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Fatigued but Engaged: What Drives Fake News Sharing Among Malaysian University Students in the Age of Social Media.

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ABSTRACT

The escalation of fake news on social media platforms has surfaced as an urgent issue in Malaysia, particularly among university students who exhibit substantial engagement with digital environments. The swift propagation of misinformation presents considerable risks to public perception, societal unity, and the reliability of media outlets. Despite increasing scholarly attention, there remains a paucity of research examining the psychological and behavioral determinants that facilitate the sharing of fake news within the context of Malaysian higher education. In response to this gap, the present study meticulously explores the impact of socialization, social media fatigue, self-disclosure, and online trust on the dissemination of fake news among university students. Employing a quantitative, cross-sectional methodology, data were collected via an online survey from 449 university students across Malaysia. The measurement instrument utilized a five-point Likert scale to assess the relevant constructs, and multiple linear regression analysis was performed to evaluate the proposed hypotheses. The model explained 49.8% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.498$) in fake news sharing behavior. The results indicate that socialization, social media fatigue, and self-disclosure serve as significant predictors of fake news sharing behavior, whereas online trust did not exhibit a statistically significant relationship. This study contributes to the expanding corpus of research on misinformation by elucidating key behavioral factors influencing fake news dissemination in a Malaysian academic context. It also provides practical implications for the formulation of digital literacy initiatives and targeted awareness campaigns designed to foster responsible online behavior among the youth demographic. Future studies should broaden the participant pool beyond university students, adopt probability-based and longitudinal research designs, and integrate additional psychological and contextual factors to enhance the generalizability and comprehensiveness of the findings.

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1.0 Introduction

The phenomenon of fake news has emerged as a critical global concern, profoundly influencing media discourse, political dynamics, and public trust. The term fake news generally refers to fabricated or misleading content that imitates legitimate news reporting, often created to misinform or manipulate audiences (McBrayer, 2020). Within this broader information disorder, misinformation denotes false or inaccurate information shared without intent to deceive, whereas disinformation involves the intentional creation and dissemination of falsehoods to achieve specific political, ideological, or financial objectives (Baptista & Gradim, 2020). The deliberate misuse of the term “fake news” by political actors to discredit unfavorable media coverage has further eroded journalistic credibility and undermined public confidence in legitimate news institutions.

The proliferation of digital platforms and social media networks has amplified the circulation of false information globally, allowing deceptive content to spread rapidly and reach vast audiences with minimal verification. In Malaysia, the issue has become particularly pronounced amid the nation’s high rate of social media usage (Shiang & Wilson, 2024). The uncritical consumption and sharing of inaccurate information threaten to distort public understanding, weaken social cohesion, and erode confidence in both media organizations and democratic institutions. As noted by Dan et al. (2024), the complexity of Malaysia’s digitized information environment necessitates urgent attention to the psychological and social mechanisms that drive misinformation dissemination.

Empirical evidence by Isa et al. (2022) highlights that the phenomenon of information disorder is especially prevalent among university students, a demographic characterized by high digital engagement and peer-driven communication patterns. This underscores the need for both regulatory measures and educational interventions to enhance media discernment and digital literacy. Accordingly, the present study investigates the determinants influencing the sharing of misinformation and fake news among university students in Malaysia, with the expectation of identifying key behavioral and psychological factors that shape this phenomenon. The findings are anticipated to inform the design of digital literacy initiatives and awareness campaigns aimed at promoting critical evaluation, responsible information sharing, and ethical online participation among the youth in higher education.

2.0 Literature review

Historically, fake news has been used for various purposes, such as financial gain, character assassination, and as a war tactic. The term has been used to discredit factual information by labelling it as fake, a tactic that has been prevalent since the late 19th century (Romaguera, 2023). Fake news can take many forms, including news satire, yellow journalism, and pseudo-news. The boundaries between these forms and fake news are often blurred, complicating the task of defining and countering it (C.-C. Wang, 2020). The motivations behind creating fake news include financial profit, political influence, and social manipulation. During political campaigns, fake news can be used to intercept and control the political agenda, creating excitement and distraction around fabricated stories (Simons & Manoil, 2021).

