**Disinformation across the moral domains: when reflecting on fake news credibility can moderate moral emotions**

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Abstract

The spreading of fake news and the phenomenon of disinformation pointed out increasingly the importance of the ‘credibility’ issue. A contribution of the psychological scientific literature on fake news is to provide a systematic definition of "credibility" and try to respond to why people believe in fake news. Some scholars have tried to define the concept of "credulity" starting from the factors that determine it. For example, Kim and Brown (2015) defines believability (or credulity) as the level of beliefs attributable to a group of information (meaning a message) and its source. As to the cognitive processes, the psychological scientific literature notes that credibility on social media among analytic and heuristic processes follows mainly an automatic, heuristic one (Metzger, 2010) mainly featured by mechanisms linked to the more superficial side of information. In addition, Pennycook and colleagues (2020; Martel, Pennycook & Rand, 2020) highlighted how affective processes can play a pejorative role in credibility, whether heightened emotionality is associated with increased belief in fake news and decreased. The results show that emotion, both positive and negative, is predictive of fake news credulity and that it increases the possibility of discerning real from fake news.

Furthermore, other empirical studies (Fazio, Barber, Rajaram, Ornstein, & Marsh, 2013; Rapp, 2008) have shown that people exposed to information containing manipulation, therefore inaccurate, felt more confused and can also change their opinion and attitude (Bastick, 2020). This suggests that for the veracity assessment the understanding of cognitive and affective processes can play a crucial role, and thus our contribution tries to understand the role played by cognitive and affective processes considering in particular the moral emotions. Moreover, people may be unaware, unprepared or unwilling to engage in the necessary evaluative behavior to avoid being influenced by inaccurate statements. For this reason, authors such as Salovich and Rapp (2020) have highlighted the role of reflection to encourage the process of evaluating information analytically. The results show that participants who have metacognitive awareness of their ability tend to avoid the problematic effects of exposures to inaccurate/manipulated content. Other studies, such as Batailler et al. (2021), study the role that (1) partisan bias, (2) cognitive reflection, (3) motivated reflection, and (4) prior exposure play in determining whether the information read is evaluated as true or false. However, the role of reflective cognitive evaluation in eliciting specific emotions has been neglected, specifically the moral ones, emotions that typically emerge in the polarizing and flaming ethical debate. Thus, first of all the proposed study aims to explore the role played by the moral domain of the news and, in particular, according to the Haidt model (Haidt, 2001), it will test if the moral content was a predictive factor of credibility considering different domains echoed by online news. Starting from a sample with a high level of linguistic ability (advanced degree in communication sciences), we tried to understand if insinuating doubt by means of a ‘cognitive prompt’ on credibility is a way to activate an analytical and non-automatic path of credibility processing. In particular, our study hypotheses that, in a condition in which people are more able to assess the veracity of a news, will better process news credibility and thus after this cognitive evaluation they will feel more emotions. Methodologically, the present study investigates the effects elicited by cognitive evaluations on emotional processes after the presentation of five made-up Instagram news screenshots in two different linguistic modalities, each specifically developed to activate the content domain for each of the five moral foundations, as theorized by Haidt (2001), namely: Care, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority, Purity. The first modality of each screenshots adopts an emotionally activating and biased linguistic framing (similarly to the one occurring in online disinformation outlets), while the second version adopts a dry and impartial communicative style. This study should be considered as the first step toward the construction of an ecologically valid tool to assess the impact of different online linguistic styles of fake-news on moral emotions and cognitive evaluations. For the sample of university students considered (N = 50, 12 male, 38 female, Mage = 32.6, SDage = 13.5), the results indicate that whenever the news screenshot was evaluated as credible and true, the emotionally linguistically framed stimuli elicited significantly less pronounced emotional responses than did the linguistically unbiased stimuli. Moreover, emotional activation, in turn, can facilitate the willingness to share the piece of news on social media for most of the five moral foundations. These preliminary findings revealed a more complex interplay among evaluative cognitive processes and moral emotion in relation to spread of fake news. If reflective processes are offered, linguistic experts are able to identify fake news, and credibility is associated with moral emotion consistently with the ‘unbiased’ reported ethical topic. As future perspectives, from an applied point of view, the data obtained through this ecological model of misinformation analysis can contribute to throw a new light on the relations between credulity, linguistic competence, moral emotions and sharing of fake news in online contexts, thus providing a useful framework for those interventions aimed at actively countering this phenomenon.

Acknowledgment: The present study is a part of the European project 'STERHEOTYPES-Studying European Racial Hoaxes and sterEOTYPES' recently founded by ‘Challenge for Europe’ call for Project (CUP: B99C20000640007).

*Keywords*: Disinformation, fake news, misinformation, moral emotions, moral foundations