

Gen Z and the crisis of trust: linguistic manipulation in AI-generated fake news

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Abstract: This study fills a research gap in the field of experimental investigations on the impact of linguistic manipulation on the assimilation of fake news among members of Generation Z. It aims to examine the extent to which members of Gen Z display susceptibility to media manipulation, with a particular focus on the linguistic markers of deception (LMDs) in media coverages. The research investigates whether the inclusion of credibility factors (CFs) in a text layer influence the perceived veracity of information. Specifically, the study seeks to determine whether the strategic use of CFs can lead individuals to perceive fabricated news as true. By analyzing the correlation between CFs and the perceived veracity of media coverage, the study explores the mechanisms behind text-based persuasion. A pilot study was conducted using a convenience sample of 47 undergraduate students from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. As part of the study procedure, the participants were asked to evaluate the veracity of eight media messages by completing a survey. After listening to pre-recorded video news segments, the participants assessed the credibility of each item using a five-point Likert scale, indicating the extent to which they believed the information to be true or false. This research contributes to the analysis of manipulation within text linguistics, providing insights into the role of LMDs in shaping media perception. This paper presents the initial analysis of research findings obtained within the project *Communicative Competence in the Global Village: Gen Z Facing the Truth, the Post-Truth, and Fake News in Social Media*, conducted as part of the NCN Miniatura 5 grant.

Abstrakt: Prezentowane wyniki wypełniają lukę w dziedzinie eksperymentalnych badań nad wpływem manipulacji językowej na przyswajanie fałszywych wiadomości przez członków pokolenia Z. Jego celem było zweryfikowanie, w jakim stopniu członkowie pokolenia Z przejawiają podatność na manipulację językową, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem

nieniem oddziaływania lingwistycznych markerów oszustwa (ang. Linguistic Markers of Deception, LMD) w przekazach medialnych. Analizowano czy uwzględnienie czynników uwiarygodniających (ang. Credibility Factors, CF) w warstwie tekstowej wpływa na postrzeganie informacji jako wiarygodnej. W szczególności badanie miało na celu ustalenie, czy strategiczne wykorzystanie CF może prowadzić do postrzegania sfabrykowanych wiadomości jako prawdziwych. Analizując korelację między CF a postrzeganą prawdziwością relacji medialnych, badacze zidentyfikowali mechanizmy warunkujące skuteczność perswazji zawartej w tekście informacji. W badaniu pilotażowym na próbie 47 studentów Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu poproszono o ocenę prawdziwości ośmiu komunikatów medialnych poprzez wypełnienie ankiety. Po obejrzeniu przygotowanych przez badaczy fragmentów wiadomości wideo, uczestnicy ocenili wiarygodność każdego z nich w pięciostopniowej skali Likerta, wskazując, w jakim stopniu uważają informacje za prawdziwe lub fałszywe. Badanie to stanowi studium manipulacji w obszarze lingwistyki tekstu, dostarczając informacji na temat roli LMD w kształtowaniu postrzegania przekazów. Artykuł przedstawia wstępna analizę wyników badań uzyskanych w ramach projektu „Kompetencje komunikacyjne w globalnej wiosce: pokolenie Z wobec prawdy, post-prawy i fake newsów w mediach społecznościowych”, realizowanego w ramach grantu NCN Miniatura 5.

Key words: fake news; credibility factors; disinformation; persuasion; linguistic manipulation; Gen Z

Slowa kluczowe: fake news; czynniki uwiarygodniające; dezinformacja; perswazja; manipulacja językowa, Gen Z

Introduction

Fake news has emerged as an important area of study due to its disruptive effects on society, including its ability to shape public opinion, erode trust in institutions, and influence decision-making. This phenomenon has been accelerated by the rise of social media, which enables the rapid dissemination of misinformation, and more recently, by the proliferation of bots—automated accounts programmed to propagate fake news at an extraordinary speed (cf. Himelein-Wachowiak, 2021; Wan et al., 2025). These technological developments have magnified the societal impact of fake news. Some of the real-world consequences of fake news are well-known. For instance, widespread belief in election fraud during the 2020 U.S. presidential election has continued to this day, despite the absence of evidence, undermining public confidence in the electoral system processes (see: Sharma, Ferrara & Liu, 2021; Starbird, DiResta & DeButts, 2023). Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, bots played a significant role in spreading vaccine misinformation, exacerbating vaccine hesitancy, and fueling distrust in public health initiatives (cf. Lee et al., 2022; Allen, Watts & Rand, 2024). False claims during the 2016 U.S. election—most notably the untrue story that Pope Francis had endorsed Donald Trump—illustrate how fake news can manipulate voter perceptions and distort democratic (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

