

# Understanding the Role of Technology and Community Interactions in the Lived Experience of Online False Information

A Phenomenological Perspective on Encounters with False Information  
through Sense-making, Social Interactions, and Media Literacy

**Bahar Riazi**  
**baharri@ifi.uio.no**

Department of Informatics  
Faculty of Mathematics and Natural Sciences

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## **Abstract**

This study explores how different types of false information (i.e., mis-, dis-, and malinformation) spread out on different social media platforms, with a focus on the community interactions and practices of the users when encountering such information online. The goal of this research is to better understand the dissemination of this type of information, motivated by how it is a growing issue increasingly harming media integrity and democracy online. In order to achieve this goal, the ways in which the spread of false information is experienced on three different social media platforms — X (previously Twitter), Instagram, and YouTube — with different forms of media have been investigated to understand how the phenomenon appears within one's online experience. A phenomenological approach has been used to understand the nature of the interactions that take place on these platforms, with a focus on the lived experiences of individuals who have encountered the phenomenon of false information. The findings of this research have been used to establish a groundwork for design implications to improve social media platforms in promoting media literacy, taking into consideration the actual practices of the users and their interactions with false information.

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# Acronyms

**AI** Artificial Intelligence. 10, 16, 32–34, 36, 48, 50, 58, 62, 90, 98

**CIS** Common Information Space. 12, 15, 66, 69, 71, 94, 96, 108

**CSCW** Computer-Supported Cooperative Work. 2, 3, 7, 9, 10, 12, 85

**HCI** Human-Computer Interaction. 3, 9, 20, 21, 28, 85, 111

**NLP** Natural Language Processing. 103

**TA** Thematic Analysis. 25, 26

**UiO** University of Oslo. ii, 24

## Acronyms

# Glossary

**confirmation bias** A psychological tendency for people to favor new information that supports existing beliefs (Efstratiou & De Cristofaro, 2022). 44, 49, 64

**embodiment** A dimension of the lifeworld encapsulating how we manifest through our movements and practices, and feelings of one's body, emotions, and reactions (Ashworth, 2003). 5, 20, 29, 31, 34, 41, 43, 45–47, 49–51, 53, 60–65, 67, 68, 80, 81, 86, 88, 89, 91, 92, 94

**fluency effect** A psychological effect signaling how easily information is processed and thereby impacts decision making (Starbird et al., 2018). 1, 15, 99

**lifeworld** A framework for understanding experiences through the notion of an intersubjectivity between one's body and perceptions of reality; including various fragments of the 'lifeworld' as we see it (Finlay, 2014). 1, 3, 5, 20, 22, 25–30, 34–36, 38, 41, 43, 45, 46, 48–53, 55, 56, 58, 60, 64, 65, 68–70, 76, 79–82, 85, 86, 88, 91, 92, 94, 95, 97, 101, 102, 105

**NVivo** System for qualitative analysis. 26

**selfhood** A dimension of the lifeworld, detailing one's social identity and sense of self, particularly defined by how we are perceived by others (Ashworth, 2003). iii, vii, 5, 20, 30, 31, 35–37, 39, 41–49, 51–53, 55–57, 59, 60, 62, 64, 67, 70, 80, 86–90, 92, 94, 100, 101

**sociality** A dimension of the lifeworld, encompassing relations with other social actors, including how these actors are perceived through social aspects such as language (Ashworth, 2003). 5, 20, 29, 31, 39, 41, 52, 53, 55–57, 59, 60, 64, 65, 67, 68, 80, 86, 88, 90–92, 94, 96, 102

**spatiality** A dimension of the lifeworld defined by one's perceptions of space and the geography of the places one acts within (Ashworth, 2003). iv, 5, 6, 20, 29, 35, 36, 50, 57, 68, 69, 73–76, 78, 80, 88, 91, 95–97, 102, 105

**temporality** A dimension of the lifeworld encapsulating the presence of the past, the present, and the future in relation to an experience (Ashworth, 2003). 5, 6, 20, 29, 35, 46, 53, 68, 70, 76, 78–80, 88, 99, 104

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

This thesis emphasizes the influential role of information technology in mediating experiences with online false information, particularly through social media platforms. In exploring the topic, this work underlines how day-to-day social interactions in these virtual spaces influence the dissemination of online false information. This is understood through a phenomenological investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018) that analyzes people's *lifeworld* (Finlay, 2013); encompassing subjective experiences as they appear for the individuals when encountering the phenomenon. As such, the study emphasizes the meaning of social connections, lived experiences, and differences across virtual spaces in understanding how false information spreads naturally, and elaborates on some implications of these findings by recommending platform design suggestions that are meaningful in shaping these interactions.

### 1.1 Research Problem

Social media platforms have been a revolutionary addition to the Internet, providing a widespread space for information exchange in recent times (Allcott et al., 2020). These platforms harbor online communities that focus on sharing information, communication, and social interactions (Ning Shen & Khalifa, 2008). While the development of such technologies has had significant positive outcomes regarding issues of socializing, subjective well-being, and dramatically reducing the cost of communication and information sharing, they have also led to negative consequences with dramatic repercussions for society at large (Adams et al., 2023; Brindha et al., 2022). One of the most critical concerns associated with this is the role of social media in amplifying the dissemination of false information (mis-, dis-, and malinformation) (Shu et al., 2017). Existing literature exploring this effect notes that through the mediation of these technologies, false information is enabled to spread rapidly, often outpacing the dissemination of accurate information — a phenomenon referred to as the fluency effect (Bak-Coleman et al., 2021; Starbird et al., 2018). Further explorations recognize the role of false information in impacting multiple domains in society, such as health (Bashardoust et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2023), political issues (Lemmon, 2024; Pennycook & Rand, 2021), and even war conflicts (Jones & Chandrasekharan, 2024; Whitten-Woodring et al., 2020). Findings from this exploration often delineate how social media platforms became recognized as a space for individual and institutional communication, corporations, political actors, and influential individuals routinely use these platforms to engage with the public. It is, therefore, imperative to understand how information is received, interpreted, and propagated through social media to envision strategies for

mitigating their harmful effects (Vosoughi et al., 2018), by exploring aspects of the phenomenon as they occur in these interactions (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024) — with an emphasis on the role that technology has in its dissemination. This highlights the importance of an Informatics perspective on the topic; but one that also encompasses the existing research within other fields, such as the socio-technical perspective of the fields of Computer-Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) and social computing, due to the social nature of the phenomenon (Adams et al., 2023; Allcott et al., 2020).

## 1.2 Motivations

The existing body of literature investigating online false information has contributed to an understanding of the phenomenon through multiple different angles; such as exploring its characteristics as it takes place online and the effect of technological developments (Adams et al., 2023; Condran, 2024; Starbird et al., 2018), platform-specific interventions and methods of mitigating the phenomenon — particularly focused on enabling cognitive engagement and supporting media literacy (Chuai et al., 2024; Zade et al., 2023), and, more recently, exploring the phenomenon in relation to communities and how they affect dissemination (Chen et al., 2024; Ghafouri et al., 2024). Although these explorations have provided meaningful insights, there are remaining gaps due to the advancement of technology and its impact on the phenomenon; this vast and increasingly crucial topic.

**Technical interventions** in relation to false information mitigation on social media platforms have been explored to a large extent. Results show that context is an important factor in supporting media literacy among users, and ways of showing context have been explored in this regard (Bak-Coleman et al., 2021; Brisola & Doyle, 2019; Zade et al., 2023). However, the existing research focuses mainly on interventions and mitigation efforts specific to particular platforms, where most of these are regarding the platform X (previously Twitter). Additionally, to date, research has usually focused on how the phenomenon spreads through platform features and algorithms, and explores the phenomenon through artificial circumstances (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). This data collection method does not allow for in-depth understandings of human aspects in this relationship, highlighting an area that is missing from this research.

**The role of communities** has been explored in relation to online false information through such as the echo-chamber effect (Starbird et al., 2018) and collective efforts of false information campaigns (Starbird et al., 2019). Additional research explores the connection between communities and normative behavior online (Aghajari et al., 2023, 2024), in which the social presence theory has been meaningful in providing insights (Wijenayake et al., 2020). However, an emphasis has not been laid on every-day online interactions between peers, how these interactions can influence the dissemination of false information, and how the phenomenon can navigate across personal networks (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024).

**A cross-platform approach** is another underexplored area of the existing literature on the topic (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). Some present findings have focused on various isolated platforms — such as Chuai et al. (2024), Ghafouri et al. (2024), and Zade et al. (2023) on X — or artificial environments, such as platforms made for experimental research (Aghajari et al., 2023). Differences between these, such as the existing communities present on the platform, algorithmic feeds, and more human factors

such as opinions and values, highlight how the phenomenon can manifest in different ways depending on the virtual space. This is additionally supported by literature on information sharing through how context and the informational environment are meaningful in shaping sense-making, and subsequently how the phenomenon is experienced (Bak-Coleman et al., 2021; Brisola & Doyle, 2019). This understanding additionally justifies a phenomenological approach to the current investigation, as the spatial dimension of encounters with online false information and its effect on perception are analyzed (Ashworth, 2003; Svanæs, 2013).

Overall, a review of the current body of literature on online false information reveals some meaningful gaps in the understanding of the phenomenon. While recent studies show how online communities and social interactions are involved in the dissemination of false information online, the day-to-day interactions under natural circumstances that go into the larger developments of the phenomenon remain underexplored (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). Furthermore, while existing work highlights how false information can spread within communities and through self-motivation, more understanding of how false information spreads through personal networks and the intricacies of what motivates these interactions would provide a meaningful elaboration on these findings. Additionally, existing research on interventions and mitigation efforts often focus on platform-specific features, and a cross-platform approach would provide an understanding of how false information can navigate across multiple spaces and through a human focus of its aspects (Fernandez & Alani, 2018), which is yet to be investigated.

### 1.3 Aim of Research and Research Questions

Taking account of the dangers of false information and the ease of spreading it by means of information technology, this study aims to understand how different spaces and communities impact affordances, values, and other aspects of interactions and experiences of individuals as they encounter false information online. Fundamentally, the goal of this research is to understand the lived experience of encountering false information and how it manifests within natural, every-day online interactions. Understanding the intricacies of these interactions allow for a development of platform design implications that can support media literacy within them. With an in-depth understanding of how participant experiences were shaped by their lifeworld dimensions as mediated through social media — influencing their sense- and decision-making, and their isolated and social interactions — this work seeks to explore how these interactions influence the spread of false information on the Internet. The underlying aspects that impact this dissemination and how these aspects can be properly mediated across various spaces are outlined through a cross-platform approach. These insights provide a rich understanding of how communities and different virtual spaces play a role in the way false information is experienced, but also how the phenomenon is understood by the users of the platforms, and aims to achieve design implications based on real-world experiences and specific circumstances that may better prevent the prevalence of false information through these arenas.

Within Human-Computer Interaction (HCI), the fields of Computer-Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW) and social computing emphasize the importance of social interactions and how aspects of this are ingrained in our practices relating to information technology (Parameswaran & Whinston, 2007; Schmidt & Bannon, 1992). Not only this, but false information as a phenomenon is ingrained in conversation and interactions between people; all in how it spreads, how it is experienced, how it unravels and unfolds,



and how it is corrected (Adams et al., 2023; Efstratiou & De Cristofaro, 2022). Thus, the phenomenon of online false information is inherently social in nature, and thereby is affected by social aspects such as communities and information sources.

Furthermore, motivations for the cross-platform approach are grounded in the various affordances that accompany different online spaces, in order to investigate the phenomenon of this study. Drawing on the work of Gibson (2014) and his ecological notion of affordances, as well as the existing literature on false information emphasizing how contextualization of information is vital (Brisola & Doyle, 2019), exploring the phenomenon across various online spaces gives insight into how the way information is situated influences experiences with it. Due to the nature of media formats as a characteristic aspect of the way information is portrayed online (Livingstone, 2009), these aspects can be particularly meaningful for this exploration. The specific platforms of X, Instagram, and YouTube offer distinct primary media formats that are through prior literature shown to affect how people make sense of the online content (Wang et al., 2023; Weinel et al., 2011). Furthermore, the platforms generally harbor differing commentary and communication based on these features; where X is informal and short-formed, Instagram emphasizes aesthetic expression, and YouTube enables longer-form content.

Based on these research goals, the following three research questions have been formulated in order to fill the gap in the literature, focusing on the three various areas that motivated this study:

**RQ1:** How do features of different platforms impact how people differentiate between reliable and unreliable information online?

**RQ2:** In what ways do social media platforms mediate the dissemination of false information through community interactions?

**RQ3:** How can social media platforms be designed to promote media literacy for mitigating the spread of false information?

The first question aims to understand what aspects of the platform and the information are meaningful for the sense-making processes of individuals and how this manifests in their online interactions, concerned with exploring how the phenomenon of online false information is understood by the participants. This is also linked to media literacy through how people interpret the content they encounter on social media through the features of these spaces and how this affects their experiences with false information. The second question aims to explore community interactions on the various platforms and how they affect false information dissemination. Here, examining the motivations, intentions, and outcomes of such interactions through the detailed accounts of a phenomenological approach provide an understanding of the nature of these exchanges and their connection to the spread of online false information. As such, the role of communities in sense-making processes is explored, and how the platforms mediate these. The third question is tailored towards the development of design implications, investigating platform features and how they can support media literacy within the interactions explored through the previous research questions.

## 1.4 Methodological Overview

In order to achieve this goal, this study takes a qualitative, phenomenological approach, providing an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of people who have

encountered the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The aim of using this approach is to engage with the real-life experiences of individuals affected by the dangers of false information online, and investigate how to better support these interactions. The participants' experiences are explored through in-depth interviews and thereby analyzed through hermeneutic phenomenological analysis (Finlay, 2014), where the essence of the phenomenon is described through detailed recounted instances of individuals who have encountered it. This essence will be excerpted through the phenomenological framework of lifeworld aspects, where the lifeworld defines a structure for the human experience (Ashworth, 2003). The following elements of the lifeworld as particularly relevant for this topic: embodiment, sociality, spatiality, and temporality — all connected to the element of one's selfhood — which will be described more in depth in section 3.1.

Following a recommended participant pool for a phenomenological study (Creswell & Poth, 2018), the total number of participants for this research is 10. The interview partners gathered for this study each participated in an initial interview, where two of them were also called back for a second follow-up interview. The transcripts resulting from this data collection have been used to provide a rich understanding of how the phenomenon is experienced through lived encounters.

## 1.5 Summary of Findings and Contributions

The study contributes to the literature on online false information and the support of media literacy on social media by exploring lived experiences and demonstrating how these specific situations influenced interactions with the phenomenon within various platforms. The findings demonstrate the sense-making processes of individuals as they encounter false information on social media platforms, and contribute to the existing body of literature by investigating the circumstances in day-to-day interactions with the phenomenon in which people are susceptible to false information.

The study contributes with the following findings extracted from this exploration: (1) it provides an in-depth understanding of the sense-making process when encountering false information online, and identifies how these encounters shape media literacy and future interactions with the phenomenon; hence, emphasizing design implications that make the experience more salient, as justification for nudging and prompting interventions; (2) it identifies a distinction between individual and collective fact-checking, in which both are important for effective sense-making. Particular circumstances render individuals susceptible to false information through either of these channels. Additionally, it provides a framework for understanding how false information disseminates through one's personal network through the various roles one assigns to particular social media platforms, and how this influences platform behavior. As such, allowing individuals to organize their online experience is a novel aspect for design implications; (3) it elaborates on how social discussion and collective fact-checking is often prioritized in sense-making. As a result, this work emphasizes design implications that bring awareness to the other social actors within the informational environment, through such as social engagement metrics and the display of community members who have engaged with the piece of online content.

