# Combating Fake News in the Post-Truth Era: A Study on the News Verification Practices of University Students

*Post-Truth Çağda Yalan Haberle Mücadele: Üniversite Öğrencilerinin Haber Doğrulama Pratikleri Üzerine Bir Araştırma*

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**Abstract**

Fake news is rapidly disseminated through the internet and social media. For news consumers to access accurate information, they must be able to recognize and differentiate fake news. At this juncture, news verification practices gain significance. The objective of this research is to examine the news verification practices of university students. To this end, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 university students. The findings of the research indicated that the primary verification method students employed when encountering suspicious news was typically to cross-reference information from various websites via a Google search. Furthermore, it was observed that methods such as consulting television main news bulletins, seeking opinions from their social circle comprising family and friends, and referring to diverse social media accounts to ascertain the veracity of news were predominantly preferred as secondary or tertiary verification mechanisms. Upon examining students' experiences with encountering fake news, it was concluded that deepfake content, generated using artificial intelligence technologies, is a factor that heightens skepticism towards news. It was also revealed that awareness of fact-checking/verification platforms actively engaged in combating fake news remains considerably low among university students, and these platforms are not actively utilized by students as a verification method.

**Keywords:** *News Consumption, Fake News, Factcheking, Post-Truth, Disinformation*

**Öz**

İnternet ve sosyal medya aracılığıyla yalan haberler hızla yayılmaktadır. Haber tüketicilerinin doğru bilgiye ulaşabilmesi için yalan haberleri tanıması ve ayırt edebilmesi gerekmektedir. Bu noktada, haber doğrulama pratikleri önem kazanmaktadır. Araştırmanın amacı, üniversite öğrencilerinin haber doğrulama pratiklerini incelemektir. Bu amaç doğrultusunda, 16 üniversite öğrencisiyle yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Araştırma sonucunda, öğrencilerin şüpheli haberler karşısında başvurduğu ilk doğrulama yönteminin, genellikle Google araması yaparak farklı internet sitelerinden bilgi kontrolü sağlamak olduğu belirlenmiştir. Bunun yanı sıra, haberin doğruluğunu kontrol etmek amacıyla televizyon ana haber bültenlerinden yararlanma, aile ve arkadaşlardan oluşan sosyal çevreye danışma ve çeşitli sosyal medya hesaplarına başvurma gibi yöntemlerin ise daha çok ikincil veya üçüncül doğrulama mekanizmaları olarak tercih edildiği görülmüştür. Öğrencilerin yalan haberle karşılaşma deneyimlerine bakıldığında, yapay zekâ teknolojileri kullanılarak üretilen deepfake içeriklerin habere duyulan şüpheyi arttıran bir unsur olduğu sonucuna ulaşılmıştır. Üniversite öğrencileri arasında yalan haberle mücadelede faaliyet gösteren teyit/doğrulama platformlarına yönelik bilinirliğin ise oldukça düşük kaldığı ve söz konusu platformların öğrenciler tarafından aktif bir doğrulama yöntemi olarak kullanılmadığı ortaya çıkmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Haber Tüketimi, Yalan Haber, Doğruluk Kontrolü, Hakikat-Ötesi, Dezenformasyon*

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## Introduction

The term "post-truth" was initially employed in 1992 by Steve Tesich in his article titled "The Government of Lies." In this aforementioned article, Tesich critiqued American society throughout a period that commenced with the Vietnam War and extended through the Watergate Scandal, the Iran-Contra Affair, and the Gulf War. Tesich (1992) articulated that despite an escalation in the severity of scandals during this period, the American public grew progressively indifferent. Unable to contend with realities, the populace, after a certain point, began to favor falsehoods over truths. This was attributed to truth—irrespective of its vital importance—becoming synonymous with bad news, and the public's aversion to receiving further bad news. Consequently, it was no longer incumbent upon politicians to exert effort to conceal truths, as the public was disinclined to heed them (Tesich, 1992, p. 12).

Subsequent to Tesich's observations, in the early 2000s, the concept of "truthiness" (resembling truth, seemingly true) emerged in relation to our engagement with reality. Stephen Colbert, a talk show host, utilized the term "truthiness" to convey that truth had devolved into mere material for entertainment, and for a phenomenon to be perceived as truth, it sufficed for it to merely feel like truth (Altun, 2022, pp. 250–251). Ball (2017) extends this analysis further, asserting that the post-truth era is, in fact, less about lies and more about "bullshit". In his view, the media is now entirely under the sway of bullshit.

For this perspective, Ball references Harry G. Frankfurt's 2005 book, "On Bullshit" In this work, Frankfurt (2005) posits that even the act of lying necessitates an acknowledgement of the truth, whereas for bullshit, the truth is of no consequence whatsoever. An individual who tells a lie must be cognizant of what the truth is. The bullshitter, conversely, is unconcerned with reality; they mold any given situation to align with their interests as they see fit (Frankfurt, 2005, p. 52). The post-truth era, characterized by the prevalence of lies and bullshit, is engendering a world marked by diminished trust in science, burgeoning social inequalities, and heightened polarization (Lewandowsky et al., 2017, p. 353). Later, in 2004, Ralph Keyes, in his book "The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life" delineated the post-truth concept as a tertiary category, encompassing ambiguous statements that do not precisely mirror reality yet cannot be unequivocally classified as lies (Keyes, 2004). In contemporary society, mendacity has become a commonplace act, and the falsehoods propagated by politicians serve to desensitize and numb the populace (Keyes, 2004, pp. 20–22).