There have been numerous studies conducted on fake news over the past decade (see: El Rayess et al., 2018; Lee, 2019; Lelo, 2020; Anderau, 2021; George, Gerhart & Torres, 2021; Abrar et al., 2023; Watt, 2023, among other). Yet, this study is a bit different in that fake news stories were both created and tested by the researchers. As for the specific results of the study, it is expected to verify the researchers' hypothesis that states that through the skillful insertion of credibility factors (CFs), individuals can be manipulated into thinking a fake news story is true.

1. Study background

We define fake news as intentionally deceptive content that violates standard journalistic norms and is dynamic in nature, requiring a minimum audience to be considered impactful. It constitutes counterfeit news—fabricated information presented as genuine, with a clear intent to mislead or deceive (Andreau, 2021; Fallis & Mathiesen, 2019; Pepp et al., 2019). This definition also encompasses fake news that is disseminated by ordinary users on social media without an intent to deceive, often due to ignorance. The intention to mislead is understood as originating from the source of the message; therefore, the fact that an uninformed user further distributes the content does not negate its falsehood or deceptive character.

The term revived and gained a worldwide recognition during the 2016 presidential election in the United States, when first used by Donald Trump. “Regarding possible efforts by Russian agents to manipulate the US Presidential election. A similar alarm was raised during subsequent European elections the following year” (Jankowski, 2018, p. 248). Consequently, political actors started incorporating the term to describe even more traditional news outlets. Since then, fake news has become a prominent area of interest for scholars. Arqoub et al. (2020) found through a systematic review of over 100 articles that research on fake news peaked between 2017 and 2018.

Generation Z refers to those generally born between 1997 and 2012 (Dimock, 2019). This generation has been often termed to be “digital natives” meaning that they grew up with digital technology as well as social media (Prensky, 2001). They should, therefore, be more proficient than generations before them on digital platforms. They may also, however, be encountering more information than previous generational groups since they spend more time online. Some believe they may have higher media literacy skills; however, this does necessarily mean that they are able to critically evaluate and discern between credible sources and sources that are unreliable. Gen Z tends to consumer their news by way of social media platforms. These platforms utilize algorithms; thus, content may be aligned with their existing political beliefs. They may also be more skeptical of traditional sources of media. Consequently, due to Gen Z’s reliance on social media, they may encounter more fake news stories.

Christiansen (2021) distinguishes between “**language as revealer**” (involuntary leakage of truth) and “**language as concealer**” (linguistic camouflage of deception); in this sense, the study utilized a set of CFs to serve as the means of deception, placing it in the latter category. This study fills a research gap in the field of experimental investigations on the impact of linguistic manipulation on the assimilation of fake news among members of Generation Z. It focuses upon students aged 18–24, with this particular analysis based on a segment of the study conducted at a Polish university. The researchers hypothesize that carefully crafted and manipulated news messages, incorporating CFs, will increase the likelihood of recipients perceiving fabricated news as true. These CFs – also referred to as linguistic markers of deception (LMDs) – included the strategic insertion of specific details, such as data points, dates, names, numerical values, and institutional references, all of which were fabricated for the purposes of the study.

2. Literature review

Studies have embarked upon the topic in diverse ways. Studies have focus upon factors such as writing style, source credibility, propagation patterns and the implementation of false content (Zhou & Zafarani, 2018). There have different ways to detect false news stories, some being manual and some being automated. Various machine learning detection approaches have arisen and have proven to be resourceful (Tajirian et al., 2023). Political figures have used the term “fake news” to downplay and discredit news organizations (Jankowski, 2018). The term has often been misused, leading individuals to distrust even reputable news media sources. Grazulis and Rogers (2021) report that the misuse of the term can have implications upon the actual gratifications that come from news consumption. The topic of “fake news” has been approached in an interdisciplinary manner. Zhou and Zafarani (2018) and Tarjarian et al. (2023) find that the topic is explored in fields such as psychology and social science. Data scientists are also engaging in research aimed at understanding fake news. Researchers hope to develop strategies to better identify fake news and to mitigate the impact of such news.

