themes for the proposed research. The phrases or sentences (as the two may or may not be separate) focused on the emotional states that the participants felt while reading the articles, information on typical interactive behaviors, and the motivations guiding the behaviors.

Data analysis was conducted using the modified Van Kaam method proposed by Moustakas (1994). Moustakas proposed a seven-step procedure for identifying themes within a phenomenological interview approach to data collection: listening and early groups, reduction and elimination of irrelevant data, clustering the themes, finalization of themes, constructing textural descriptions, constructing structural descriptions, and finally, developing a textural-structural description. Each step of the analysis process requires attention to meet the standards.

Step one of the processes ensured that phrases, emotions, and feelings are accounted for when making meaning out of the interviews (Moustakas, 1994). Although participants were guided using a semi-structured interview, it was essential to determine the information relevant to the study and describe it in enough detail to be applicable (Moustakas, 1994). After themes were initially identified, properly clustering the themes and then finalizing the themes selected are essential in bringing a detailed description of the phenomenon under investigation. Once themes were finalized, the researcher developed individual textural descriptions based on keywords or descriptions. Moustakas (1994) explains that textural descriptions are meant to understand the individual participants' lived experiences. The structural descriptions provided by each participant focus on the descriptions each individual uses (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, the textural-

structural description focused on the collective information from each participant to identify the unifying themes and subthemes (Moustakas, 1994).

The identification and categorization of themes were accomplished using NVivo. Sotiriadou et al. (2014) explain that NVivo software is digital software meant to analyze transcripts and help identify common themes. In addition to helping with theme identification, NVivo helps with data organization. One of the critical benefits of NVivo compared to other types of analysis software is the level of engagement that the researcher has to put in to ensure that proper codes are assigned and evaluate the accuracy of the theme (Sotiriadou et al., 2014). The developer website reports that the current version of Nvivo is version 14, which was used to analyze the interview transcripts.

Qualitative research requires the researcher to ensure the findings meet the trustworthiness standard of qualitative research (Nowell et al., 2017). The interview nature of the research requires data analysis and results to meet five important criteria: trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

### **Trustworthiness**

Nowell et al. (2017) report that trustworthiness is key to good qualitative research as it is one of the major factors impacting how other researchers understand the legitimacy of the findings. Establishing trustworthiness relies more on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Nowell et al., 2017); however, a few initial factors may help meet the standard. Adler (2022) suggests that one way to understand trustworthiness better is to equate it to rigor. Trustworthiness starts with building on a theoretical framework and clearly outlining the methods used within the

project (Adler, 2022). A detailed description of the data collection and analysis process helped meet the trustworthiness factor.

### **Credibility**

Establishing the credibility of the findings is key for qualitative research. Credibility is related to the accuracy of the information received from participants and the appropriate interpretation of findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Similar to the internal validity in quantitative research, credibility allows other researchers to have confidence that responses and interpretations were genuine statements made by the participants (Korstjens & Moser, 2018)

This researcher employed a member check system to help establish the credibility of the findings. Transcription and interpretation of information are challenges that qualitative research must address (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Member checks allow research participants to verify the answers' accuracy and clarify points of misunderstanding (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). With studies relying on communication instead of data, it is important to have accurate accounts of the statements made to ensure the results are accurate and meaningful.

### **Transferability**

Stahl and King (2020) report that the standard of transferability is one of the most complex aspects of conducting qualitative research. Whereas quantitative research means generalizability and replicability, qualitative research requires a different way of achieving the standards (Stahl & King, 2020). Qualitative research aims to increase the knowledge regarding the phenomenon under investigation with the application (Stahl &

King, 2020) but requires future researchers to determine appropriate use (Nowell et al., 2017).

One way of achieving the standard of transferability is triangulation. Stahl & King (2020) report that triangulation is the process of using two or more methods to verify the data's accuracy. Different types of triangulations include methodological, data, investigator, theoretical, and environmental. The current research focused on data triangulation, which included listening to each interview, reviewing notes and observations made during the interviews, and transcribing/checking the accuracy of the transcriptions. Due to time constraints, researcher triangulation may not be possible.

Qualitative research relies heavily on detailed descriptions of methodology, data collection, and results (Stahl & King, 2020). Achieving the standard of transferability means that the researcher provides a deep description of the population demographics, the setting for the research, and the intended setting in which the application of results is most appropriate (Stahl & King, 2020). To achieve the standard of transferability, this researcher provided detailed information regarding the participants' demographics, including educational levels and basic understanding of the topic under investigation. The transferability of the results was limited due to the interviews' personal nature and identification with fake news.

### **Dependability**

The core foundation of dependability in qualitative research is the strength with which other researchers trust the results (Stahl & King, 2020). Therefore, the research manuscript should be publication-ready and requires the researcher to establish a process to ensure accurate results (Stahl & King, 2020). Nowell et al. (2017) posit that

dependability can be achieved by striving to have a process that is “logical, traceable, and clearly documented” (p. 3). Stahl and King posit bracketing as a method for dealing with dependability.

Using bracketing allows the researcher to separate observations from interpretation (Stahl & King, 2020). All researchers are impacted by a bias, which is often where the inquisitive nature of the phenomenon develops (Stahl & King, 2020). Researchers such as Shirsat et al. (2022) use randomly selected participants to provide feedback regarding the questions being asked. Using the feedback from a participant allowed the researcher to provide challenges with the clarity and open-mindedness of the questions (Shirsat et al., 2022).

Shufutinsky (2020) reports that using Epochè is another consideration for establishing dependability. Using Epochè in qualitative research requires the researcher to set aside preconceived ideas about the topic (Shufutinsky, 2020). Using Epochè techniques is one of the ways that the researcher can maintain curiosity and openness to findings that may challenge expectations (Shufutinsky, 2020). Awareness of personal values, prejudicial thinking, and personal connection to the topic are key components in actively implementing Epochè methods (Shufutinsky, 2020). Using techniques inherent in bracketing, such as question clarity, provides a chance for the researcher to become aware of how these different aspects may potentially influence the interview and the presentation of information in the data analysis.

The concepts of Epochè and bracketing are used interchangeably but can have different applications (Bednall, 2006). Bednall (2006) posits that the pivotal difference between Epochè and bracketing lies in each concept's applications. Epochè is considered

to be a continuous process during research. At the same time, bracketing occurs only during the interpretation of data or in situations where the researcher has a personal connection to the information (Bednall, 2006). The intentional application of both concepts is necessary to develop a more accurate, unbiased interpretation of the information discovered during the interviews.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability is the degree to which the research findings are objective (Stahl & King, 2022). Unlike quantitative research, which uses statistics as information presentation, qualitative research must be precise and accurate when conveying the findings (Stahl & King, 2022). Providing a clear account of participant information transcripts helped confirm the results' interpretations. Rodrigo et al. (2022) provided the use of direct quotations in addition to summarizing information to help meet the confirmability criteria.

## **Delimitations, Assumptions, and Limitations**

### **Delimitations**

The concept of fake news is challenging to navigate yet becoming more problematic (Tandoc et al., 2018). A few delimitations occurred to ensure the information obtained during the study is relevant. Individuals must have active social media use and receive some portion of their news through these outlets to participate.

Additionally, due to potential barriers, fluency in English was a requirement. This requirement helped avoid any interpretation issues or language barriers that may occur. All participants were 18 years of age or older. This ensured no extra permissions were needed, such as parental consent, to complete the study. A final delimitation for

consideration was selecting a purposeful technique and using a qualitative project instead of other types of projects.

Gentles et al. (2015) posit that purposeful sampling allows the researcher to focus on individuals who will be an appropriate fit based on specific criteria. The key difference between purposeful sampling and other types is that the participants are selected based on familiarity with the phenomenon under investigation. Purposeful sampling limits the target audience as it potentially excludes certain groups of people.

If a minimum of 6-12 participants was not successfully recruited using purposive sampling techniques, a snowballing technique was proposed to be utilized to achieve the recommended number of participants. Snowball sampling occurs when recruited participants are able to refer other individuals to be potential participants in the research (Acharrya et al., 2019). Selected participants had to have some understanding of the requirements while having social networks, which the researcher may not have access to based on the location of recruitment. Additionally, participants knew which of their friends or family members met partial (if not all) requirements to participate in the research.

### **Assumptions**

The current research has important assumptions for consideration. Assumptions of the current project included the depth of information obtained during interviews (Adler, 2022; Rowley, 2012), appropriate sampling techniques and size (Acharrya et al., 2019), honest responses (Bell et al., 2016; Rasinski et al., 2005), and a better understanding of

the phenomenon under investigation (Rowley, 2012). These assumptions helped guide the research while ensuring the standards of validity were met.

Using interviews in qualitative research is meant to advance the information on a topic by exploring deeper aspects of the phenomenon that may not be achievable using self-report assessments (Rowley, 2012). Interview-based research aims to collect facts while acknowledging the impacts of opinions, experiences, and behaviors (Rowley, 2012). The assumption that the information is meaningful and provides additional understanding of the phenomenon is critical in developing accurate and significant results (Adler, 2022; Rowley, 2012). The population sample must properly represent the public for the information to be meaningful.

Acharyya et al. (2019) posit that sampling methods are necessary to avoid having unmanageable amounts of data and individuals to address. Although the sample selection may be small, it was assumed that the information is representative of other people with similar demographics and exposure to the phenomenon (Acharyya et al., 2019). Using a purposive sampling technique met the assumption that the participants had been exposed to the topic under investigation by meeting pre-established criteria (Acharyya et al., 2019). If the purposive selection did not yield the required number of participants, a snowball sampling technique was used as a secondary option.

Snowball sampling occurs when appropriately selected participants inform people they know about the research and refer them as potential candidates (Acharyya et al., 2019). Selected participants had basic insight into the nature of the research and were able to reach out to individuals outside the initial recruitment zones for potential involvement (Acharyya et al., 2019). Referred participants completed the same screening



as those recruited through the initial process to ensure proper experience with the phenomenon under investigation.

Assuming the sample size is appropriate and meets standards of acceptance relies on looking at similar research projects. Rodrigo et al. (2022) and Shirsat et al. (2022) both utilized semi-structured interview methods to explore aspects of fake news and had sample sizes of 21 (Rodrigo et al., 2022) and eight (Shirsat et al., 2022). These sample sizes guide the assumptions of an appropriate sample for the current research.

Achieving the assumption that answers from the participants are honest begins with building rapport (Bell et al., 2016). The semi-structured nature of the interview allowed the researcher to have an open dialogue with the participants without straying from the intended subject (Bell et al., 2016). Rasinski et al. (2005) state that factors deterring the potential truthfulness of research participants include embarrassment, disapproval, or unwillingness to disclose certain information to unfamiliar individuals. It was important to allow the participants to feel like the interview is a safe place to disclose information while also helping them understand why true answers are critical. It is important to develop a deeper understanding of the topic being explored (Bell et al., 2016; Rasinski et al., 2005).

Qualitative research methods are used to gain a deeper insight into both observable and invisible factors impacting the nature of the identified phenomenon under investigation (Loraine et al., 2020). It was assumed that using an interview-based, qualitative approach to research would result in the findings presenting information based on facts and insights regarding opinions, experiences, and behaviors (Adler, 2022;

Rowley, 2012). The current research intends to add information to the ever-growing body of literature regarding the extent and impact of the spread of fake news on social media.

### **Limitations**

Limitations for the study required a clear understanding to avoid research bias (Taherdoost, 2022). One limitation of the current study was that individuals may have different opinions or understanding regarding fake news. Differences in understanding fake news may include political beliefs and prior exposure to fake news (Pennycook & Rand, 2021). While individuals may have encountered the term fake news on various platforms, it is important to understand that users are exposed to different amounts of fake news articles, and many do not necessarily look past the article's headline (Pennycook & Rand, 2021).

Due to the small sample size, the findings lack generalizability. Taherdoost (2022) explains that the small sample size of qualitative research means that findings do not necessarily generalize to other groups or cultures. In addition to a small sample size, the participants' demographics were another factor impacting the generalizability of the results. The purposive sample process occurred through a university, meaning that the population may have different levels of exposure to education, may be more aware of the issues, and may critically analyze the information differently. Therefore, the findings may not generalize to other populations and may also differ between individuals in undergraduate programs compared to those in graduate school. These limitations required an analysis of the results within the interviewees' scope. The purposeful selection

technique that was used for finding appropriate participants potentially excluded many interested individuals.

Other potential limitations that were encountered during the data collection phase include how engaged the participants were during the interviews. Rowley (2012) explains that some participants may feel pressed for time, bored, or threatened to answer the questions in a way that meets the researcher's wants. It was vital to help the participants feel a sense of ease and openness during the data collection to ensure accurate responses.

Assumptions for the current study included the appropriateness of using a qualitative phenomenological approach, adequate sample size, honest answers that are unbiased by fact-checking the article, and proper research questions. Using a qualitative interview approach to research allowed for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Adler, 2022; Rowley, 2012; Stahl & King, 2020). The depth of application and understanding from qualitative, interview-based research relies on the participants providing accurate and honest answers (Rowley, 2012). Assuming that clients were honest during the interview provided better insight into the impact of emotional states on interactive behaviors associated with fake news articles (de los Santos & Nabi, 2019). The use of interviews also allowed for understanding past experiences with the topic (Taherdoost, 2022).

Assuming the interview questions were adequate enough to gain meaningful information is critical to interpreting and identifying themes (Nowell et al., 2017). Using a semi-structured interview rather than a structured format allowed participants to explore

different aspects under investigation while allowing the researcher to ask follow-up questions that may not be initially identified (Rowley, 2012).

A key component of qualitative research is ensuring that the participant sample size is adequate to understand the phenomenon in other populations or settings (Nowell et al., 2017; Rowley, 2012; Stahl & King, 2020). While the sample population of qualitative research is smaller than quantitative, the same goal of generalizability should be met (Nowell et al., 2017; Rowley, 2012). The generalizability of findings relies on the proper selection of participants and having a big enough sample size to be deemed a fair representation of others with similar demographics (Nowell et al., 2017; Rowley, 2012; Stahl & King, 2020).

For the current research, the participants must provide honest answers. Shirsat et al. (2022) posit that confirmation bias could impact the answer. Confirmation bias occurs when individuals intentionally seek out information that will support personal beliefs in some way (Shirsat et al., 2022). Honesty from the participants is critical to understanding better how emotional lexicon and emotional states impact an individual's interactive behaviors.

### **Summary**

Quantitative research has been the primary method for exploring the ways individuals interact with fake news on social media. As the topic becomes more problematic and gains more attention, there are attempts to understand better the more intimate aspects of an individual's fake news behaviors using qualitative research (Rodrigo et al., 2022; Shirsat et al., 2022). This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to explore how individuals on social media platforms experience the emotional

lexicon found in fake news articles and fill the gap identified by de los Santos & Nabi (2019) by exploring other emotions within articles.

This research sought to gain insight into the behaviors of individuals when experiencing the emotional lexicon found in fake news articles on social media platforms through subthemes and themes that arise from the rich data provided during the interviews. Using a semi-structured interview method for qualitative research allowed the researcher to explore what components may influence these interactions and the extent to which verbiage matters.

The study was limited in generalizability to those similar to the research sample population. However, the findings have the potential to help strengthen interventions to deter individuals from spreading fake news. This deterrence includes perpetrating fake news articles and spreading them by word of mouth in everyday conversations.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

### Overview

The present study sought to understand better the impact of negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles on interactive behaviors on social media platforms. The target population for the study was individuals between the ages of 18 and 35 who use social media regularly to view news. A purposive criteria-based selection process was used to recruit appropriate candidates for the interview section. The purpose of the study was to explore the gap identified by de los Santos & Nabi (2019), who state, "future research would also be well-served by considering other emotional states commonly evoked by news content, including sadness and compassion, as well as blended emotions in and across news content" (p. 55).