Following Keyes's aforementioned observations, the post-truth concept continued to be employed in numerous theoretical discussions. However, the year 2016 marked the period when the concept truly gained prominence. The Brexit referendum and the US presidential elections conducted in 2016 brought the issue of fake news disseminated via the internet to the forefront, thereby instigating intensive debate surrounding the "post-truth" concept. During Donald Trump's election campaign, his rhetoric targeting his opponent Hillary Clinton, predicated on non-factual information, contributed to an escalation in post-truth discussions. Indeed, the usage of the concept increased by 2000% compared to 2015 (Flood, 2016). With the Oxford Dictionary's designation of "post-truth" as the word of the year in 2016, the concept became recognized by broader audiences and gained increasingly widespread currency in public discourse. Succinctly, the post-truth concept, which can be articulated as

*"emotions overriding facts"* can be defined as "*the public prioritizing personal emotions and beliefs over shared, objective facts when forming* opinions."

Discussions surrounding the post-truth concept are undoubtedly inseparable from the influence of social media. Donald Trump, who was elected US President in 2016, actively utilized social media throughout his election campaign. Emphasizing the purported bias of traditional media, Trump predicated his social media strategy on populist rhetoric and accusations aimed at his opponent (Altun, 2022, p. 254). In this period, social media platforms faced accusations of failing to act responsibly concerning the dissemination of fake news and the facilitation of political manipulation within the post-truth era (Karagöz, 2018, p. 682). The Cambridge Analytica scandal serves as the most proximate contemporary example of how political manipulation is executed via social media. In 2014, it came to light that data procured through Facebook had been sold to a company named Cambridge Analytica. The company was accused of leveraging big data, composed of voter profiles, to steer voters towards supporting Trump (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018; Rosenberg et al., 2018). Alexander Nix, an executive of the company, corroborated these allegations in footage covertly recorded by Channel 4 reporters, admitting that they had guided voters through the use of fake news (*Cambridge Analytica Uncovered*, 2018). Subsequent to the scandal's emergence, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg issued an apology for the events (Wong, 2018). Cambridge Analytica was also implicated in interfering in elections in various other countries, notably Kenya (Moore, 2018), and in influencing the Brexit process (Reuters, 2018).

In the post-truth era, new media function as a mechanism facilitating the dissemination of fake news. Fake news, as a phenomenon, has manifested in numerous forms throughout history. However, the advent of new media has considerably simplified the production and propagation of fake news in contemporary times (Wardle, 2020, p. 10). The principal peril in this process stems not so much from fake news inadvertently spread by users, but rather from disinformation campaigns systematically executed by professional teams (Karagöz, 2018, p. 681). The concept of misinformation, often generalized as fake news, encompasses seven distinct types: parody, distortion, imitation, manipulation, decontextualization, false attribution, and fabrication (Wardle, 2017, as cited in Foça, 2019). In the post-truth era, all seven of these varied types are put into circulation for the purposes of both political manipulation and the acquisition of commercial revenue.

In the realm of new media, news production is not exclusively confined to professionals. New media users who are not professional journalists are now also capable of producing news. This development has led to news being consumed more frequently via the internet than through traditional media channels (Vosoughi et al., 2018). However, users who lack familiarity with the professional responsibilities inherent in journalism may disregard the necessity of verifying news accuracy. Furthermore, there exists the potential for citizen journalists to manipulate news in accordance with their own interests. Consequently, news items produced by citizen journalists can contribute to the dissemination of fake news (Rubin et al., 2015).

The sheer volume of news items on social media, coupled with the challenges in pinpointing their original sources, complicates the verification process for journalists. Additionally, verifying the accuracy of each distinct component of a news report—such as photographs, videos, and text—is a time-consuming endeavor. Yet, the contemporary media landscape, which prioritizes speed, progressively intensifies competitive pressures. Journalists may, therefore, bypass the news verification stage to avoid being scooped on a story (Martin, 2017).

The role of professional journalists who utilize the internet and social media as news sources is as substantial as that of citizen journalists in the propagation of fake news. Professional journalists often resort to social media as a news source even when uncertain about the veracity of the information obtained therefrom (Devran & Özcan, 2017; Taşkıran & Kırık, 2016).

Fake news circulating within new media can nowadays even influence the programming of traditional media outlets (Karagöz, 2018, p. 681). According to Ball (2017), this is attributable to the escalating pressure on traditional media stemming from transformations in the media's economic structure, driven by the internet. Individuals can now readily access news online, which consequently diminishes interest in traditional media. Fake news has generated a substantial revenue stream for internet-based media. In pursuit of a share of this income, long-established traditional media organizations find themselves concurrently combating fake news and, paradoxically, producing it (Ball, 2017, pp. 9–14). In the post-truth era, where it is increasingly challenging for news consumers to access truth, the ability to recognize and differentiate fake news—which proliferates rapidly via the internet—is becoming progressively more crucial for obtaining accurate information. The principal objective of this study is to investigate the news verification practices of university students in the current period, designated as the post-truth era, wherein fake news presents a highly significant problem. Congruent with this primary objective, the research questions that this study seeks to answer are formulated as follows:

- What are the news consumption habits of university students?

- What factors shape university students' perceptions of credibility in news?

- What are university students' experiences with encountering fake news?