Nadarevic et al., (2020) studied the variables that influence the perceived truth of information. They found truth judgments were higher for information presented by credible sources and repeated exposure of the same information. They also found that truth judgements were even higher when the two factors were present. These results support the idea that people use both explicit information (like the credibility of the source) and their personal experiences (like repeated exposure) to assess the truthfulness of what they read. Dinu et al. (2024) explored the awareness of fake news on social media fatigue and discontinuous behavior. The study confirms that fake news positively affects social media fatigue and indirectly leads to discontinuous social media use by causing fatigue. The study also found the need for constant evaluation of the veracity of online news,

combined with the huge volume of information, can lead to frustration and emotional overload.

Seol, Mejia and Dennis (2024) studied the inclusion of falsehoods in an otherwise true news report. They found that commingling partisan falsehoods increased the number of politically aligned viewers and sharing intentions. The researchers document the significant involvement of confirmation bias in their study. Additionally, the researchers find that when the viewer trusts the source, the effect is enhanced. Horner et al. (2021) studied the effect of reposting political news (sharing stories) on the internet as a function of the subject's emotional reaction to the story. The subjects' emotions were independently evaluated by their reaction to the story's headlines. The authors found both Republicans and Democrats pushed back against fake news. Interestingly, participants "had negative feelings about fake news headlines even when they harmed the other party" (p. 1059). The study also found that "people who were more emotional about the headlines expressed intentions to engage more actively with the content or the poster" (p. 1061).

Hlaing and Kham (2021) find that content as well as social context are important when it comes to detecting fake news stories that are encountered on social media platforms. Francis et al. (2023) find that trust in news is declining for individuals from all political backgrounds bringing about a need for digital tools that can authenticate news information, such tools could enhance the trustworthiness of news. Eilders (2006) reveals that news factors serve as relevance indicators to guide information processing.

The existing body of research illustrates that the phenomenon of fake news is multifaceted. Scholars have examined the mechanisms by which false information is produced, disseminated, and perceived, highlighting the roles of source credibility, emotional engagement, repetition, and confirmation bias. The following study intends to focus upon credibility factors. The study sets out to investigate whether carefully fabricated messages containing credibility factors (CFs) increase the likelihood of perceiving fabricated news as true.

3. Method

The study utilized a mixed method approach. The first part of the study was conducted by way of a quantitative survey instrument. The participants were shown eight pieces of news, and each participant was asked to mark on a five-point Likert scale (1-2-3-4-5) the value that corresponded to the perceived authenticity/reliability of the information presented to them. The study sought to understand to what extent students would be susceptible to misinformation. AI software (HeyGen) was utilized to create a recording containing fabricated news items. The participants were then asked to watch each news story and then after watching each, they would then try to determine on a scale from 1 (where

1 equals definitely true) to 5 (where 5 equals definitely false) whether they thought the information was true or not true.

With regard to the second part of the study, the linguistic analysis of the textual materials—both those fabricated by the researchers and those sourced from authentic media content—was conducted using discourse analysis methodology (Fairclough, 2015; Hyland, Paltridge & Wong, 2021; Canning & Walker, 2024). After gathering the results, the researchers analyzed the participants' responses, seeking to determine whether—and to what extent—the inclusion of credibility-enhancing factors (CFs) in the news reports influenced a higher number of respondents to perceive the information as true.

Regarding the text manipulation of the material used in the study, we employed some markers of veracity or credibility that we label with an umbrella term “linguistic markers of deception” (after: Arciuli Mallard & Villar, 2010) or credibility factors (CFs). The factors used in the material were categorized into:

1. Sensory detail – the reference to sensual cognition (e.g., smell, sight, sound) through vivid language including adjectives (DePaulo et al., 2003);
2. Cognitive verbs – the use of the verbs that relate to cognitive engagement (e.g, think, know, remember) (Hauch et al., 2014);
3. Concrete nouns and verifiable info – the incorporation of names, dates, facts and quantities, often relating to non-existing or fictional phenomena or persons (Christiansen, 2021; Nicklaus & Stein, 2020);
4. Stable narratives – coherent and consistent narratives over multiple tellings, with slight nuanced discrepancies involved (Nicklaus & Stein, 2020).