Understanding the phenomenon through the lifeworld aspects that are detailed in relived accounts of participants who have interacted with false information online provides the literature with a novel and detailed perspective of the topic. Henceforth, understanding the concept with a phenomenological approach that emphasizes one's lifeworld in exploring the various dimensions of selfhood, embodiment, sociality,

spatiality, and temporality, outlines the mediation of experiencing the phenomenon, and highlights the role of the everyday person and their online interactions in influencing its dissemination.

The findings of this study demonstrate how different online spaces and their various affordances affect informational perception online with a novel perspective of interpretive phenomenology (Finlay, 2014; Gibson, 2014), providing an understanding of how social media platforms mediate the dissemination of false information through these day-to-day interactions currently missing from the body of literature discerning the topic (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024; Fernandez & Alani, 2018).

Additionally, the spread of false information may be experienced differently across various social media platforms. This is an important aspect of false information that has yet to be explored and provides meaningful insights into how a piece of information may be experienced differently as it navigates across spaces, and how the variations of these spaces play a role in such interactions. This is insightful in order to identify false information and aspects of it that are less visible when exploring the phenomenon tied to an enclosed space.

Emphasizing the role of information technology as it mediates these everyday interactions is essential in understanding how to support media literacy and encouraging technological democratization with a focus on people's lived experiences underlining their right to rightful information. For handling this issue, discerning design implications with a focus on promoting media literacy provides a step towards this democratization, attempting to mitigate the harmful effects of false information (Adams et al., 2023).

### 1.6 Thesis Outline

The remaining of this thesis is structured as follows: chapter 2 details background and existing literature in the topic of relevance. Chapter 3 elaborates on the research design, how the problem is approached in this study, and why it is a meaningful approach for adding to the literature. Then, the findings are presented across the next four chapters, following the main themes extracted from the data analysis: chapter 4: The Omnipresence of False Information, chapter 5: My Lived Experience, chapter 6: Social Aspects of Experiencing Online False Information, and chapter 7: Issues of False Information Within Virtual Information Spaces. Chapter 8 connects these findings to the research questions, and extrapolates implications for design based on this. Chapter 9 finally concludes the thesis, presenting a summary of the research and discussing limitations as well as the potential for future work on the topic.

## Chapter 2

# Background

This chapter reviews the existing CSCW and social computing literature relevant for the work of this thesis, contextualizing it within existing knowledge on the research topic. This includes two sections; first, the relevant concepts in this research and the theoretical frameworks used for its interpretation are introduced. Then, a review of relevant existing work on issues of online false information is presented, contextualizing the research topic and prior findings that contribute to the understanding of the issue at hand. This review notes ways in which the existing body of literature guides understandings of the phenomenon, and additionally illuminates on areas with meaningful gaps that the work of this thesis is concerned with addressing.

### 2.1 Conceptual and Theoretical Background

A description of the key concepts and theoretical frameworks central for this research is crucial in order to situate the work within existing literature and ensure conceptual clarity. This clarification is particularly crucial for a phenomenological investigation that emphasizes the lived world in shaping a phenomenon to situate the findings of its experience. As such, definitions of the key terms of *false information* and *media literacy* present for this work are delineated, as well as any additional terms of interest, before the theoretical frameworks used for the interpretation of the subsequent findings are presented.

#### 2.1.1 Defining Online False Information and Media Literacy

The literature discerning the topic at hand often differentiates between various types of false information, where relevant distinctions are misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. *Misinformation* is information that is not necessarily spread maliciously, but is false or misleading in nature (Prochaska et al., 2023; Shu et al., 2020). *Disinformation*, also described as a strategic information operation, is false information spread intentionally; deliberately attempting to deceive others and undermining information integrity (Prochaska et al., 2023; Shu et al., 2020; Starbird et al., 2019). Lastly, *malinformation* is defined as false information with intent to harm, such as hate speech and harassment (Shu et al., 2020). As the common denominator within these concepts is that of falsehood, the collective term of *false information* will be used within this paper to refer to all such types of information online, regardless of the underlying aspects of intent and motivation that differentiate these concepts. This decision was made as the distinction of these concepts was not particularly important

for the main research goals of this study. Additionally, such terminology can be too specific and cause distortions or boundaries between participant conceptualizations, which is important to address as this is a phenomenological study that emphasizes the individuality of each participant and their unique experiences and understandings of the phenomenon (Finlay, 2014).

In discussions of mitigating the harmful effects of false information online, different forms of literacy have been shown to be meaningful in addressing various aspects of this topic, where supporting information and media literacy is a particular way of providing support of these efforts (Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022; Zade et al., 2023). *Media literacy* refers to one's ability to accurately interpret and understand media content through efforts of analyzing and evaluating the information portrayed through these environments (Zade et al., 2023). While other forms of literacy have overlapping qualities, media literacy has been the focus of this study. This is due to the exploration being focused on how the features of platforms impact the spread of false information, where aspects of the media in how they convey information are necessary to examine this relationship. These aspects warrant a focus on media literacy to encompass the technological affordances of the virtual spaces. Nonetheless, aspects of other explorations have additionally contributed to this interpretation. Brisola and Doyle (2019) highlight the role of *critical information literacy* in perceptions of false information, where their work underlines the importance of critical thinking in the effectiveness of literacy in these instances. They emphasize a perspective of information as socially constructed, where users who are of this same understanding are able to cognitively engage with and navigate information — particularly that of fake news — more effectively. Another relevant topic is that of *cultural literacy* and its relation to *information literacy* which has been explored in how language interpretation, particularly shared language and meanings, are used for information sharing within communities (Chen et al., 2024), and the effects this has on correcting instances of false information (Liu et al., 2024). While these notions of literacy emphasize the accuracy of information interpretation which is not the focus of this study, they provide the basis of understanding how information is socially contextualized — which, shifting the focus to that of media literacy on social media platforms, can be applied to how information is portrayed through media through its framing and way of presentation (Zade et al., 2023), highlighting its contextualization and the focus of media-oriented exploration.

In investigating how platform design influences action and online behavior, *practices* and *affordances* are meaningful conceptualizations. *Practice*, described in existing literature as the 'smallest unit in the analysis of social phenomena' (Wulf et al., 2011, p. 506) is relevant here as it is the basis of understanding the interactions individuals take when engaging within the platforms and with the phenomenon. Understanding the human aspects of what goes behind such practices and how they shape interactions provides an in-depth understanding of how experiences unfold in their informational context. Furthermore, Gibson (2014) introduces the notion of *affordances* as 'information that specifies functionally meaningful properties of the environment' (Gibson, 2014, p. xxv), and highlights how the detection of this is crucial in shaping the sense- and decision-making of practices taken within an environment. These affordances are linked to one's surroundings, and contain information about how aspects of these surroundings are to be interacted with. Thus, these concepts are closely related, and are meaningful topics in understanding platform use and behavior (Svanæs, 2013). In this work, they provide an understanding of how the lived experience manifests in technological mediation.

### 2.1.2 Theoretical Frameworks

Previous work exploring social engagement and community participation has focused on motivational theory to explain the behaviors involved. More recently, this topic has been explored in online contexts, where work has illustrated a connection between motivation and social presence and how this relationship is affected by other subjective factors; highlighting the need for a more complex and multidimensional understanding of the phenomenon. Namely, Ning Shen and Khalifa (2008) elaborate on this understanding with their conceptualization of *multidimensional social presence*, portraying how the notion relates to motivation for social and community engagement in online settings. This perspective outlines how social presence is affected by both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, which in turn are influenced by three dimensions relevant within online environments specifically; being that of *awareness*, *affective social presence*, and *cognitive social presence*. This theorization is used for this work to frame motivations for community participation that are involved in the dissemination of online false information, highlighting the personal networks of individuals (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024) as explored through their social interactions.

Social presence additionally influences individual perceptions of the media format through which information is portrayed — subsequently impacting sense-making and understandings of the phenomenon. The work of Weinel et al. (2011) demonstrates how different media formats lead to different reaction times, implying a meaningful difference in information perception tied to the framing of the content. Hence, this concept is additionally helpful in understanding the correlation between involved social aspects and information- and media processing, which subsequently influences the course of the experience as it takes place across multiple platforms, with different formats.

Finally, a concept related to social presence is that of *social conformity*, where social presence can provide insights into how engagement with communities influence normative behavior within a social environment (Wijenayake et al., 2020). Recent work has focused on this effect in online occurrences of the phenomenon, tied to how individuals perceive information in virtual environments. In this conceptualization, social conformity is one factor that influences the processing of information particularly from information sources that are within one’s own community. These findings demonstrate how people are more likely to believe information from community members than otherwise, through effects of social conformity and how it influences behaviors related to critical evaluation and validation of information (Allen et al., 2022; Wijenayake et al., 2020).

The body of work on social engagement with online communities provides a framing of exploring online false information dissemination particularly in how it spreads through communities and social interactions. Additionally, these works can elaborate on more aspects of the phenomenon, such as cross-medium explorations of community interactions with false information, especially warranted as this is an area within the topic that is yet to be explored at the time of this study (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024).

## 2.2 Related Work

This section delves into relevant investigations of online false information with a focus on the fields of HCI, CSCW, and social computing. The aim of this review is to situate the work of the present thesis in existing discussions of how false information spreads online and current efforts of its mitigation. The presented literature is categorized by general research within online instances of false information, research correlating false

information and communities, and more specific research on platforms interventions and mitigation efforts. In doing so, particular gaps in the literature are identified, which highlight areas that the thesis aims to address.

### 2.2.1 False Information Mediated by Social Media

Literature exploring false information as it occurs online emphasizes the role that information technology has had in drastically influencing information flow and communication as we see it today; directly impacting false information as it occurs in these arenas. First, developments within the Internet and mainstream media have greatly impacted the process of information mediation and how it takes place. Namely, information is produced through multiple means, within multiple representations, and mediated in different ways (Livingstone, 2009). In delineating this, false information has been identified to take place across different media-formats, particularly highlighting a differentiation between text- (Condran, 2024; Lutz et al., 2024) and image-oriented content (Chang et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2023). In recent developments, visual representations of false information have especially garnered virality through the advancements of Artificial Intelligence (AI)-technology, highlighting how it is used in efforts of spreading false information (Chang et al., 2025). Hence, technological developments have been particularly demonstrated to impact the prevalence of false information in daily lives (Adams et al., 2023), illuminating the notion of how societal developments have influenced the phenomenon. In relation to the dangers of false information occurring through such technologies, an issue of the temporal dimension has also been raised; where existing research expresses a form of *hypervelocity* in virtual information flow, which subsequently shapes and complicates false information in its navigation across online spaces (Brisola & Doyle, 2019). While this outlines the importance of acknowledging temporal aspects in understanding the phenomenon, further investigation of how online false information is shaped temporally and the evolution of the phenomenon is warranted (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024).

Due to the dissemination of false information being enabled by the ease of informal communication and information sharing that is mediated by social media, it is undeniably essential to understand aspects of information sharing in how they have been explored currently. *Knowledge and information sharing* is a particular area of research within the field of CSCW, where the topic is explored in close relation to practice (De Carvalho et al., 2018). Other research emphasizes the social nature of this topic, as information and knowledge is situated within social contexts (Ackerman et al., 2013). Through an understanding of practices, this exploration of information sharing reveals insights about human behavior when engaging in these interactions. While this area of research is often contextualized within industrial- and work settings, the findings can provide insights into how these patterns influence the spread of false information through similar knowledge and information sharing practices. In this sense, concepts such as ‘embodied knowledge’ and ‘knowledge in people’ are used to emphasize the intertwinement of knowledge and practice and how they can thus lead to expertise, highlighting the ‘human components’ of knowledge sharing (Ackerman et al., 2004), and even highlighting how knowledge is *embedded* in practice (De Carvalho et al., 2018).

Embodied knowledge in information sharing is also closely related to awareness. *Awareness* — a central concept in the field of CSCW — details the perception of one’s social actors and actions within one’s surroundings (Gross, 2013; Schmidt, 2002). Schmidt and Bannon (1992) demonstrate how the concept is essential in maintaining social connections. This is done particularly through informal interactions,

shared cultures, and shared meanings. While existing work on awareness is typically framed within workspace settings, they reveal valuable insights into how the awareness of one’s environment supports seamless cooperation among social actors within the space (Gross, 2013; Schmidt, 2002). Furthermore, Heath et al. (2002) investigate the concept of awareness within social interactions, highlighting how it influences individuals’ interpretations of the significance of various events. Thus, awareness can have implications for the sense-making processes of individuals when browsing social media, particularly based on the affordances of these spaces (Gibson, 2014) and one’s perceptions of these (Svanæs, 2013). Regarding online false information, awareness has been demonstrated through existing findings to promote critical thinking and increasing the effectiveness of fact-checking interventions (Seelam et al., 2024), noting an impact on media literacy (Brisola & Doyle, 2019). Regarding false information detection, this provides insight into the development of fact-checking efforts, which is explored more in-depth in section 2.2.3. Although this emphasizes the importance of mediating awareness in information sharing practices, the investigation of this concept through the lens of correcting and mitigating false information on social media platforms has not been sufficiently investigated, particularly in how awareness might affect users’ sense-making and recognition of false information instances.

Exploring the nature of false information spread on social media platforms, the literature on this topic is often concerned with its presence concerning particular events that are accompanied by large amounts of mis-, dis-, and malinformation. These instances span multiple domains, where recent examples include the 2020 and 2024 U.S. presidential elections within the political environment (Chang et al., 2025; Lemmon, 2024; Pennycook & Rand, 2021; Prochaska et al., 2023), and the COVID-19 pandemic within the health domain (Brindha et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2023). The insights provided from these explorations elaborate on the discussion of how false information is directly affected by societal developments, while demonstrating a mutual impact between these. That is to say, that social media platforms are used by various influential stakeholders in certain events with the deliberate attempt to misinform the public, through such as false information campaigns (Adams et al., 2023; Broda & Strömbäck, 2024; Stanford Internet Observatory et al., 2023). As a result, a serious danger of false information instances is highlighted; namely that of its ability to impact real-world events and situations such as political elections, and even amplifying issues of social conflict (Kaufhold & Reuter, 2019). This effect is a notable characteristic of false information in online environments due to the meaningful role of social media platforms in mediating information sharing practices (Allcott et al., 2020; Livingstone, 2009), and additionally raises the issue of the intertwinement of news and entertainment (Edgerly, 2017). This characteristic of social media platforms in their ability to blur the lines between news and entertainment integrate informal discussion, humorous content, and ‘memes’ within more formal and serious topics. While this allows for novel engagement with formal topics such as political discussions in newer environments, it additionally has implications for how such issues are perceived (Chang et al., 2025).

Similarly, the phenomenon of interest has been explored in how it relates to real-life developments. This involves a detailed examination of specific instances of online false information that emphasize the links between such cases and the mobilization of real-world events including campaigns, political uproar, and social movements (Lemmon, 2024; Prochaska et al., 2023). The findings of this investigation additionally highlight the collaborative nature of such a mobilization; solidifying the role of communities and collective action in developments related to false information — a topic that is



explored further in section 2.2.2. In sum, this literature outlines the correlation between online and offline developments where a recent example is that of the January 6th 2021 insurrection attempt (Prochaska et al., 2023), an event that took place after mass false information spread regarding the 2020 U.S. presidential election. As such, Prochaska et al. (2023) illustrate the aforementioned effects through the resource mobilization theory, highlighting how motivation to spread false information reaches a critical mass — impacted by social aspects — and subsequently acts as fuel for the mobilization of offline social movements and campaigns. Their work illustrates how the online movement was a driving motivator for the storming of the U.S. Capitol, clearly demonstrating the ability of online efforts to impact physical developments. This is additionally seen regarding social issues and movements, where false information tactics on social media is used by influential actors in order to control the opinion of the general public, and particularly spreading hateful information to harbor resentment and mobilizations through false information campaigns (Brindha et al., 2022; Nyhan & Reifler, 2015).