- What methods do university students employ when verifying the accuracy of news?

- What are university students' views on news verification platforms?

## 1. Accuracy and Credibility in News

News consumers, who seek to comprehend events unfolding in the world and their immediate environment, expect the media to deliver accurate and reliable news. Traditional media outlets, which for many years constituted the sole source for news consumers, have gradually ceded their position to new media. As the internet and social media have altered news consumption habits, traditional media has become a less favored option for news acquisition. Nevertheless, during periods of crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a resurgence in interest towards traditional media (Newman et al., 2020). Throughout the pandemic, traditional media news managed to renew a degree of trust among news consumers, particularly when contrasted with the myriad fake news items prevalent on the internet and social media (Güz et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2020; Uzunoğlu, 2020). However, it is still not feasible to assert that traditional media is an unequivocally reliable source.

A multitude of factors—including shifts in the ownership structures of traditional media, the deterioration of relationships between media entities, governing powers, and interest groups, escalating pressures exerted upon the media, and a disregard for ethical principles—have progressively eroded trust in traditional media. To contend with the novel competitive landscape forged by the internet and social media, traditional media organizations are

reducing newsroom budgets and endeavoring to make news gathering more cost-effective through staff dismissals. Consequently, skepticism regarding the credibility of traditional media is steadily intensifying (Balcı et al., 2013, p. 187; Marchi, 2012). Social media users, in particular, tend to perceive traditional media as a channel that is government-driven and susceptible to manipulation (Tsfati & Cappella, 2003).

Research concerning media and credibility commenced in the 1950s. Particularly with the advent of television, this medium became the central focus of such investigations. In contemporary times, a discernible shift is observed in the axis of credibility studies, moving from traditional media towards digital media (Mehrabi et al., 2009, p. 138). Presently, the number of news sources has proliferated, and access to news has become more rapid compared to previous eras. However, this does not inherently signify that individuals are accessing more reliable news.

In the process initiated by the emergence of the internet and social media, journalistic identity and the very concept of news have undergone a transformation, and the operational methods of journalists have changed. The mission of delivering accurate news, a fundamental duty and responsibility of journalists, has also been impacted by this shift. The disruption of the monopoly previously held by traditional media in the journalistic sphere by new and diverse channels, such as the internet and social media, has cast uncertainty upon the continued viability of concepts like accuracy and credibility, which are highly valued in professional journalism (Çaplı, 2016, p. 67). The "click-stream" publishing paradigm of internet journalism prioritizes easily clickable popular content in news selection, rather than news items grounded in public interest. Publishers who manipulate algorithms to achieve higher rankings in search engine results and reach a broader audience have precipitated the emergence of junk news sites, which operate devoid of journalistic principles (Güzel & Özmen, 2018, p. 212). With the rise of the internet and social media, news production has ceased to be an activity conducted exclusively by professionals within newsrooms. The news-gathering function, traditionally considered the primary task of journalists, can now also be undertaken by individuals who are not professional journalists. Consequently, journalists must evolve from being primarily collectors of accurate information to becoming selectors and processors of what constitutes accurate information (Himma-Kadakas & Palmiste, 2019).

Fake news is rapidly disseminated through social media and the internet. While users can simultaneously access a vast amount of data, they are also exposed to a considerable volume of fake news and misinformation (Karagöz, 2018, p. 683). According to the Digital News Report 2024, produced collaboratively by the Reuters Institute and the University of Oxford, the proportion of individuals expressing concern about the accuracy and reliability of information they obtain from the internet stands at 59% (Newman, 2024). This figure is notably higher in countries such as South Africa, the USA, and the UK, where elections were conducted in 2024. The report also revealed that younger individuals and those with lower educational attainment tend to exhibit greater trust in news. Furthermore, in nations characterized by significant political polarization, the perception that media organizations are untrustworthy is prevalent (Newman, 2024).

One of the prominent issues highlighted in the report stems from a question posed to users for the first time: whether it is easy to differentiate credible content from other types of content. The findings indicate that among social media platforms, TikTok is where users experience the greatest difficulty in identifying credible news. The report concluded that

approximately 27% of TikTok users are uncertain about the veracity of the news they encounter. The gravity of this situation becomes more apparent when considering that 70% of TikTok users are young people aged between 18 and 34. On the X platform, which ranked after TikTok in terms of this challenge, approximately 24% of users—or one in four—reported difficulty in selecting credible news. While the situation on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp is somewhat better than on TikTok and X, it is not regarded as substantially different (Newman, 2024).

Turning to the research findings pertinent to Turkey, the proportion of individuals expressing trust in the news was recorded at 35%. This figure positions Turkey 26th among the 47 countries surveyed. Data delineating the concentration of news consumption indicate that 70% occurs via the internet and social media, 56% through television, and 19% via print newspapers. The most frequently chosen social media platforms for news were, in order, YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp (İltir, 2024; Şahin, 2024). On social media, content creators also contribute to the proliferation of fake news and misinformation. Within the framework of a study titled "Behind the Scenes," conducted collaboratively by UNESCO and Bowling Green State University, 500 social media influencers from 45 countries were analyzed. The research concluded that two out of every three digital content creators do not verify the accuracy of the content they disseminate. Furthermore, it was found that users following these influencers tend to assess content credibility based on criteria such as likes, shares, or peer recommendations (Ha, 2024, pp. 7–8).