2.1 Socialization

Socialization is one of the key gratifications that motivate individuals to share fake news on social media platforms. This is supported by the uses and gratifications theory, which suggests that people use media to fulfil specific needs, including the need for social interaction (Sampat & Raj, 2022). Socialization plays a crucial role in the sharing of fake news within social networks (Wang, 2025). The paper by highlights that socialization on platforms like Twitter significantly influences fake news sharing. Users often share sensational content without verifying its accuracy, driven by their social connections and engagement levels. The study introduces the Twitter Follower Following Ratio (TFF) to measure user influence, indicating that users with more followers and engagement are more likely to disseminate fake news.

Understanding these social dynamics is crucial for addressing the rapid spread of misinformation in online social networks (Moon et al., 2024).

2.2 Social Media Fatigue

Social media fatigue is driven by factors such as information overload, compulsive use, and fear of missing out, which contribute to feelings of exhaustion and disinterest in social media interactions (Qin et al., 2024). According to Dinu et al. (2024) privacy concerns and the overwhelming amount of content can exacerbate fatigue, leading users to disengage from social media platforms. Social media fatigue can increase the likelihood of engaging in negative online behaviors, including the sharing of fake news, as users may become less discerning about the content they consume and share (Huang et al., 2025).

2.3 Self-disclosure

Self-disclosure is a prevalent behavior on social media, where users often share personal information without fully considering the risks involved. This behavior is driven by a perceived sense of control and undervaluation of personal data, which can lead to increased sharing, including of potentially false information (Fejes-Vékássy et al., 2024). The spread of fake news is a significant concern on social media, where users often share content without verifying its authenticity. This behavior is influenced by factors such as the perceived credibility of the source and the user's motivation to present themselves favorably to their audience (Ihm & Kim, 2024).

2.4 Online Trust

Trust in the source of information plays a crucial role in the spread of fake news. Studies have shown that users are more likely to share information from sources they trust, even if the content is false (Bruns et al., 2024). The study highlights that individual with high levels of institutional trust is more likely to share stories from authoritative sources, such as politicians, while those who believe in conspiracy theories tend to engage more with stories from ordinary people. This suggests that online trust significantly influences the sharing of information, including fake news, as trust in the source affects the willingness to engage with and disseminate content on platforms like Facebook (Atad & David, 2024)).

Therefore, the proposed hypotheses are:

- H1 Socialization has a positive relationship with fake news sharing.
- H2 Social Media Fatigue has a positive relationship with fake news sharing.
- H3 Self-Disclosure has a positive relationship with fake news sharing.
- H4 Online Trust has a positive relationship with fake news sharing.

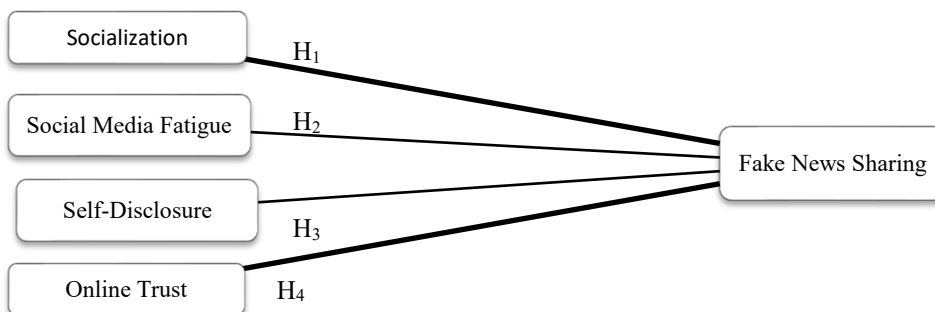


Figure 1 Research Model

3.0 Methodology

The current study, *Fatigued but Engaged: What Drives Fake News Sharing in the Age of social media*, aims to determine the factors that contribute to fake news sharing among University Students in Malaysia.

This study utilized a quantitative, cross-sectional design, characterized by the acquisition of data from either a population or a representative sample at a singular temporal juncture. This methodological strategy proves efficacious in evaluating the prevalence of particular conditions or attributes within a specified population (Ziauddin et al., 2023). The data pertinent to this study were gathered over two months among university students.

This research employed an online survey disseminated through Google Forms to gather empirical data from university students throughout Malaysia. The selection of an online medium was predicated on its pragmatic advantages, extensive outreach capabilities, and efficacy in securing participant responses within the established data collection timeframe spanning from January 2025 to February 2025.