3.1. Sample

A convenience sample consisting of $n=47$ undergraduate students from Adam Mickiewicz University were asked to participate in the fake news study. A few demographical questions were first asked to be certain that the students were indeed members of Gen Z. With respect to gender identity, the majority of participants ($n = 37$; 80.4%) identified as female, while 6 individuals (13%) identified as male. Additionally, 2 participants (4.3%) chose not to disclose their gender, and 1 participant (2.2%) identified as non-binary or belonging to a third gender category. Regarding employment status, 36 participants (78.3%) reported being students, 7 (15.2%) were employed part-time, and 1 participant each (2.2% each) reported being employed full-time, self-employed, or unemployed. All respondents indicated Poland as their country of residence at the time of data collection.

3.2. Materials

The study utilized audiovisual material generated using HeyGen technology, in which the same news presenter avatar delivers the news content using a voice-over narration. A brief headline summarizing the news appears at the bottom of the screen in each case; however, no subtitles are displayed during the video, meaning that participants rely solely on the spoken text. After watching each video segment, participants complete a survey in which they select the response they consider most accurate.

3.3. Procedure

Before watching the news bulletin, the participants were informed that it contained both **true information and fake news**. They were not told how many items were true, and how many contained disinformation. They were asked to watch and listen to the bulletin, and after each news item, they indicated their perception of whether the information was true or false. A Likert scale (1–5) was used in the study, and participants were tasked with assessing how likely they believed the given news item to be true or false. The scale was structured as follows:

- It is definitely false.
- I think it might be false.
- Hard to say if it is true or false.
- I think it might be true.
- It is definitely true.

The same scale was displayed under each video segment, and respondents were required to select a single response per news item.

3.4. Data analysis

The data collected through the quantitative survey instrument were exported in the form of diagrams, and the results were then presented in tabular format. For each of the eight news items used in the study, statistical information was obtained indicating how many participants classified the given news item as authentic or as fake news.

3.4.1. Africa's life expectancy (fake news)

The initial information presented to the respondents falsely claimed a significant decline in life expectancy in Africa between 2000 and 2019, suggesting a drop from 46.7 to 42.7 years, making it one of the most alarming trends globally. The report attributed this decline to unexplained factors, despite noted improvements in healthcare access and disease prevention. In reality, the official WHO data contradicts this assertion, revealing that life expectancy in Africa actually increased by nearly ten years during the same period, reaching 56 years in 2019. This rise is attributed to advancements in maternal and child healthcare, improved treatment of infectious diseases, and expanded access to essential medical services.

Data analysis reveals that 20 respondents (42.6%) considered the information to be false, selecting the option "I think it might be false." An additional 8 participants (17%) expressed strong skepticism, choosing "It is definitely false." A substantial proportion of participants, however, 12 in total, accounting for over one-quarter of the respondents (25.5%)—perceived the information as true, selecting "I think it might be true." Meanwhile, 7 respondents (14.9%) remained undecided and indicated that it was "hard to say."

While a considerable proportion of respondents—nearly 60% in total—exhibited discernment and resisted the misinformation, approximately 40% displayed varying degrees of susceptibility (with one-quarter of respondents accepting the claim as plausible and nearly 15% expressing epistemic uncertainty regarding its veracity). The inclination to perceive the information as legitimate may have been reinforced by the presence of multiple persuasive cues (credibility factors), including the citation of purported researchers, the invocation of a fictitious academic institution, the attribution of statements to a fabricated WHO expert—thereby evoking an association with a reputable international body—as well as the strategic deployment of ostensibly precise statistical data despite the presence of credibility factors such as specific numerical data and the names of experts and institutions ostensibly linked to the information (e.g., "Dr. Pituba Unanah and Dr. Mugabe Phutoo, the researchers from East African University of Life Sciences in Kampala, Uganda, are unable to find a reason for this disturbing trend." [Source: The study data, *FNI*, created by AU]).