## 2. News Verification Practices

The accuracy of news disseminated within the internet environment has evolved into a highly contentious concept within the contemporary media ecosystem. Fake news, rumors laden with unfounded information, and distorted truths are phenomena for which numerous historical precedents exist. However, owing to their accelerated rate of dissemination and escalating adverse impacts, fake news has attained dimensions of danger unprecedented in history. Presently, fake news—easily fabricated with digital technologies and readily circulated via the internet to reach millions of individuals in an exceedingly short timeframe—constitutes one of the most significant problems of the post-truth era. Consequently, the concept of verification, or fact-checking, which encompasses the entirety of efforts directed at substantiating the truth or falsity of claims presented in traditional or digital media, holds considerable importance (Fabry, 2017).

Endeavors to rectify errors in news production and to affirm the veracity of claims have been extant since the nascent stages of professional journalism. In the field of reporting, the concept of verification carries two distinct connotations: "editorial verification," undertaken prior to news publication, and "post-hoc verification," conducted subsequent to publication. Editorial verification activities, performed before news was published, functioned as a mechanism for scrutinizing the accuracy of assertions made by reporters in their stories and for correcting typographical errors. The earliest Western exemplar of this practice can be traced to Time magazine, one of America's foremost news magazines, in the 1920s. The editorial verification mechanism, which effectively served as a form of quality control for the newsroom by authenticating news items before their release, began to wane from the early 21st century onward due to the economic crises afflicting news organizations, and in time, it ceased to exist (Mantzarlis, 2022, pp. 86–87).

Post-hoc verification, which is conducted after news publication, primarily focuses on political advertisements, campaign speeches, and political party manifestos. The fundamental objective in this context is to ensure that public figures and politicians remain accountable for the veracity of their statements. Accordingly, within the post-hoc verification mechanism, fact-checkers consult primary and reliable sources to authenticate claims disseminated to the public. Among the earliest examples of post-hoc verification practices are the Factcheck.org project, initiated in 2003 by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, and Channel 4's Fact-Check application, established in 2005 (Mantzarlis, 2022, pp. 86–87). In addition to these, initiatives such as Snopes.com (1996), Spinsanity (2001), and FactCheck.org (2003) also warrant attention. However, broadly speaking, it can be asserted that two pivotal moments have marked the development of post-hoc verification as a journalistic practice. The first of these was the awarding of the Pulitzer Prize in the journalism category in 2009 to PolitiFact, a verification project. The second turning point was the extensive dissemination of fake news to mass audiences, particularly after 2016, and the global ramifications of its impact. During this period, alongside news verification, a significant focus was also directed towards debunking fake news and unfounded viral content (Mantzarlis, 2022, pp. 86–87).

Verification platforms, the significance of which has notably burgeoned over the past decade, also fulfill crucial functions in Turkey's struggle against misinformation and unfounded news. Yalansavar.org (2009), Muhtesip.com (2009), and Evrimagaci.org (2010) are counted among the pioneering verification platforms in Turkey. Additionally, Malumatfurus.org (2015), Gununyalanlari.com (2015), and FactCheck.TR (2015) can be cited as further examples. Among the verification platforms in Turkey, those holding membership in the International Fact-Checking Network include Doğrulukpayi.com (2014), Teyit.org (2016), and Doğrula.org (2017). As of February 2025, the aggregate subscriber numbers for these IFCN member platforms across Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube are as follows: Teyit.org with 1,317,000; Doğrulukpayi.com with 566,000; and Doğrula with 500,000. Consequently, it can be affirmed that Teyit.org stands as the most digitally popular news verification platform in Turkey.

In the existing literature, it is evident that news verification practices have been the subject of various research endeavors. A study conducted in 2020 by Türkiye Raporu (Turkey Report), a public opinion research initiative of Istanbul Economics, concerning the information-seeking and verification practices of news consumers, revealed that more traditional methods were predominantly employed for news verification. These included consulting other websites (25.6%) or seeking the opinions of friends/family members (9.4%). While 17.4% of the participants indicated that they did not verify news, the proportion of those who reported using news verification platforms was 10%. The platforms most favored by participants were Doğrulukpayi.org and Teyit.org (Türkiye Raporu, 2020; Ünver, 2020, p. 16). Corroborating these findings, other studies in the literature suggest a generally low level of awareness regarding news verification platforms (Balcı et al., 2013; Kavaklı, 2019; Şener, 2018). Consequently, possessing knowledge about news verification practices—an essential mechanism for fostering awareness against fake news—is of progressively increasing importance. This study aims to contribute to the literature by examining news verification practices from a contemporary perspective.

## 3. Methodology

This study, which aims to investigate the verification practices developed by university students in their engagement with fake news, employed semi-structured in-depth interviewing, a qualitative research method. The ethical approval was acquired with the decision of Bandırma Onyedi Eylül University, Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee dated 05.09.2024 and numbered 2024-7, before proceeding to the data collection phase in this research.

Interviewing, a data collection technique frequently utilized in qualitative research, not only enables participants to articulate their experiences firsthand but also affords the researcher an opportunity to gain a profound understanding of the participants' interpretive frameworks, perspectives, and their emotions, thoughts, and experiences concerning their particular circumstances (McCracken, 1988, p. 9).

For this study, individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with 16 university students between October 25, 2024, and November 7, 2024. Utilizing a random sampling method, 8 female and 8 male university students, all enrolled in different academic departments, were selected. In the study, female participants are denoted as K1, K2, K3, K4, K5, K6, K7, and K8, while male participants are designated as E1, E2, E3, E4, E5, E6, E7, and E8. The ages of the participants are provided in parentheses.