A qualitative phenomenological approach to data analysis and collection was used for the current study. The phenomenological approach allows this research to gain a deeper insight into the interactive behaviors of social media users when viewing fake news articles that utilize a negative emotional lexicon as a central part of the writing style. Looking at how people experience the negative emotional lexicon in fake news articles allows the researcher to understand multiple aspects of how the fake news article influences behaviors (Moustakas, 1994).

Five semi-structured one-to-one interviews were conducted to gain insight into the impact of negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles. Study participants were provided a chance to reflect on how they understand fake news, typical interactive behaviors with articles in general, identification of fake news, and outside factors. The guiding research question for this study was:

RQ 1: How do individuals on social media platforms experience the negative emotional lexicon found in fake news articles?

The five semi-structured interviews provided common themes associated with the impact of negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles on social media platforms. The themes were developed based on common statements related to the interview questions. Participants were questioned on behaviors, the influence of the verbiage of the fake news articles, their understanding of fake news, and the potential impact that family and friends may have. The intent of Chapter 4 is to relay the identified common themes found within the five interviews.

### **Descriptive Results**

The appropriate population for the current research was individuals between the ages of 18 and 35 who use social media weekly. All participants affirmed viewing and receiving news while on social media platforms. Participants for the study were purposively selected after responding to an email sent to all students attending a local university online. The recruitment message was also published in the university's online classroom as an announcement. The researcher offered no incentives for participation in the current study.

A criterion-based selection process was utilized to ensure the appropriateness of each participant. Individuals completed a basic demographic questionnaire, which was composed of seven questions. The recruitment email and announcement contained Google Forms links for individuals to submit their interest in the study. After individuals

were deemed appropriate to participate, an email was sent providing the participants with a study information sheet and an additional link to schedule an individual interview.

Out of 29 individuals who responded to the initial request, 24 were identified as eligible to participate. The results of the follow-up email resulted in one of the participants being disqualified due to a lack of appropriate social media use. A total of nine scheduling emails were sent out, and only 5 participants responded and followed through with the interview process.

Although the demographic questionnaire sought age, ethnicity, and education information, none of these factors were accounted for in the selection process. Due to the nature of the recruitment process, participants were in various locations and time zones while completing the interview. Four of the participants responded to the recruitment email or announcement. One of the participants was recruited through the use of snowball sampling, which was the identified backup recruitment technique.

Due to the age range and online nature of recruitment, participants had varying employment statuses, including military service, service industry jobs, and full-time students. All participants in the student use identified active, daily social media use, including regular news-viewing behaviors. The table below is meant to provide information regarding basic demographics, identifiers used for coding, and pseudonyms used to protect participant's confidentiality.

Table 4.1

*Participant Demographics*



Identifier	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	SM Usage Weekly
P01FNSM23	Alex	31	M	Asian	4-8 hours
P02FNSM23	Billy	25	M	Mixed Race	8-12 hours
P03FNSM23	Cathy	28	F	Caucasian	8-12 hours
P04FNSM23	Dereke	28	M	African- American	4-8 hours
P05FNSM23	Edith	22	F	Caucasian	8-12 hours

All interviews were conducted using Zoom for recording and transcription reasons. The research verified transcripts completed by Zoom by replaying the videos and ensuring that the verbiage matched up. Participants were informed about the reason for recording the interviews and how the information would be safeguarded. The interviews lasted an average of 35 minutes due to participants' experiences and how they related to fake news. After transcription verification was completed, participants were provided a chance to verify the accuracy of statements made within.

### **Preparation of Data**

Data preparation occurred in multiple phases to ensure the findings and information were organized and properly interpreted. All participants were given a pseudonym and code to ensure privacy and confidentiality of participant's identities. All interviews were recorded with Zoom, but all name identifiers were removed from the transcripts before data analysis. After completion of the interview, transcripts were

converted to Microsoft Word to make appropriate changes. Once the transcripts were finalized and verified by the participants, the files were uploaded into NVivo for analysis.

### **Study Findings**

Thematic analysis is intended to explore the experience of participants in a way that develops commonalities among the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes are identified as ‘emergent’ or ‘developing’, denoting the researcher's understanding of the information that was presented during the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore, when evaluating the information, the researcher looks for common themes found by identifiable phrases or words that help better understand the topic under investigation.

The Modified Van Kaam method of analysis was chosen for the current process due to in-depth guidance for analyzing and interpreting the information. Moustakas (1994) identified seven steps to analyzing qualitative information: listing and developing primary data, reducing and eliminating identified invariants, developing themes found within the invariants, validating themes, development of constructural descriptions of participant's experiences (textural descriptions and structural descriptions of each participant's individual interview), developing individual's variations, construction of meaning, and development of a composite description from the textural-structural information. Nowell et al. (2017) posit that the Modified Van Kaam system can be thought of in six phases, which combine the steps in Moustaka's original conceptualization. The six steps that compose the original seven and help to establish worthiness are 1) familiarization of the information; 2) development of initial codes; 3) identification of themes; 4) reviewing developed themes; 5) developing the definition of

the themes and naming them; 6) producing the report. The themes were developed with the assistance of Nvivo 14, which helps categorize information and organize the data.

### **The Importance of Epochè**

Epochè is a term that is focused on the researcher avoiding bias' during the interpretation of the interviews (Shufutinsky, 2020). Bednall (2006) posits that Epochè is a process that occurs at all times during research to avoid guiding the results or findings meaning where there is no meaning. Epochè requires the researcher to avoid presumptions and understanding of words based on their concepts and instead look carefully at the participant's experiences and understanding (Bednall, 2006). Making meaning of the results should be conducted without personal emotional states influencing the findings.

Self-reflection techniques were utilized throughout the research during all phases. This researcher's clinical mental health therapist background helped identify automatic, responsive thoughts that were journaled about. Additionally, this research remained aware of previous and personal interactions with fake news and how family and friends have appeared to interact with the articles. Journaling helped with awareness of how the interviews and findings may differ or be similar to the researchers' understanding while avoiding the pitfalls of inserting personal bias into the results.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Familiarization of the Information**

The researcher started with familiarization of the participant's interview responses. The interview recordings were played back, and the researcher followed along with the transcriptions. Appropriate changes were made to the transcripts, mostly

accrediting the statements made to the right speaker and fixing grammatical errors. After the initial reading and listening, the researcher read each interview individually while identifying key statements made by each participant. A second read-through occurred after the initial statements had been categorized to ensure that all information was properly reviewed and understood.

During the familiarization phase, participants were allowed to review their transcripts and provide any corrections on statements they felt were inaccurate within seven days. Of the five participants, one responded with no changes, one responded with an incorrectly identified speaker discrepancy, and three did not respond within the seven days. Additionally, participants received a summary of their interviews and were provided another seven days to give input on the accuracy of interpretation per their experiences with the topic. After these steps were completed, the researcher began to develop the themes.

### **Initial Coding**

Initial coding development is a central part of the familiarization process in which the researcher(s) begins to develop a concept regarding the ideas found within the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The codes are meant to explore the raw, uninterpreted data to understand each participant's experience with the phenomenon under investigation. Coding the data also allowed the researcher to begin establishing a concept of the emerging themes as patterns started to become apparent (Nowell et al., 2017).

NVivo 14 was utilized to help with coding and developing themes. The initial coding process produced 32 different codes related to the theme. A sample of the initial

codes is shown in Table 4.2. Codes within the initial analysis provided a chance for the researcher to begin understanding the emergent themes across the five interviews.

Table 4.2

*Sample of Initial Code*

Name	Files
Emotional State	4
Confusion	1
Fear and Anger	2
Shock	1
Sympathy	1
Family and Friend Impact	3
Depends on the article title or family member sharing it	1
No impact from others	2
Validation and willingness to be more accepting	1
Willing to explore the article	1

### **Grouping and Elimination**

Reviewing the initial themes and codes allowed the researcher to examine aspects of the participant's experiences to begin developing emergent themes. Moustakas (1994) posits two questions for consideration when eliminating unnecessary information: 1) is the information necessary to the participant's experience, and 2) is it possible to label the theme and provide abstract information regarding the theme? The elimination of unneeded themes is essential in sorting out relevant information without having an

overwhelming amount of information. It is recommended that the researcher condenses the initial codes to a range of six to eight grouped themes to avoid information overload.

During the grouping and elimination analysis phase, the researcher is tasked with ensuring data saturation. Data saturation revolves around identifying all relevant ideas, with information starting to repeat itself in a way that develops common themes (Mason, 2010). When exploring data saturation, this research looked for states or wording with similar meanings and applications. Data saturation is critical to data collection and analysis as it ensures that experiences are well expressed and understood.

The concept of grouping and eliminations within the current study helped to discover similar verbiage used by the participants. One example within the current study relates to how individuals experienced the fake news article they were asked to review. When exploring the emotions that the sample article brought out, Alex related that fear was a prominent theme for him. Alex stated, “So what it brought out when I was reading it, it brought fear and it brought out anger.” When interviewing Cathy, the participant said, “I think that, honestly, it felt like it was. It really wanted me to be scared of like coming in contact with Fentanyl. So fear, anger that people are putting people in danger like that that kind of thing.” These two statements are representative of a similar compacity across all five interviews.

### **Identification of Themes**

The next step in the process is to formulate and develop the themes within the grouped codes. Once coding elimination has occurred, the research starts to identify the commonalities of the information in ways that will begin expressing the participant's

particular experiences. Identifying themes involves two steps to ensure that emerging themes are properly explored: labeling and translating (Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

### ***Labeling Themes***

Labeling themes is the process in which the researcher starts to identify keywords or phrases presented by the participants (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). During this phase, sentences, single words, and whole paragraphs are considered relevant to understanding each participant's lived experience (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). The researcher's goal at this time is to continue reviewing each participant's transcripts and codes in an attempt to identify appropriate verbiage for the potential themes. Vaismoradi et al. posit that although individual words are acceptable, the researcher will better understand the phenomena by looking at the sentences and paragraphs that express whole ideas.

To begin identifying themes for the current project, this researcher utilized the NVivo coding system to identify words, sentences, and paragraphs that may be relevant to the topic under investigation. Once labeling has been completed, the researcher begins translating the themes.

### ***Translating Themes***

Translation of codes is a crucial step, but one that is both challenging and questioned. The main goal of translating the themes is to develop references to concepts and experiences that other researchers could also understand (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). The codes are meant to help guide other researchers and interested people in understanding the findings. During this phase, the researcher must be careful not to misinterpret the results or mix verbiage. The previous use of member checking can help

with challenges, as the participants have already provided any recommended changes to their parts of the transcripts.

### **Reviewing, Defining, and Naming the Developed Themes**

Once the themes have been developed and identified, the researcher sets out to verify the themes are accurately reported and presented. The review process is meant to verify that all relevant data is properly grouped together and that data saturation has been met (Nowell et al., 2017). During the review phase, the research also ensures that all original codes were accounted for and validated for relevance. During these steps, the recoding of themes may occur. As the researcher reviews the codes, some previously ungrouped codes may be combined under a category, while others may be recognized as needing to be separated (Nowell et al., 2017).

After the codes have been reviewed and verified, the research begins developing definitions and names for the developed themes. The name and definition of the themes are processes in which the researcher sets out to catch the reader's attention by providing clarity and catchy wording (Nowell et al., 2017). During this phase of the analysis process, it is important to identify why this theme or idea is relevant to the phenomenon under investigation and where it should be placed to convey results (Nowell et al., 2017). The researchers develop each participant's textural and structural themes during this phase.

Textural descriptions are meant to provide insight into each participant's understanding of the phenomena by summarizing their experience (Moustakas, 1994). The textural description will often include a combination of summarization and direct quotation to help better understand the participant's particular experience and



understanding of the investigation topic. Textural descriptions for the current study participants can be found in Appendix H.

Alongside the textural descriptions for each participant is a structural description. Moustakas (1994) explains that structural descriptions are meant to help connect “how” participant's feelings and thoughts are connected to the phenomena. Structural descriptions aim to look beyond just the words of each participant by looking at the emotions underlying their experiences. An example of a structural description for the current study is found in a statement made by Edith regarding the way that the negative emotional lexicon in fake news articles impacts the reader “I feel like it, said a lot of like there, was a lot of words kind of referring to it, being like a scary situation. It was like they... I know it, said Scary at 1 point, and I think it was like just different words to describe something that's scary or like being scared.” Complete structural descriptions can be found in Appendix I.

### **Producing the Report**

The final step in producing the report is to convey the finalized emergent themes and relevant information (Nowell et al., 2017). Producing the final report goes beyond just conveying the information; it also relies on the researcher presenting the information in a manner that helps portray a story in a logical order (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). The final report helps to convey the participants' lived experience with the phenomenon under investigation. Within the final steps, it is important that the researcher also ensure that the results of a qualitative project meet the standards of trustworthiness (Nowell et al., 2017).

## **Trustworthiness of Results**

When a researcher is compiling and developing the findings of a qualitative research project, it is crucial to ensure that the findings are trustworthy. Qualitative research is focused on the individual researcher's interpretation of the information discovered from the interviews, whereas quantitative research has replicability and can be assessed by running statistical analysis independently (Stahl & King, 2020). Adler 2022 posits that trustworthiness is founded on four underlying constructs: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

The credibility of the findings is understood as how readers can recognize the experiences and information of the results (Nowell et al., 2017). The development of credibility is important as it helps to eliminate potential researcher bias that may occur. The credibility factor of research findings beings with being transparent about the research process.

Transparency of data collection and data analysis are important steps in developing the credibility of the findings as it helps provide insight into processes conducted and methodology used during a research project. This researcher took multiple steps to ensure the best diversity, relatability of the phenomenon with the participants, and accurate collection of information. This research utilized a purposeful, criterion-based sampling method to ensure all participants were appropriate for the study and screened before the interview. The interview questions were developed to verify the appropriateness of participating in the project before conducting the full interview.

Additionally, the one-on-one interview questions were structured around the topic under investigation and helped better understand each participant's experience with fake

news and interactive behaviors on social media sites. The researcher took multiple steps to become familiar with the information, including listening to the recorded interviews and multiple readings of the transcripts. While these steps help to establish the credibility of the findings, Cruz and Tantia (2017) report that credibility can also be achieved using techniques such as triangulation, member checking, and thick descriptions of the findings.

Nowell et al. (2017) report that triangulation involves using other researchers to verify the coding found within the interview transcripts. Qualitative research requires that the individual researcher validate the codes and develop the codebook based on the repetition of words or identifiable meanings. To accomplish triangulation for the current study, this researcher contacted another individual familiar with qualitative research to provide a secondary check and verification of the initial code development.

According to Nowell et al. (2017), member checking involves using informants to ensure the accuracy of information found within the report. Member checking was accomplished in two phases: a review of initial transcripts by participants and then a review of summarization by each participant. As noted in Chapter 4, participants were provided a copy of their completed transcripts and given seven days for corrections. Participants were contacted once more with summaries to ensure their ideas and experiences were adequately conveyed.

Thick descriptions help with providing adequate and sufficient information to understand the individuals' experience with the phenomenon (Cruz & Tantia, 2017). Readers and other researchers should be provided with enough details to understand the individuals' demographics and experiences to feel that the information is relevant. A

guiding factor for developing thick descriptions is to help individuals decide whether the information presented is transferable to other settings or demographics (Cruz & Tantia, 2017). In the findings section of the paper, this researcher details how individuals have experienced the impact of the negative emotional lexicon found within fake news articles and their individual interactions with these articles on social media sites.