This correlation of events brings forth the implications of social phenomena in their relation to the topic and how they can amplify the effects of false information. Some of this research explores collaborative aspects of the phenomenon (Chen et al., 2024; Starbird et al., 2019) — elaborated more under section 2.2.2 — and, regarding its effect on individuals, emotional responses (Khan et al., 2024; Malki et al., 2024) and how this can impact the spread of the phenomenon. While these still usually focus on particular events of false information, the findings highlight how collaboration and shared beliefs are involved in motivations to share false information (Starbird et al., 2018, 2019), related to that of social presence and conformity (Wijenayake et al., 2020). Here, work in the field of CSCW can contribute to an understanding of these influences. Within CSCW research, the topic of knowledge and information sharing is often correlated to the concept of a Common Information Space (CIS). Common Information Spaces (CISs) are understood as spaces for collaborative actors to distribute communication, information, and shared meanings (Bannon & Bødker, 1997; Bossen, 2002) — hence also closely tied to awareness due to its role in conveying these aspects (Schmidt, 2002). The conceptualization of social media platforms as CISs can provide insights into how shared meanings influence the information sharing practices and general experience of individuals as they encounter false information through these arenas. Essential for the effectiveness of CISs, people sharing these spaces require a sense of understanding of the information within the social environment, the conventions regarding the information, and need to be rendered aware of all of these aspects (Schmidt & Bannon, 1992). Put differently, CISs emphasize shared meanings and understanding within the communication space; something that is closely related to and enabled by awareness and perceptions towards the informational environment. In this way, CISs highlight that information is not consumed; but rather interpreted and re-contextualized by the various social actors and their shared understandings. Tying this to existing literature on collaborative efforts of online false information, such a perspective underlines how information — including false thereof — is socially constructed (Brisola & Doyle, 2019), and elaborates on the understanding of how collaborative and social phenomena can amplify its dissemination (Starbird et al., 2019).

Although this body of work contextualizes the phenomenon within society and gives insight into how it affects real issues, Broda and Strömbäck (2024) reveal through their systematic literature review on the topic that the way false information manifests in everyday contexts remains relatively underexplored. As the existing studies focus on particular events, they often do not encompass the micro-dimensions of the phenomenon

in how they appear in day-to-day interactions, or in instances not connected to a larger context or event. Hence, the course of the experience under specific events of false information may not accurately reflect the way the phenomenon occurs in everyday life and its integration into an individual's typical online interactions, contextualized within their overall online experience. These instances can reveal or display other aspects of the phenomenon that are neglected otherwise, particularly on how people interact with false information in a more general sense, unrestrained by these boundaries.

Online false information has also been explored in how it impacts people, particularly through one's emotions. Exposure to false information is found to trigger negative emotions and fatigue (Malki et al., 2024). The influence of emotions in interactions to false information is that the subsequent actions taken are impacted by these reactions, particularly through ad-hoc strategies. Additionally, this effect is particularly notable in instances of the phenomenon tied to heavy topics such as racism and sexism (Khan et al., 2024; Malki et al., 2024). While such work solidifies the mutual impact of false information on human aspects, the intricacies of this relationship present an underexplored area of the topic within current literature.

Additionally, these perspectives have implications for research on spatial differences. While picture-oriented instances of false information have been explored (Chang et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2023), the way the instances can differ depending on the platform has not been emphasized — and, as affordances are meaningful in shaping behavior (Gibson, 2014), these findings point towards differences that are underexplored regarding how false information navigates across these mediums. Furthermore, although existing research explains how instances of false information travel across different online spaces (Moore et al., 2024), little is known about how the content may change under this navigation, how this is experienced by the user, and — despite delineating the importance of acknowledging context and surroundings — under what circumstances people are more susceptible to false information (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). These gaps warrant further exploration of the phenomenon through a cross-platform study.

In sum, the existing work defining online false information and identifying the influences important for its understanding clearly highlight the role of social influences — and consequentially the influence of communities and social interactions — in the dissemination of online false information, introducing the next topic of this literature review.

### 2.2.2 Communities and Social Interactions Impacting the Phenomenon

The implications of communities and collaborative behavior on online false information are made clear through the literature reviewed thus far. These findings highlight the participatory and collaborative aspects at play when examining the dissemination of false information on social media platforms. Additional research that explores the effect of communities regarding this topic is related to information sharing and social media use. Baumer et al. (2011) delineate the collaborative aspects of blogging and community interactions, comparing the interactions that take place through the arenas of social media to mainstream media. This provides insights of the relationship between blogger and reader, and reveals how being part of a community in this way influences one's access and susceptibility to information received through these means. In order to research the involvement of community interactions in false information dissemination online further, Efstratiou and De Cristofaro (2022) note the importance of acknowledging the socio-cognitive processes taking place within the phenomenon, and how these relate to collaborative efforts and community interactions within the topic.

Work on the importance of the participatory nature of online false information explores the collaborative aspects of social media interactions that have implications for the phenomenon. Some of this work explores collaborative efforts of spreading false information, such as through false information campaigns (Lemmon, 2024; Starbird et al., 2019) and delineates the development of echo-chambers in these arenas (Alatawi et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2024; Starbird et al., 2018). *Echo-chambers*, a common term found in the body of work regarding community impact on false information dissemination in online environments, describes parts of the Internet where various stakeholders of different intentions reiterate (or ‘echo’) information of similar views between each other, continuously reinforcing these beliefs in question Aghajari et al., 2023, 2024; Scott, 2023; Scott et al., 2023. (Starbird et al., 2018, 2019) has contributed extensively to this exploration, working to understand the social effects that take place in their development. Her work has highlighted that collaborative attempts of spreading false information online consist of environments where stakeholders re-source, re-publish, and remix content repeatedly, resulting in a large network of sources reiterating the same beliefs. The findings discerning echo-chambers also show how false information often appeal to one’s emotions and innermost values (Alatawi et al., 2021), subsequently impacting engagement with the content. The acknowledgment of this effect further emphasizes the importance of understanding psychological effects in how the impact the dissemination of false information.

The danger of echo chambers continue to be emphasized through ways in which users may feel more inclined to believe other actors within their own communities (Allen et al., 2022). This effect additionally demonstrates the varying intentions in the different stakeholders involved in such an online space. *Intent* is identified as an important aspect in the understanding of this effect — where engagement involves both natural information- and content-sharing practices, in addition to deliberate and coordinated efforts by a set of actors. Therefore, tied to the significance of intentions in the various stakeholders involved in the spreading of false information online, existing work has elaborated on this issue by demonstrating varying degrees of danger as dependent on these intentions (Alatawi et al., 2021; Starbird et al., 2018), and how the identification of these intentions is an aspect of handling the various scenarios involved in false information dissemination (Wang et al., 2023).

Another central aspect in exploring social effects of false information has been identified through existing literature to be that of *motivation*, justifying the use of social presence theory to understand these aspects of false information collaborative efforts to understand the motivations for such engagement (Ning Shen & Khalifa, 2008; Prochaska et al., 2023). Prior studies mentioned in section 2.2.1 reveal the negative emotions accompanied by engagement with false information (Khan et al., 2024; Malki et al., 2024), particularly regarding sensitive subjects. Elaborating on these findings in correlation to collaborative efforts of the phenomenon, such emotions are shown to amplify effects of self-motivation to spread false information online (Ghafouri et al., 2024; Prochaska et al., 2023; Zade et al., 2023). This highlights the role of emotions in impacting the dissemination of the phenomenon, while also showing the intertwinement between this and community engagement. Further examining this effect reveals the construction of a *manufactured reality*, as presented by Prochaska et al. (2023). These manufactured realities describe how false information is used to inform false narratives, involving the intertwinement of different stakeholders with varying intentions and motivations, similar to that of echo-chambers (Ghafouri et al., 2024). Put differently, these explorations demonstrate how the participating social actors involved

in the dissemination of online false information have different intentions and motivations, and how these actors come together in order to amplify the effect of the phenomenon, underlining the importance of communities and interactions in this relationship.

Additional exploration on the topic identifies aspects of what makes someone want to engage in the activity of information sharing online (Bashardoust et al., 2024; Do et al., 2024). Do et al. (2024) explore this particularly through understanding how individuals assess information from peers through collaborative discussion, and highlight the importance of this aspect within the larger validation process of encountering information. The findings from this work underline the importance of social discussion in effective sense-making and critical thinking mechanisms, as the validation process maintained a higher accuracy for one’s mental models of the participants in this study. Furthermore, tied to the aforementioned literature on CISs and the importance of shared meanings and interpretation in these arenas (Bannon & Bødker, 1997), prior research has explored aspects of community behavior in social processes such as language, and highlight how this is central in mediating a sense of community (Chen et al., 2024; Sharma & De Choudhury, 2018). Sharma and De Choudhury (2018) particularly note that this has implications on one’s subjective well-being and mental health. Additionally, this sense of community is again found to have implications for how people judge information from sources within their communities (Allen et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2024) — solidifying community interactions as meaningful in the dissemination of false information, but highlights the need for a deeper exploration on the particular day-to-day interactions that influence these effects.

In interactions with false information, particularly within online communities, Efstratiou and De Cristofaro (2022) and Prochaska et al. (2023) find that attention is often shifted from being based in accuracy and reality to other personal goals. This is found to be due to the psychological cost of challenging one’s own beliefs, as is present in findings regarding echo-chambers and manufactured realities (Alatawi et al., 2021; Cinelli et al., 2021; Prochaska et al., 2023; Starbird et al., 2018). These circumstances can contribute to the mobilization of online groups and close-knit community spaces within platforms that further polarize and radicalize views, portrayed through the repetition of false information that leads to a fluency effect (Adams et al., 2023; Efstratiou & De Cristofaro, 2022; Shu et al., 2017; Starbird et al., 2018). This *fluency effect*, identified as a characteristic aspect of false information when it occurs within online spaces, reveals the tendency of such falsehoods to spread faster than factual information (Brisola & Doyle, 2019; Starbird et al., 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018). This effect is particularly evident in online false information as compared to offline developments of the phenomenon (Allcott et al., 2020; Kaufhold & Reuter, 2019).

In conclusion, this literature offers insights into how communities influence engagement with false information, as well as the underlying psychological processes that influence the sense- and decision making of individuals for community interactions when confronted with false information. However, an area of further study in relation to this is exploring how false information occurs within natural environments and across a larger collection of social actors with different roles (Prochaska et al., 2023), examining the phenomenon in real, authentic, day-to-day interactions between individuals within various virtual spaces (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024), focusing on human aspects such as motivation and emotions over technical aspects such as algorithms (Fernandez & Alani, 2018).

### 2.2.3 Platform Interventions and Mitigation Efforts

Much of the existing research on the topic of mitigating online false information is concerned with platform design interventions such as fact-checking approaches and ways of providing context to social media content. Fernandez and Alani (2018) and Sehat et al. (2024) evaluate such efforts, particularly professional fact-checking, where their findings note the tedious nature of the approach. This is in part due to the magnitude of information disseminating on social media, where the various steps necessary for effective fact-checking are unable to keep up. Sehat et al. (2024) thereby suggest for tools that enable the prioritization of online content to fact-check — however, this still leaves a notable amount of false online content up for correction. The hypervelocity of information flow on social media (Brisola & Doyle, 2019) additionally has implications on this in the detection and fact-checking of such information.

More limitations of current fact-checking approaches are also explored. Common strategies for mitigating false information are found to center around models of early detection, where this detection centers around the generation of facts and explicitly deliberate falsehoods that thereby neglect human aspects of the issue (Fernandez & Alani, 2018). These aspects involve issues of intent and motivation, that have previously been established to be meaningful in the dissemination of false information (see section 2.2.2). Similarly, much of the existing research on this topic focus on datasets and assessing false information within artificial environments (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024), with a primary focus on algorithmic aspects of intervention strategies. Some of these include automatic fact-checking systems and flagging of false information, some of are guided by the use of AI (Chuai et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2024; Mauri et al., 2024; Zade et al., 2023). However, these efforts are additionally unable to encompass human aspects of the phenomenon such as intention (Wang et al., 2023) and false information framed in different ways, such as memes (Chang et al., 2025).

Further elaborating on the challenges of false information detection, Condran (2024) identifies three particular aspects that amplify difficulties in such efforts; namely (1) losing multidimensionality of the issue, (2) temporal dynamics, and (3) the lack of consideration of cross-platform analysis. Furthermore, the systemic literature review of Broda and Strömbäck (2024) notes how knowledge regarding the ways in which false information flows through various spaces of the Internet in natural settings is underdeveloped, calling for more research on the topic. Overall, the limitations of current mitigation strategies emphasizing reactive approaches after false information detection warrants exploration of additional, less platform-side approaches in intervening in the dissemination of false information. These challenges warrant further exploration of the phenomenon through in-depth, context-dependent understanding, exploring temporal dynamics, and investigating the phenomenon as it takes place across multiple virtual spaces.

Recent literature exploring other strategies elaborates on how platform interventions can support media literacy through design to encourage critical thinking in users (Zade et al., 2023). The work of Dame Adjin-Tettey (2022) additionally explores the meaning of media literacy in order to recognize and identify online false information using instances of fake news in media. This work emphasizes media literacy in education — illustrating that familiarity to the concept and existing experiences will help cognitive engagement and the support of media literacy when encountering false information (Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022). This work addresses motivations of sharing false information which recognizes the role of intentions and false information spread through personal networks. In a similar vein, the findings of Brisola and Doyle (2019) encourage a contextual

perspective of information as a social construct for social media users to adapt in effectively navigating information on social media platforms. Lastly, Bak-Coleman et al. (2021) and Chuai et al. (2024), in assessing the efficiency of existing platform interventions, find that a combination of multiple interventions in conjunction is most effective.

Generally, a review of the existing work in this topic reveals how studies of platform interventions are primarily concerned with their technical and algorithmic aspects; some of these being automated fact-checking systems, false information detection and flagging, and user-interface design — even in explorations of media literacy (Chuai et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2024; Mauri et al., 2024; Zade et al., 2023). The body of literature concerning these explorations emphasize how providing context to online information is essential for supporting interactions with media literacy and mitigating instances of false information in these exchanges. Although these are meaningful insights, a perspective that encapsulates the intricacies of individual encounters with false information — including their practices, human aspects, and how these are impacted by the technological mediation of the phenomenon remains underexplored (Fernandez & Alani, 2018). Additionally, while the existing work on this topic identifies the influence of social factors in the dissemination of false information, they do not encapsulate full representations of the lived experiences of individuals encountering false information, and the human aspects involved in its interpretation and dissemination (Fernandez & Alani, 2018). Put differently, despite the findings of prior literature putting an emphasis on social aspects that influence false information dissemination on social media platforms — such as community engagement, or socially constructed and contextualized factors shaping trust and interactions with information sources (Allen et al., 2022; Starbird et al., 2019) — exploring the phenomenon through research approaches that emphasize human experience is an area that necessitates further contribution. The omission of such a perspective is particularly meaningful from the nature of media consumption being deeply embedded in social structures and contexts that influence how individuals interpret, perceive, and act on information (Brisola & Doyle, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In so doing, recent work on other strategies also acknowledges the effect of communities in interactions with online false information, and explores collective fact-checking efforts — an approach that also handles the lack of resources as a drawback of professional fact-checking approaches (Fernandez & Alani, 2018). Chuai et al. (2024) explored the effectivity of one such recent effort, being the crowd-sourced approach of Community Notes on X. In exploring this, they found that this intervention, in order to maintain credibility, is speculated to be too slow to meaningfully mitigate engagement with false information on the platform, similar to that of other strategies (Sehat et al., 2024). Accordingly, while community engagement is valuable in these instances, their technological mediation is still impacted by the challenges of existing reactive strategies, such as false information detection and prioritization (Sehat et al., 2024).