During the study, participants were posed questions regarding the channels through which they frequently follow news, the characteristics they associate with trustworthy news, the types of news they approach with skepticism, and the procedures they follow to ascertain the veracity of news items they find doubtful. A total of 145 minutes of audio recordings was obtained from these face-to-face interviews. The audio recordings procured from the interviews were subsequently transcribed and grouped according to themes formulated based on the research questions and the answers provided by the participants. The data were analyzed using descriptive analysis, a technique based on presenting the participants' statements as direct quotations (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008, pp. 221–223).

## 4. Findings

In this section, the findings derived from the semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with the participants are categorized and interpreted within the framework of the research questions and the responses provided.

### 4.1. News Consumption Habits

The research initially sought to establish the news consumption habits of the participants. To this end, participants were posed the following questions: "How frequently do you follow the news?" and "Do you generally prefer to follow the news from traditional media or social media?"

Of the 16 participants with whom in-depth interviews were conducted, 7 reported that they follow the news on a daily basis, while 9 indicated that, although not every day, they endeavor to follow the news "whenever they find the opportunity." K6 (21), who affirmed that she definitely follows the news daily, stated that she checks on global events at almost every opportunity throughout the day. Similarly, E6 (22) also conveyed that he engages in constant news tracking, responding, "I follow the agenda on Twitter every minute I am free." It can be

posited that participants who follow the news daily regard access to information as a routine necessity.

Among the participants who stated they do not follow the news every day, E4 (20) remarked, "I don't follow it every day, but when a very significant development occurs, it invariably appears before me on Twitter." In a similar vein, participant K8 (20), referring to social media, answered, "I try to follow it as it comes across my feed." It is plausible to suggest that while these participants may not follow news as an integral part of their daily routine, they consume news as they are exposed to it on social media platforms. Participants who reported not consuming news daily generally expressed that they read news via social media platforms "as they encounter it" or "as it appears before them."

Regarding preferences for news consumption via traditional media versus social media, it was observed that the vast majority of participants follow news through social media channels. Ten of the participants (K1, K2, K3, K4, K5, E2, E4, E5, E6, E7, E8) indicated that they follow news via social media, while 4 participants (K6, K8, E1, E3) stated that although they predominantly prefer social media for news tracking, they also engage with news from traditional media. On the other hand, only one participant reported not preferring to use social media for news tracking. K7 (20) explained, "I follow the news from traditional media, from television. I do not follow news via social media."

To further investigate the participants' habits of following news via social media, they were asked which platforms they preferred. The X platform (formerly Twitter) was identified as the most frequently chosen social media channel for news tracking, with 13 participants indicating its use for this purpose. Two participants, conversely, stated that they follow news via Instagram. Some participants who reported frequently tracking news via the X platform also mentioned that they occasionally follow news from other platforms such as Telegram, Reddit, and Instagram. For instance, participant E5 (20) described the channels through which he follows news as follows: "I'm on Twitter every minute I'm free. I follow the agenda there extensively. Apart from that, I might check Instagram or Reddit. I generally follow news through mobile applications. I don't particularly enjoy watching television." Based on these findings, it is possible to assert that digital platforms play a determinative role in the news consumption habits of university students, and that the use of social media is fundamentally reshaping the modalities through which they access news.

## 4.2. Factors Shaping Perceptions of Credibility in News

In the research, to ascertain the factors that shape participants' perceptions of credibility in news, they were posed the questions: "What characteristics make news seem more credible to you?" and "What characteristics make you approach news with suspicion?" The preponderant majority of participants indicated that the trust vested in the individual or institution disseminating the news on social media platforms—that is, the news source—correspondingly influences the trust placed in the news itself. In addition to this, the language employed in the news, its impartiality, and whether the news is substantiated by visuals or comparable evidence pertinent to the subject matter are also among the factors that affect trust in the news.

Some participants who underscored the significance of the source in determining news credibility focused on the recognizability of that source. Participant E3 (20), while also noting

his attention to impartiality in news, expressed greater confidence in news shared by publicly known individuals, articulating this as follows:

*For me, impartial news is credible news. The source of the news is also important, for instance. Would you place more belief in news I post, or in news posted by someone who is known and recognized by everyone? If it were me, I would place more belief in news posted by a well-known person. It is important for them to be a known individual.*

While news shared by publicly recognized figures tended to augment trust in the news, it was observed that some participants approached shares originating from anonymous accounts with skepticism. Furthermore, some participants who emphasized the importance of the source in news credibility conveyed that they found news shared on social media, particularly by individuals whose profession is journalism, to be more reliable. Participant E8 (21) described this sentiment thus: "It seems credible when shared by people who do this for a living. A share by an ordinary person does not inspire confidence because their job isn't to create or share news." Similarly, participant E (22) stated that he pays close attention to who shares the news, remarking, "News posted by an anonymous person on Twitter can be unfounded. But if the one sharing is a known person or a journalist, such news inspires greater confidence and is more believable."