Transferability of the findings can be interchanged with the term rigor, which refers to how the findings can be applied in other ways (Adler, 2022). Although the findings may be generalizable in the ways that quantitative findings may be, the transferability of the results of qualitative research is meant to help the reader evaluate the potential connectedness of the findings to other settings or demographic groups (Cruz & Tantia, 2017). Cruz and Tantia explain that the thick descriptions found within the results is the guiding factor to understanding how these findings can be understood beyond the current research. In addition to the transferability of the findings, there is a requirement to establish the dependability of the results.

The dependability of the findings is closely associated with properly utilized procedures used during all data collection and analysis phases (Nowell et al., 2017). Nowell et al. further elaborate that the construction of dependability is anchored on the provided well-documented, non-confusing, logical explanation of the steps and processes throughout all project phases. When other researchers or interested individuals read the findings, there should be no confusion about how the study was conducted. The other individuals should be able to conduct the research similarly to the provided information.

The final concept that helps with the development of trustworthiness is the confirmability of the findings. Confirmability is focused on the ways that interview

transcripts are interpreted and supported (Nowell et al., 2017). One way to achieve this is for the researcher to maintain an objective view of the information with the intent and expectation that the results are based on the facts presented without undo bias or alterations (Stahl & King, 2020)—the use of Epochè and bracketing which were previously discussed in this chapter.

### **Organization of Data**

As the spread of fake news on social media continues to be problematic, this researcher sought to explain better how individuals between the ages of 18 and 35 experience the negative emotional lexicon found in the articles. To better understand this topic, the project's focal point was to explore how the potential of negative language influences interactive behaviors on social media platforms (i.e., like, share, or comment). Participants were allowed to view a fake news article as an example, allowing them to discuss their experiences in individual interviews. After reviewing the transcripts and codes, two emergent themes were discovered: 1) negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles results in altered mood and deters social media activities, and 2) negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles complicates the ways that individuals identify the truthfulness of the article. Three main themes were found within the first thematic label: 1.a) negative emotional lexicon found within fake news articles makes it hard to identify the truthfulness of the articles, 1.b) negative emotional lexicon results in social media sharing avoidance, 1.c) negative emotional lexicon results in corresponding negative emotional states within the reader. The findings of this theme are an extension of the comments made by the participants when exploring the negative language of fake news articles on social media sites.

The second thematic label resulted in one main theme related to the individual's identification of fake news articles. Within the emergent themes section of this chapter are verbatim examples of comments made by the participants regarding the complexity of identifying fake news from factual news. Four main themes and five subthemes were identified and are reflected in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3

*Emergent Themes and Frequencies*

<b>Thematic Label</b>	<b>Main Themes</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>	<b>Frequency (%)</b>
Negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles results in altered mood and deters social media activities.	No social media interactive behaviors (sharing, commenting, liking).	Not wanting to spread unverified information	4 (80%)
		Had a previous incident go bad	1 (20%)
		Willingness to bring up the article in verbal conversations	5 (100%)
	Negative emotional lexicon results in social media sharing avoidance		5 (100%)
	Negative emotional lexicon results in corresponding negative emotional states within the reader		5 (100%)
Negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles complicates the ways that individuals identify the truthfulness of the article.	Negative emotional lexicon found within fake news articles makes it hard to identify the truthfulness of the articles.	Negative emotional lexicon results in assumption of truthfulness.	3 (60%)
		Negative emotional lexicon results in the automatic assumption that articles are fake	2 (40%)

## **Emergent Themes**

### **Thematic Label One: Negative Emotional Lexicon Within Fake News Articles**

#### **Results in Altered Mood and Deters Social Media Activities.**

Participants were given a chance to read a fake news article and provide details regarding the impact of the selected articles and how they usually experience these news articles on social media. The article was purposely chosen based on the information identified on Snopes.com. During the interviews, participants were asked to reflect on the article's tone, emotional responses to the information, and how they typically respond to these kinds of articles.

The participants also reflected on how family and friends may impact their interactive behaviors with news on social media. How individuals experience the negative emotional lexicons within fake news articles is best understood as an exploration and understanding of how the negative emotional lexicon invokes an emotional response and plays a key role in how individuals interact with the behaviors. The first thematic label also addresses how individuals interact with articles outside social media settings. The three main themes found within this label were established as an appropriate summary of how a negative emotional lexicon influences interactive behaviors on social media. As noted in table 4.3, the main themes and subthemes were identified as

1. No social media interactive behaviors (5)
  - a. Not wanting to spread unverified information (4)
  - b. A previous incident that went bad (1)
2. Negative emotional lexicon results in social media sharing avoidance (5)
  - a. Willingness to bring up the article in verbal conversations (5)

3. Negative emotional lexicon results in corresponding negative emotional states within the reader (5)

### **Emergent Theme One: No Social Media Interactive Behaviors**

The first emergent theme was identifying how individuals interact with fake news articles on social media. The five participants explored ways that the negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles impacted their social media behaviors, and a summary of the findings found that participants are not likely to interact with these articles based on the information alone. Within the first theme were identified subthemes that guide the participant's reasons for not interacting with the articles: 1) not wanting to spread unverified information, 2) a previous incident that went bad.

#### ***Subtheme 1.a: Not Wanting to Spread Unverified Information***

The first subtheme of not wanting to spread unverified information is best understood as an unwillingness to interact with news articles on social media sites, regardless of the article's truthfulness, to avoid any chance of perpetuating the spread of false or misleading news articles. Participant's reflections on the topic of spreading or interacting with fake news presented a chance to explore ways they may interact with fake news on social media. When Dereke was asked about interactive behaviors, the participant stated, "I don't think I want to be the person that would just put out something that doesn't make sense." Three other participants make this similar sentiment.

One participant (Alex) expressed that their experience with not wanting to spread news relates to the vast amount of misinformation and people's beliefs. During the interview with Alex, the participant stated, "Negative emotional lexicon results in the automatic assumption that articles are fake." The participant further explained that they



should keep a neutral appearance on social media and instead leave the information discussions to outside settings.

Edith's reason for not wanting to spread unverified information is related to emotional states and how COVID-19 and the 2016 election impacted their lives. The participant shared that the COVID-19 news often resulted in strong negative emotions, but that due to other family member's professions, they felt the information was being greatly misreported. Edith elaborated that the negative nature of the news was meant to incite fear, in their opinion, but that a family member was a health care worker who provided information contradictory to the news outlets, confused emotions, and informational understanding. Edith noted that the complexity of the illness and ways that news outlets were playing on emotional states led them to become heavily critical of the information without doing further research for their understanding.

***Subtheme 1.b: A Previous Incident That Went Bad***

The one exception regarding reasons to not interact with fake news articles was a bad experience that Cathy expressed having. Cathy stated, "I think I have one in the past shared it, and then I had to like, go back. I was like, Wow! I can't believe I shared that without really thinking about it." Cathy followed up with additional information and expressed that sharing fake news resulted in feeling "mortified." The participant expressed a lot of distress associated with the idea of sharing fake news and the incident that occurred in the past.

## **Emergent Theme Two: Negative Emotional Lexicon Results in Social Media**

### **Sharing Avoidance**

The current study aimed to explore how individuals interact with fake news articles on social media. Emergent theme two addresses how individuals interact with fake news articles both in and out of social media platforms. Participants in the current study expressed no social media behaviors beyond reading the article but noted they are quick to interact with articles in different ways. While participants do not have interactive behaviors on social media sites, all the participants expressed how they tend to discuss information outside of social media settings.

Alex expressed that while they do not interact on social media, they tend to “talk to my peers and see what opinions they have. Sometimes when I bring it up, you know they do, have some good arguments and stuff like that.” Other participants shared similar sentiments in their behaviors outside of social media sites. Edith shared that although they don’t interact on social media sites when close friends or family members share something, they may “talk to them about it later to see how they feel about it, or like their reactions to what it was.”

Participants elaborated that these articles are good talking points but not necessary on social media platforms. Participants identified ways in which they enjoy having conversations about the topics but in beneficial and not necessarily confrontational ways. The overall consensus among the current study participants is that there is a higher chance to share the information verbally instead of through social media sites.

### **Emergent Theme Three: Negative Emotional Lexicon Results in Corresponding Negative Emotional States Within the Reader**

The final emergent theme within the first label relates to how emotional language impacts the reader's emotional state. Within this theme, individuals were asked to reflect on a purposely selected fake news article with a negative tone. The determinant for the positive or negative tone of the article was based on certain words within the article deemed to be negative by the EmoLex. Participants were provided a chance to explore and identify key phrases within the text and examine the emotions the article brought out.

Four participants experienced negative emotions associated with the article. The common emotion that was identified among all five participants was fear. The participants of the current study referred to words such as “fentanyl” and “death” for the reason they felt fear while reading the article. Billy stated,

So, I would say, like, obviously, they said it was scary. So, you know, they wanted to elicit an emotional fear. And yeah, I guess that that'd probably be like the main one is, I think they want the articles meant to have people worried about? The fentanyl epidemic. And it's like. You know, dangers.

The way the article was written, and the nature of the verbiage selection evoked a strong negative emotional response from the participants. Dereke shared that his experience and fear were associated with how the family is brought into the conversation. Dereke highlights a key part of his emotional state, which could be summarized by saying, “So I think that pulls on like a, you know, kind of not like, scared, but like you don't, It makes you think about your family” which he did confirm was meant to discuss the way that fear was impacting his emotions.

One of the participants expressed that although fear was the intended tone of the message, their emotional surprise was more shocking. The participant said it was shocking due to the severity of the situation and how the article was written. When questions regarding it were shock as opposed to other emotions, Edith elaborated, “I guess just cause like I'm whenever I read things that say that they're like scary, it doesn't register for me as something scary. It registers as shocking that something could happen like that.” The participant noted similar ideas regarding the emotion associated with the word fentanyl but that their emotional states differed due to the lack of proximity to her family or life.

**Thematic Label Two: Negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles complicates the ways that individuals identify the truthfulness of the article.**

As participants reflected on how they experienced fake news articles and how the selected article impacted them, they were offered a chance to discuss how the negative emotional lexicon impacts their understanding of the article's truthfulness. All participants were asked about their definition of fake news and how they understood it to be presented in the media. After establishing each participant's understanding of the term “fake news,” the participants began exploring different responses and reactions to fake news articles in general.

Therefore, the second thematic label describes how verbiage within fake news articles can impact individuals' identification of the true versus fake nature of articles they are exposed to. During the individual interviews, participants expressed their ideas of fake news, some similar to others. Four participants expressed their understanding of fake news articles or news pieces with information meant to deceive people or result in

an emotional reaction. Alex deviated from the other participants and explained that their way of understanding fake news was, “I guess what I try to look for is what fits into my beliefs, and it doesn't fit in my belief in you know I like it, can. It can be like the real thing.” The second thematic label found one emergent theme with two subthemes:

1. Negative Emotional Lexicon found within fake news articles makes it hard to identify the truthfulness of the articles.
  - a. Negative emotions result in the assumption of truthfulness.
  - b. Negative emotional lexicon results in automatic assumption that articles are fake.

**Emergent Theme Four: Negative Emotional Lexicon Found Within Fake News Articles Makes It Hard To Identify The Truthfulness Of The Articles.**

The final emergent theme identified within the current projects relates to how the negative emotional lexicon complicates and influences how the reader identifies the article's truthfulness. This theme focused on how individuals apply their understanding of fake news against their judgments in identifying the article's truthfulness. Participants were first challenged to determine whether the selected article was true or fake, and then explored how these behaviors extend to other news articles.

All participants were able to provide a relevant understanding of what the term “fake news” means. After establishing each participant's knowledge of fake news, each interviewee was asked to present their determination on the article's truthfulness. Three participants felt the article was factual, while two felt it was fake. Dereke was one of the participants who identified the article as fake during the interview; however, this participant related that they made the claim because they did personal research ahead of

time. Dereke noted, “if I didn't look it up for research purposes. I may have, I definitely I would have believed that,” which puts this participant’s opinion being impacted by previous knowledge. Within the final main three were two subthemes:

- A. Negative emotional lexicon results in the assumption of truthfulness (3).
- B. Negative emotional lexicon results in the automatic assumption that articles are fake (2).

***Subtheme 2.a: Negative Emotional Lexicon Results in Assumption of Truthfulness***

The first subtheme related to identifying fake news is best summarized as an automatic assumption that the information presented in the articles is factual and accurate. Participants who felt this similar phenomenon related that the negative emotional lexicon significantly impacts their willingness to assume the information is accurate. During the interviews, Alex reflected specifically on the article that was read and noted, “with these articles like that that I like to read it, and you know I just believe that is true you... With lethal fentanyl is, I wouldn't try to go in and do some more research.”

The reflections made by Alex emphasize people’s willingness to believe articles based on the emotional states invoked. Dereke provided additional insights into the willingness to believe a news article is accurate automatically. Dereke shared that his willingness to make assumptions relates to his emotions. For the example provided, Dereke stated,

I think, just overall, it's one of those articles that would kind of make me angry, and not really a honestly like not really try to care too much about the story because then my brain would just start spiraling too much.

The experience that Billy has had with believability in articles is similar to that of Alex. Billy expressed, “if I don’t see that it has an issue, or it sounds plausible, I probably wouldn’t look at it like, to closely.” Furthermore, Billy noted that his determination of the articles’ facts heavily depends on how the article impacts emotional states and whether the information aligns with their own beliefs.

However, Dereke provides a unique contradiction to this topic due to his approach regarding the interviews. Dereke noted that although he would normally assume this type of article to be fake, he was hesitant with the selected article and did additional research due to being a part of this research project. His initial report during the interview was that he believed the article to be fake but admitted he sought out additional information.

Dereke elaborated further, though he assumed that under any other conditions, it would be true due to the negative emotional lexicon and previous exposure to similar articles.

***Subtheme 2.b: Negative Emotional Lexicon Results in Automatic Assumption that Articles are Fake***

The second subtheme identified relates to people automatically assuming the articles are fake due to the negative emotional lexicon utilized. In the final subtheme identified, participants expressed automatically discrediting and doubting the truthfulness of the information due to the emotional language of the article and presentation of information. Edith shared their experience with automatically assuming something is false, which relates to how the head results in an emotional expression and an overall distrust of news due to the vast amount of fake news articles in circulation. Edith elaborated that between the 2016 election and COVID-19, they were upset by the fake news and stated, “I started having to look into things because it just didn’t make sense. Yeah. I didn’t see why, like

why we were being lied to in news articles whenever it wasn't actually as bad as they were saying.”

Cathy expressed their experience was slightly similar to that of Edith. Cathy expressed that while the vast amount of conflicting news articles is a significant factor for assuming that the articles are fake, the nature of the verbiage within the article is a more significant factor. The experience noted by Cathy relates to conflicting emotions that arise within articles compared to the facts discovered after some initial investigation. Cathy reflected on another instance involving fake news and noted that the starting feeling was “sympathetic, and then you’ll do some research, and then you get kind of angry.”

Cathy’s statements indicate how different emotional tones and language within articles lead to an assumption that the articles are mostly fake. One additional factor noted by Cathy relates to the source of the information. Although Cathy recognizes different news outlets as “credible,” the participant is more willing to discredit certain outlets. The unique interaction between emotionally based language and automatic discredit of information is the opposite reaction to the first group, which is willing to assume the information is automatically accurate. It is worth noting that there was no middle area among the five participants interviewed during this research project.

### **Summary**

The current qualitative phenomenological research study sought to answer one question: how do social media users experience the negative emotional lexicon found in fake news articles? This researcher utilized individual, semi-structured interviews with five participants to explore the phenomenon. The specific nature of the current study



required the use of a purposive selection process for the recruitment of participants, with secondary options for snowball sampling if participants could not be recruited with the primary method. Selecting individuals between the ages of 18 and 35 allowed the researcher to look at a specific target population to understand better how negative emotional lexicon impacts the behaviors of fake news articles within social media platforms.