3.4.2. Poonami (authentic news)

The second piece of news highlighted a growing environmental and public health crisis in the UK, revealing that several beaches in England and Wales had been closed due to the discharge of raw sewage into the sea by water companies, prompting health warnings from the UK Environment Agency. Tourists, swimmers, and surfers were advised to avoid affected areas to mitigate the risk

of waterborne diseases, while reports from residents highlighted the visible and odorous pollution. It reported that the incident had intensified public outrage over the privatization of England's water supply since 1989, with critics condemning water companies for prioritizing executive salaries and profits over environmental and public health, as evidenced by a staggering 2,000% increase in sewage discharges over the past five years.

This seemingly absurd—yet entirely factual—report about raw sewage being discharged into the sea off the coasts of England and Wales, a region classified among the world's highly developed and industrialized nations with a strong environmental consciousness, misled respondents. A total of 17 respondents (36.2%) believed this accurate report to be false, selecting “I think it might be false,” while an additional 11 respondents (23.4%) were even more certain, choosing “It is definitely false.” Meanwhile, 11 participants (23.4%) remained uncertain, marking “It is hard to say,” and only 8 respondents (17%) recognized the report as truthful.

This indicates that nearly 60% of participants mistakenly identified a factually accurate report as false. Notably, the text of the news item lacked fabricated CFs, such as precise statistical data or other credibility-enhancement. The respondents, apparently relying on their pre-existing knowledge and intuition, dismissed the information as false.

3.4.3. Rome's Colosseum to be restored (fake news)

The third piece of news concerned a controversial plan for one of the world's most iconic historical landmarks. In a move that defied historical preservation norms, the Italian government had unveiled plans to modernize the Colosseum, transforming the ancient amphitheater into a contemporary tourist and entertainment hub. The proposed renovations included rebuilding damaged sections using 3D printing, installing a full-scale roof akin to modern sports stadiums, and incorporating glass, plastic, and steel—materials entirely foreign to the original structure. While officials claim this will ensure the Colosseum's longevity, UNESCO and preservationists have condemned the project as an act of “wanton barbarism,” arguing that it disrespects one of the world's most iconic monuments. If completed, the Colosseum may soon bear more resemblance to a high-tech arena than the legendary relic of Imperial Rome.

However detailed the information, the respondents did not believe the fabricated report claiming that Rome's Colosseum was to be reconstructed using the latest technologies. They remained vigilant, with 33 individuals (66%) unequivocally identifying the information as “definitely false,” while an additional 9 respondents (19.1%) considered that “it might be false.” Only 5 participants (10.6%) were misled into believing that “it might be true,” and 2 respondents (4.3%) were unable to determine whether the news was true or false. In this case,

even the strategic manipulation of facts through the conscious use of CFs—such as the fabricated name of a Japanese architect (*Mr. Kengo Kuma*) allegedly leading the revitalization project, the inclusion of a detailed cost estimate (*173 million EUR*), and the emphasis on the supposed outrage of certain figures within the European political establishment—failed to persuade the respondents.

3.4.4. Budget flights (fake news)

The fourth piece of news concerned a controversial airline policy that had allegedly sparked widespread criticism. It reported that a major low-cost carrier had introduced strict new baggage rules, limiting passengers to a 2-kilogram (4.4-pound) personal item, including such essential accessories like shoes, belts, and duty-free purchases. Any excess weight would incur additional charges, justified by the airline as a measure to offset rising fuel costs and reduce emissions. While the company framed it as an environmental initiative, many saw it as a thinly veiled attempt to increase revenue at the expense of passenger rights.

In this case, 16 respondents (34%) confidently identified the information as “definitely false,” while an additional 7 (14.9%) considered that “it might be false.” However, as much as one-quarter of the participants (25.5%) believed that “it might be true,” and another 25% were uncertain, selecting “hard to say.” This means that nearly half of the respondents dismissed the entirely unrealistic and absurd claim regarding additional charges for boarding a plane fully dressed, while the other half remained unconvinced, with one-quarter even considering it plausible.