News disseminated from anonymous accounts prominently emerged as one of the factors that most significantly eroded the perception of credibility among participants. Participant K3 (22) articulated her stance on this issue as follows: "I don't trust news from anonymous accounts because I don't know who is saying it; the source becomes dubious." Participant E6 (22), in turn, expressed his skepticism regarding anonymous accounts in this manner: "If news is shared by an anonymous account, then I cannot be certain of its accuracy. Because I do not trust them since I am unaware of their real identities." These statements reveal that participants adopt a cautious approach towards news originating from anonymous accounts and generally deem such news unreliable.

Some participants, who reported a lack of trust in news shared by anonymous accounts and expressed greater confidence in shares from publicly known individuals and professional journalists, also considered visuals used in news as constituting a form of evidence, stating that news supported by such visuals engenders trust. Participant K2 (23) articulated this perspective as follows:

*There are certain prominent pages on Twitter. I trust the news they share about 80%. However, I always leave a margin for a question mark. But I don't believe what anonymous accounts write. Alternatively, when tweets from individuals well-known in society, such as lawyers, or from some journalists I follow, appear on my feed, I examine them. This is because they also share information in an evidenced manner, accompanied by visuals, when an event occurs. That inspires a bit more trust. Anything that utilizes visuals inspires more trust. I can put it that way.*

Similarly, participant K8 (20) expressed that the credibility of news is enhanced when it is supported by visual evidence and disseminated by publicly recognized figures, stating:

*I trust it more if there's proof. By proof, I mean it could be a photograph, a video related to the news, or if there's something tangible and concrete, its credibility also increases. Apart from that, I wouldn't really believe news shared by someone completely unknown.*

Differing from other participants, one individual (K4) stated that the language employed in the news also influences its credibility. K4 (19), who, akin to many participants, underscored the importance of the sharer's identity in her assessment of news trustworthiness, commented, "(…) Also, what kind of language was used? If it's like a very colloquial language, the kind

commonly used among the public, I honestly don't trust it much. I expect a slightly more formal language," and added that she also distrusts anonymous accounts.

Based on the responses to the research questions, it was discerned that participants place greater trust in news shared by publicly known individuals or professional journalists. Furthermore, the impartiality of the news, its language, and the presence of news visuals were identified as among the factors shaping this trust. Conversely, news shared from anonymous accounts is approached with suspicion.

## 4.3. Experiences with Encountering Fake News

In the research, participants were posed the question, "How often do you encounter fake news on social media platforms?" and were subsequently asked to elaborate on their experiences with encountering such news. While 13 participants stated that they are very frequently exposed to fake news on social media platforms, 3 participants (K8, E4, E2) responded that they do not encounter it very often.

Participant E6 (22), who reported frequent encounters with fake news, articulated this situation as follows: "It appears before me a lot. On Twitter, for instance, there are constantly news items that people share falsely or inaccurately from anonymous accounts. They attempt to gain engagement by portraying others as having done things they haven't actually done." Participant K4 (19), who also indicated frequent encounters with fake news, remarked, "I encounter it a great deal. Then, the correct version is usually shared on many pages anyway. When I see those, I already doubt every piece of news. In fact, most of it seems like lies," thereby emphasizing that her extensive exposure to fake news leads her to approach most news items with suspicion.

Some participants who expressed frequent encounters with fake news also touched upon the topics of the news they encountered. Five of the participants (K1, K2, K3, K7, E1) exemplified their experiences with encountering fake news through celebrity-focused or gossip news items. Participant K7 (20), who stated she frequently encounters fake news, described the situation as follows: "It constantly appears before me. I am exposed to it on Instagram. Since celebrity news items usually land on my page, I more often encounter fake news related to celebrities." Similarly, participant K3 (22) responded, "There is a lot of untrue celebrity news I encounter via Instagram. I believe it is done extensively in the celebrity domain for the sake of gaining followers. Apart from that, I haven't encountered it," thus highlighting that fake celebrity-themed news may be shared on social media accounts to attract more followers. Two of the participants (E5 and E7) who shared their fake news experiences based on news topics expressed that they predominantly encounter fake news in sports reporting. E7 (21), who stated he frequently encounters fake news related to football, mentioned that news items concerning football player transfers that do not reflect reality often appear on social media. Similarly, E5 (20) explained, "I encounter fake news most often in sports news. There is a significant amount of news on social media concerning football transfers that arouses suspicion." One of the participants who shared fake news experiences based on news topics stated that she had encountered fake news on health-related subjects. E8 (21), who reported very frequent exposure to fake news, expressed her experience with encountering fake news in health-related topics by saying, "I encounter it constantly. To give a simple example, there is a lot of fake news concerning health. For instance, there can be a great deal of fake news about topics like nutrition or diet that lack any scientific explanation."

One of the noteworthy points in the experiences of encountering fake news was that some participants (K1, E3, E5, E6, E7) shared their fake news experiences through news items produced with artificial intelligence technologies, referred to as deepfakes. E3 (20), who reported encountering deepfake news related to political events, articulated this situation as follows: "I encounter fake news a lot; for instance, most recently I came across a deepfake video concerning the statements of a political party leader. However, it was later revealed to be fake." Some participants who stated they had encountered deepfake content also shared their opinions on the level of realism of such content. Participant E7 (21), who had previously mentioned frequently encountering fake news related to football, made the following statement:

> There were also a few incidents where I encountered fake news that used deepfake photographs. It's difficult for you to notice, I mean, it's very realistic. There are some that I still believe even though they are said to be fake. There are a few incidents; they call them deepfakes, but I don't know, they are very realistic.