Other recent work exploring how the dissemination of false information can be addressed by platform design points in the direction of user- and experience-oriented research and interventions. Some of this literature highlights the lack of such research and media literacy support in platform design (Aghajari et al., 2023, 2024; Jahanbakhsh & Karger, 2024). The work of Jahanbakhsh and Karger (2024) emphasizes the role of user engagement in the assessment of false information online, aligning with the aforementioned findings of Seelam et al. (2024) in demonstrating the importance of engagement and awareness in the effectivity of fact-checking mechanisms, and Do et

al. (2024) stating the importance of social discussion. Jahanbakhsh and Karger (2024) further elaborate on how affordances of user engagement with false information can be provided outside of privately owned platforms, on other spaces of the Internet, as an alternative for platform-specific interventions. This illustrates a perspective of the phenomenon that investigates its nature independently from the platforms. Through this perspective, multiple aspects of false information and methods to address them are emphasized, as well as the impact of cross-platform interactions on the propagation of false information. In line with this, Broda and Strömbäck (2024) mention missing work regarding how false information flows across the Internet through natural settings. This calls for research that assesses the topic across platforms with different affordances, with a focus on the participant in their informational environment.

In conclusion, reviewing the existing platform interventions reveals significant gaps in the phenomenon — gaps that warrant an exploration of human aspects in the dissemination of false information over algorithmic ones; one that encompasses how false information navigates across multiple online spaces; and one that seeks to understand the flow of the information naturally and authentically (Brisola & Doyle, 2019; Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). Additionally, in noting challenges of current interventions, Fernandez and Alani (2018) find that the neglect of human aspects in existing research is from the perspective of users as passive consumers instead of active participants in the dissemination of false information.

### 2.3 Final Remarks

By exploring the increasing entanglement of false information within everyday digital practices, combined with the limitations of existing approaches that focus primarily on specific events and fact-checking for mitigation, the reviewed literature points to the need for research that attends to the lived, interpretive dimensions of false information (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024; Fernandez & Alani, 2018). The work of this thesis fills this gap in an understanding of the topic through a phenomenological inquiry into how individuals experience and make sense of false information across different social media platforms.

## Chapter 3

# Research Design

This research operates under a social constructivist (interpretivist) worldview, bringing a framework for the philosophical assumptions that focuses on understanding the world based on how it is lived and experienced (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This framework includes the ontological assumption often associated with qualitative research that there exist multiple realities based upon subjective experiences with different contexts and circumstances, and the epistemological assumption highlighting how this knowledge was gained: qualitatively, through interactions with the relevant participants who can illustrate the phenomenon through this exploration.

Specifically, following the phenomenological tradition of inquiry (Langdridge, 2008), reality is understood through the various lived experiences of the participants who have encountered the phenomenon, while knowledge is generated through an understanding of these experiences as authentically as possible from the perspective of the participants. This is done through the use of in-depth interviews as the method for data collection and hermeneutic phenomenological analysis (Finlay, 2014) to bring meaning to the resulting data. This research design provides an understanding of the essence of the phenomenon of false information online through how it is experienced by various individuals who have encountered it.

This chapter provides an overview of the research design of this study, elaborating on the various aspects making up the work of this thesis. First, the meaning of the research paradigm and its relation to the choice of methodology in answering the research questions are delineated. Then, the sampling strategies are described, followed by the methods for data collection and subsequent data analysis procedures of the resulting dataset. Lastly, as this is a phenomenological piece of work, I reflect upon my own positionality and how this has impacted the present findings through my role as the researcher.

### 3.1 Issues of Phenomenology

The present work has been carried out within the realms of phenomenology: a tradition of inquiry that focuses on investigating people's experiences as well as the underlying structural aspects of these experiences in order to understand certain phenomena — which makes up the methodological assumption of this study. This approach to research is concerned with the idea of how human experiences are integral to understanding particular phenomena due to the cruciality it has within the definition of sociocultural contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2018).



*Phenomenology* was originally proposed by Edmund Husserl as an approach combining philosophical assumptions and psychological theories to explore ‘things in their appearing’ (Langdridge, 2008, p. 1127). The traditional approach to phenomenology, as Husserl envisioned it, aimed to redefine philosophy as a field by describing human experiences through the knowledge that can be gained empirically — an approach termed transcendental phenomenology. Future philosophers built on this tradition of inquiry to envelop other interpretations. For example, while still tied to the same idea of understanding things as they appear to individuals, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre went on to criticize the radicalizing nature of this descriptive perspective, arguing that reality is socially contextualized, and shifted the focus to that of understanding human experience (Dowling, 2007; Langdridge, 2008; Van Manen, 2017).

Heidegger, in particular, introduced the notion of *hermeneutic phenomenology* that became concerned with the idea of one’s *lifeworld* in order to interpret human experience as it is lived, emphasizing one’s ‘presence in the world’ (Dowling, 2007, p. 133). Through this interpretation, Heidegger outlined the meaning of social contexts and deeply contextualized truths. This approach was additionally elaborated through the work of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty in their focus on embodiment and perception, which has particularly played a role in how phenomenology is used within HCI, bringing implications of the lived body in how it translates into technology use. Correspondingly, the work of Merleau-Ponty introduced notions of embodiment and perception that have been central for an understanding of how these experiences include embodied interactions with the virtual spaces (Svanæs, 2013).

The conceptualization of the *lifeworld* as presented within existing literature of the phenomenological tradition of inquiry elaborates on how researchers can explore and understand the nature of subjective experiences in how they manifest in individuals’ personal realities (Langdridge, 2008). Hence, the notion of the lifeworld delineates reality and the world as it is lived authentically, framing and influencing experiences. Furthermore, Heidegger, in articulating the interpretation necessary for understanding such experiences, emphasized how such encounters ‘must be seen in the context of the embodied and situated subject’ (Langdridge, 2008, p. 1128). This conceptualization further introduces various aspects of the lifeworld that shape it, guiding an understanding of human experiences as part of the world and not isolated from it; some of these dimensions being *embodiment*, *sociality*, *spatiality*, and *temporality* — elements that are all connected to the *selfhood* at the center of the experience. Defining these dimensions more in depth elaborate that *embodiment* is understood as the connection between a particular situation and the embodied expression of an individual; encapsulating their emotions and how the situation affects their perceptions of themselves, including their body and aspects of their identity (Ashworth, 2003). This gives insight into the phenomenon and the lifeworld of the users as it connects their physical body to their understanding of the phenomenon through ‘body-world relations’ (Finlay, 2013, p. 188). *Sociality* is about how a situation is influenced by and impacts relations with other people (Ashworth, 2003). Social interactions provide a channel for one’s social identity to interact with the other social actors within the informational environment, and is thus closely related to both the selfhood and spatiality within one’s lifeworld (Finlay, 2013). *Spatiality* is regarding the environment where the situation takes place, and *temporality*, describes how the concept of time is affected — including past, present, and future implications of the phenomenon (Ashworth, 2003).

Within Informatics, phenomenological studies have previously been used to gain

insight into user experiences and the social and physical aspects of interactions with digital technology (Brindha et al., 2022; Frauenberger et al., 2010; Simonsen, 1992; Svanæs, 2013). It is acknowledged as a meaningful perspective for understanding cooperation supported by technology. The rationale behind this is the importance of linguistics for understanding social structures that are relevant for systems design (Simonsen, 1992), where exploring concepts through a phenomenological approach reveal interpretations and descriptions from the perspective of the users that may be meaningful in understanding how to better support the experiences with the phenomenon of interest. Furthermore, by acknowledging the embodied and social nature of human interaction with technology, the importance of social aspects and the general perspective of the user in interacting with technology is clear.

Interpretations of embodiment, particularly through Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the lived body, have also been explored within interaction design — introducing the term of *embodied perception*, in which interaction with an interface is compared to that of perception (Svanæs, 2013). Furthermore, prior research has connected the role of digital artifacts with that of individual experiences and cultural meaning through a phenomenological perspective (Glöss, 2012). This allows us to understand the way technology connects with the person. A phenomenological approach within areas of HCI provide rich descriptions of the relationship between the self and the object of interaction that help understand aspects of these interactions (Frauenberger et al., 2010). The results of such explorations are dependent on the type of phenomenological approach used — and, while a descriptive approach has provided deeper understandings of experiences of individuals as they use information technologies, a hermeneutic, interpretive approach is less explored, and could provide newer, socially contextualized insights.

The phenomenological approach of this thesis is deeply essentialist, attempting to understand how people make sense of experiences with false information through their lived world and building on how truths are generated through social contexts and individual understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Langdridge, 2008). As such, this work has been carried out under the auspices of Heideggerian phenomenology, using fragments of the lifeworld as a framework for this understanding, and emphasizing how false information is deeply contextual based on these various elements (Finlay, 2014; Langdridge, 2008).

Through this research, the lived experiences and the meanings that these experiences give to the understanding of online false information are emphasized, and discussed in relation to how they shape the phenomenon. This research investigates how an individual’s subjective experiences in interacting with false information can shape their understanding of it, directly impacting the phenomenon itself as it is always understood within a subjective context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Finlay, 2013), as proposed in Heidegger’s approach to the tradition (Dowling, 2007). This additionally highlights the intersubjectivity of human nature and reality, another philosophical assumption within phenomenology concerned with *rejecting the subjective-objective perspective*.

With a phenomenological approach comes the philosophical assumption of the *intentionality of consciousness* — fundamental in the original assumptions introduced by Husserl — referring to the notion that consciousness is always directed towards an object or phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Langdridge, 2008). In this instance, the individual’s consciousness is directed towards the information they process online, and their understanding of it is affected by their own subjectivity; their beliefs, values, attitudes, and previous experiences. Because of these assumptions, it is crucial to

understand how and why users engage the way they do with false information, in order to understand the underlying subjective perspectives that give meaning to their experiences with false information and thereby affecting the phenomenon itself. The practical implications of this in this work was that the differences between the types of false information perceived online has not been the focus of this study. Rather, the individual conceptualizations of the participants of false information has been emphasized in order to provide an authentic and bracketed understanding of how the phenomenon manifests in their experiences (Finlay, 2013) — see section 3.4 for more on bracketing.

The worldview integrating the epistemological, ontological, and methodological assumptions of this research refers to *interpretivism*, a research paradigm predicated on the notion that reality is a portrayal of human interpretation through the social world (Bryman, 2008). This paradigm elaborates on the individual, embodied, social, spatial, and temporal aspects that make up a person's lifeworld (Finlay, 2013; Langdridge, 2008), helping shape the design of this research through the use of research methods that focus on enabling the researcher to inductively understand these experiences through the lifeworld of the participant and allow for close and in-depth explorations of these dimensions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### 3.2 Sampling Strategies and the Recruitment Process

This study has used a combination of multiple sampling strategies, namely self-selected, purposive, and snowball sampling methods. The *self-selected sampling* strategy involves inviting volunteers to take part in the study, calling for their participation in the data collection phase. *Purposive sampling*, specifically criterion sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018), describes how individuals must fulfill a set of screening requirements for participation. These criteria are in accordance with the research goals of the study, attempting to recruit individuals that can give insight into how the phenomenon is authentically experienced through their lived recounts. Lastly, *snowball sampling* is a strategy that involves already recruited participants to join the recruitment process by inviting more participants to increase the sample size of the study (Bryman, 2008). These individuals would naturally also have to fulfill the requirements of the purposive sampling method. Each of these strategies and an elaboration of the final list of participants involved in this study are detailed next.

In conducting the self-selection strategy, a number of recruitment artifacts in the form of participant advertisements and informational content have been produced for this work. The advertisements have been publicized through the three social media platforms addressed in this study, being that of X, Instagram, and YouTube. The advertisements have been tailored and adhered to these specific virtual environments through the main form of media emphasized within each of the platforms — this includes a short text description on X, recruitment photos for Instagram, and a video advertisement for YouTube. In order to provide further information regarding the study, a website was also created; see <https://recruitfacts.wordpress.com>. As such, volunteers seeing these advertisements have been involved in the study.

Regarding the second strategy of purposive sampling, the main criteria for participant recruitment was the use of at least one of the three social media platforms addressed (X, Instagram, YouTube) at a frequency of which is described as *regularly* (concluded to be at least 3 times a week), and, most importantly, have prior experiences of false information on the relevant platform(s). Due to the research goals of this study focusing on the experience in day-to-day interactions rather than investigating issues of the phenomenon

between or within particular demographic groups, the recruitment process remained flexible regarding other aspects such as age, gender, and educational background.

Concerning the third and final sampling strategy, after recruitment and conversation with the first set of participants, these individuals were asked if they knew any other people who could imagine involvement in the research in order to further expand the sampling size and fulfill the recruitment criteria. The individuals have either been posteriorly contacted after consent had been agreed upon, or reached out themselves via e-mail.

The recruitment initially aimed at the recommended participant pool for a phenomenological study as described by Creswell and Poth (2018) to be between 5 and 25, and continued until no significant new insights emerged from analysis of the recent data, resulting in *theoretical saturation* (Bryman, 2008; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally related to this notion of theoretical saturation; based on the research goals of guiding an authentic illustration of the phenomenon through lived experiences, the analysis has focused on conveying trustworthiness in alignment with phenomenological research as accounted by Finlay (2014) in the analysis process, which is delineated in section 3.4.

Overall, 10 participants were involved in totality for data collection, consisting of 6 female and 4 male participants. Table 3.1 provides an overview of the profiles of the recruited participants, the data collection activities they participated in, and the social media platforms they were active on in accordance to the purposive sampling requirements. 4 participants expressed the pre-defined requirements of regular social media activity on all three of the platforms considered in this study, while 4 were active in one of these, and the remaining two participants contained a mix between. Each of these individuals took part in an initial, in-depth, semi-structured interview exploring their individual experiences with the phenomenon. Additionally, two of these participants — specifically P01 and P07 — agreed to come back in for a follow-up interview, focusing on elaborating the findings of their prior conversations. The other participants did not express availability or the findings did not necessitate further elaboration emerging after analysis of the initial interview.