The measurement instrument employed in this study was adapted from established scales used in previous studies by (Thompson et al., 2020), (Bright et al., 2015), (Chen, 2013), (Majerczak & Strzelecki, 2022) and (Omar et al., 2023) to ensure content relevance and theoretical consistency. All items were carefully contextualized to suit the Malaysian higher education environment while maintaining conceptual alignment with the original constructs. The instrument underwent validity and reliability assessments, and the results confirmed that all measurement items achieved acceptable psychometric standards. Specifically, the Cronbach's alpha values exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating strong internal consistency, while factor loadings surpassed 0.60, confirming construct validity. These findings affirm that the instrument was both reliable and valid for assessing the key variables in this study socialization, social media fatigue, self-disclosure, online trust, and fake news sharing behavior.

To evaluate the principal variables of interest, the survey incorporated a five-point Likert scale, thereby facilitating respondents in articulating their degrees of agreement or disagreement with a range of statements. Specifically, the scale was structured to range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A score of 1 denoted the utmost level of dissonance or disagreement with the statements presented, succeeded by 2 for general disagreement, 3 for neutral responses, 4 for agreement, and 5 for strong concordance or endorsement. This scale provided the researcher with the capability to categorize and scrutinize items of considerable relevance to the overarching research objectives.

To uphold the integrity and precision of the research outcomes, methodologies were instituted to detect and mitigate the potential ramifications of Common Method Bias (CMB), which is a recognized issue in behavioral research that predominantly utilizes self-reported data. CMB has the potential to distort the relationships among variables, resulting in illusory correlations that may not accurately represent genuine associations (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

According to Chang et al. (2020), researchers are encouraged to adopt procedural remedies during the data collection phase to reduce the likelihood of CMB. In line with these recommendations, this study incorporated procedural controls by assuring participants of both confidentiality and anonymity. These assurances were clearly communicated at the beginning of the questionnaire to reduce evaluation apprehension and to promote honest and unbiased responses. By reinforcing the voluntary nature of participation and the absence of any identifying information, the study aimed to mitigate social desirability bias and minimize the impact of CMB on the validity of the results.

Given the lack of a comprehensive and accessible sampling framework for students in Malaysian universities, this research adopted a non-probability sampling methodology, primarily employing the convenience sampling technique. Convenience sampling represents a prevalent approach within social science investigations, whereby participants are chosen based on factors such as accessibility, availability, and willingness to engage, rather than through methods of random selection (Farrokhi & Mahmoudi-Hamidabad, 2012). This approach was deemed appropriate given the logistical constraints of the study, the limited timeframe for data collection, and the need to obtain a diverse range of responses from students across various institutions. While convenience sampling may limit the generalizability of findings due to

potential selection bias, it was considered effective for reaching a broad segment of the target population under the given research conditions.

This sampling approach was deemed suitable given the logistical constraints and the imperative to engage a broad and diverse cohort of university students within a limited data collection window.

Recognizing the importance of statistical power in quantitative research, recent methodological advancements advocate for the determination of appropriate sample sizes through power analysis (Memon et al., 2020). Accordingly, this study employed G*Power analysis to calculate the minimum required sample size for conducting Multiple Linear Regression, specifically using the F-test: Fixed model, R^2 deviation from zero framework. The analysis indicated that a minimum of 129 respondents was necessary to detect a statistically significant effect with adequate power typically 0.80 at a standard significance level.

Despite this requirement, the study successfully collected responses from 449 participants, which not only exceeds the minimum threshold but also enhances the statistical robustness and generalizability of the results. The larger sample size contributes to greater confidence in the stability of parameter estimates and reduces the margin of error, thereby strengthening the validity of the research findings.

The data that were amassed were subjected to analysis utilizing IBM SPSS Statistics version 26, with a predominant emphasis on evaluating the hypotheses of the study that pertain to the determinants influencing the dissemination of fake news among university students. In striving for this aim, we applied Multiple Linear Regression Analysis to investigate how the independent variables of Socialization, Social Media Fatigue, Self-Disclosure, and Online Trust relate to the dependent variable of Fake News Sharing. This inferential statistical method provided the researcher with the ability to gauge the importance, scale, and directionality of each predictor's impact through the assessment of beta coefficients, t-values, and p-values.

4.0 Data analysis

Table 1. Hypothesis testing table.