Similarly, participant E6 (22), who also expressed encountering deepfake content in his fake news experiences, indicated that the level of believability of deepfake disinformation is quite high, stating:

> With artificial intelligence, they can now imitate a famous person's voice, create their photograph. It comes across as very believable. When I encounter deepfake content, my perception of that person unfortunately remains that way. I don't really think there's much opportunity to prove one hundred percent that it's false. Even if it's later announced that this is fake content, I believe it always stays in the mind that way.

In addition to the participants who stated they frequently encounter fake news, 3 participants (K8, E4, E2) expressed that they do not encounter fake news very often. From the responses given by participants E4 and K8, who reported rarely encountering fake news, regarding their news consumption habits, it was understood that they do not regularly follow news as part of their daily routine but rather consume news as they are exposed to it on social media—or, in other words, "as it appears before them." It can be suggested that the fact these particular participants do not regularly follow news is a factor that reduces their frequency of encountering fake news. Furthermore, E2, another participant who expressed rarely encountering fake news, stated that he only follows news related to topics that specifically interest him, thereby indicating a selective approach to news consumption.

## 4.4. Verification/Fact-Checking Practices

In the research, to ascertain the verification process participants follow when they encounter fake news, they were posed the question: "What procedure do you follow to check news items whose accuracy you are unsure of?" Distinct tendencies were discernible in the news verification practices of university students. These tendencies were identified as: utilizing search engines, consulting various news websites, verifying the news from traditional media, consulting their social circle, and examining interaction data on social media.

The most prevalent method employed when participants were uncertain about the accuracy of a news item was to search for it on search engines. Ten of the 16 university students with whom interviews were conducted stated that their primary course of action is to search for the news on Google, thereby enabling them to quickly check whether the news item appears on different internet sites. Participant K7 (20) articulated this approach with the words, "I look it up on Google. If the same news appears on different news sites, I consider it to be true."

Similarly, participant E5 (20), who also indicated that he primarily checks Google to verify the accuracy of news he doubts, emphasized the importance of conducting research across different news websites during the fact-checking stage, stating: "One needs to research, not to remain confined to a single site. There are some news sites I trust. I look at 3-4 news sites concerning the same news item. If all 4 report the news in the same manner, then I say that news is true." Participants such as E3 (20), E4 (20), K6 (21), K8 (20), K2 (23), E8 (21), K3 (22), and K5 (22) also underscored that Google searches are notably their primary avenues of first recourse.

Although for most participants the initial step in news verification practices involves searching via Google and checking if the news appears on different internet sites, it was observed that some participants, in addition to cross-referencing the news through various internet sites, also employ distinct verification mechanisms. Consulting their social circle to verify news items of uncertain accuracy is the most prevalent among these additional verification strategies. Four of the participants (K1, K4, K5, E6), while affirming that they primarily verify news by checking it on different internet sites, also expressed that they may opt to consult family members and friends. K1 (22), who prefers different news sites as a primary verification method, explained this approach as follows:

> First, I try to research by reading from different news sites. If I cannot be certain, I ask my friend group or, at home, it is usually my mother and father who follow the news the most; I ask them if such a thing exists. If it's a widely discussed topic, it is also conferred about with friends.

Similarly, participant K5 (22) stated that when she encounters a news item on social media whose accuracy she is unsure of, she checks it by visiting news websites, and further elaborated, "(…) if I am still not sure, I ask people if they have heard such a thing," thus indicating her use of her social circle as an additional verification mechanism.

On the other hand, it was noted that some participants, beyond researching through different internet sites to check the accuracy of news and consulting their social circle, preferred to utilize a tertiary verification mechanism by cross-referencing the news through social media accounts they deem trustworthy. Participant E6 (22) expressed his use of multiple verification practices when confronted with dubious news as follows:

> There are a few journalists' social media accounts that I follow, whom I believe will publish reliable and accurate news. I check those. Apart from that, I talk to people around me; if it's news I'm curious about and I couldn't ascertain its veracity, I ask them. If that also doesn't yield a result, I then look at internet news sites.

Another verification mechanism that university students employ when confronted with news they find dubious has been to check the accuracy of the news through traditional media. Four of the participants (E1, E8, K3, K8) stated that they perform fact-checks on news they deem suspicious via Google, but also expressed that they utilize the method of following television news bulletins as an additional verification mechanism. Participant E8 (21) articulated this situation as follows:

> I type it into Google to check if other sources, news sites, have written about it. Apart from this, I look at traditional media, television. If I check several places and they all say the same thing, I consider it to be true.

Similarly, the statements of participant E1 (22), who indicated that in addition to searching for news on search engines and checking different internet sites, he also consults traditional media to verify news, are as follows:

*Generally, if it's a topic I'm curious about and one that I think is important on the national agenda, I also look at different news sources. I conduct research. I check other internet sites. I resort to traditional media; I follow the news on television. I try to listen to what journalists write and say. I endeavor to delve into its details as much as I can. I try to find out from which source the news originated.*

As can be understood from the statements of E1 and E8, the appearance of the same news item on multiple internet news sites and in traditional media stands out as a factor that enhances trust in the accuracy of the news.