ID	Age	Gender	Education	Follow-up	X	Instagram	Youtube
P01	18-24	Female	Bach. (ongoing)	yes	yes	yes	
P02	18-24	Female	Mast. (ongoing)				yes
P03	18-24	Female	Bach. (completed)			yes	
P04	18-24	Female	Bach. (ongoing)			yes	
P05	25-31	Female	Bach. (completed)			yes	
P06	18-24	Male	Bach. (completed)		yes	yes	yes
P07	18-24	Male	Mast. (ongoing)	yes	yes	yes	yes
P08	18-24	Female	Sec. School (completed)		yes	yes	yes
P09	18-24	Male	Mast. (ongoing)		yes	yes	yes
P10	18-24	Male	Bach. (completed)		yes		yes

Table 3.1: Participant demographics and their social media usage

### 3.3 Data Collection

As typical of phenomenological studies, the method employed to gather information on participants' experience of the phenomenon of interest — in this case how online false information manifests in their day-to-day interactions — was that of in-depth

semi-structured interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interviews as a data collection method are widely used in order to gain rich insights into the lives, opinions, and subjective understandings of individuals (Crang & Cook, 2007). These understandings are central to shed light on the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Finlay & Eatough, 2012; Langdridge, 2008). The rationale behind choosing a semi-structured approach for the interviews of this study was to reach a balance between flexibility and consistency in communication across all participants. The choice of such a method ensured that pre-planned, key topics were addressed and explored across all interviews, while also allowing for the room of natural conversation flow (Bryman, 2008). This flexibility additionally enabled the conversation to adapt to each participant and their unique experiences with the phenomenon. Furthermore, an important aspect of this flexibility is the opportunity for researchers to restructure and prioritize the order of conversation topics as well as elaboration on emerging and unanticipated issues throughout the interviews (Bryman, 2008), while verifying that all topics have been met.

The advantages of such a method lie in the detailed information that one may receive and explore, especially if multiple interviews are utilized with the same individual for deeper exploration (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A potential drawback with this method concerning the current topic of false information online is related to the philosophical assumption within phenomenology of *intentionality* — namely, one may not always be aware that they are interacting with false information (the object they are directed towards) and therefore cannot communicate these interactions through interviews — which may in turn affect the ways to make sense of the phenomenon. In handling this issue, also due to the nature of phenomenology, the understandings and conceptualizations of the participants will be emphasized in order to allow for their experience and understanding of the phenomenon to set the center stage for data collection and analysis (Finlay, 2014).

Prior to the arrangement of these interviews, an interview guide<sup>1</sup> has been elaborated with a list of topics to cover in order to expand on the research questions of this study. Interview guides for semi-structured interviews typically contain a list of questions that are to be asked in similar veins but not necessarily in the same order (Bryman, 2008). Nevertheless, the interview guide for this study contained the structuring of topics and issues to address within the interviews, and not necessarily questions. These topics were extrapolated from the literature review conducted prior to the chosen design of this study, highlighting emerging topics that this review found to be relevant in the understanding of the phenomenon. The formulation of the guide in topics instead of questions allowed for a more natural conversation with the participants and enabled flexibility in the way questions are framed as being contextualized within the current conversation.

These interviews explored topics such as the typical platform use of the participant, their involvement in online communities, and their recollections of experiences with the phenomenon of false information on the relevant platforms. The experiences with the phenomenon in particular were explored in relation to the emotional and psychological reactions within these interactions, then subsequently sense-making and action taking, and finally mitigation efforts on the side of the platforms and their opinions regarding current interventions. The interviews were carried out through a mixture of in-person and online interactions in accordance with the current circumstances and preferences of the participants. The in-person interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed using the Nettskjema-diktafon application developed by the UiO. Meanwhile, the interviews that were carried out remotely were conducted digitally through Zoom

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<sup>1</sup>the interview guide for data collection is included in the appendix A

and video-recorded through these means. The participants were presented with and asked to sign an informational consent form prior to the data collection which detailed these specifications. The interviews ranged from 40 to 90 minutes in total (average = 65 minutes), the shortest of these being the follow-up interviews. The goal of this length was to encapsulate the detailed, in-depth experiences of the individuals. The interviews were subsequently transcribed within two weeks of data collection, in which participants were able to withdraw from participation within this time period. The transcripts were then pseudonymized in order to prepare for the following data analysis.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

As usual for a phenomenological study, the analysis of the collected data has been conducted through a thorough phenomenological analysis emphasizing a deep understanding of lived experiences that encompass the phenomenon of interest. Specifically, the current research has engaged in a *hermeneutic phenomenological analysis* as described by Finlay (2013, 2014), exploring this understanding through the fragments of the participants' lifeworld. This approach involves four main components; namely (1) embracing the phenomenological attitude, (2) dwelling in the data, (3) explicating the phenomenon, and (4) languaging. These components will be explained in depth throughout this section and how they were conducted in this research design in order to thoroughly describe the analytical process shaping the findings of this research.

The first aspect of this process revolves around the conceptualization of a phenomenological attitude and is concerned with achieving *phenomenological reduction* (Finlay, 2014), where any personal knowledge or assumptions regarding the phenomenon should be put away in order to prepare for a novel and authentic exploration concerned with the lived experiences of the participants. This process is mainly achieved through what is described as *epoché*: being the 'bracketing' of these personal perceptions towards the phenomenon, underlining the phenomenological attitude in this ideation. In order to pursue epoché as the researcher of this study, I began bracketing any assumptions and experiences of the phenomenon before data collection by noting down any personal reflections on the topic. In addition to that, my supervisor has interviewed me using the interview guide previously established before the data collection started. This mock interview was audio-recorded through the same means of the study, and was summarized and used as an additional reminder of any personal perspectives or opinions on the raised topics, next to the original bracketing notes. Throughout this process, a phenomenological attitude was sought (Langdrige, 2008).

The second, third, and fourth aspects in the hermeneutic phenomenological analysis process of this study are likened to that of a conventional Thematic Analysis (TA) as described by Braun and Clarke (2012, 2022). This TA is organized in the following six phases: (1) *familiarization*, (2) *initial coding*, (3) *themes search*, (4) *themes review*, (5) *themes definition*, and (6) *report*. The first and second phases of this TA (Braun & Clarke, 2012) are similar to the second process in Finlay's 2014 description of phenomenological analysis, namely *dwelling in the data*; a process that involves a familiarization and initial interpretation of the datasets. Then, the third, fourth, and fifth phases of TA go under the third process of the phenomenological analysis; *explicating the phenomenon*. This phase encompasses efforts of pulling together and processing the individual datasets in relation to each other — which is done through the development of themes. These themes focus on connecting the experiences of the participants to the philosophical assumptions within phenomenology, situating their

experiences in the lifeworld (Finlay, 2013). Lastly, phase six of TA is comparable to the fourth and final process described by Finlay (2014): *linguaging*. These processes of hermeneutic phenomenological analysis conducted in line with this work are elaborated in this understanding throughout the rest of this section.

The data analysis was a continuous process that was managed in close ties and accordance with the data collection, and was initiated after the first interview of this study. After the transcript of this interview was pseudonymized and finalized in preparations, an initial code scheme for analysis of the transcripts was generated. This initial code scheme was developed based on the interview guide to inspire the direction of the *a priori codes* used for analysis, being codes that are anticipated to be relevant in examining the topic due to their visibility in and relation to issues mentioned in existing literature (Ayres & Sandelowski, 2008), particularly as the interview guide was based on the literature review of this work.

The second aspect of the phenomenological analysis of Finlay (2014) thereby began with the familiarization phase as described by Braun and Clarke (2012). This phase consisted of reading through the dataset — being the pseudonymized transcript — at least twice, and noting down any reflections, similarities, and any other aspects of the data particularly brought to attention after the first pass; i.e., *memoing*. This activity was conducted in isolation before any coding of the transcript in order to achieve the familiarity as recommended for TA (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The analytical process then moved on to the following coding phase, where NVivo was used for the organization of the coding activity, using the initial coding scheme containing *a priori codes*. As the analysis continued throughout the growing dataset, *empirical codes* were added to the code scheme, which continued to illuminate the phenomenon through the emerging findings from data collection. This interplay of deductive and inductive coding defines a strength of Braun and Clarke's 2012 approach to TA, as enabled by the structure of the phases in this process (De Carvalho, 2021). Due to the continuous emergence of empirical codes in this process, a final pass was conducted through all transcripts after the last one was coded in order to verify adherence of all transcripts to the most recent version of the code scheme. In conclusion, for this part of the analysis, a total of 65 codes were generated during the coding phase of this study. A comprehensive overview of all codes are displayed in Appendix B.

The analysis then moved on to the third phase of the phenomenological analysis, i.e., *explicating the phenomenon*, by organizing the results of these codes into initial themes, following the process of thematic analysis with the pursuit of revealing patterns and exploring the phenomenon through relationships and connections between the identified codes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). As stated previously, the dimensions of the lifeworld have been emphasized in the generation of these themes, underlining the lived experiences of the participants. This process resulted in a total of 4 main themes, that are each composed of 2-4 sub-themes, adding up to a total of 12 sub-themes. The main themes make up the upcoming findings chapters of this thesis: (1) *the omnipresence of false information*, (2) *my lived experience*, (3) *social aspects of experiencing false information*, and (4) *issues of false information within virtual information spaces*. Each of these have given insight into different aspects of the participant's lifeworld in experiencing the phenomenon, organized with the goals of expanding upon the research questions of this study. Appendix C details an overview of all these themes, the sub-themes that make them up, and their associated codes.

In the fourth and final *linguaging* process of this analysis, trustworthiness has been underlined in the relationship of quotations and subjective understandings from the

participants and the base of any analytical claims of this study adhering to the density of the evidence (Finlay, 2014). As such, multiple quotes from different participants have been used for the reporting of each main theme (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Finally, bracketing continued until the end of data collection and analysis, where a reflection on personal experiences and assumptions was carried out regarding the findings after analysis. This bracketing revolved around philosophical reflections on the phenomenon, as well as the positionality and reflexivity of the researcher (Finlay, 2013, 2014), resulting in a positionality statement as detailed in the next section 3.5.

### 3.5 Positionality Statement

To ensure transparency and reflexivity, this section outlines my positionality and how it may have affected the results of this thesis. As qualitative inquiry is inherently shaped by the researcher's perspectives, experiences, and assumptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018), I reflect upon how aspects of my personal background may have influenced the research process, including data interpretation and interactions with the participants. In phenomenological research, the goal of bracketing is not to 'ensure objectivity' of the results; but rather acknowledge and reflect upon the researcher's background and perspective in how it may impact the findings of the work, setting aside past experiences and understandings in order to extract the essence of the phenomenon through the lifeworld of the participants (Finlay, 2014; Van Manen, 2017).

Introductory to this research, I approached the topic with limited expectations regarding the potential outcomes that would be provided. However, it is natural to still carry assumptions regarding relevant and emerging topics of the study; some of which are provided from personal past experiences with the phenomenon. For example, during the initial bracketing prior to data collection, I disclosed various examples of false information that came to mind. I was also able to reflect upon the implications of these assumptions through the preliminary mock-interview in which the topics of the interviews were explored through my own experiences. While a lot of these examples were also instances mentioned by the participants, as well as situations prevalent in the existing literature — e.g., U.S. presidential elections, the COVID-19 pandemic — some of the personal accounts raised by participants during data collection were unexpected to me. Some of these included game ads; that I did not include as it seemed trivial — and online scams; that simply did not occur in my personal conceptualization of false information. Regardless, throughout the data collection of this work, I expanded my own understanding of the phenomenon to fit the participants', and found meaningful findings in the differentiation of these conceptualizations. As someone with a cultural background from the Middle East, a large motivator of this study has been on the societal inequalities and consequences of false information towards marginalized communities. While I find this to be an important aspect of the phenomenon, I have practiced epoché (as described in section 3.4) in order to not let this provide boundaries for my conceptualization of false information, and stay open to the conceptualizations of the participants. As such, my conceptualization grew with the participants, to encompass instances that I had not thought of before.

Considering the research environment and context of this work, I understand that my identity in the same age range and region of the participants might have impacted the findings. This may provide an understanding of the phenomenon as well as the development of media literacy for a specific group of people that can be difficult to translate to other populations without further examination. Additionally, this work



may have provided Western ideations of the phenomenon and subsequent experiences therein, as this is where my educational background is centered. As such, I sometimes recognized my own behavior in the actions stated by the participants — e.g., checking comment sections and habitual behavior in interactions with false information online. I interpreted these findings not as my own, but acknowledging the context and lifeworld of the particular participants, as well as interpreting them tied to the existing literature; such is the goal of phenomenology and bracketing within this tradition of inquiry (Finlay & Eatough, 2012).

As a student within the field of HCI, the focus of this study has been on technological mediation of the phenomenon and how technology has impacted developments with false information. As this is my field, it could have impacted the findings through a lack of focus or connection to psychological terms or concepts within humanitarian studies as they are also closely connected to this topic. Due to this, the study uses an approach to phenomenology interpreted through how interaction and online behavior is understood through the lifeworld (Ashworth, 2003; Svanæs, 2013), and, from the foundation of the phenomenological traditional inquiry, this naturally has some involvement with psychological and social issues. These issues, while addressed through a HCI-perspective, can be further interpreted in future cross-disciplinary works on the topic.

What follows is a presentation of the findings of this research approach, interpreted through the lifeworld continuously in its presentation. The next four chapters contain a presentation of the themes resulting from this analysis.

## Chapter 4

# The Omnipresence of False Information

Due to the impact that false information has on societal developments (Brindha et al., 2022; Lemmon, 2024), there is an importance of acknowledging the overarching context surrounding the phenomenon in order to understand how this influences one's lifeworld experience. With an attempt of exploring the mutual shaping of this relationship — both how societal developments impact issues of false information, and how the dissemination of false information impacts societal developments — this chapter explores how instances of false information have been impacting the participants, their lives, and their understanding of the phenomenon. The lifeworld perspective connects individual encounters with false information to dimensions of embodiment, sociality, spatiality, and temporality, showing how the phenomenon manifests and is integrated into daily life.

Two aspects compose this theme. First, the chapter explores the conceptualizations of the participants — what they define as experiences with false information. Understanding how the participants conceptualize false information provides insight into how it is understood and impacted by their lifeworld, and subsequently explores the role of technological mediation in these encounters (Ashworth, 2003; Finlay, 2013; Finlay & Eatough, 2012). Second, the chapter situates these conceptualizations within the societal environment surrounding the experience. In doing so, the chapter provides an understanding of how the phenomenon is built within its context; where, supported by existing literature, context — particularly of how technological systems are used in practice — is essential for understanding the phenomenon and how technology is used under natural circumstances (Gross, 2013; Schmidt & Bannon, 1992).

Seelam et al. (2024) suggest that awareness regarding one's context, in relation to fact-checking interventions, increases the efficiency of these efforts. Thus, investigating the context of the phenomenon provides insight that can be meaningful in mediating the experience. The analytical development in this chapter allows for a demonstration of how the participants categorize false information, where the findings can guide an understanding of how individuals differentiate between what they perceive to be reliable and unreliable online. Additionally, how these differences impact the participant varies, as what is perceived as reliable and unreliable is dependent on each participant and their conceptualization of false information. Overall, the findings of this exploration elaborate on how individuals judge information they see online and their understanding of the phenomenon.

## 4.1 Individual Conceptualizations

As this study is phenomenological in nature, it is rooted in the participants' lived experiences of the phenomenon; thus, delineating how they define the phenomenon is crucial for understanding their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Finlay & Eatough, 2012). Here, the focus is on examining how the participants understand online false information, and how this may impact their encounters with it. Their conceptualization of the phenomenon reflects how it is manifested in their understanding, while being based on their past experiences with the phenomenon (Ashworth, 2003). Thus, their conceptualization is explored in order to understand how the phenomenon is experienced in relation to the dimensions of the lifeworld, and through technological mediation.

False information was defined by all participants in one way or another as information that is either incorrect or misleading in nature, acknowledging that the piece of information may not always be inherently false, but framed in a way that is distorted or inaccurate. Often mentioned was the deliberate attempt of spreading harm and confusion — however, most participants additionally acknowledged the varying intentions behind the actors who spread false information, which additionally impacts the perceived significance of the piece of information in question (see section 6.3). These findings support existing literature detailing how the intention of the information source is important for handling the piece of false information, particularly regarding the development of detection and fact-checking algorithms (Condran, 2024).