Moustakas (1994) modified Van Kaam analysis process was utilized to analyze the data collected from the five interviews. The modified Van Kaam analysis establishes the trustworthiness of the results due to the rigorous steps taken to ensure the data is fully understood and presented in ways that allow others to feel confident in the findings. Using the modified Van Kaam analysis method, the researcher produced four emergent themes and four subthemes related to how the negative emotional lexicon impacts interactive behaviors. The main themes and subthemes identified are:

1. No social media interactive behaviors
  - a. Not wanting to spread unverified information (4)
  - b. A previous incident that went bad (1)
2. Negative emotional lexicon results in social media sharing avoidance (5)
3. Negative emotional lexicon results in corresponding negative emotional states within the reader (5)
4. Negative Emotional Lexicon found within fake news articles makes it hard to identify the truthfulness of the articles.
  - a. Negative emotions result in the assumption of truthfulness (3)

- b. Negative emotional lexicon results in the automatic assumption that articles are fake (2).

The themes and subthemes directly address the identified question to understand better the impact of the negative emotional lexicon found within fake news articles on interactive behaviors within social media platforms.

The findings of the interviews are meant to understand the experiences of the five participants who have had to navigate the complexities of dealing with an overwhelming amount of fake news on social media platforms. With this study being qualitative instead of quantitative, the researcher took steps to reduce bias while ensuring the results were trustworthy. This researcher utilized various methods to establish the four components that encompass trustworthiness in research, including the credibility of the findings, ways in which the results may be transferable, establishing the dependability of the interview process and data analysis, and confirmability of the results.

The coding process and identification of themes were accomplished through NVivo, which allowed for the initial identification of themes found within phrases or paragraphs to identify the core elements and main themes common in all five interviews. Multiple readings of the transcripts occurred before the finalization of the emergent themes. The transcripts were based on individual, semi-structured interviews that helped guide participants through exploring their own personal understandings and experiences with fake news on social media platforms. Verbatims were used to show individual participants' experiences of the identifiable themes in meaningful ways.

A comprehensive exploration of the connection between the current findings against other research will be discussed in Chapter 5. Chapter 5 will also address how the

limitations impact the findings and establish the connection to previously established frameworks. Finally, Chapter 5 will discuss any potential implications of the findings, ways these findings may help address the problem of fake news, and remaining issues that could be points of consideration for future research.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

### Overview

As technology continues to be an influential aspect of society, social media usage has risen by an estimated 5% since 2005 (Chauhan et al., 2021). In that same time frame, over 72% of all adults report receiving some news while on social media sites (Chauhan et al., 2021). The 2016 election set the stage for the usage and popularity of “fake news” to become increasingly weaponized in ways meant to discredit factual-based news and cause discord in society (Green & Murphy, 2021). The amount of fake news has extended beyond the 2016 election and became a significant problem that impacted public health during the COVID-19 pandemic. While much research has been conducted on identifying fake news and ways to slow the news, there is still a continued struggle with deterring the far-reaching spread of these articles.

Chapter 2 highlighted the depth and amount of research conducted regarding the impact of fake news but identified the lack of understanding in exploring the impact of the emotional negative lexicon on interactive behaviors when individuals read the articles (de los Santos & Nabi, 2019). De los Santos and Nabi (2019) noted a gap in the current literature regarding how certain emotional states may impact interactive behaviors. Additionally, most previous research has been conducted at the headline level without going into the articles themselves (de los Santos & Nabi, 2019; Ghanem et al., 2020; Horner et al., 2021; Martel et al., 2020). It is currently not known how the negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles impacts the interactive behaviors of 18-35-year-olds on social media platforms. This research project aimed to identify this gap and help add to the current literature.

### **Summary of Findings**

After completing and analyzing the transcripts of five interviews, two main themes were identified as shared experiences with the impact of the negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles and the ways the language impacts social media behaviors: 1) negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles results in altered mood and deters social media activities, and 2) negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles complicates the ways that individuals identify the truthfulness of the article. The thematic labels identified help address the original research questions, which stated it is not known how individuals experience the negative emotional lexicon found within fake news articles and the way individuals interact with these articles on social media platforms. The data analysis resulted from information from five individual interviews; however, the intended purpose was to understand those five participants' experiences to understand potential applications to other groups. Four emergent themes were identified within the two thematic labels.

Negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles results in altered mood and deters social media activities resulting in three emergent themes with two subthemes. The three emergent themes are 1) no social media interactive behaviors, 2) negative emotional lexicon results in social media sharing avoidance, and 3) negative emotional lexicon results in corresponding negative emotional states within the reader. Emergent theme one had two subthemes: wanting not to spread unverified news and a previous incident that went bad. The first thematic label directly impacts how individuals choose to interact with these articles on social media platforms.

The second thematic label is composed of one emergent theme and two subthemes. The emergent theme developed within the second label was negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles, which complicates how individuals identify the article's truthfulness. The second emergent theme was founded on two subthemes: a) confliction of identification, a) negative emotional lexicon results in the assumption of truthfulness, and b) negative emotional lexicon results in the automatic assumption that articles are fake. The second emergent theme identifies ways that the negative emotional lexicon with fake news articles challenges the believability of the information and ways that individuals understand the information.

### **Thematic Label One: Negative Emotional Lexicon Within Fake News Articles**

#### **Results in Altered Mood and Deters Social Media Activities**

##### ***Emergent Theme One: No Social Media Interactive Behaviors***

The first emergent theme was developed after exploring how individual participants interact with fake news articles on social media platforms. The shared experience among the five participants resulted in findings showing that participants do not interact with articles on social media platforms. For the current studies, the interactive behaviors under consideration were liking, sharing, or commenting on the articles. Within this first emergent theme, two subthemes were discovered that guide individuals' unwillingness to interact with these articles on social media: 1) not wanting to spread unverified information and 2) a previous incident that went bad.

Four of the five participants expressed concerns about not wanting to spread information that may be fake or unverified. The first subtheme was composed of thoughts and concerns from the participants that it is not worth having their name attached to an

article they chose to share and finding out it was inaccurate later. Additionally, some participants noted their occupation or community status as factors influencing an unwillingness to interact with these articles.

The second subtheme of the study was expressed by one participant whose experience was slightly different than the rest. The one outlier within the first emergent theme had a previous incident of sharing a news article that was later deemed to be misleading. The participants expressed distress with themselves for having believed (to some extent) the information within an article that turned out to be greatly misleading. These individuals did share similar sentiments to the other participants about not wanting to share unverified information. Still, this behavior resulted from the previous incident, resulting in negative consequences for the participant.

***Emergent Theme Two: Negative Emotional Lexicon Results in Social Media Sharing Avoidance***

The second emergent theme is best understood as a lack of interaction with articles on social media sites. Instead, it was found that the participants were likely to address the articles in social settings. During the interviews, all participants shared ways in which they were willing to talk about the information they read with friends or family members during verbal conversations instead of using social media as the method of interaction. The second emergent theme found that individuals want to discuss the information and feel that the information is worth addressing. However, the previously established issues stop them from doing so on social media platforms. The reasons for sharing in face-to-face interactions compared to social media are founded on the same

concepts as the first emergent theme of not wanting to be publicly associated with spreading unverified information.

***Emergent Theme Three: Negative Emotional Lexicon Results in Corresponding Negative Emotional States Within the Reader***

The third emergent theme of the current study was that the negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles results in readers' appropriate emotional states. Participants of the current study explored how the nature of the news topic and language used throughout the articles results in negative emotions. Individuals identified common feelings of fear, disgust, or shock while reading the article presented to them for the current research study. The participant further explored how other articles impact their emotional state and recognized that the article's topic and the verbiage impact them. For the purpose of the current study, only negative emotional lexicon and negative emotional states were under consideration.

**Thematic Label Two: Negative Emotional Lexicon Within Fake News Articles Complicates the Ways That Individuals Identify The Truthfulness Of the Article**

The second thematic label found within the current study focused on how the negative emotional lexicon of fake articles impacts the believability of the articles. Within this second label, individuals were challenged with identifying the truthfulness of the article they were presented prior to receiving a verification of the information. The participant's answer produced one emergent theme with two subthemes. Within the second thematic label, results of the transcripts found that the negative emotional lexicon can complicate the determination by readers regarding an article's factual basis or fictitious nature.



While exploring this topic, participants were asked to give their opinions regarding the truthfulness of the prechosen article. Within five interviews, two distinctive subthemes were identified: a) negative emotional lexicon results in the assumption of truthfulness, and b) negative emotional lexicon results in the automatic assumption that articles are fake. These two subthemes were identified based on a combination of participants' initial judgment calls of the article to choose and follow information that was pivotal in understanding the unique experiences of individuals.

Within the second thematic label was one participant who provided a unique insight into determining the article's truthfulness. One of the participants chose to do additional research due to being an active participant in this research study. During the interview, that participant noted that he felt the article was fake, but only due to his additional research. However, these participants' sentiments later in the interview feel in line with the first subtheme of the fourth emergent theme.

***Emergent Theme Four: Negative Emotional Lexicon Found Within Fake News Articles Makes It Hard To Identify The Truthfulness Of The Articles.***

The fourth emergent theme found within the research aimed to identify ways that negative emotional lexicon impacts the reader's perception of the truthfulness of articles viewed on social media platform. The participants gave their opinions on whether the chosen article was fact or fake and explored their reasons for their opinions. Participants further explored how articles using negative emotional lexicon impact their belief system. Emergent three four found two distinctive subthemes that accounted for participant's beliefs: 1) negative emotional lexicon results in the assumption of truthfulness, and 2) negative emotional lexicon results in the automatic assumption that articles are fake.

The final emergent theme connected to the main phenomenon under investigation, aimed to understand the impact of the negative emotional lexicon on interactive behaviors within social media platforms. In the first subtheme, three of the five participants noted that the negative vocabulary leads them to automatically assume the information or parts of the information to be true. The participants who expressed these ideas noted that they felt the language was meant to convey a serious need to pay attention to the information, and therefore, it was at least partially true. These participants also noted that due to how they felt while reading the articles, there was a lack of wanting to dig deeper into the truthfulness of the articles.

On the opposite end of this idea was the last subtheme, in which two of the five participants noted they automatically discredited the information when the negative emotional lexicon dominates in an article. Participants within this subtheme identified that the vocabulary can be overdone and inflated, making it seem like the writer is presenting facts. However, these participants explained that there have been too many instances in which the language is meant to sway their opinion. Still, after conducting their own research, the results are often misleading. The two participants in this category followed a similar sense as those in the first subtheme by reporting they do not usually do any additional research unless the topic is close to home.

### **Discussion of Findings**

Previous studies have found that negative emotional states and negative emotional lexicon result in higher chances of spreading the news regardless of verification (Hsu et al., 2021; Pennycook & Rand, 2021; Vosoughi et al., 2018). These studies also found that fake news spreads faster and more often than factual news (Hsu et al., 2021; Pennycook

& Rand, 2021; Vosoughi et al., 2018). Ermolaev et al. (2020) further supported the evidence of fear impacting response in their study, which found that negative emotions tended to increase interactive behaviors. The results of the first emergent theme have found potentially contradictory information. Current findings from this study's participants show that while reading emotionally charged news articles has an impact, an individual's interactive behaviors may not be reliant on the emotional impact of the article.

While some of the study's findings in the first thematic label differ from previous studies, the third emergent theme aligns with established findings. Emergent theme one relates to how the emotional verbiage in articles impacts the individual's emotional states. Previous findings by de los Santos and Nabi (2019) and Horner et al. (2021) found that language within headlines can invoke an emotional state within the readers. The current study findings produced similar findings in that the negative lexicon and keywords within the articles result in individuals experiencing emotions congruent with how the message is intended to be presented.

The study's findings also highlight how individuals are willing to share their experiences directly outside of social media but within the platforms. Although these findings are unique to this study, much work and effort has been done to decrease the spread of fake news. Additionally, all the participants in the current study are college-educated individuals, which may impact the findings.

The current study additionally addressed ways that the negative emotional lexicon of articles potentially impacts the believability of the articles. The results of the current study partially align with previous research regarding the believability of news articles

based on the emotional language found within the articles. As noted in Chapter 2, Martel et al. (2020) found that emotional reactions from news headlines alone significantly influenced an individual's willingness to believe the information. De los Santos and Nabi (2019) found similar results regarding negative emotional states. Although the participants of the current study were allowed to explore their emotional reactions, de los Santos and Nabi identified the emotion of anger as being the most significant factor in individuals' willingness to believe an article unquestioningly.

Additional factors associated with the believability of news articles involve motives, credibility, reliability, fears (Rodrigo et al., 2022), and information overload (Shirsat et al., 2022). Some of the participants in the current study shared similar experiences regarding looking for information that confirms their beliefs and discrediting information that goes against their stances. The previously established factors, coupled with the current findings, provide a chance to understand better why constructs such as emotional states impact individuals' willingness to believe or discredit information.

The study's findings should also be viewed from a Biblical perspective. Zechariah 8:16-17 (*King James Bible*, 1769/2022) tells Christians that if one speaks, it should be to spread the truth and not to use misinformation as a weapon. Furthermore, Christians are warned about the dangers of lies in 2 Thessalonians 2:9-13 (*King James Bible*, 1769/2022), where emphasis is put on the Devil's role in the spread of lies. In a complex digital news landscape, there seems to be an identification issue regarding the fact or fake basis of news articles. As individuals continue to be overwhelmed with information, there is an increasing chance of misunderstanding the news or spread lies, which goes against the Biblical foundations of Christianity.

The findings of the current study also identify the extent that fear based messages have on individuals responses and behaviors associated with news. The results of this research found that fear can result in uncertainty of information, yet drives individuals to seek out the comfort of others. Although fear can be a power emotions, Biblical scriptures teach Christians ways to address fear. Psalms 34:4 (*King James Bible*, 1769/2022) states “I sought the Lord, and he heard me, and deliver me from all my fears.” The scriptures teach out the significance in confiding in the Lord as a source of strength in those times of uncertainty. Jesus reassures believers of the comfort provided by trusting in God when he is speaking in John 14:27 (*King James Bible*, 1769/2022) “peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” Although the Devil is set on a path of disruption and chaos bringing, God provides a sense of peace and strength for all who believe in him.

Additionally, the findings of the current study show that individuals are drawn to their community to share these news events in attempts to gain additional insights while also seeking out comfort for things that are fearful or shocking. The importance of community is a point that is emphasized throughout the Bible. In Galatians 6:2 (*King James Bible*, 1769/2022) Christians are told to help carry the burdens of one another. In discussing news that is fearful in nature, individuals are seeking a chance to unburden the fear with other individuals who can potentially provide support. Proverbs 27:17 (*King James Bible*, 1769/2022) speaks further into this idea when author states “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.” As fake news continues to draw on

negative emotions, such as fear, it is Biblically important to seek out the wisdom of other individuals who may can help provide clarity and insight in areas that cause confusion.

### **Implications**

Previous studies by Asch (1956), Deutsch & Gerard (1955), and Milgram (1963) found that individuals believe and follow instructions from perceived authoritative individuals. When individuals put out news articles, especially from reputable sources (i.e. CNN, MSNBC, Fox News), individuals are ideally faced with a need to either trust or distrust the source. Due to the authority held by these sources, previous studies would highlight that individuals are willing to follow the information even if it causes psychological distress. The current study provides additional insights into how individuals continue to experience and interact with fake news articles on social media due to the lexicon found within the articles.

A particular point of emphasis in the current study is that individuals in the sample population are opposed to interacting with fake news articles on social media. However, the motivation and reasons may differ. Many attempts are being made to discourage the spread of unverified information (Chung & Kim, 2021; Kim et al., 2019). The current study finds that individuals are willing to spread the news on social media sites but may instead rely on other forms of communication to discuss topics found on social media.