Variable	Hypothesis	Beta value	T Statistics	P Values	R^2	Remark
Socialization	H ₁ Socialization has a positive relationship with fake news sharing.	.465	16.234	.000	0.498	Supported
Social Media Fatigue	H ₂ Social Media Fatigue has a positive relationship with fake news sharing.	.333	9.772	.000		Supported
Self-Disclosure	H ₃ Self-Disclosure has a positive relationship with fake news sharing.	.171	4.155	.000		Supported
Online Trust	H ₄ Online Trust has a positive relationship with fake news sharing.	.034	.974	.330		Not Supported

The multivariate assumptions were rigorously evaluated to ensure no infringement of the foundational criteria inherent in multivariate analysis. The data were first assessed for normality, linearity, and homogeneity of variance. Normality was examined through skewness and kurtosis values, which were found to be within the acceptable range of ± 2 , indicating that the data approximated a normal distribution. Linearity was confirmed via scatterplots showing consistent linear relationships among the variables. Homoscedasticity was verified through residual plots, which demonstrated uniform variance across predicted values.

Multicollinearity was also assessed using the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and tolerance values. The results revealed that all VIF values were below 5 and tolerance values exceeded 0.2, confirming the absence of multicollinearity and indicating that the predictor variables were sufficiently independent of one another.

The regression model explained a substantial portion of the variance in fake news sharing behavior among university students. Specifically, the regression model demonstrated strong explanatory power by accounting for 49.8% of the total variance in fake news sharing behavior ($R^2 = 0.498$). This indicates that nearly half of the variability in students' tendency to share fake news can be explained collectively by the four predictors socialization, social media fatigue, self-disclosure, and online trust. In other words, these psychological and behavioral factors substantially contribute to understanding why university students engage in the dissemination of fake news within the Malaysian context, while the remaining 50.2% of unexplained variance may be attributed to other unexamined variables such as personality traits, cultural influences, or contextual factors.

The outcomes of the hypothesis testing are delineated in Table 1. H1 examined the correlation between Socialization and the dissemination of fake news. The analysis yielded a significant and positive correlation ($\beta = 0.465$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that individuals who exhibit higher levels of social engagement are more predisposed to partake in the sharing of fake news. This hypothesis is affirmed.

H2 scrutinized the relationship between Social Media Fatigue and the sharing of fake news. The findings illustrated a statistically significant positive correlation ($\beta = 0.333$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that individuals who experience fatigue due to social media usage are likewise more likely to disseminate fake news. Thus, H2 is validated.

H3 evaluated the influence of Self-Disclosure on the propagation of fake news. The results indicated a significant positive correlation ($\beta = 0.171$, $p < 0.001$), supporting the proposition that individuals who exhibit greater self-disclosure in online environments are more likely to engage in the spread of fake news. Consequently, H3 is also validated.

Conversely, H4 investigated the association between Online Trust and the sharing of fake news. The analysis did not reveal a significant correlation ($\beta = 0.034$, $p > 0.05$), suggesting that trust in digital platforms does not substantially affect the propensity to share fake news. As a result, H4 is not validated.

In summary, the hypothesis testing elucidated that Socialization (H1), Social Media Fatigue (H2), and Self-Disclosure (H3) were all positively and significantly correlated with fake news sharing, thereby corroborating these hypotheses. In contrast, the relationship between Online Trust (H4) and fake news sharing was not statistically significant, thereby refuting the hypothesis. These findings underscore the intricate dynamics of social behavior, emotional fatigue, and personal openness in facilitating the dissemination of fake news, while indicating that trust in online platforms may not exert a crucial influence on this behavior.

5.0 Discussion

The research conducted identified that socialization, the phenomenon of social media fatigue, and the act of self-disclosure play a significant role in the propagation of fake news among university students in Malaysia. Conversely, the variable of online trust did not demonstrate a salient correlation, indicating that confidence in digital platforms may not substantially affect behaviors related to misinformation. The outcomes of this research align with previous academic studies; for example, Choi, (2023) demonstrated that socialization gratification is positively associated with the likelihood of sharing misinformation. Specifically, individuals who reported experiencing elevated levels of socialization gratification exhibited a greater likelihood of disseminating false information. Socialization has been identified as a fundamental driver for the dissemination of COVID-19-related misinformation on social media platforms. Individuals frequently disseminate fake news to enhance engagement with peers, cultivate connections, and partake in social exchanges. This conduct is motivated by an aspiration to belong to a community or contribute to ongoing discussions, which can inadvertently facilitate the spread of misinformation (Kong et al., 2023). The study performed by Omar et al. (2024) indicated that factors related to users, particularly socialization, are critical predictors of the propensity to share fake news ($\beta = 0.228$, $p < 0.001$). This finding substantiates the hypothesis that user motivations, notably socialization, are integral to the inclination of individuals to disseminate fake news via social media platforms. The investigation indicated that socialization