Additionally, findings indicate a perceptual similarity between what is considered to be false information, and information that is not explicitly incorrect, but still misleading and harmful in nature; often distinguished in literature as *malinformation* (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). As a result, some participants also classified opinions as false information, despite acknowledging their inherent subjectivity. This is further linked to similar findings of how individuals think of certain information that aligns with their existing views as more credible (see section 5.1), and is consistent with prior literature that explores the role of this effect in the development of echo-chambers (Alatawi et al., 2021; Cinelli et al., 2021; Ghafouri et al., 2024). A participant details an instance where they encountered a post on YouTube regarding dieting advice, and while uncertain regarding defining it as false information, they highlighted the harmful nature of the post in their conceptualization:

I saw a video once. They were talking about dieting. And, so she was talking about ways to diet that I found to be really harmful. You're free to follow the advice, whether you ... like, it's up to you, right? But I just didn't approve the message, and I thought that if some impressionable people watch the video, maybe they could be negatively affected by it. Yeah, I didn't really enjoy watching the video, to be honest. But I don't really know if that counts as false information. I would just say that it is harmful information. (P02)

Thus, the participants explain how opinions and personal advice may be harmful in the same way as false information is, and — despite having difficulties categorizing them as instances of information as they are not as factually grounded as other more explicit forms of information, they still seem to be associated with the phenomenon. This highlights how selfhood shapes the phenomenon of false information itself and how it is defined, through opinions being involved in its conceptualization. The following quote highlights the reasoning and reflections of participants regarding this topic:

Like aggressive people that are really strongly holding onto their views. That's definitely a part- I would say that's a part of misinformation, because if your beliefs are very strong, but if you don't really have the data to be speaking so loudly, that can definitely be a source of false information. But that again is something else than if BBC would come out and just say something that's not happening. (P03)

These reflections of the participants also introduce the acknowledgment of different types of false information, which may impact the severity of a particular instance of the phenomenon. While participants were often uncertain about how to precisely define these different types when asked spontaneously, they frequently described the boundaries as being determined by three different external factors, namely: the *authority of the information source* (i.e., news outlets and impressionable influencers with large followings vs. everyday people in a random comment section); the *intentions of the information source*, and *the way the information is presented*. These differ from internal factors that influence the perceived significance of a piece of false information, which are identified in section 5.1. As these external factors are mostly tied to the source of the information, a deeper exploration of connections to information sources is warranted (see section 6.3).

These findings highlight how the phenomenon is closely related to selfhood through the involvement of personal conceptualization and the entanglement of opinions and personal beliefs, as well as embodiment and sociality through the social connections and conformity with information sources. Furthermore, they can be linked to existing work regarding that of Prochaska et al. (2023) and Wang et al. (2023) displaying how different participating social actors within misinformation campaigns with varying intentions work together to amplify the dissemination of false information online. Tied to this research, the findings of the present study elaborates on how different types of false information are interconnected, and work together to enable the mobilization of manufactured realities in such misinformation campaigns. Thus, they illustrate a direct correlation of how false information is experienced in day-to-day interactions, and the role of these experiences in larger developments of the phenomenon.

Progressing through the analytical process, findings indicate that these identified boundaries between various types of online false information are also interdependent. Discussions were raised of how the framing of the information — such as conspiracy theories framed as informal jokes — can influence individuals' views on whether the source aims to be informative, which in turn reveals their intentions. In these instances, information presented through 'memes' often make it harder to decipher the intentions of the information source, while also often being taken less seriously.

I don't know. I guess to me, I interpreted it as, that's the message that they're trying to give, but that might not be how other people interpret it, so I'm not sure if it's correct, you know? Because it's less- it's less clear. It's a meme. He's not really saying anything direct. So is he sharing *information*? I don't know. (P01, follow-up interview)

This illustrates how the aspects that impact the conceptualization of the phenomenon guides judgment of the information, and highlights how these factors directly influence each other. While this find may be considered more closely related to information literacy than media literacy, there is still a relevant correlation to the topic of 'meme culture' on social media platforms as elaborated by the participants. Furthermore, this can be related to the increasing entanglement of news and entertainment (Edgerly, 2017), where,

from personal accounts of the participants, this development has caused difficulties in interpreting information online. Similarly, a participant mentioned how they originally misunderstood a meme as a legitimate attempt of spreading false information, before they expanded the Instagram post — providing more information, and making them re-evaluate the intention of the information source:

I originally thought that this was someone trying to spread false information and then I re-evaluate and realize that it's just, obviously, it's a joke. And that made me realize that this sarcastic way of speaking that is so popular on the Internet right now may be indirectly contributing to false information online. [...] Again, after expanding the picture, I was a hundred percent certain that it was just a joke. Because also, it was just an everyday person who had retweeted it and said this funny joke, you know? It wasn't like a news article. If a news article said that then I would actually think that they're trying to spread misinformation because news articles don't joke like that. You know, it was just an everyday person throwing a joke out on the Internet which is a pretty regular occurrence. (P07, first interview)

Media literacy is additionally relevant when elaborating on this relationship, as the findings indicate that different media formats may provide varying levels of context, and have different connotations (see section 7.1) — such as investigated regarding image-based information (Wang et al., 2023). This highlights how technology mediates the information and the way its affordances impact personal understandings of the phenomenon, thus directly impacting the definitions of the concept, and providing implications for how the individual is to assess the information as they encounter it. Additionally, it illustrates how false information differs when it takes place through technology — providing implications for further investigations of differences between online and offline false information, signifying a meaningful difference between the two.

Because let's say you are on Instagram and you encounter a photo or you encounter a video of some kind. A lot of the time, at least with what I engage on Instagram, it is, you know, these are humor-based things or humor-based posts or these are of people's lifestyles, and with that sometimes you encounter things like sarcasm, which, I don't know if you would class that as false information, but sometimes it involves, you know, picturing something in an exaggerated or in a deliberately facetious way. (P09)

This exposes differences between platforms and between mediums, bringing forth the next topic of technological mediation, and how the fact that the phenomenon takes place online differentiates the definition of the phenomenon from otherwise false information. From accounts of the participants, the findings indicate that when false information is connected to the technological environment of social media platforms, the definition of the phenomenon is expanded to further include the acknowledgment of spam bots, online scams, and AI-generated content. In exploring what attributes of a piece of information as it takes place online adds to the perception of online false information, many pieces fall into place as to how technology mediates the phenomenon. That is to say, that the technological mediation of the phenomenon is central to the participants' understanding and experiences with the encounter; based on how vital attributes of false information are directly linked to the virtual space it inhabits. Related to this, the analytical process differentiates between how the phenomenon varies from in-person interactions

with false information, in the following section 4.2. Technology further complicates the phenomenon of false information through the incredible availability (Allcott et al., 2020), and, subsequently, the opportunity for anonymity that is added when sharing content on the Internet. This supports existing claims that may further explain why informational influences are stronger than normative influences regarding social presence particularly in online environments (Wijenayake et al., 2020). More details regarding the implications of different affordances within virtual spaces is explored in chapter 7.

In recounting specific instances with false information, the participants commonly described distinct encounters that resonated with them, and shared how these encounters stood out either due to the significance of the instance, or frustration due to the prolonged exposure to the phenomenon. As these are also factors that impact the severity of the emotional reaction from the experience (see section 5.2), these findings indicate that encounters that evoke stronger emotional reactions or otherwise have larger consequences for the participants are more prominent for the individual in shaping the phenomenon. This can be tied to existing literature regarding media literacy (Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022), and works as additional justification for nudging interventions in mitigation efforts (Bak-Coleman et al., 2021).

Additionally, many accounts of the participants are false information instances through what can be considered ‘secondary’ information sources, such as comment sections — however, they typically have less perceived severity, linked to the degree of authority that is perceived to be lower within these sources (see section 6.3). This difference in severity also leads the information to be treated differently, as stated by the participants:

I feel like it’s a lot easier for a post to get taken down because it’s untruthful, than it is for a comment. So if a post is fake, it’s more likely to get reported and taken down, but comments just kind of stay there and you can always read them. (P03)

Another unique characteristic of technology-mediated false information is the correlation between the phenomenon and AI-generated content on social media, providing a novel influence that continues to evolve through recent societal developments (see section 4.2). The findings indicate that AI-generated content is often considered a more severe and fraudulent form of false information as it may provide “fake evidence”:

I think that’s also why I get so annoyed with AI, because it’s trying to be evidence when it’s obviously not, because AI can’t be evidence, because it’s just false, you know? AI-generated pictures are just immediately classified as false information in my head. (P07, first interview)

Further analysis demonstrates that information that is framed through the use of AI-generated content is particularly telling of the intentions of the information source as it is perceived by the participant. The influence is often considerably negative, leading individuals to question the source of the information; ‘And with the way it is being presented, if it, for example, has like an AI voice speaking, it is usually kind of weird and suspicious to me.’ (P02). This participant goes on to state that the reason they tend to avoid AI-generated content is due to the low effort needed to generate it, which transforms the intention of the source from a genuine attempt information exchange to one concerned with monetary gain from social media engagement — which was a common belief among multiple participants. This exemplifies how the framing of the information

is crucial in shaping the participant's perception of source intentions. Moreover, these findings suggest that AI-generated content seems to boost existing implications of false information when it is considered to be involved in the participant's definition of the phenomenon.

These findings highlight the correlation between AI and false information for the participants, while also showcasing how personal conceptualizations directly impact the encounters with the phenomenon, as central within phenomenology (Finlay, 2013). The involvement of AI also heightens the perceived frequency of false information, highlighting how these concepts are closely related for the participants:

Because there are actually lots of bots on YouTube and with AI I feel like it's getting even more challenging. Because now we're seeing content farms, I think they're called, where people create tons of channels and they're all made by AI or they have an AI voice, AI type of content, and they just ... push out tons of videos every single day. (P02)

This also relates the issue to societal developments, as technological advancements within AI-technology and its increased and simplified use in society has had drastic consequences for the topic of false information online. Accounts from the participants indicate that false information with AI-generated aspects seemingly poses more of a danger due to the unpredictable nature of the way it frames information. This is further elaborated through an interpretation that acknowledges the correlation of this topic to embodiment within one's lifeworld, which is elaborated more in section 6.2.

Like, the way people have posted to Twitter, because like, Americans have gotten the AI thingy for Google, right? The shit it says. I think so far my favorite one, which is quite bad, honestly, has been a post on how to prepare this food. And one of the things to add is like "oh yeah a little bit of glue as well" right? And the source of that is a Reddit post from 12 years ago. And the AI doesn't care, it doesn't know any better. And the fact that that's the first thing that pops up as a result for a search ... yeah that's not good at all. So I think it directly affects the false information strongly because it can't sift what's right from wrong. (P06)

This correlation between AI and false information demonstrates what individual conceptualizations mean for experiences with the phenomenon. Participants who feel strongly towards AI-generated content — conceptualizing it as a severe form of false information — generated stronger emotional reactions when encountering AI-generated information, and portrayed a strong aversion for it as soon as they encountered such content. This relationship illustrates how the dimensions of the lifeworld are closely connected to and impacted by experiences with the phenomenon (Ashworth, 2003; Finlay, 2013), and how this influence impacts behavior in interactions with online false information.

Similarly, participants who defined false information more concretely as lies or fraudulent information over misrepresentations, tended to recount instances that aligned with these definitions. However, when questioned further, particularly regarding discussions of emotional reactions to online information, multiple participants seemed to broaden their definitions of the phenomenon. This included the addition of more reflections around what they conceptualize the phenomenon to be, including such reflections as: 'It's not necessarily false, but it's highlighting kind of unevenly.' (P03),

‘And I think that somewhat . . . could go under fake news, or false information, at least, without necessarily being so simple to point out as it.’ (P04), and ‘A lot of fake news are opinions regarding a situation, and since their opinion is based on fake news, it’s harder to fix when you’ve already generated an opinion from a falsehood.’ (P10).

These findings showcase the influence conceptualizations have for the phenomenon and how it manifests in experiences for the participants (Ashworth, 2003; Finlay & Eatough, 2012). Generally, the technological mediation of online false information is closely related to the phenomenon itself, where characteristics of technology and affordances of the digital spaces are directly involved in the conceptualization of the phenomenon. Participants recounted instances with the phenomenon that aligned with their initial descriptions; however, once questioned further through in-depth exploration of their experiences, the participants further reflected about how the phenomenon is revealed through their experiences; and is shaped by their prior encounters with it. Additionally, these findings introduce the importance of selfhood in the understanding of experiences based upon the relevance of personal beliefs, opinions, and perceptions (Ashworth, 2003), which is explored more in depth in chapter 5.

## 4.2 The Bigger Picture

This sub-theme addresses how false information fits into the larger context of society in present time as it takes place online, and how this context may influence experiences with the phenomenon. By examining the effects of engagement with online false information in the broader context of participants’ personal lives, the importance of these daily encounters with the phenomenon is emphasized. The experience is explored through physical spatiality — as how the environment of the participants as they are engaging with the phenomenon, focusing on the spatial context within society in this case, and temporality — as how the experience is shaped by as well as directly impacting the ever evolving societal context it exists within (Ashworth, 2003; Finlay & Eatough, 2012).

Exploring the greater context of society thus allows the phenomenon to be situated within the daily lives of the individual, and the influence of societal developments on these experiences are delved into. The findings of this analytical focus suggest that social media behavior including encounters with false information both shape and are shaped by societal attitudes, regulatory efforts, and political contexts — indicating a sort of feedback loop between society and technology. This is supported by existing work that illustrate the impact of social media interactions on societal developments (Chang et al., 2025; Prochaska et al., 2023). The findings of this section demonstrate that while the platforms mediate false information, the experiences are also influenced by economic, cultural, and governmental pressures; through the addition of various actors and domains involved, such as platforms ownership and the development of AI technology. These findings elaborate on the phenomenon in the broader influence, and how the external environment and societal forces shape the lifeworld of the individual within the experience.

Commonly, large societal topics at the time of the research — such as the Israel-Palestine conflict, recent U.S. presidential elections, and the COVID-19 pandemic — were often the topic of interest in the experiences recounted by the participants. This supports existing research focused on these various topics (Brindha et al., 2022; Chang et al., 2025; Pennycook & Rand, 2021; Wang et al., 2023) that explore a heightened amount of false information circulating at the time of these events. The present findings



indicate that these developments also impact the perceived frequency of online false information, where participants stated more instances related to these topics.