The current research also supports previous studies highlighting the complexities of identifying real versus fake news. Although some factors, such as political beliefs (Bago et al., 2020) and analytical thinking (Pehlivanoglu et al., 2021), have been identified as potential positive aspects in identifying the truthfulness of news articles,

there continues to be a spread of false information. All participants in the current study were college-educated, which may account for the analytic aspect. However, this study also identifies continued challenges in how emotional states can influence and impact decision-making in identifying whether news articles are real or fake.

### **Theoretical Implications**

The theoretical work that set the foundation for understanding the impact of behaviors based on emotional states and other individuals was developed by Asch (1956), Deutsch & Gerard (1955), and Milgram (1963). The seminal work conducted by these previous research teams found that individuals are more likely to go against their own personal morals or beliefs in favor of not being the odd person out (Asch, 1956; Deutsch & Gerard, 1995) while also being obedient to the perceived authoritative individuals (Milgram, 1963). These studies have shown implicit in previous studies regarding the spread of fake news on social media.

However, the current findings show a potential change in how individuals view the need to follow the popular crowd or even blindly follow authority without question. The current study found that individuals are more cautious of blindly posting information that may or may not be true, regardless of the impact on others. Participants of the current study shared a similar experience of not posting information due to the complexity of the news situation and conflict with the negative emotional lexicon.

The findings additionally highlight potential changes in news-sharing behaviors compared to work within the last six years. Most of the research that has been conducted found various complications, such as a willingness to share articles just based on different verbiage in headlines (Calvillo & Harris, 2022; Horner et al., 2021; Martel et al., 2020)

and the type of news being presented (Bago et al., 2020; Bronstein et al., 2019). As discussed in Chapter 2, the 2016 election and the COVID-19 public health crisis brought a significant amount of fake news, resulting in considerable work being done to understand the reasons for spreading fake news and ways to decrease the chances of news articles spreading.

The work conducted in the past years may be a significant factor in the current findings as there has been to implement deterrents of fake news such as attaching warnings to news articles (Pennycook et al., 2020) and using wording over articles such as “disputed” (Clayton et al. 2019). Studies such as those conducted by Clayton et al. and Pennycook et al. have found a positive impact in challenging individuals’ willingness to spread potentially unverified or fake news. The current studies’ findings did not directly assess the impact of the warnings. Instead, this study mainly focused on the impact of negative emotional lexicon. It resulted in findings that differ from previous studies, showing that fear makes people more susceptible to spreading fake news (Tunney et al., 2021). The current study found that negative emotional lexicon and negative emotional states tend to discourage interactive behaviors within the current participation population.

### **Limitations**

Four limitations within the current study are critical to account for when understanding the results: a) the short-term nature of the research, b) the small size, c) recruitment challenges, and d) the unknown regarding whether the participants were being truthful. The limitation of the findings does not negate the importance of the results, but some of them should be accounted for when understanding the impact of this study.



The study's first limitation was the short-term nature of the data collection. The study participants were given up to a one-hour interview to express their experience with fake news on social media. Due to the nature of the current project, there were no follow-up interviews. However, all participants were allowed to check the accuracy of their transcripts and provide feedback on summarizing individualized experiences.

This study had additional challenges with recruiting participants. The recommended number of participants for the current qualitative phenomenological research project was 6-12. A total of 29 individuals expressed interest in the project, but only 24 were deemed eligible. Out of the 24 participants, only five responded to the recruitment call even after being sent two follow-up emails asking if they were still interested.

Participation in the current study was voluntary, with no incentives offered. Khatamian (2018) reports that while it is not mandatory to offer compensation for participation, incentives tend to increase individuals' willingness to participate in research projects. Gul and Ali (2010) explain that another factor limiting recruitment and retention is the over-estimation of available participants. Due to researcher bias, the requirements for participation in a research project may seem broad, yet quickly eliminate population samples from one to ten percent (Gul & Ali, 2010). After individuals review the criteria or the researcher verifies the criteria with interested participants, the sample pool may decrease due to a lack of requirements or misunderstandings.

Another factor that may have accounted for the lack of participation could be the participants' motivation (Negrin et al., 2019). Participant recruitment should occur with

the individuals having an altruistic motivation to increase participation. Individuals who are more focused on their world or lack interest in the topic of the investigation are less likely to follow-up with the completion of research (Negrin et al., 2019). These multiple considerations highlight potential complications relating to the low follow-through rate. The current study did not offer any incentives for the time that was being asked of the participants. A lack of incentives and the elimination of potential participants were two key factors that impacted recruitment and retention.

The small sample led to issues within the study relating to the generalizability of the results. All participants of the current study had some college education level and were recruited through the researcher's university. It is challenging to understand what other populations and demographics have similar experiences and understanding of the topic under investigation. Additionally, the small, criteria-based selection process limited participants between the ages of 18 and 35 who use social media for news. The impact of participant recruitment limitations is discussed later in this chapter under the Recommendations for Future Research heading.

The final significant limitation of the current study was the reliance on truthfulness by the participants. The current study sought to better understand individual experiences with social media interactive behaviors due to the negative emotional lexicon used in fake news. Participants of the current study were tasked with expressing their own personal experiences and ways that the language impacts their decision-making. Therefore, the results depend on the participants being honest with themselves and the researcher. It is, therefore, an assumption that the answers were truthful; however, there

are always questions about whether the participant was giving a truthful answer or answers they thought the researcher wanted to hear.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The current research focused on the negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles and the impact on interactive behaviors on social media sites for individuals aged 18-35. As discussed in the previous section, all participants had some college education level. The first recommendation for future research would be to explore the impact of other age groups. Although this researcher addressed a diverse group of participants, there is still a need to understand how younger generations (such as teenagers) and older generations (such as those 50 years old or older) experience and interact with fake news articles while on social media. As social media continues to grow as a news source, understanding the impact of other age groups, educational levels, and even ethnic backgrounds are key topics that this research did not address.

Another recommendation for future research would be to explore if the negative emotional lexicon within real (verified) news reports has similar results. The current study focused solely on fake news with a negative emotional lexicon throughout. The participants were also given one article to read, which was used as a reflection point for understanding the impact of the verbiage and the ways it compares to other experiences while using social media. However, it is still unclear whether this would impact the spread of real news.

A final recommendation for future research would be to view the impact of negative emotional lexicon in different news source types. The current project utilized an article regarding fentanyl to avoid any potential political bias during the investigation.

However, it did not explore some of the more controversial topics that may have been prevalent, such as ongoing political challenges, geopolitical situations, or COVID-19. Future research could benefit greatly from exploring how the emotional lexicon within fake news articles impacts interactive behaviors in different news sources, including those with no relevance.

### **Summary**

While current research has found that negative emotional lexicon impacts interactive behaviors on social media, the bulk of the work up to this point has focused on headlines alone (Calvillo & Harris, 2022; Horner et al., 2021; Martel et al., 2020). Previous research has noted that negative emotional lexicon within fake news headlines typically impacts behavioral responses, can cause negative cognitions, and impacts health (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Constantinou et al., 2021; de los Santos & Nabi, 2019). However, emphasis and attention given to headlines in previous research projects failed to address how individuals respond to the text within the articles.

The current qualitative, phenomenological study aimed to address the gap identified by de los Santos & Nabi (2019), who stated, “future research would also be well-served by considering other emotional states commonly evoked by news content, including sadness and compassion, as well as blended emotions in and across news content” (p. 55). The current research and results were completed using five individual interviews with purposively selected individuals. The research intended to have the participants read a fake news article as a discussion point for understanding their experiences with interactive behaviors on social media platforms.

The current study found two thematic labels, with four emergent themes, that provide additional insight into how fake news and negative emotional lexicon influence behaviors. The thematic labels identified were as follows: a) negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles results in altered mood and deters social media activities, and b) negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles complicates the ways that individuals identify the truthfulness of the article. The two identified themes were the avoidance of spreading news that may be unverified (regardless of the negative emotional lexicon) and complications with identifying whether a news article is real or fake.

A modified Van Kaam analysis was utilized to transform the interview transcripts into a meaningful application. The detailed information provided by participants provides a chance to understand better how individuals interact with and address fake news in social media. However, due to the small sample size, criteria requirements, and short-term nature of the researcher, there remain gaps in understanding how participants of other demographics (such as those with no college education) may experience the emotional lexicon in fake news and choose to interact with these articles.

Much research has been conducted regarding potential deterrents to slow the spread of fake news, including rater comments (Kim et al., 2019) and fact-checking warnings (Chung & Kim, 2021). The current study adds to the previous body of knowledge by understanding how individuals are potentially impacted by fake news as the issues continue to be problematic. The continued need to understand why individuals interact with and spread fake news still requires research, with more emphasis on the impact of verbiage and even additional methods for deterring individuals from choosing to interact with potentially unverified news.

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## APPENDIX A: DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

**Demographic Information**

**Directions:** Please circle the number that best reflects your answer for each question.

**Directions:** Please circle the options that best reflects your answer for each question.

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Gender: Male    Female    Other \_\_\_\_\_    Prefer not to answer.
2. Age:    18-21    21-26    27-30    31-35    36-40    41+
3. Ethnic Background:    White/Caucasian    Asian    Hispanic    African American  
                                  Native-American    Mixed race    Other \_\_\_\_\_    I prefer not to say
4. Education: Masters or Above    Bachelor's Degree    Associate    High School    Other  
                                  \_\_\_\_\_
5. Marital Status:    Married    Divorced    Separated    Single    I prefer not to say
6. Social Media Usage (hour per week)    0-4    4-8    8-12    12+
7. Do you news while using social media? Yes\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B: STUDY INFORMATION SHEET

**Study Information Sheet**

**Title of the Project:** FAKE NEWS AND SOCIAL MEDIA: THE IMPACT OF EMOTIONAL LEXICON ON INTERACTIVE BEHAVIORS.

**Principal Investigator:** Charles Montjoy, Doctoral Candidate Psychology Department, Liberty University

<b>Invitation to be Part of a Research Study</b>
--

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be between the ages of 18-35, use social media a minimum of four hours weekly, receive news from social media platforms, and be proficient in the English language. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

<b>What is the study about and why is it being done?</b>
--

The purpose of the study is to gain a better understanding of the ways in which emotion-based vocabulary impact interactions with news articles on social media platforms.

<b>What will happen if you take part in this study?</b>
---

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Participation will begin by reviewing a selected news article, no more than 1 week prior to the interview. The article will take approximately 5-10 minutes to read.
2. Participate in an audio-recorded interview that will take no more than 1 hour. Audio recordings are necessary for transcribing the interviews and data analysis.
3. After transcripts have been completed by the researcher, participants will be asked to member check the transcripts. Member checking involves research participants to review the transcripts of their interview and provide feedback help ensure the accuracy.

<b>How could you or others benefit from this study?</b>
---

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include a stronger understanding of the ways that language within news articles influences individuals' willingness to interact with articles. Gaining this understanding helps the field of psychology better understand motivation and reasons to share, like, and comment on news articles. Additionally, the research helps strengthen a

growing body of literature on ways to ensure that factual news is what people are viewing and sharing.

#### **What risks might you experience from being in this study?**

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

I am a mandatory reporter. During this study, if I receive information about child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others, I will be required to report it to the appropriate authorities.

#### **How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher and members of his doctoral committee will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer, with an encrypted folder. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer, within an encrypted folder for 3 years and until participants have reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts and then deleted/erased. The researcher and members of his doctoral committee will have access to these recordings.

#### **Is the researcher in a position of authority over participants, or does the researcher have a financial conflict of interest?**

The researcher serves as doctoral candidate at Liberty University. To limit potential or perceived conflicts, collection will be anonymous. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on his or her decision to participate or not participate in this study.

#### **Is study participation voluntary?**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to

participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?**

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

**Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?**

The researcher conducting this study is Charles Montjoy. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Nathan Borrett], at [REDACTED].

**Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*



## APPENDIX C: FAKE NEWS ARTICLE

## Ohio police officer overdoses after brushing fentanyl powder off uniform

[local5yr.com/news/local-news/ohio-police-officer-overdoses-after-brushing-fentanyl-powder-off-uniform/](https://www.local5yr.com/news/local-news/ohio-police-officer-overdoses-after-brushing-fentanyl-powder-off-uniform/)

ARTEMIS MOSHTAGHIAN, CNN

May 16, 2017



Here's a frightening reminder of the dangers of fentanyl, a powerful opioid that can be lethal even in tiny amounts.

A police officer in East Liverpool, Ohio, collapsed and was rushed to the hospital after he brushed fentanyl residue off his uniform, allowing the drug to enter his system through his hands. The officer had apparently encountered the opioid earlier in the day while making a drug bust.

"This is scary. He could have walked out of the building and left, and he could have passed out while he was driving. You don't even know it's there on his clothes," East Liverpool Police Chief John Lane told CNN.

"His wife, kids and his dog could be confronted with it and boom, they're dead. This could never end."

It happened last Friday night after East Liverpool officers made a traffic stop and detained two men they believe were involved in a drug transaction.

"Once they got blocked in, they (the suspects) tried to dispose of the evidence in the vehicle," East Liverpool Captain Patrick Wright told CNN affiliate WKBN. "There was white powder on the seat, on the floor, on the guys' shoes, and on his clothing."

After arresting the two men, East Liverpool Police Officer Chris Green was winding down his shift in the police station's break room when one of his colleagues pointed out he had something on his uniform. Green wiped the white powder off with his bare hands.

Within minutes, he wasn't feeling well.

"I started talking weird. I slowly felt my body shutting down. I could hear them talking, but I couldn't respond. I was in total shock," Green told the Morning Journal of Lisbon, Ohio.

Green, who had worn gloves while searching the suspects' car, collapsed on the floor. Police believe he was experiencing an overdose.

Fentanyl is 50 to 100 times more potent than morphine and 30 to 50 times more potent than heroin. Just a quarter of a milligram — a few granules — can kill you.

Paramedics gave Green a dose of Narcan, an opioid antidote, to reverse the effects and rushed him to a hospital. Green told the Morning Journal he was feeling better on Saturday.

Experts say the effects of fentanyl can be felt when absorbed through the skin or accidentally inhaled, making the drug hazardous to anyone who comes into contact with it.

"It's time our state government drafts legislation to protect our safety forces from these harmful drugs," the City of East Liverpool said in a Facebook post. "Those in possession not only pose a risk to themselves but everyone they come into contact with as well."

## APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Q1: How often do you use social media as a source for receiving news?

Q2: What types of news articles do you tend to interact with most? For example, politics, healthcare, local news.

Q3: Reflecting on the news article you were asked to read, what emotions (if any) did you feel the article brought out?

Q4: Please describe what emotional verbiage or tone you noticed was central to the article you read?

Q5: Do you believe the article to be real or fake? Please explain why.

Q6: The article was proven to be fake by Snopes.com but could have been viewed as real. If you encountered this article on a social media website, how do you think would have interacted with it, assuming there was no information that the article was fake?

Q7: In what ways would the language within the articles influence decision making to interact with it?

Q8: How do you feel the way you interact with articles impact people who see your news feed?

Q9: What motivation do you have for sharing potentially unverified information on social media?

Q10: When browsing social media sites, do you feel that labels have been deterrents from view articles?

Q11: How does the type of news your friends and family members on social media use impact the way you interact with different articles?


Q12: What definition do you put to fake news?