Finally, in the research, participants were posed the question: "Do you consult fact-checking/verification platforms that operate in the fight against fake news to check news items whose accuracy you doubt?" However, 13 out of the 16 participants stated that they had never heard of verification platforms, while only 3 participants (K3, K6, E3) expressed awareness of them. On the other hand, K3 (22) and E3 (20), who were aware of verification platforms, indicated that among such platforms, they were only knowledgeable about Teyit.org but had never utilized it for the purpose of checking news they found dubious. Only participant K6 (21) reported resorting to verification platforms for checking suspicious news. K6 (21), referring to Teyit.org and the Center for Combating Disinformation operating under the Presidency stated that she considered such initiatives to be beneficial in verifying news she doubted.

## Conclusion

In the post-truth era, social media emerges as a domain where truth and falsehood are intricately intertwined and the boundaries between them become blurred. This environment, characterized by an accelerated flow of information yet wherein reliability is often questioned, renders individuals' endeavors to access accurate information more critical than ever before. In today's complex information ecosystem, shaped particularly by the influence of digital media, news verification practices stand out as one of the most effective instruments in the struggle against fake news.

This study, which aimed to examine the news verification practices of university students, initially sought to establish the students' news consumption habits. It was observed that social media plays a determinative role in the news consumption patterns of university students. The majority of participants indicated that they follow news via social media platforms, predominantly through X (Twitter). While students who consume news on a daily basis perceive this practice as a routine necessity, others access news as they encounter it on their social media feeds. Conversely, traditional media outlets hold a limited role in students' news consumption; only a small number of participants expressed a preference for conventional sources such as television or print media. The fact that students' news consumption has become increasingly social media-centric makes the issues of information accuracy and reliability even more critical.

When examining the factors that shape the perception of credibility in news, it was revealed that greater trust is placed in news shared by publicly known individuals or by professionals whose occupation is journalism. The trust that university students place in news shared by publicly known individuals or by professionals from the field of journalism indicates that they have developed an awareness regarding the credibility of information sources. In the study, it was understood that in addition to the credibility of the source, the language of the news, its impartiality, and the support of the news with visuals or similar evidence related to the subject

are also among the factors that increase trust in the news. On the other hand, news shared from anonymous accounts stood out as one of the factors that most significantly undermined the perception of credibility among participants. The suspicion with which anonymous accounts are met can be considered a defense mechanism against the widespread information pollution and manipulation attempts prevalent in the social media environment.

When examining experiences with encountering fake news, it was observed that the vast majority of students frequently encounter fake news on social media platforms, typically in the domains of celebrity/gossip, sports, and health. This finding aligns with the research results of the Digital News Report 2024, prepared in collaboration by the Reuters Institute and the University of Oxford (Newman, 2024). On the other hand, it was concluded that deepfake content, produced using artificial intelligence technologies, also draws attention as a subtype of fake news and stands out among participants as an element that challenges their perception of reality. The high level of believability of deepfake content not only erodes participants' trust in information but also contributes to the development of a general skepticism towards news.

Regarding the verification practices of university students when faced with news they doubt, it was concluded that the preferred primary verification mechanism is predominantly to check the news on various internet sites via a Google search. It was observed that students attach importance to not relying solely on a single source during the verification process and prefer to check suspicious news by turning to multiple internet sites, television main news bulletins, and different social media accounts. Some participants, when experiencing hesitation regarding the accuracy of news, expressed that they resort to feedback from their social circle, stating, "I ask people around me." This finding of the study is consistent with research indicating that users consult information obtained from their acquaintances when verifying news (Beşikci, 2024; Karlsen & Aalberg, 2023; Turcotte et al., 2015). This approach points to a social verification mechanism wherein information is evaluated collectively rather than individually. On the other hand, it was concluded that while checks conducted via search engines constitute the primary verification mechanism, resorting to traditional media, examining different social media accounts, and consulting one's social circle are preferred as secondary or tertiary verification mechanisms.

The study also examined students' awareness of fact-checking/verification platforms that operate in the fight against fake news, as part of their verification practices. Verification platforms are an important instrument in ensuring that accurate information reaches the public and in preventing the dissemination of misleading news. The effective utilization of these platforms can contribute to the establishment of a more accurate, reliable, and healthy information ecosystem within society. On the other hand, the study found that a substantial majority of participants were not knowledgeable about verification platforms, and of the three university students who were aware of such platforms, only one resorted to them as a verification mechanism. This situation reveals a significant lacuna concerning the use of verification platforms. Other studies in the literature pertaining to the awareness of verification platforms have also arrived at similar conclusions (Çömlekçi & Başol, 2019; Çömlekçi, 2019; Kavaklı, 2019). The participants' lack of active engagement with these platforms, while underscoring a low level of awareness, also suggests—given their expressed need for accurate information and the diverse methods they have developed to counter fake news—that there is considerable potential for the utilization of verification platforms. In a

digital environment where information pollution is so pervasive, enhancing the recognizability of verification platforms and integrating them into user habits will constitute a significant stride in the fight against fake news.

## Declarations

* *Approval of Institutional Review Board:* The ethical approval was acquired with the decision of Bandırma Onyedi Eylül University, Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee dated 05.09.2024 and numbered 2024-7, before proceeding to the data collection phase in this research.

* *Publication Ethics:* This study has been prepared in accordance with the rules outlined in the "Guidelines for Scientific Research and Publication Ethics of Higher Education Institutions." Additionally, the article has been scanned using the Turnitin plagiarism detection software, and no instances of plagiarism have been detected.

* *Author Contribution Rate:* The authors' contributions to the study are 50% and 50%.

* *Conflict of Interests:* There is no direct or indirect financial, commercial, legal, or professional relationship or conflict of interest involved in the study.

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