gratifications precipitate the immediate sharing of news across social media channels. Individuals driven by the inclination to socialize are predisposed to swiftly share fake news, driven by the intent to interact with others and engage in discussions (Sampat & Raj, 2022). Regarding social media fatigue, the study conducted by Dinu et al. (2024) reveals that social media fatigue is positively influenced by the prevalence of fake news; however, it fails to establish a direct correlation between social media fatigue and the act of sharing fake news. Research conducted by Ahmed and Rasul (2023) further indicates that social media fatigue exhibits a positive relationship with the sharing of fake news. This suggests that individuals experiencing social media fatigue may become increasingly susceptible to accepting misinformation, which subsequently affects their intention to share such content. In addition, findings from Khawaja et al. (2023) also contend that social media fatigue is indirectly affected by the propagation of deceptive information. The scholarly article indicates that social media fatigue is shaped by the act of sharing fake news, among other variables. It contends that the spread of unverified information during the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified social media fatigue (Khawaja et al., 2023). Self-disclosure has been acknowledged in previous studies as a pivotal factor influencing online communication behaviors. In the view of Ashuri and Halperin (2024), online self-disclosure constitutes the action of disclosing personal information and is subject to various socio-technical influences. These dynamics not only affect the content individuals opt to share but also the accuracy and authenticity of the shared material, including the potential for the dissemination of misleading information. Comprehending the structural and cognitive components that shape self-disclosure is crucial for elucidating the motivations underlying the spread of fake news. Ostendorf et al. (2022) emphasize that self-disclosure on social networking platforms involves a combination of rational (reflective) and impulsive (automatic) decision-making processes. The reflective system often governs the initial decision to create a post, while the impulsive system may determine the extent or depth of the information disclosed. This finding challenges the notion that self-disclosure is purely a deliberate or reasoned act. A practical example of the potential risks of excessive self-disclosure can be seen in the case of Indra Kenz, whose personal branding efforts through open sharing on social media reportedly contributed to his involvement in the spread of fake news and his eventual detention Herlina and Nurhaliza (2022). This case illustrates that heightened self-disclosure may create vulnerabilities, leading individuals to inadvertently share false information or damage their credibility. Consistent with previous research, online trust did not exhibit a significant relationship with the examined variables, indicating that trust alone may not be a decisive factor in influencing online behavior in this context. One possible explanation is that university students in Malaysia may rely more heavily on peer validation, emotional resonance, and social engagement rather than cognitive trust when deciding to share online content. This aligns with the argument by Sterie et al. (2023), who reported that online trust does not significantly impact the distribution of fake news among users, suggesting that other psychological and social mechanisms may override trust in determining sharing behavior.

However, Omar et al. (2024) provided contrasting evidence, asserting that online trust, when conceptualized as an extrinsic motivator, can act as a significant predictor of fake news sharing. This highlights the contextual dependency of trust wherein individuals with high trust in their online communities may unintentionally amplify misinformation due to reduced critical scrutiny or social conformity pressures. The present study's non-significant result may therefore indicate that trust functions differently within a university-based digital environment, where users are exposed to diverse information sources and have developed a higher level of skepticism toward online content.

Furthermore, Majerczak and Strzelecki (2022) observed that online trust could negatively influence information verification behaviors, as individuals tend to accept content from seemingly credible or familiar sources without sufficient evaluation. This finding parallels the current result, implying that while trust exists, it may not directly encourage sharing behavior, it may instead shape the evaluation process preceding the decision to share. In contrast, Choi (2023) concluded that online trust had no significant moderating effect between most gratification factors and fake news sharing, reinforcing the notion that trust does not universally determine misinformation diffusion.