## APPENDIX E: SCHEDULING FORM

5/9/23, 9:30 AM

Interview Scheduling

### Interview Scheduling

cmontjoy132@gmail.com [Switch account](#) 

 Not shared

**\* Indicates required question**

Please provide the first initial of your first name, and full last name \*

Your answer

Which day of the week works best \*

- Monday
- Tuesday
- Wednesday
- Thursday
- Friday
- Saturday
- Sunday

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQL5qpa0U1vMqZDR6574nsv5OymcpYUQkw07r5LNt82q8A/viewform>

1/4

7/25/23, 9:06 AM

Interview Scheduling

If you opted for Monday-Friday Please choose an appropriate time

- 6 pm EST
- 7 pm EST (with the exception of Thursdays)
- 8 pm EST
- 9 pm EST

Saturday and Sundays

- 9 am EST
- 10 am EST
- 11 am EST
- 12 pm EST
- 1 pm EST
- 2 pm EST
- 3 pm EST
- 4 pm EST
- 5 pm EST
- 6 pm EST
- 7 pm EST

Proposed date. Please select a date that is at least 1 week out from the date of completion of this form. \*

Date

mm/dd/yyyy



Submit

Clear form 

## APPENDIX F: RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear Liberty University Students:

As a doctoral candidate in the School of Behavioral Sciences at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a PhD in Social Psychology. The purpose of my research is to gain a better understanding of the ways in which emotion-based vocabulary impact interactions with news articles on social media platforms, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be between the ages of 18 and 35, use social media at least 4 hours a week, and explore news articles while using social media. Participants, if willing, will be asked to schedule a time with the researcher to complete an interview that will last between 45 minutes to 1 hour. Prior to completing the interview, participants will be required to read a pre-selected news article that will be emailed as a PDF. After the interview is completed, participants will be provided a chance to verify the accuracy of the transcripts. It should take approximately 10 minutes to read the article, no longer than an hour for the interview, and up to an hour for transcript verification. Participation will be completely anonymous, and no personal, identifying information will be collected.

To participate, please click here (<https://forms.gle/8Y8BLnny7AfuD6Yj9>).

An info sheet will be emailed to you one week before the interview.

Sincerely,

Charles Montjoy  
Doctoral Candidate

██████████  
████████████████████

## APPENDIX G: APPROVAL EMAIL

7/14/23, 8:02 AM

Mail - Montjoy, Charles - Outlook

RE: Research IRB Approval

Knapp, Kenyon Christian (School of Behavioral Sciences Admin) [REDACTED]

Sun 7/9/2023 3:31 PM

To: Montjoy, Charles [REDACTED]

Cc: Borrett, Nathan James (Psychology) [REDACTED] Piferi, Rachel L (Psychology)

Hi Charles,

This research is approved, assuming you apply and receive IRB approval from Liberty University. Thanks.

Kenyon Knapp, Ph.D., LPC

Dean

School of Behavioral Sciences

Health Professions

(434) 582-2697


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**From:** Montjoy, Charles <cmontjoy@liberty.edu>**Sent:** Saturday, July 8, 2023 11:29 AM**To:** Knapp, Kenyon Christian (School of Behavioral Sciences Admin) <kcknapp@liberty.edu>**Cc:** Borrett, Nathan James (Psychology) <njborrett@liberty.edu>**Subject:** Research IRB Approval

Good Morning Dr. Knapp,

My name is Charles Montjoy. I am currently working on dissertation as a partial requirement for my Ph.D in Social Psychology. My dissertation is regarding the impact of negative emotional lexicon found within fake news articles and individual's interactive behaviors on social media sites. In order to complete the data collection portion of my dissertation I am requesting the use of LUO students to be participants in the study. I appreciate any support you can offer in this process. If you have any questions on the nature of the my diss

Sincerely,  
Charles Montjoy, M.A.  
Doctoral Candidate  
LCMHC-A

## APPENDIX H: TEXTURAL DESCRIPTIONS

### **Textural Description for Alex**

Alex's experience with the negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles is of surprise with the ways that the emotional language is used to perpetuate fake news. The participant shared that he is on social media and views news articles multiple times daily. Alex expressed that some topics relate to fear and anger, but these emotional states do not impact social media interactive behaviors. Alex finds that the tone and messages within the articles can be a powerful tool; however, Alex did express an understanding that not all the information in articles is factual.

The participant described his understanding of fake news and the ways that it impacts his life. Alex stated, “my definition of fake news, is something that doesn't fit my answers. I mean, that's like I'll be true. That's the truth, for, like for fake news. I guess what I what I try to look for is what fit into my beliefs, and it doesn't fit in my belief in you know I like it, can.” The participant further elaborated that he is more likely to discredit some topics but not completely.

Alex explained that the emotional lexicon of articles complicates his understanding and identification of fake versus real news. The participant described that although he does not interact with news articles on social media, he still finds the topics interesting to discuss in face-to-face encounters. The participant shared that part of the reason for not interacting on social media sites is due to his current enlistment as an active-duty Army soldier.

The participant shared that when he is faced with a topic such as politics, he tends to believe the information based on previous exposure to the article topic. Alex described



that these kinds of assumptions of truthfulness are prevalent in his experience but also acknowledged that there can be inconsistencies with the information. Additionally, Alex described part of his reason for not interacting with articles on social media was to avoid any chance of spreading fake news.

Alex further explained that the emotional lexicon within fake news articles results in personal, emotional responses. The participant expressed that he notices negative emotional attitudes within himself when the tone and language of the articles are negative. The participant does not feel that this is enough reason to share potentially unverified fake news.

However, Alex acknowledges that these emotional states in combination with conflicting information, result in him automatically assuming the information is true. The participant described how he just assumes the information is factual instead of looking further, especially when the information aligned with his beliefs. Alex mentioned that he does not find himself influenced by other individuals' actions. Overall, Alex finds it best not to use social media as a platform for interacting with news articles, regardless of whether they are fake or real.

### **Textural Description for Billy**

Billy described their typical experience with fake news articles that use negative emotional lexicon as typically neutral. The participant expressed that he is more likely to explore positive articles than articles with negative emotional lexicon when he sees positive articles. Billy is more likely to read comments made by other individuals but refrains from interacting via liking, sharing, or commenting on these articles himself.

The participant does not interact with articles on social media to avoid sharing information that may not be completely factual. Billy shared that he likes to talk about the information but usually avoids using social media as a platform for information sharing and discussions. Billy explored the frequency of his interactions with news on social media and reported that he receives up to four articles daily.

This participant described ways that different emotional lexicons will result in corresponding emotional states. For the article utilized for the research project, the participant stated, "Okay, so yeah, it brought up a sense of like sympathy for the officers going with Fentanyl." These feelings of sympathy (or other emotional states) impact the client's decision-making skills regarding the truthfulness of an article.

Even though Billy is unwilling to share the information on social media sites, he will bring it up to family members. In particular, the participants expressed that it is more important to discuss local events than others. The participant described ways in which warning labels associated with negative emotional lexicon have been helpful in deterring interaction and the negative implications that may arise from interacting on social media sites.

Billy's experience with identifying fake news is to assume the information is typically factual. Billy explored his typical judgment of the factual nature of the news articles when he stated, "If I don't see that it has an issue, or it sounds plausible, I probably wouldn't look at it too closely." This participant's sentiments highlight the willingness just to accept information within articles (regardless of the truthfulness) if it aligns with beliefs. Additionally, this participant notes that regardless of opinions regarding the truthfulness of the articles, it does not impact his interaction with them. The participant also noted that there is influence arising from his family and friends on social media sites.

### **Textural Description for Cathy**

Cathy described their experience with the negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles, which usually involves struggling with accepting articles and being impacted by the emotional language within the articles. The participants noted looking up news on social media daily which is not their preference. The participant noted that the main type of news viewed on social media is mainly local news, but she does not avoid political news.

Cathy explained her definition of fake news as “News that may like is misleading at at the like base level. Sometimes there is bits of facts scattered into it, but often it is just kind of scare tactic and meant to excite.” The participant noted that the fake news is usually meant to be for fearmongering reasons, which is often the result she sees from her friends and family. Cathy further describes the corresponding emotional states she experiences, which align to some degree with the article read.

For the selected article, the participant noted her emotional response as scared and attributed it to the use of the word fentanyl within the article. The participant related that due to this understanding of the nature of news, she automatically assumes the news is fake and that appears on her feeds is “specifically due to the algorithm that goes on, you will see things that are from a viewpoint that is pretty opposite of your own, a lot of the time. And I feel like a lot of the time that is to agitate.” The participant elaborated that this understanding is a significant reason for doubting the truthfulness of most news.

However, Cathy related that regardless of her emotional state, she strays away from interacting with news on social media sites, regardless of the emotional lexicon within or even the article's truthfulness. The participant mentioned that she is willing to

share these articles in daily conversations as family and friend's opinions matter to her. The participant mentioned that she wants to avoid any sort of arguments or negative comments on social media, which means it is better for her to share the information in communications.

The participant further described that she automatically assumes news is fake, especially when the tone and emotional language are negative. Cathy expressed that the amount of conflicting news that appears and is posted has led to the assumption of fakeness within the news. The participant explored ways that just assuming news is fake leads to doing her research but not using that information for interactive behaviors.

Additionally, the participant shared that her experience and interactions with news article is not reliant on family and friends shared articles or opinions. The participants concluded their experience with news on social media as a willingness to read the articles but not allow the negative emotional lexicon to influence any interacting behaviors due to the complexities within the news being posted and shared.

### **Textural Description for Dereke**

Dereke's experience with negative emotional lexicon within fake news article was expressed as one in which the language of the articles is not as important for the believability of the news. The participant noted that he usually spends an average of two to three times daily on social media sites and finds news articles. Dereke discussed the various ways he explores news articles, the impact on emotions, and his interactive behaviors.

The participants noted that he mainly looks up articles related to politics or sports, which results in various types of news exposure. Dereke defined his understanding of fake news as

if you're gonna watch the news, then maybe just investigate on what you're actually listening to or hearing. If you see something on Cnn or fox, or this or that for the most part. I don't think they're just completely fake news across the board.

While exploring how the participant felt about the selected article, he admitted he would usually have assumed it to be accurate. However, due to being a research participant, he did previous research to verify. Dereke noted throughout the interview that the language within articles is an important factor in both his decision-making and emotional responses.

The participant elaborated on the selected article by saying the way the article was written raised some red flags, but not enough for him to explore the context further. During the interview, the participant expressed that the negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles usually results in him feeling in ways that align with the tone and verbiage of the article.

The participant reflected on the selected article and reported that substance-related articles bring out emotions such as “confusion and question marks.” The participant explored reasons for avoiding the spread of fake news while also discussing the impact of the verbiage. This participant described the ways in which he is unwilling to interact on social media because of his position in the community but is willing to share the information in discussion with family and friends.

The participant shared that his motivation for sharing outside of social media platforms is to gather opinions from family and friends regarding topics that are seen. The participant noted, "I just like talking about politics to be honest. I think a lot of people are afraid to talk about politics, or about the government, or about you know the military or religion." The participant overall expressed his experience with the negative emotional lexicon as leading to assumptions of truthfulness, but non-interactive to avoid potentially sharing information that may be false or result in discord on social media sites.

### **Textural Description for Edith**

Edith described their experience with the negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles as a shock. The participant described ways that the verbiage of articles often impacts her but can highlight contradictory information. Edith notes during the interview that with the amount of fake news floating around, she has become cautious of most news in general. Edith explored her amount of time using social media for news viewing and related “I would say at least, daily. I end up looking at the news on social media more often than I would like to admit it's almost like it. Just kind of like sucks you in.”

Edith elaborates further on the amount of time she views news on social media and the wide contradiction of information, which is part of why she is cautious about the articles she views. The participant stated part of her reason for struggling to accept news articles as truthful results from “feeling like a lot of the time that is to agitate because those people that that kind of feels a fire, and I think that it like furs division that kind of thing. I think that a lot of it is used to fire people up and get clicks, because, you know, advertisements.” The participant notes that these articles have and do typically result in feelings aligned with the nature of the emotional-based lexicon.

The participant explored her interactive behaviors on social media with fake news articles both as she interacted and her current behaviors. Edith discussed the extent of conflicting information she gets from family, friends, and the news as a point of confusion. She shared ways in which family member's professions can be points of conflict for the news she is presented with. When discussing ways she has alerted her behaviors and approaches to news on social media, the participant used the 2016 election as an example and stated,



whenever I was younger like back in high school I didn't ever like look into things, really. But after probably about my junior year, I started where I was like looking into stuff because of politics and everything like that's whenever they were getting ready to kick off for like the election that following year.

The participant discussed that she may look up other information to verify the information but potentially has already heard a conflict of information. Additionally, the participant described her behaviors towards interacting with fake news articles as being not impacted by her family or friends on social media.

The participant described that her family and friends have the same opinions of her; however, she feels no need to interact with fake news on social media platforms. The participant elaborated that she does not necessarily address the articles on social media; instead, she will likely discuss the information with others face-to-face. The participant's experience of avoiding liking, commenting, or sharing the articles is to avoid spreading the news, and for her, it is easier to assume that the articles are untruthful.

## APPENDIX I: STRUCTURAL DESCRIPTIONS

**Structural Description for Alex**

## Exploration of the participant's experience

<b>Experience</b>	<b>Structural Theme / Description</b>
<p>Alex experienced the negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles through the ways it emotionally impacted him.</p> <p>The participant usually experiences negative emotional states based on the verbiage used and key statements made within the article.</p> <p>He usually does not realize the extent the verbiage has on him in the immediate reading. He feels some type of way while reading the articles.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles results in a corresponding emotional state such as fear or anger (distress, fear, or negative emotional state).</li> <li>○ Feels emotions aligned with the tone and verbiage found within the articles.</li> <li>○ Distress with the emotions he feels.</li> <li>○ Focuses on key phrases or tones within the articles.</li> </ul>
<p>Alex experiences articles on social media daily. While viewing the articles, he finds the information to be of interest and viewable.</p> <p>Alex usually does not share the information, though, because he does not want to spread potentially unverified information due to anxiety and ways it may impact his job.</p> <p>Alex reminisced about his understanding of fake news, as it is important to what aligns with his own personal beliefs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Negative emotional lexicon does not result in social media interactive behaviors (avoidance of social consequences).</li> <li>○ Participant's understanding of fake news is less about the accuracy of information and more about personal beliefs.</li> <li>○ Due to this understanding, the participant does not interact with the article to avoid confrontation or potentially spreading unverified information.</li> </ul>
<p>Alex expressed feeling as if the information is worth discussing but not on social media.</p> <p>The participant expressed intrigue with other individual's opinions but does not want his name attached to the information publicly due to fear.</p> <p>He shared that his news-viewing behaviors are negatively impacted by the extent of negative emotional lexicon, which leads to finding an outlet for discussion.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● A wanting to share the information that is relevant to his perceptions (confirmation bias).</li> <li>○ Feelings of being overwhelmed by the amount of information he read.</li> <li>○ Needing to have a sounding board to discuss the information.</li> </ul>
<p>Alex pointed out that he finds it hard to discredit information within news articles.</p> <p>He related a lot of negative emotional states within the languages. He mentioned that he feels the language is meant to get the reader to take the information seriously instead of ignoring it.</p> <p>The participant typically assumes the information is accurate instead of doubting the information presented by the experts.</p> <p>He also feels that he gets validation from his family due to their lack of knowledge on topics and willingness to support his ideas on the information blindly.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Negative emotional lexicon complicates understanding fake news (confusion, lack of clarity).</li> <li>○ Unwillingness to explore information further.</li> <li>○ Assumptions that time spent writing the information must be accurate.</li> <li>○ Validation from other individuals in his life allows the belief to be maintained (wanting for validation).</li> </ul>

**Alex**

***Structural theme 1: Negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles results in a corresponding emotional state such as fear or anger (distress, fear, or negative emotional state).***

Textural theme: Feels emotions aligned with the tone and verbiage found within the articles.

Textural theme: Distress with the emotions he feels.

Textural theme: Focuses on key phrases or tones within the articles.