The fabricated news included highly detailed explanations justifying the supposed need for fees on items such as shoes, wallets, and belts. Notably, the story introduced the completely ludicrous procedure of weighing passengers twice before boarding. And yet, only half of the respondents unequivocally discredited the claim. It can be assumed that a lack of familiarity with standard airline policies may have contributed to a significant portion of participants being misled by this blatant baloney.

3.4.5. Latin back to school (authentic)

The news that the UK’s Minister of Education concerning the implementation of Latin into the national curriculum was regarded by respondents as rather unconvincing, despite being entirely true. A total of 10 respondents (21.3%) classified it as “definitely false,” while another 5 (10.6%) believed that “it might be false.” Additionally, 13 participants (27.7%) were unable to determine whether the information was true or false. Meanwhile, 18 respondents (38.3%) considered it potentially true, and only one participant (2.1%) identified it as “definitely true.”

Once again, the study reveals the crisis of trust among respondents. The significant number of participants selecting “hard to say” may indicate reluctance to take a definitive stance and a potential fear of being deceived. Notably, only slightly more than one-third of the respondents correctly recognized the information as true, while nearly one-third dismissed it as false. The report itself followed the typical structure of a press article, accurately summarizing the UK Ministry of Education’s plans as expressed by Minister Gavin Williamson, who sought to pilot Latin instruction in 40 schools. In line with journalistic best practices, the news item presented the proposal while juxtaposing it with diverse perspectives from within the educational community.

3.4.6. Depression on the decrease (fake news)

The next piece of news reported a decline in the number of young people struggling with depression. The news item contained multiple credibility-enhancing elements, including specific statistical data and references to researchers legitimizing the presented findings. However, despite being saturated with CFs, as many as 32 respondents (68.1%) declared that “it’s definitely false,” while 7 (14.9%) stated that “it might be false.” Another 5 respondents (10.6%) were uncertain, selecting “hard to say.” Only 2 (4.3%) believed that the information “might be true,” and just one participant (2.1%) confidently asserted that “it is definitely true.”

In this case, respondents remained vigilant and did not fall for the misinformation. They rejected the claim that the prevalence of mental health issues among young adults—particularly university students—was declining. Their skepticism likely stemmed from their awareness of the issue, serving as a natural defense mechanism against falsehoods. This may be attributed to the fact that universities, including the institution where the study was conducted (AMU), have actively expanded psychological support programs in response to growing demand. The university in question had recently launched a comprehensive student mental health initiative, which was widely publicized among the student body. This exposure to factual information enabled respondents to critically assess the claim, recognizing it as highly implausible.

3.4.7. Armani school uniforms (authentic news)

The news item reported on a school in Japan, located in Tokyo’s Ginza district, where administrators proposed school uniforms designed by the renowned fashion house, Armani. The report stated that the cost of a single uniform was \$730, sparking justified outrage among parents. The information was entirely authentic and sourced from the media.

However, respondents deemed this information to be false. A total of 19 participants (40.4%) unequivocally classified it as false, while an additional 13 (27.7%) believed that it might be false. Meanwhile, 10 respondents (21.3%) considered the news to be credible, and only one person (2.3%) was fully convinced that it was definitely true. Another 4 respondents (8.5%) were uncertain, stating that it was difficult to determine whether the information was true or a fake news item.

Once again, guided by an instinctive sense of skepticism, respondents misclassified an authentic piece of news as fake. Notably, the report lacked strong credibility factors. It was fairly general in nature, presenting the introduction of expensive, designer uniforms in a rather superficial manner—framing it more as a global curiosity than a serious issue. In this instance, the truth failed to defend itself. The respondents' skepticism may also be attributed to their limited familiarity with Japan, a country that is both geographically and culturally distant. The notion that a wealthy district of Tokyo would implement school uniforms costing over \$700 from Armani likely seemed improbable to them. As a result, the overwhelming majority of respondents dismissed the report as false. In this instance, the truth failed to defend itself.