Taken together, the non-significant relationship found in this study suggests that online trust may be a context-dependent construct whose influence varies according to platform culture, user maturity, and media

literacy levels. In the Malaysian higher education context, it is plausible that students' exposure to digital literacy campaigns and awareness of misinformation have weakened the role of trust as a predictor. Consequently, this finding underscores the need to reconceptualize online trust not as a static determinant but as a dynamic, situational factor that interacts with social, cognitive, and emotional dimensions of digital behavior. Overall, this section underscores the significance of the study's fundamental variables socialization, social media fatigue, self-disclosure, and online trust in elucidating the behavioral dynamics associated with the dissemination of false information. Effectively addressing misinformation necessitates a comprehensive understanding of the interplay among these factors within the social media landscape, rather than depending exclusively on platform-level regulations or content moderation approaches.

6.0 Conclusion

Overall, this research yields important revelations about the elements that drive the circulation of misleading news amongst university students in Malaysia, underlining the pivotal influences of social interaction, social media fatigue, and self-disclosure. These variables were ascertained to substantially contribute to the propensity to disseminate misinformation across social media platforms. Nonetheless, the variable of online trust did not exhibit a noteworthy correlation with fake news sharing, indicating that reliance on online platforms alone may not serve as a robust predictor of misinformation behavior within this specific context. The results corroborate previous studies suggesting that individuals frequently engage in the sharing of misinformation as a mechanism for enhancing social connections, managing online fatigue, or impulsively revealing personal viewpoints. Such behaviors are frequently motivated by the aspiration to engage and participate in online discussions, even at the potential detriment of content verification. Despite these substantial contributions, this research is not devoid of limitations. In the first instance, the sample was solely comprised of university students, which confines the relevance of the findings to the overall Malaysian populace or other demographic divisions. Secondly, the employment of a cross-sectional design limits the capacity to draw causal inferences regarding the relationships among the examined variables and the behavior of sharing fake news. Thirdly, the research employed non-probability sampling techniques, which may lead to sampling bias and potentially undermine the representativeness of the findings.

Furthermore, while the identified variables yield significant insights, the study could be further enhanced by integrating additional predictors, such as media literacy, political orientation, emotional regulation, or cognitive biases, to formulate a more holistic model of misinformation behavior. Future research activities should focus on addressing the limitations of the current study by widening the participant demographic to include individuals from different age groups, educational backgrounds, and geographic areas. Such an expansion would enable a more comprehensive understanding of behaviors linked to the dissemination of fake news across diverse segments of the population. Moreover, subsequent investigations are recommended to employ longitudinal or experimental designs to explore causal relationships over time, which cannot be adequately assessed through the current cross-sectional approach. The adoption of probability-based sampling methods would further enhance the external validity of the findings and reduce sampling bias. Additionally, researchers should consider the incorporation of a wider range of psychological and contextual factors, including media literacy, cognitive distortions, emotional regulation, and political orientation, to more precisely capture the intricate nature of fake news dissemination. The insights derived from this research can significantly inform the development of targeted digital literacy programs and awareness campaigns within higher education institutions. Such initiatives are vital not only for reducing the spread of misinformation but also for fostering critical, ethical, and reflective media consumption habits among university students. Educators should integrate digital literacy competencies such as source evaluation, information verification, algorithmic awareness, and digital empathy into both curricular and co-curricular activities. Embedding these competencies across disciplines can enhance students' cognitive resilience and their ability to critically assess online information.

Policymakers should also collaborate with universities to establish national frameworks for digital literacy education that emphasize critical thinking, media ethics, and social responsibility. Practical

interventions such as workshops, peer-led awareness campaigns, and simulation-based training can cultivate responsible sharing behavior and strengthen the overall information ecosystem. Furthermore, partnerships between educational institutions and social media platforms could enable the co-creation of interactive learning modules that simulate real-world misinformation scenarios, thereby promoting active learning and reflective digital engagement.

Further research is imperative to cultivate a more generalizable and nuanced understanding of this increasingly urgent issue. In particular, digital literacy competencies should be examined as potential moderating or mediating factors influencing the relationship between psychological determinants and fake news sharing behavior. Such investigations would yield deeper theoretical and practical insights, guiding the design of more effective educational and policy interventions to foster a discerning and responsible digital citizenry.

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Conflict of interest statement

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