Textural theme: Focuses on key phrases or tones within the articles.

***Structural theme 2: Negative emotional lexicon does not result in social media interactive behaviors (avoidance of social consequences).***

Textural theme: Participants understanding of fake news is less about the accuracy of information and more about personal beliefs.

Textural theme: Due to this understanding, the participant does not interact with the article to avoid confrontation or potentially spreading unverified information.

***Structural theme 3: A wanting to share the information that is relevant to his perceptions (confirmation bias).***

Textural theme: Feelings of being overwhelmed by the amount of information he read.

Textural theme: Needing to have a sounding board to discuss the information.

***Structural theme 4: Negative emotional lexicon complicates understanding fake news (confusion, lack of clarity).***

Textural Theme: Unwillingness to explore information further.

Textural Theme: Assumptions that time spent writing the information must be accurate.

Textural Theme: Validation from other individuals in his life allows the belief to be maintained (wanting for validation).

## Structural Description for Billy

### Exploration of the participant's experience

Experience	Structural Theme/Description
<p>Billy reflected on the typical way he feels while reading news articles that are negative in tone.</p> <p>Billy explored his emotional state with the selected article and expressed that articles of this nature bring out sympathy and fear.</p> <p>He reminisced on his typical responses to the articles and how his emotions shifted according to the tone.</p> <p>The participant also expressed that he finds he may experience multiple emotions, ranging from negative to positive, while reading articles, with the most impactful emotions being associated with the negative tone and lexicon rather than the positive.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Emotional states depend on the tone and language of news articles (fluctuation in mood and emotional feelings).</li> <li>○ Verbiage and topic are important in emotional responses.</li> <li>○ Emotions may change multiple times.</li> <li>○ Certain words can result in specific emotions.</li> </ul>
<p>Billy described spending viewing political and local news 3-4 times daily on social media platforms, which is a distressing amount of time for him.</p> <p>He tends to be drawn to these articles as they are what appear naturally on feeds, but he does not feel drawn to seek out anything.</p> <p>Billy shared that he feels a need to avoid sharing or interacting with news articles regardless of the negative emotional lexicon found within the articles.</p> <p>He shared concerns about the vast amount of information, conflicting news, and differences of opinions from family and friends.</p> <p>He shared his understanding of fake news is anything that is meant to be extreme or avoids any descriptions that provide his perception of fair descriptions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Unwillingness to share information due to complexities of news (confusion and overload).</li> <li>○ Easier to avoid sharing since the information is due to uncertainty.</li> <li>○ Individuals in his life may have different opinions.</li> <li>○ Feels more positive if he does not have to address lengthy conversations in a digital platform.</li> </ul>
<p>Billy showed a great interest in sharing the information in verbal formats.</p> <p>He expressed the feeling that he should be able to discuss his opinions with family in a safe place to gain additional perspectives on articles and news.</p> <p>The participant reminisced about how he does not want to share information as he may find articles interesting simply because they may be controversial, which can lead to interesting conversations.</p> <p>However, he wants to avoid spreading the information if he cannot say the information is completely accurate for fear of social embarrassment.</p> <p>He further shared that he doesn't like to use social media for anything more than just viewing what others share, which is an additional deterrent to sharing any articles regardless of his emotional state.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Finds enjoyment in speaking with friends about topics (importance in sharing of ideas).</li> <li>○ Does not feel like social media is the appropriate way to discuss complicated situations.</li> <li>○ Enjoyment when the topic may be controversial in conversation.</li> <li>○ Indifferent about using and applying social media for news interactions and sharing.</li> </ul>
<p>Billy shared that he experiences challenges with identifying news as fake regardless of any negative emotional lexicon.</p> <p>He elaborated that he finds it more comforting and easier to just assume the news is true.</p> <p>Billy typically avoids any further research to avoid confusion or challenging belief systems.</p> <p>He elaborated that he also relies on his own background knowledge as a source for determination but acknowledged that he may be misinformed.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Emotional states complicate understanding of the topics (confusion and wanting peace of mind).</li> <li>○ Willingness to automatically assume information is accurate.</li> <li>○ Trusts his personal opinions to be factors in the identification of fake news.</li> <li>○ Finds it easier just to accept the news.</li> <li>○ Does not want to do research for fear of becoming overwhelmed.</li> </ul>

**Billy**

***Structural theme 1: Emotional states depend on the tone and language of news articles (fluctuation in mood and emotional feelings).***

Textural theme: Verbiage and topic are important in emotional responses.

Textural theme: Emotions may change multiple times.

Textural theme: Certain words can result in specific emotions.

***Structural theme 2: Unwillingness to share information due to complexities of news (confusion and overload).***

Textural theme: Easier to avoid sharing since the information is due to uncertainty.

Textural theme: Individuals in his life may have different opinions.

Textural theme: Feels more positive if he does not have to address lengthy conversations in a digital platform.

***Structural theme 3: Finds enjoyment in speaking with friends about topics (importance in sharing of ideas).***

Textural theme: Does not feel like social media is the appropriate way to discuss complicated situations.

Textural theme: Enjoyment when the topic may be controversial in conversation.

Textural theme: Indifferent about using and applying social media for news interactions and sharing.

***Structural theme 4: Emotional states complicate understanding of the topics (confusion and wanting peace of mind).***

Textural theme: Willingness to automatically assume information is accurate.

Textural theme: Trusts his personal opinions to be factors in the identification of fake news.

Textural theme: Finds it easier just to accept the news.

Textural theme: Does not want to do research for fear of becoming overwhelmed.

## Structural Description for Cathy

### Exploration of the participant's experience

Experience	Structural Theme/Description
<p>Cathy reflected on the ways that the negative emotional lexicon in fake news articles impacts aspects of their behaviors.</p> <p>Cathy shared that she feels negatively when reading fake news articles reliant on negative verbiage.</p> <p>The participant expressed that her emotional response often aligns with the words used but maybe a sense of shock sometimes.</p> <p>She explained that the extent of the emotional response relies heavily on the topic's relevance.</p> <p>Cathy expressed that relevance is important, as it helps to identify the impact of the news article on her life and situation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Negative emotional lexicon alters her emotional state (emotional fluctuations).</li> <li>○ Sometimes, the emotion may be shock (unsure how to feel)</li> <li>○ The ways the news may impact her life are significant factors.</li> </ul>
<p>Cathy shared that she uses social media more often than she would like, which is problematic.</p> <p>She described her experience with news viewing as nonchalant and said she has a particular type of news preference.</p> <p>Cathy related that while she may read multiple articles, she does not use social media as a platform for information sharing.</p> <p>Cathy avoids sharing news articles on social, regardless of the negative emotional lexicon within the article, due to wanting to avoid acting on emotions or sharing misinformation.</p> <p>Her understanding of fake news was expressed as news that is misleading but has a possibility for some truth.</p> <p>She expressed a great deal of emotional distress in the past when she shared an article she felt was real (based on emotions) to find out later it was misleading, and parts were fabricated.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Casual news viewing behaviors to try and keep current.</li> <li>○ Participant finds it risky to share information when it has been unverified.</li> <li>○ Often exposed to multiple articles daily.</li> <li>○ Has had a previous incident of sharing information result in the spread of fake news and distress (avoidance of sharing).</li> </ul>
<p>Cathy reminisced on her willingness to discuss fake news articles with friends and family.</p> <p>She explained her reasoning for doing so is more to challenge their willingness to believe news and help highlight the importance of fact-checking blindly.</p> <p>Cathy additionally shared that she feels validation when speaking to others as sometimes they acknowledge immediately the news was fake and are in agreement or show appreciation for the corrected information.</p> <p>During the interview, Cathy shared that she also avoids interacting on social media due to how strangers can negatively react to unpopular opinions/comments.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Conversations allow for the correction of fake news (validation).</li> <li>○ She is more willing to engage in conversation due to the intimate nature of the conversation.</li> <li>○ Finds joy and pleasure when providing family with accurate information.</li> <li>○ Can result in a sense of validation as opposed to being attacked (acceptance versus rejection)</li> </ul>
<p>Cathy's experience with believing news is to automatically assume it is fake when a lot of negative emotional lexicon is used.</p> <p>The participant shared feeling as if the tone of the message is a way to mislead since emotions can override logic.</p> <p>She expressed a lot of caution with certain sources.</p> <p>Cathy ultimately relies on doing additional research for her own purposes.</p> <p>She relayed that she knows she cannot correct the news, but she needs peace of mind to know the reality of what she is reading.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Emotions necessity assumption of fake news (conflictual thoughts)</li> <li>○ Understanding the negative emotional lexicon is a way of covering up the reality of news.</li> <li>○ Seeks out additional information for fact-checking.</li> <li>○ Longing to know which news is fake so she has an accurate understanding.</li> </ul>



## **Cathy**

***Structural theme 1: Negative emotional lexicon alters her emotional state (emotional fluctuations).***

Textural theme: Sometimes, the emotion may be shock (unsure how to feel)

Textural theme: The ways the news may impact her life are significant factors.***Structural theme 2: Casual news viewing behaviors to try and keep current.***

Textural theme: Participant finds it risky to share information when it has been unverified.

Textural theme: Often exposed to multiple articles daily.

Textural theme: Has had a previous incident of sharing information result in the spread of fake news and distress (avoidance of sharing).

***Structural theme 3: Conversations allow for the correction of fake news (validation).***

Textural theme: She is more willing to engage in conversation due to the intimate nature of the conversation.

Textural theme: Finds joy and pleasure when providing family with accurate information.

Textural theme: Can result in a sense of validation as opposed to being attacked (acceptance versus rejection)

***Structural theme 4: Emotions necessity assumption of fake news (conflictual thoughts)***

Textural theme: Understanding the negative emotional lexicon is a way of covering up the reality of news.

Textural theme: Seeks out additional information for fact-checking.

Textural theme: Longing to know which news is fake so she has an accurate understanding.

## Structural Description for Dereke

### Exploration of the participant's experience

Experience	Structural Theme/Description
<p>Dereke's experience with the negative emotional lexicon in fake news articles is one of confusion in addition to appropriate emotional responses.</p> <p>The participant shared that sometimes they shut down from articles due to the heavy nature of the topic and key negative words used throughout the articles. He also noted that he tries to remain neutral and believes in the initial read he does well.</p> <p>When reminiscing on past responses, he expressed distress with realizing he allows his emotions to be impacted by verbiage in fake news articles, which is a new revelation for him.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of awareness regarding the extent to which verbiage impacts mood (emotionally unaware).</li> <li>○ Finds it easier to try to avoid negative emotions by trying to neutralize the topic.</li> <li>○ Attempts to understand the information without the emotional impact.</li> </ul>
<p>Dereke relayed that she uses social media 2-3 hours daily and typically views political and sports news. His understanding of fake news was described as news that may be hard to detect for the everyday person. Because of his perceptions regarding the state of news and the extent of fake news articles, DEREKE strongly emphasized the importance of just not sharing news on social media.</p> <p>He believes that negative emotional verbiage is a reason to be cautious about the news and may not be appropriate to share because of his personal bias toward the article's topic.</p> <p>Dereke clarified that it is better to read the article for entertainment/information but that social media is the appropriate outlet for discussion due to how new companies try to draft articles.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Believes fake news relies on his concept of topic (self-defined against academic definition).</li> <li>○ Challenging to detect news due to individual's beliefs (confirmation bias).</li> <li>○ Distrust of major news companies.</li> <li>○ Does not agree with social media being used for sharing news.</li> </ul>
<p>Dereke described his experience sharing fake news in social settings as a positive experience.</p> <p>His primary motivation for avoiding sharing topics on social media is his position within the community. However, the participant feels a desire to get opinions on politics and religion from family.</p> <p>He expressed a passion for getting his family and friend's opinions in social settings, as it is more socially acceptable and safer.</p> <p>Dereke also explained that he believes discussing with other individuals provides a chance to see ways his opinions may cloud his judgment while validating appropriate understandings.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community expectations and position are crucial deterrents for interacting on social media (social obligation/acceptance)</li> <li>○ It is important to share ideas without having fights or conflicts with strangers.</li> <li>○ Positive feelings associated with validation and support offset distress from the articles.</li> <li>○ Social conversations provide insight into blinders.</li> </ul>
<p>Dereke related that a negative emotional lexicon leads him to assume the information is accurate automatically. He does not typically do additional research as he feels it is a waste of time.</p> <p>For Dereke, the parts of the article that are accurate based on some previous knowledge validate enough reasons to accept the information blindly.</p> <p>He recognizes the dangers of accepting information without additional research, which is a fear factor in not sharing any news through social media.</p> <p>The participant's impact by the negative emotional lexicon is more of a need to discuss the information in order to find relief.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experiences mental comfort from just accepting the news (avoidance of potential belief challenges).</li> <li>○ The factual parts of the articles are more important than anything fake within them.</li> <li>○ Fear of dissent from peers is a reason for keeping his opinions on the reality of news to himself (fear of social rejection).</li> <li>○ Feels that family and friends' validation sustains his judgment calls.</li> </ul>

**Dereke**

***Structural theme 1: Lack of awareness regarding the extent to which verbiage impacts mood (emotionally unaware).***

Textural theme: Finds it easier to try to avoid negative emotions by trying to neutralize the topic.

Textural theme: Attempts to understand the information without the emotional impact.

***Structural theme 2: Believes fake news is reliant on individual concept of topic (self-defined against academic definition).***

Textural theme: Challenging to detect news due to individual's beliefs (confirmation bias).

Textural theme: Distrust of major news companies.

Textural theme: Does not agree with social media being used for sharing news.

***Structural theme 3: Community expectations and position are crucial deterrents for interacting on social media (social obligation/acceptance)***

Textural theme: It is important to share ideas without having fights or conflicts with strangers.

Textural theme: Positive feelings associated with validation and support offset distress from the articles.

Textural theme: Social conversations provide insight into blinders.

***Structural theme 4: Experiences mental comfort from just accepting the news (avoidance of potential belief challenges).***

Textural theme: The factual parts of the articles are more important than anything fake within them.

Textural theme: Fear of dissent from peers is a reason for keeping his opinions on the reality of news to himself (fear of social rejection).

Textural theme: Feels that family and friends' validation sustains his judgment calls.