3.4.8. New tie policy in Spain (authentic news)

In the final piece of news, which was also a genuine report sourced from the media, respondents once again displayed a lack of trust. A total of 17 participants (36.2%) discredited the information, classifying it as fake news, while another 9 (19.1%) went even further, deeming it definitely fake. As a result, more than half of the respondents (approximately 55%) rejected the report about the Spanish government's proposal, led by the tieless left-wing Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, to ditch neckties amid scorching weather and the need to conserve energy following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Evidently, despite being factual, Sánchez's proposal failed to withstand the respondents' common-sense judgment. Their critical analysis of reality likely led them to conclude that the tieless policy was too far-fetched to be anything but an exaggerated fabrication—when, in fact, it was an entirely accurate press report.

The table below summarizes all the data collected in the study. It can be assumed that, overall and statistically, the median for fake news was 67%, meaning that the majority of respondents detected falsehoods. However, almost 18% of respondents were manipulated into believing that the information presented could be true, while nearly 13% of respondents were unable to determine whether the information was true or false. It is worth noting that the percentage of people who considered the presented fake news to be true was almost 0%.

3.5. Data comparison: Fake News vs Authentic News

News item	Definitely false (%)	Might be false (%)	Hard to say (%)	Might be true (%)	Definitely true (%)
FN1	17	42.6	14.9	25.5	0
FN2	66	19.1	4.3	10.1	0
FN3	34	14.9	25.5	25.5	0
FN4	68.1	14.9	10.6	4.3	2.1
Median	50.00	17.00	12.75	17.80	0.00
AN1	23.4	36.2	23.4	17	0
AN2	21.3	10.6	27.7	38.3	2.1
AN3	40.4	27.7	8.5	21.3	2.1
AN4	19.1	36.2	14.9	25.5	4.3
Median	22.35	31.95	19.15	23.40	2.10

Table 1. Data comparison between the reception of Fake News and Authentic News.

Researchers observed that the median for authentic information was as follows: just over 50% of respondents did not believe the true information. Nearly 20% were unable to determine whether it was factual or manipulated. Close to a quarter of respondents risked stating that the information was true. The percentage of people who definitively believed the information to be true was around 2%.

The results should be interpreted cautiously, yet they point to a significant crisis of trust and an emerging trend of contesting the truth. Further research is needed to provide more consistent results.

4. Conclusion

The researchers hypothesized that saturating news content with credibility factors (CFs)—such as dates, names of researchers, politicians, academic institutions, or public trust organizations, in other words, authorities (most of them fictional, though in some cases referencing real entities like the European Commission or UNESCO)—may influence the perception of fake news as factual information. While the collected responses do not provide a definitive answer as to the extent to which fake news can be legitimized through credibility factors, they contribute to a deeper understanding of rhetorical persuasion strategies and linguistic manipulation in shaping the reception of falsehoods.

Most significantly, the study exposed a **crisis of trust among Generation Z** regarding the information they receive, as well as the key determinant of their

susceptibility to fake news: a lack of preexisting factual knowledge in the given field. Individuals with limited, superficial knowledge of surrounding events and trends may be less capable of distinguishing between truth and falsehood in media messages. A clear pattern emerges—the closer a topic is to a respondent's personal experience, the more confidently they classify the information as either true or false.

Synthesizing, the study highlights two critical areas that require further in-depth research. The first is the crisis of trust, a form of skepticism toward presented information. While this skepticism is beneficial in fostering critical thinking, it also suggests that respondents approach all media messages with a degree of detachment. This phenomenon is particularly evident when factual information is misclassified as false by a significant number of participants. The second issue is the lack of substantive knowledge, which often leads individuals to prioritize their subjective feelings over factual accuracy in evaluating news content, which seems characteristic of the post-truth era.

4.1. Study limitations

The authors acknowledge that the presented research findings are not fully conclusive, as the study was conducted on a relatively small sample of respondents. Moreover, while the research cohort consisted exclusively of individuals from Generation Z, it cannot be considered entirely representative, given that all participants were students at a prestigious, high-ranking university with a competitive admissions threshold. This implies that the sample comprised individuals who are both highly capable and socioeconomically privileged. Furthermore, the group lacked significant diversity, being composed predominantly of young women.

Nevertheless, the study serves as a valuable starting point for further analysis and comparative research, which will be the focus of subsequent investigations. The findings should be interpreted with caution and are regarded primarily as the foundation for a new research hypothesis.

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