There's been a lot of false information on Instagram specifically about the war in Gaza. Like, for example, people saying that, Hamas beheaded like 40 babies or whatever. But, the one that I saw was this video of Joe Biden giving a press conference or something. And I think this- this was a Reel, and then he said that he saw the beheaded babies, like, the beheaded Israeli babies with his own eyes. (P01, first interview)

Advancement in the analytical process demonstrate that this frequency is further amplified through the involvement of AI. This revelation illustrates how technological advancements within society directly impact online false information due to it being directly mediated through virtual spaces — highlighting the meaning of spatiality for the phenomenon. Multiple participants mentioned concerns regarding this for future societal developments:

It seems to be increasing. I've seen a lot of it. A lot of like AI generated ... and there's also like videos of stuff happening and I do believe it's getting even more difficult to recognize, and that's a bit concerning. Because like that one comment mentioned, they said it's very concerning for the future if this many people are fooled by this kind of post. (P03)

Spatiality is thus helpful in order to situate the phenomenon within its context, recognizing the virtual setting in which it exists as it is mediated through technology. Exploring the differences between how the phenomenon takes place online and offline helps map the phenomenon within this context. Here, it is relevant to acknowledge the welfare effects social media has had and its impact on information sharing and communication practices (Allcott et al., 2020). While this literature highlights a difference between in-person and technology-mediated communication, exactly how these differences are experienced by the individual warrants further exploration; especially within the context of false information, as this is underexplored (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). Participants noted that the nature of their conversations tend to vary based on whether they are meeting face-to-face or communicating virtually:

And when it is something like that then we text about it, but otherwise I would rather talk in person, so that actually I can get more of my thoughts out and more of the context. And I just think it's easier to give context when it is physical. (P07, first interview)

Further elaboration from the participants revealed reflections indicating that this difference is due to their values and priorities fluctuating depending on their environment — between in person and online contexts. This illustrates how the spatial dimension of the lifeworld directly impacts the selfhood, and thus interactions of the participants in connection to the phenomenon. For example, the findings indicate that personal connections are emphasized in face-to-face interactions, while online discussion is usually more centered around being right or wrong in an argument: 'Because online, I'm a lot more concerned with the topic, while in person, with close connections, I'm very concerned with the relationship.' (P04). This is consistent with the findings of Wijenayake et al. (2020), exploring social conformity in online communication

spaces, where discussion in online environments are more concerned with informational influences over normative ones.

With the phenomenon situated in technology, the findings suggest that different technological affordances affect how the phenomenon is experienced digitally compared to in-person encounters with false information through such as social interactions. Participants mentioned a larger sense of suspicion when they are navigating online spaces, as they have a higher expectation of encountering false information in these environments:

Because when I go about my life in real life, I am not suspicious to everything everyone says to me at all times ... but when I am on the Internet, it may not be such a thing that's in the front of my mind all the time, but I am a lot more suspicious to the information that I come into contact with just out of prior experiences. Probably just because of this underlying fact — I would call it a fact — that a lot of the information online is ... somewhat lacking important context, or something. (P07, follow-up interview)

Additionally, this suspicion is further connected to the governance of the spaces, as multiple participants speculated intentions of platform owners and their aim to maintain user activity and engagement, even through immoral practices that may amplify negativity and false information dissemination: 'I know socials are made to make you angry just to keep you watching, you know? So you do have to be like conscious about it all the fucking time which is annoying.' (P06).

Interpretation of these findings illustrates how the phenomenon, as it occurs online, is accompanied and impacted by additional stakeholders; revealing that the social actors involved in these interactions are different from in person instances (e.g., platform owners and different information sources). These findings highlight how the frequency of false information on social media, as it is mediated by the characteristics of technology that make information sharing so easy to access (Allcott et al., 2020), creates an expectation for the participants in encountering false information within these spaces, which has further implications for their goals and behaviors (see section 7.3).

Further related to platform governance is how societal developments may shape one's selfhood through views and opinions, that in turn affect the actions of the individuals as they use the platforms. Findings regarding this topic are explored more thoroughly in section 6.3, also including how views towards specific actors involved in the phenomenon — such as platform owners — impact perceptions of information online.

the West likes controlling the narrative and I feel like these social media platforms also have an agenda, right? So yeah I don't think there's a lot being done. I don't know what can be done as well. (P01, first interview)

The results of the analysis indicate that greater societal developments impact the views of the individual regarding the platforms they engage on, resulting in mistrust in platform mitigation. This is particularly relevant as a development in platform governance through the platform presently renamed as X after the renewed ownership of Elon Musk — which was a concern of multiple participants regarding the topic: 'Twitter, it's so easy to get away with it. Especially now that the moderation has gone to hell. It's barely there and what it monitors is what it shouldn't care for, because Elon Musk decided so.' (P06). Due to this belief, the participant exhibits a higher expectation of encountering false information on the platform, which in turn impacts their online experience.

These findings additionally introduce the role of Internet accessibility through the participants noting an expanded reach of false information due to the availability of online spaces. ‘If it’s online, you never know how many people it’s going to reach. Like, if they make a post or a video, it could get millions of views without even trying.’ (P08). This interpretation emphasizes the ease of communication enabled through social media platforms (Allcott et al., 2020), and supports existing literature detailing the ‘permanence’ of false information (Brindha et al., 2022; Nyhan & Reifler, 2015); as instances of false information may continue to influence and shape opinions if they are not subsequently debunked and explained away by another causal explanation.

Further advancement of the analysis reveals another characteristic of technology-mediated information impacting the phenomenon, namely the abundance of people that are enabled to engage at once due to the availability of the Internet. Findings indicate that this makes it easier to engage in false information, supporting existing literature regarding the mobilization of misinformation campaigns (Prochaska et al., 2023). Participants expressed frustrations regarding the habit of people to disregard context, and thus continuing the dissemination of false information instances.

They talk about situations they don’t know about, and because of that then the other person experiences a lot of hatred for no reason. It’s so easy to just send hate because it’s anonymous. And if there are several thousands of people sending hate at the same time, it’s easier to send hate. (P10)

Additional findings suggest that the experience differs depending on the affordances of the different social media spaces. This is highlighted particularly through differences between media formats (see section 7.1), which additionally warrants cross-platform approaches to exploring the phenomenon (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). The participants reflected between differences in the various media formats online compared to face-to-face communication, where findings suggest how these experiences impact their lifeworlds differently (see section 7.2):

If it was in person then, you might be able to, like, someone’s voice might genuinely be sincere, and their body language and expressions might help people believe the fake stuff a little bit more, but then, also, if it’s online, then, if it’s a video with, I don’t know, 100,000 likes, then people might be more inclined to believe it. (P09)

The findings suggest that the quick-paced and short-formed nature of social media content has a role to play in the shaping of false information perception and reaction in its bigger context. Some participants stated a preference for short-form content as they consider it to be more time-effective: ‘It’s more condensed because of that character limit [...] Compared to like an hour long video, you can read a couple of tweets and you get the same thing.’ (P01, follow-up interview). Other participants mentioned that, while it is easier to consume, shorter content often provide less context:

I feel like it’s easier to consume video-format of the information rather than reading a long text. Even if the translation- if there was originally text-based information that was transformed to video, maybe some things would be lost in translation. (P10)

While these findings signify a difference between media formats in information perception (see section 7.1), the resulting analysis additionally exposes a characteristic of

social media platforms in mediating information sharing practices that complicates the development of media literacy. This introduces how differences in the spatial dimension — through platform affordances — impact one’s selfhood, also highlighting a concern of multiple participants regarding the impact of false information in societal development:

I would say the prevalence of short-form content as well because it’s ... well, anecdotally, it is shortening people’s attention spans. Whereas before, someone might go, “oh, let me seek out information about this and read through it.” Now it becomes, “okay, I’ve had that hit of information with dopamine. I’m chasing the next one.” Notifications as well. Often you get notifications that something is trending, a topic is trending, or that specific account posted something. So I think that plays a role as well in terms of if you like the content or the information put out by an account enough, regardless of whether it’s true or false, you can be notified every time they put out new stuff. And for a lot of people, it becomes, okay, let me click on it, let me click on it, let me click on it. Because it’s a ... you know, it’s designed to make you want to click on it. (P09)

Further analysis explores how interactions with false information impact the personal lives of the participants to help assess the perceived significance of false information as experienced by the people. Multiple participants mentioned that they no longer speak with people who have disagreed over false information, while others acknowledged the impact it may have on their relationship — elaborated more in chapter 6.

My friend who calls me out on the Joe Biden stuff, for example, even though she was completely right to do it, I noticed that it gave me a hurtful feeling, and without being aware of it myself, I became somewhat distant from this person who corrects me. So, it’s uncomfortable to sit with the fact that you were wrong, you kind of made a fool of yourself, and you have told the world that you believe this. (P04)

This shows the consequences that everyday instances of false information has for participants, and the entanglement of sociality and selfhood in experiences with the phenomenon.

### 4.3 Final Remarks

This chapter makes clear how the participants conceptualize the phenomenon of interest, and how it fits into the greater societal context and their personal lives. As evident in the findings, this conceptualization influences the actions participants take in encounters with online false information. Additionally, it emphasizes that the technological mediation of this information through social media platforms is closely related to the phenomenon itself, highlighting the deeply contextualized nature of this phenomenon. Furthermore, as the findings of this chapter solidify the online false information as a socio-technical phenomenon (Adams et al., 2023; Vicario et al., 2016), the phenomenon is introduced through how it is experienced in the daily lives of the participants, which introduces the following chapter focused on selfhood and how individuals individually make sense of the phenomenon; including their reactions and the impact it has on them as a person.



## Chapter 5

# My Lived Experience

The selfhood dimension of people's lifeworld refers to what a situation means for one's personal identity and their sense of self (Ashworth, 2003). This dimension is also closely related to issues of sociality (which is the focus of chapter 6), as our identity is what sets us apart from some social actors while binding us to others. Therefore, it can be argued that understanding selfhood is essential to understand community interactions. This involves the emotions, values, and expectations of the individual at the center of the experience.

Understanding how the experience impacts and is impacted by one's selfhood provides a deep understanding of how these instances affect people under real circumstances. Here, the analytical focus seeks to explore the correlations between the individual and the experience. Additionally relevant in this discussion is the dimension of embodiment as it involves emotions and feelings regarding oneself (Ashworth, 2003). Thus, encounters are viewed on a smaller, more specific scale, exploring the individual experience and how people engage with false information in everyday instances. Further relevant to understand this is the concept of awareness (Schmidt, 2011), as it poses ourselves as co-extensive with the meaning of the lifeworld (Ashworth, 2003; Gross, 2013).

This chapter explores the practices and awareness of the participants in their individual experiences with the phenomenon. False information is not just processed cognitively, but experienced through the self; shaped by personal identity and emotions (Ashworth, 2003; Svanæs, 2013). Exploring the connection between the individual and the phenomenon provides insight into how false information can be mediated with a focus on everyday interactions (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). Understanding this connection through one's lifeworld provides an in-depth understanding of how the participants experience the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Finlay, 2013), and how these experiences are mediated by the relevant technologies.

This exploration of the self establishes the aspects that make up the present theme, which is composed of three sub-themes. The first sub-theme explores how individuality and selfhood impact the perceived significance of the encountered piece of false information. The relationship of this with the role of personal emotions adds nuances of people's lived experience by assessing how an individual is emotionally affected by a piece of online information, and how this subsequently influences their engagement with it. Finally, these processes come together to influence the sense- and decision-making processes of the individual, in an exploration of how the conclusion regarding the piece of information is reached. These factors illustrate how participants judge and make sense of false information as they encounter it within the various platforms.

Additionally, they explore how the features of the platforms are used in these processes, as well as how the experiences impact the individual through their selfhood.

## 5.1 Selfhood and the Significance of False Information

This section seeks to explore the perceived significance of the information and how this impacts actions and sense-making processes in encounters with false information. While the analysis of the findings so far has suggested external factors that impact this significance based on context and technological mediation, exploring internal factors are vital in understanding the sense of self in interactions with the phenomenon. This is highlighted through an analytical process that emphasizes the phenomenological dimension of selfhood, as the self is the subject of all experiences (Ashworth, 2003; Finlay, 2013). The individual and their selfhood impact their perception of the phenomenon and in turn influence the experiences and their actions. Understanding the factors impacting this relationship provides implications for technological mediation of personal identity and how platform design impacts perception and values (technological mediation is explored more explicitly in chapter 7). Identified internal factors that influence the significance of false information for the individual are *the information topic*, the individual's *connections to the information source*, and *personal beliefs, values, and background*. This perceived significance of the information is found to impact subsequent interactions and parts of the experience, including the emotional reaction derived from it, the sense- and decision-making processes, and the related practices taken to engage with the piece of information.

The analysis of the findings indicates that the perceived significance of a piece of false information is dependent on both internal and external factors. Participants displayed noticeable differences in their reactions regarding the severity of a piece of false information, influenced by the subject matter of that information. While discussing these distinctions, they highlighted that some subjects hold greater significance for them than others. The interpretation of these accounts note that this prioritization affects how individuals respond to the present information, as well as the effect it has on their emotions and interpersonal connections. Hence, it can be argued that the significance that a piece of false information has for an individual is deeply connected to one's personal connection to the information topic: 'If it was a very important topic to me, then maybe it would (affect me). But if it's for more trivial stuff, then I don't think it would affect anything, really.' (P05). This is highlighted by an indifference regarding trivial information or topics that are less relevant for the individuals, while familiar topics often cause more intense reactions: 'I think I react to certain news, especially negative news about (celebrity), in a very defensive way because of that, I guess. [...] Because I feel that connection.' (P01, first interview).

Based on these findings, one could infer that the closer the piece of false information is to one's selfhood — that is, personal values, identities, and their communities — the more significant one may deem the information to be. This closeness, the findings suggest, can manifest in multiple ways; related to *the information topic* in question, the *connections to the information source*, and, finally, *personal beliefs, values, and background* of the individual. These findings elaborate on existing research regarding how people judge and assess false information online (Allen et al., 2022; Lutz et al., 2024), where findings explore the different factors that impact cognitive and affective processing. The findings herein presented further suggest how these factors are related to one's selfhood, where the phenomenon in what it means for social identity is elaborated upon through the

mutual impact they have on each other. The significance of the piece of information is further found to impact the emotional reactions evoked, which is explored in depth in the following section 5.2 tied to the lifeworld dimension of embodiment.

The findings, seeking to connect the experience to one's selfhood, indicate that personal values influence engagement with false information. This interpretation is based on how participants that highly emphasized honesty in their personal values, were more intensely affected by the phenomenon as it takes place even in trivial contexts (such as fake video game ads compared to political conflicts): 'So let's say I see this fake game ad. That will, at the very least, definitely keep me away from wanting to play that game. Because I don't agree with lying. That's just a fundamental thing in my head.' (P07, first interview). Meanwhile, other participants voiced less of a disturbance in these matters, and instead often prioritized entertainment in these situations. 'There was a slight kind of ... maybe not discomfort, but ... not betrayal, but like, kind of betrayal. But then also, I kept going because they're still kind of funny and entertaining.' (P03). These participants voiced less concern with the aforementioned values of honesty, while also portraying an expectation of information on certain online spaces being less trustworthy in these environments: 'Typically I don't really trust anything I see on Instagram.' (P03). Thus, the analysis of these findings highlights that different reactions to false information are caused by a difference in values and expectations to the spaces.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that the background of the individual impacts the ways they interact with the piece of false information. Multiple participants mentioned that, despite feeling uncertain regarding the integrity or accuracy of a piece of information, they did not want to challenge it due to the differing levels of background from the information source — such as, challenging a doctor on a health statement: 'He is a person who kind of has authority. And, you know, as a person who doesn't really have that sort of education, it's hard to actually challenge anything he's saying.' (P02). However, this authority is also shown to have significance for the perceived responsibility of the information source, which impacts emotional reactions (see section 5.2) and connections to the information source (see section 6.3).

The findings indicate that the authority that affects the significance of false information is closely related to the perceived reach of the false information. This analysis is extrapolated from the multiple accounts of participants who expressed frustration regarding influential social actors spreading false information, due to the potential consequences that derive from their large reach or audience:

Because that's something that everybody, millions of people, watch every single day to get their source of information. And like I said, if they were to say the volcano was about to erupt, millions of people are going to start raiding grocery stores and trying to get stuff in order to survive. But if it was just an everyday person telling a lie, then it's ... everybody lies. It would just be another day to me. It would just be like, "wow, that's crazy". I just wouldn't give it a reaction, really. (P05)

These findings support existing literature that identifies influencers as one of the key factors that amplify the construction of manufactured realities in misinformation campaigns (Prochaska et al., 2023), additionally elaborating that this can be explained to be due to the reach they have.