## Structural Description for Edith

### Exploration of the participant's experience

Experience	Structural Theme/Description
<p>Edith shared her experience with the negative emotional lexicon in fake news articles, which typically involves shock and fear.</p> <p>She related that the way articles are written results in surprise due to specific word choices and potential exaggeration of the discussed topic.</p> <p>The participant reminisced about the ways her mood is altered when she reads fake news and the ways that words such as 'death' can ruin her mood.</p> <p>Edith additionally related she feels the tone of the messages is meant to result in fear or negativity, which she notices impacts her mood, even if she was previously feeling upbeat.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The negative verbiage and tone of fake news articles cause great distress (emotionally responsive).</li> <li>○ The articles typically cause feelings of shock and fear.</li> <li>○ Mood can be altered immediately once she gets into the text.</li> <li>○ Finds it upsetting the ways that fake news articles can shift her mood.</li> </ul>
<p>Edith relayed that she spends an average of 4 hours daily on social media and mostly follows local news.</p> <p>The participant shared that her understanding of fake news is news that is not based in fact and has the intent of causing a reaction from individuals.</p> <p>She reflected on her typical behaviors associated with fake news and emotional lexicon and emphasized avoidance of interacting with the articles on social media sites.</p> <p>Edith discussed not sharing articles as she feels there is too much information to check for accuracy on.</p> <p>Edith expressed she feels it is not worth trusting or interacting with the news because she doesn't want to be a factor in people freaking out or getting potentially unverified information.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information overload results in avoidance of social media interactions.</li> <li>○ Feels overwhelmed with too much conflicting news.</li> <li>○ Has a mistrust of news.</li> <li>○ Does not want to mislead others.</li> </ul>
<p>The participant shared her experience with speaking with individuals regarding the news she finds.</p> <p>Edith related she speaks with family members or friends who may have experience with a topic she read.</p> <p>She expressed feelings of comfort and peace when she can get insight into negative topics.</p> <p>Edith further related that she avoids social media interactions because people are more aggressive there than in her face-to-face encounters.</p> <p>She explored her high school years when she would just openly comment or share whatever on social media, which usually caused distress due to the ways the fake news was presented and stranger's responses on social media.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social acceptance leads to discussion in vocal conversation (wanting to belong).</li> <li>○ Validation when provided clarity by perceived experts.</li> <li>○ Appreciates conversations about negative topics instead of personal attacks.</li> <li>○ Avoids unneeded negativity from unknown people.</li> </ul>
<p>Edith shared that her experience with news on social media is to automatically assume it is fake when the main tone and verbiage are negative.</p> <p>She reflected on many instances of finding out articles were fake after believing them true due to her emotional state.</p> <p>The participant elaborated she will fake-check some but is even then cautious of the validity of that.</p> <p>She shared that she feels some parts of articles have truthful elements, which makes the fake aspects even more distressing and upsetting.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Negative emotional verbiage results in automatically assuming the news is fake.</li> <li>○ Her belief system has been reinforced by past negative experiences (negative reinforcement).</li> <li>○ A willingness to accept some aspects of news articles as real (logical competence).</li> <li>○ Distressed by the overall state of fake news on social media.</li> </ul>

**Edith**

***Structural theme 1: The negative verbiage and tone of fake news articles cause great distress (emotionally responsive).***

Textural theme: The articles typically cause feelings of shock and fear.

Textural theme: Mood can be altered immediately once she gets into the text.

Textural theme: Finds it upsetting the ways that fake news articles can shift her mood.

***Structural theme 2: Information overload results in avoidance of social media interactions.***

Textural theme: Feels overwhelmed with too much conflicting news.

Textural theme: Has a mistrust of news.

Textural theme: Does not want to mislead others.

***Structural theme 3: Social acceptance leads to discussion in vocal conversation (wanting to belong).***

Textural theme: Validation when provided clarity by perceived experts.

Textural theme: Appreciates conversations about negative topics instead of personal attacks.

Textural theme: Avoids unneeded negativity from unknown people.

***Structural theme 4: Negative emotional verbiage results in automatically assuming the news is fake.***

Textural theme: Her belief system has been reinforced by past negative experiences (negative reinforcement).

Textural theme: A willingness to accept some aspects of news articles as real (logical competence).

Textural theme: Distressed by the overall state of fake news on social media.

## **APPENDIX J: TEXTURAL-STRUCTURAL DESCRIPTIONS**

### **Textural-Structural Description for Alex**

Alex's experience with fake news and negative emotional lexicon is one of surprise. The typical news viewing behavior for the participant is to seek out local news, although he is not avoidant of political news and other types of news. The participant internalizes fake news as news that does not align with personal beliefs or opinions regarding the topic he is viewing. The participant expresses distress with news view behaviors both due to the amount of time he spends seeing the articles on social media and the ways that the news articles impact him.

The participant views articles daily via social media and more frequently than he would prefer. While reading news articles on social media, the participant typically experiences great distress and emotional shifts. The participant's emotions prior to reading the news may be described as positive. Still, after reading articles with negative emotional lexicon or tone, his mood will start to shift to correspond with the nature of the topic. When viewing fake news articles, he typically experiences fear or anger as his two most prominent emotional states.

Although the participant feels emotionally impacted by the language within the articles, he does not alter his behaviors associated with interaction on social media. Alex currently serves in the Army on active-duty status, which is a significant factor in avoiding interacting with fake news articles on social media sites. The participant also showed self-awareness of how his definition of fake news may alter/impact his acceptance of news, and, therefore, he makes efforts to avoid interacting on social media.



He is also motivated to not interact on social media for fear of negative social consequences.

While Alex may not interact with these articles on social media, he finds it important to discuss the topics in face-to-face interactions. The participant focuses on articles he agrees with as it helps with his want to have confirmation of ideology. The participant's family members are from different countries, which typically results in their disinterest in certain aspects, and therefore they are more likely to agree with him. Alex uses family and friends as sounding boards as well.

The participant finds the amount of news that he stumbles upon while on social media is so vast and conflicting that he deals with information overload. This information overload is the secondary motivator for discussing topics in a face-to-face setting, as it allows the participant to gain potential insight into his own bias. Additionally, the participant noted that receiving confirmation of the information provides a sense of validation that he would not achieve on social media sites.

Finally, the participant is impacted by the negative emotional lexicon significant enough just automatically to assume that the information within the articles is factual. The complicated nature of conflicting information results in anxiety that is better addressed by just believing the news and not conducting any further research. The participant feels that if an individual is willing to write out an article, there must be some truth. Instead of sorting out his emotional states, it is easier just to accept the news, which is the final component and reason why he does not interact with fake news articles on social media.

### **Textural-Structural Description for Billy**

Billy's experiences with the emotionally negative lexicon within fake news articles are one of mixed responses. He tries to remain logically neutral about the material and nature of the information but knows it impacts his emotional state. This participant views fake news articles through social media platforms an average of 4-5 times per day and does not seek out any particular type of news.

His understanding of fake news is best described as news that is extreme or devoid of adequate details. Although he feels that the lack of details accounts for the composition of fake news, he is highly aware of the impact of the articles' verbiage on his mood and emotional reactions. His emotional responses to the language are appropriate to the article's tone and choice of vocabulary used. When reading one article, these two factors can cause the individual to experience multiple emotions.

The participant feels that one goal of the emotional lexicon is to overload or confuse individuals reading the articles. He shows an understanding of this complexity, which is a significant factor in his behaviors associated with fake news. With such a vast amount of conflicting news today, this participant chose not to interact with news of any type while on social media websites. His motivator for avoiding sharing fake news includes not wanting to misguide individuals with unverified information coupled with the potential ways other individuals on social media may choose to react.

The participant finds it emotionally upsetting and exhausting to have long debates on social media. However, he finds the information important to share and discuss in social gatherings. The participant uses face-to-face discussions as sounding boards and a chance to get some validation from individuals whose opinions he values. He tries to

keep the discussion of news more related to local news as it is more relevant to his life while also making it easier to determine the validity of the information.

When he finds topics that may be highly debateable (such as politics) he will engage individuals, but not as often as local news. The distress that fake news and politics cause can lead the participant to seek a sense of ease regardless of whether the information is validated or proven false. Accurate information about his close relationships is more critical than it is within social media.

However, his family can only clarify topics brought up during these conversations, leading him to make his own decisions regarding most of what he reads on social media. The participants' emotional responses significantly impact his understanding of news viewed on social media. Having a heightened negative emotional state resulting from the news on social media, the participant finds it comforting to assume the information is accurate automatically.

He finds that automatically assuming a news article is real allows him to avoid any challenges to his belief systems. The current state of fake news is so vast and elaborate that he feels like doing any additional research would not only confuse him but potentially amplify current negative emotional states, such as anger, if he finds conflicting information. Furthermore, These factors are impacted by his background knowledge of a topic regardless of his accuracy of prejudicial concepts. The participants summed up his overall experience with the negative emotional lexicon in fake news articles as avoidant sharing on social media to avoid any potential social shame while also finding it important to speak with family and friends about the information since it is

emotionally important to address and relieve those negative emotional states associated with the nature of fake news.

### **Textural-Structural Description for Cathy**

Cathy experiences the negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles from an emotional perspective. The participant tries to take on a nonchalant, casual approach to the news views on social media. Her exposure and use of social media include daily scrolling, which can cause distress for the individual. She does not seek out specific types of news and finds herself drawn to articles that interest her. However, this participant takes steps to avoid reading political news and is not actively avoiding other types of news.

When viewing fake news articles, she finds herself negatively impacted by the information, even if the shift is not major or long-lasting. Her belief and understanding of fake news is a guiding aspect of both her emotional reaction to the news and the language within, as well as her follow-up behaviors. This participant understands fake news is intentionally meant to mislead people and utilizes facts within to confuse people. This understanding then confuses emotional responses and reactions to the news for her.

For this participant, the relevance of the information and the potential impact on her can impact the intensity of how the emotional negative lexicon impacts her mood. She finds her mood can shift from happy to shocked or angered (and other appropriate emotional states) depending on how the article is written and the information within. She is acutely aware of the intent that fake news is meant to be a tool to induce fear, which heightens her attempts to be alert to her emotional responses.

Regardless of the nature of the news, the factuality of the news, or the emotional state the participant is in, she does not actively interact with fake news articles on social media. The participant fears sharing potentially fake news articles due to a previous

incident that went bad. The participant had an important event during high school in which she believed and shared an article on social media due to how it tried to evoke sympathy and despair. After sharing the article, she was confronted by a few people, and she provided links to follow-up information, which shifted her approach to addressing news on social media.

She also finds that the need to remain current on current news for her personal reasons is more important than sharing information on social media platforms. These behaviors extend beyond fake news and represent her overall social media interactions regarding information. She finds social media to be an inappropriate place for sharing due to the vast amount of conflicting information and ways that individuals tend to respond. However, she does value the opinions of others, leading to her secondary way of viewing fake news.

High emotionally inducing news results in the participant wanting to find an outlet. Since the participant feels that social media is not an appropriate place to discuss news, she tends to speak with her mother or other close individuals in her life about the information she finds in face-to-face settings. In speaking with family members, she is often provided with validation once she receives confirmation of beliefs from others. Not interacting on social media makes it easier to avoid social rejection. Yet, the negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles also impacts her understanding of the truthfulness of news.

The participant's past experiences with sharing fake news and being emotionally impacted by the news has led the participant to embody an approach of assuming the news is fake. The participant relies on a combination of emotional impact and potential

pre-exposure to conflicting news as her motivator for doing so. She believes that emotional language within the news articles is meant to disguise the reality of the information.

The participant's assumption that the news is fake leads her to research some topics. She finds it emotionally easing to find the truthfulness of the news, even if the tone is negative. Additionally, she has a longing to determine the truth of the world, and additional research provides her with that chance to determine real versus fake news. Overall, the participant is highly cautious of the news seen on social media and takes a stance not to be an individual that fuels the fire of deceit and fear associated with negatively charged fake news.

### **Textural-Structural Description for Dereke**

Dereke's experience with fake news, social media, and negative emotional lexicon is one that results in a conflict between the information presented against the emotional language and tone of the articles. The participant tends to spend 2-3 hours on social media daily, which he finds to be more than he prefers. While on social media sites, he finds himself drawn to political and sports news.

This participant is typically unaware of how verbiage impacts his mood until he reflected upon his interactions. After spending some time reminiscing about his responses, the participant realized that he is negatively impacted by the negative emotional lexicon, which has led him to try and avoid news more than he is aware of. When reflecting on topics such as the one selected, the participant became aware of emotions that he typically experiences, including shock and confusion, as well as a general sense of negativity and fear.

When faced with a conflict of news information against his emotions, he tries to remain neutral in his understanding or believability of the information he is being presented with. His understanding of fake news guides his hesitation with news viewing and information. The participant understands fake news as news that appears factual and is hard to detect by the general public. The concept of detection and deceit is of a disturbance to the participant.

This participant also uses belief systems against the information in the articles as a referral for understanding the nature of fake news. He distrusts news in general regardless of the source or potential credibility of the findings. Due to these factors,



Dereke tends to avoid using social media to communicate or share news and his opinions with these articles.

He is less worried about his emotional state or emotional lexicon within the articles and is more influenced by his idea of social media being a platform for entertainment reasons. Dereke expressed that a secondary motivator for the avoidance of sharing on social media is his position within the community and fear of judgment over what he may share. However, his emotional responses to the information he finds in fake news articles drive him to discuss topics in face-to-face interactions.

The participant expresses his opinions with family and friends, allowing for discussion on beliefs. During the face-to-face discussions, he finds relief in validating his thoughts, even if he misunderstood a topic or was inaccurate in the information. He finds he can have open and honest conversations with friends and family, which can help alleviate his fears or shock about certain topics.

He also finds that social media can be a place of discord and where strangers feel comfortable in confrontation or belittling others to get the point across. Within his intimate situations, he can get feedback on his blinders without feeling attacked. He wants to gain insight into not just his own beliefs but others, which allows him to be open with those closest to him.

However, due to the nature of emotional responses and news, this participant is willing to accept the information as factual without needing further checks. The participant finds it provides mental comfort just to accept the information as he does not face being overwhelmed with potentially conflicting information from multiple sources. Due to the sensitive nature of politics, this participant feels that the news is biased but

also understands that these are important topics of discussion to be had. Even within these social interactions, a fear of social rejection guides Dereke to remain somewhat cautious about putting his full opinion into topics. With a willingness to unquestioningly accept news for what it is, even against his general distrust of new sources, the participant longs to become more aware of his emotional responses and reasons for it. In doing so, the participant is hopeful that the negative emotional lexicon will be less impactful in decision-making in the future.

### **Textural-Structural Description for Edith**

Edith's experience with the emotional lexicon of fake news and its impact on her is best described as shock. The participant was unaware of the extent of fake news until 2016, which was the first time she was able to vote. It was at this point in her life she started to realize that not everything labeled as "news" is factual. This pivotal turn in her ideology has slowly shaped her news viewing, interactive behaviors, and overall feelings associated with social media.

This participant finds herself using social media daily as a point of view of news. Although she mainly tries to stray away from anything not local, she still finds herself drawn to other types of news, such as politics or world events. The participant experiences emotions that are appropriate to the negative tone within the articles. Fear and shock are the most prevalent emotional states experienced when reading fake news for this participant. However, she does recognize the extent that sadness and other emotions have on her. These responses are distressing to her, and part of this distress is her understanding of fake news.

Edith has an internalized understanding of fake news as information that can be proven false and is meant just to cause a reaction from the public. She believes this intent is leading to a high amount of conflicting information regarding the truthfulness of news articles. Additionally, she recognizes that the amount of information and emotional language has resulted in her avoiding using social media as a platform for sharing or interacting with news beyond reading articles.

The participant found herself overwhelmed with the combination of news topics and emotional responses and, therefore, chose not to have those significant interactions

on social media. She is also aware of how other individuals may be impacted the negative emotional lexicon within fake news articles and thus is cautious about how the information should be shared. The fear of sharing potentially unverified fake news is so overwhelming to the participant that it has become another reason for avoidance of interactive behaviors.

However, this participant values the experiences and opinions of family members. This value system allows this participant to be more open about communicating news she has seen in a face-to-face setting, regardless of whether she has verified the information accurately. The family structure is one of support and sometimes informed opinions. The participants' beliefs were strengthened during the COVID-19 pandemic when family members were able to provide additional insights due to the jobs in the healthcare field.

Additionally, the face-to-face discussion provides this participant with a sense of acceptance and validation. She finds that in speaking with her family, she can be honest and not fear being mocked or attacked if she misunderstands information. Edith has a passion for discussing negative topics in tone and nature, as she finds these conversations are often avoided. However, she fears the social rejection and personal attacks that she sees others often endure while using social media as a platform for information sharing.

As the participant has become more aware of the extent to which a negative emotional lexicon can have judgements and behaviors, she has taken an approach to assuming the information is fake automatically. Experiences in the past and her personal ideology regarding using negative emotional lexicon are two of the strongest factors impacting automatic assumptions. However, she is able to recognize that some aspects of the stories may be factually based, resulting in a willingness to seek out additional

information to verify the validity of what she reads. The participant's overall feelings associated with the current fake news situation and how negative emotional lexicon is used is to avoid sharing due to the overwhelming and conflicting emotional states that arise while viewing potentially unverified news.