Furthermore, the findings of the present work illustrate that when false information aligns with a person's worldview, they may downplay its severity; or in some cases, even defend it. Accounts from the participants detailed instances where family members



had fallen for instances of false information due to this alignment — sometimes leading them to justify seemingly unrelated topics once a close connection to their selfhood was achieved. In such instances, this added difficulties for the individuals in correcting the false information with others when they had contrasting worldviews:

But for my grandmother, it has to feel right. For her, she's not so fact-oriented. She is much more oriented towards what feels right. And what agrees with her perception of reality from before. And in that sense, we're not so different. I have my own perception of reality too, which I look for, but she's less fact-oriented and rather faith-based. (P04)

From accounts of the participants, the analysis finds that often times, what led corrections to succeed in these difficult instances was the connection the social actors had to each other; often being that of family members or close friends. The importance of social connections for these practices is further explored in section 6.3. These findings are consistent with existing work detailing that user partisanship is the most predictive form of judgment when evaluating the content of tweets (Allen et al., 2022).

These situations can be tied to the psychological effect of confirmation bias (Alatawi et al., 2021), mentioned in existing literature regarding online false information in how it impacts judgment. The alignment of worldviews and its impact on susceptibility to false information can thus be explained through the closeness to selfhood being established through confirmation bias, and thus, may leave individuals more vulnerable to false information that exploit this. The participants themselves highlight the noticeable role it plays in these interactions, illustrating a sense of self-awareness on the topic, which guides their understanding of the experience. This supports existing literature on the topic, but accounts from the participants highlight a degree of self-awareness regarding the issue that may further guide sense- and decision-making based media literacy (Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022; Seelam et al., 2024).

I think it's difficult to say that you don't, because obviously once you encounter information that aligns with your worldview or aligns with what your interests are ... I study psychology, so people have a general tendency to seek out information they agree with. And to say that I don't have, that would be, you know, that would be a very far cry. A very, a very bold thing to claim. (P09)

Existing research further reveals how this psychological effect is impacting the development of echo-chambers (Alatawi et al., 2021). Acknowledging that some participants included opinions in their definitions of false information can explain echo-chambers through the lens of selfhood. While personal opinions and values go hand and hand with selfhood (Ashworth, 2003), these instances of information that support existing beliefs feel in close proximity to the individual's sense of self. Thus, confirmation bias is central in these instances of echo-chambers. Participants also highlight how this may lead to irrational reactions, due to the perceived personal attack on the individual:

And they might be strongly opinionated against, I don't know, a certain person or a certain country or something and they'll believe anything about that place just because they have a negative opinion towards it. (P08)

The role of technology in this interaction is through technological affordances, such as platform algorithms. Confirmation bias manifests through these affordances and impacts

the individual by catering to the selfhood and embodiment of their experienced lifeworld. Additional explorations on how the technological affordances influence this relationship is presented in section 7.2.

I would say that notifications and algorithms definitely has an impact, because if you keep getting fed information that you already agree with, information that you already know you agree with and so you trust the source, then people become less willing or even less able to critically engage with what's being put out. And I wouldn't say that's a fault, that someone isn't able to critically engage with it. It's tiring to have to critically engage with everything you come across all the time, right? (P09)

The interpretation of the findings suggest that the ways platforms mediate the social identity and values of the users additionally plays an influential role in mediating the phenomenon. Various participants mentioned that expressing opinions online and having discussions is often a different experience on the Internet compared to real-life communication (see section 4.2). These findings indicate that this is due to a difference in values, and the connections one has to other social actors (see section 6.3), aligning with issues of social conformity online (Wijenayake et al., 2020). Therefore, it can be interpreted that the way in which the online space enables individuals to express their selfhood impacts further actions taken in encounters with false information. These findings emphasize the sense of self at the center of the experience.

If you say something I don't entirely agree with, I would say my own opinion, and I'm always kind of prepared that we could have different opinions, we don't always have to have the same opinion, and we can still be civil. But I feel like that ... civil-ness, if you will, is gone on the Internet. Generally, it's so easy to just shout your own opinion, and shit-talk others for their own. (P10)

This analytical process reveals that the perceived significance that individuals attribute to a piece of false information substantially influences their beliefs regarding the consequences of the particular instance of the phenomenon. This can be interpreted to be in relation to the context in which the information is presented, where their evaluation of the information is what shapes their judgment of the information. Often times, participant recounted interactions with false information they considered to have severe consequences — either for themselves, or for others within the context.

The findings of this section identify internal factors — related to one's selfhood (Ashworth, 2003) — that, alongside external factors (see section 4.1), influence the perceived significance of a piece of online information. These findings showcase the role of selfhood in impacting information perception and the implications of this on the individual at the heart of the experience — elaborating through further lifeworld fragments on the existing work of embodied perception (Svanæs, 2013). While internal factors are not something that can be managed in the same way as the external factors mentioned in section 4.1, the findings provide meaningful insights that help explain the behavior and sense-making processes when faced with false information. Furthermore, this analytical exploration sheds light on how individuals differentiate between reliable and unreliable information as they navigate the social media platforms, in relation to their sense of self through what their presence means for the experience (Ashworth, 2003). Lastly, the findings indicate that the significance of the information and the consequences go hand in hand in the judgment of the individuals.

## 5.2 Embodied Emotions

As the analysis progressed, it further suggested that the perceived significance of the piece of false information impacts the emotional reactions derived from the experiences with them. In this section, the embodiment of the experience is explored explicitly through a reflection on the emotions that are affected and how this impacts the experience with false information. Existing research has touched on this, particularly through a focus on marginalized groups targeted by instances of false information (Khan et al., 2024; Malki et al., 2024), presenting findings that solidify the importance of affective processing in interactions with false information (Allen et al., 2022). This indicates that there is a connection between how the phenomenon of false information is related to one's embodied experience with the phenomenon, calling for investigations to shed light towards what influences these emotions, and how it subsequently impacts the experience of the phenomenon.

The findings of this research provided information on the differentiation between long-term emotions towards false information, and more short-term emotional reactions to specific encounters with the phenomenon. This is due to the exploration of how embodied emotions are impacted by the temporal dimension of the lifeworld (Ashworth, 2003). The findings suggest that one's emotions evolve in tandem with experiences of the phenomenon as time progresses. This supports existing literature that highlights the emotional burnout that comes with exposure to false information (Malki et al., 2024). Long-term emotions were found to often be linked to frustrations regarding the frequency of false information, as well as concerns about societal development and the impact of false information on others. Additionally, these long-term emotions are found to impact habitual practices both in engagement with false information and on social media as a whole.

I guess it was because it started kind of affecting the way I think in a way I didn't like. And it started like, I don't know, I'm so often on Instagram and I see so much of it so it does kind of affect you. And then it does make you, like, I don't know maybe a bit more negative, and then you walk around like ... I don't know. So just trying to talk to my friends that I know are kind of good people, and having them reassure me. (P03)

The interpretation of the findings shows a sense of fatigue in encounters with false information, especially if they challenge one's selfhood. This is consistent with existing research on the emotional impact marginalized groups experience in their encounters with targeted false information (Khan et al., 2024; Malki et al., 2024). The findings of this thesis elaborate on the importance of temporality in these instances, underlined by the participants through repeated exposure over time. Additionally, findings indicate that this often leads to aversion, with the goal of avoiding the emotional impact of false information.

I'm tired of it. I'm tired of constantly having to deal with "insert comment" but hear it like 100 times instead of once and just ignore it. It gets tiring, honestly. So it's literally just for my own peace of mind. You know? So if I'm on the Internet, I'm gonna have a good time, so you ain't gonna be there. (P06)

The participants of this study displayed an aversion to false information when their physical surroundings required their primary focus. Interpretation of these findings

suggests that this is due to the negative emotions that are evoked in experiences with false information. Multiple participants explain how encounters with online false information are distracting and tiring, and elaborate on how this in turn impacts when they choose to engage with the phenomenon, or virtual spaces it may appear in as a whole: ‘I was also probably in bed or at home just relaxing, because I try not to engage in that kind of content when I’m doing other things because it can stress me out. Because it makes me upset.’ (P01, follow-up interview).

The findings indicate that these instances impact habitual engagement and practice as they often lead to aversion, with the goal of avoiding the emotional impact of false information. This, tied to embodied knowledge (De Carvalho et al., 2018), portrays how the knowledge becomes embedded in one’s online presence and habitual practice, and thus, how the phenomenon of false information directly impacts the embodiment of the individual as it is experienced over time (Ashworth, 2003).

I do like them (comments) if it’s someone correcting the information. Otherwise, I don’t interact with them because I don’t want to see more of it on my feed. Because it really does upset me, it really does frustrate me, and I don’t want to feel that way. (P07, first interview)

When investigating the short-term emotional impacts of false information, the analytical exploration of this work finds that certain topics that are commonly associated with false information are particularly sensitive and cause intense emotional reactions, consistent with existing research on emotional findings regarding encounters with false information (Khan et al., 2024; Malki et al., 2024). Participants acknowledged that certain topics evoked particularly intense reactions — such as war conflicts — due to the inherent intense nature of the subject matter. This additionally motivated aversion, directly showcasing how embodied emotions and selfhood impacts one’s interactions with false information online:

I think if it’s something so stupid or something that I’m paranoid about. For some reason I get really paranoid about wars and stuff so I always click not interested if there’s anything war related on my Instagram or YouTube or whatever, because I don’t want to hear about it, because I’m paranoid enough as it is. (P08)

Another emerging topic was the role of the medium in affecting these emotions. Multiple participants mentioned stronger emotional reactions depending on whether the piece of information was portrayed in a visual context, as compared to a textual format:

I think videos and images often generate a stronger emotional reaction from people. And with that emotional reaction, often for a lot of people, I’m not discounting myself either. We go, okay, that’s enough. I know enough. Now I’m going to have a response because it’s generated something very emotional. (P09)

Thus, it can be inferred that this is connected to the emotional differences from the different media formats; showing how different affordances (Gibson, 2014) impact reactions and behaviors in different ways. Findings illustrating that these reactions resulted in an aversion of certain content are consistent with existing literature underlining fatigue from overexposure to false information (Malki et al., 2024). This

differentiation based on media formats is found to go deeper, also providing a noticeable difference between image- and video-based content. These findings are relevant to be elaborated through embodied knowledge (De Carvalho et al., 2018) that is able to be portrayed through video content (see section 6.2), which, through analysis of the experienced lifeworld, can be understood to feel closer to one's selfhood and thus garner more of an intense emotional reaction.

Because when I see a video of someone talking, I think there is someone to direct my anger towards. Or it's more obvious. It's that person. That person is talking. Whereas on Twitter, I saw, like, a poster. [...] And I feel like that you can kind of make excuses, you know? Like "oh maybe it's not him maybe it's like campaign people or something" you know, it's less concrete, if that makes sense. (P01, follow-up interview)

Furthermore the findings demonstrate that the emotional reactions depend on the aforementioned aspects that impact the severity of the information, both external (see section 4.1) and internal (see section 5.1). Participants mentioned more intense emotional reactions in recounting instances where the information source was deemed to be trustworthy through its authority, leading to a deeper feeling of betrayal and disappointment:

(I was) angry that he would say something like that, knowing the power that he had, knowing the power that his words hold, but also relieved that it's not true. ... Disappointed that people took that and used it as a way to spread more hate towards Palestinians. (P01, first interview)

This in turn recognizes how certain topics of information that are closer to one's selfhood more greatly impact their embodied emotions, as these dimensions of the lifeworld are closely connected. This supports existing literature on echo-chambers (Alatawi et al., 2021; Starbird et al., 2018), where information that aligns with existing views and opinions — one's selfhood, in this interpretation — are more comfortable to accept as true, while contrasting views may evoke negative emotional reactions.

I feel like if it was false information that goes against my beliefs, or what I think, then I mean if I see it then like, of course I'd be sad, you know? Or embarrassed that that is happening. But if it's on your side how would you feel angry? (P01, follow-up interview)

The framing of the information, as identified as an external factor that impacts the perceived significance of a piece of false information, is also interpreted to influence the emotional reactions of individuals when encountering false information. Participants mentioned how false information in the form of 'memes' or online jokes evoked less of a reaction, while still recognizing them as false information:

Also because it was a meme, I didn't take it as seriously, like I wasn't upset or mad or anything. I was just like, "haha, that's dumb". And then kind of moved on. (P01, follow-up interview)

Existing research details how false information spread through 'memes' is often more engaging than other online ways of communicating information (Chang et al., 2025), something that has been enabled both through the increased use of AI-generated

content, as well as the entanglement of news and entertainment on social media (Edgerly, 2017). While the simplification of information portrayed through this framing allows for novel engagement within areas such as political communication, the present findings demonstrate that these topics may not be taken as seriously as if they were communicated otherwise.

When being corrected, some participants mentioned strong emotional reactions to accepting that their opinions were wrong, emphasized by the desire of the information being true, and a growing familiarity to this understanding. Through an analytical focus that seeks to explore this relationship tied to selfhood and embodiment, these findings indicate that, as a piece of information that is close to one's sense of self gets debunked, it leads to an increased feeling of discomfort with this realization.

I felt cheated. I did. And I felt very embarrassed. And I just couldn't get it to make sense. Because I kind of wanted the information in that video to be true, in a way. (P04)

While negative reactions are plentiful in interactions with false information, these findings further acknowledge the patterns of disappointment and confusion within these situations. The increasing uncertainty resulting in interactions with false information impacts the individual and their selfhood, leading to increased doubt regarding their own views and their embodied selves. This is consistent with literature of echo-chambers and instances of confirmation bias (Alatawi et al., 2021), where accepting information that forwards own beliefs is often more comfortable than otherwise. These findings provide in-depth accounts of the participants that showcase how their interactions with false information has directly impacted them through the lens of their lifeworld, exploring the consequences it has had for their selfhood.

I think if someone's going to say something back in a debate or an argument or something or they've gone to tell their friends or family about something, I can see it backfiring a lot, because if they come out with that false information, then everyone's going to be really confused about why they said that. And they're going to have believed it for so long, then they're not going to understand why everyone doesn't agree with them, and then they're going to find out that it's not real what they've heard, and they're going to be really confused. (P08)

This is further impacted by the temporal dimension of their lifeworld, as information may become harder and harder to correct over time (Nyhan & Reifler, 2015). The interpretation of these findings suggest that the emotional reaction evoked in correcting the information that they have grown to be familiar with as truth can increase over time and potentially become harder to accept.

Multiple participants also highlight an awareness of the nature of social media platforms and false information as they target and exploit emotional reactions. This, while still leading to the same emotional reactions in the participants, implies a sense of awareness over what is expected of the individual, as well as awareness of the phenomenon, and renders the individual more applicable to engage — now with more knowledge of the situation to support their critical agency (Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022). This supports existing literature on the role of awareness in fact-checking as it is found to lead to more effective interventions (Seelam et al., 2024), and embodied knowledge for collaboration and shared meanings (De Carvalho et al., 2018).

Another noticeable observation regarding one's embodiment demonstrates variations in the intensity of emotional responses based on the utilization of AI. This may arise from the strange or unnatural characteristics of AI, particularly when it attempts to replicate human speech or habits, as several individuals specifically noted this as unsettling: 'They were so weird, they had a lot of the slang that people use nowadays. And they- they were very, I don't know, it was very strange. [...] There was something off-putting about the lingo being so juvenile.' (P03). Similarly, participants highlighted how being able to see another person talking and engaging with the viewer can add credibility: 'someone's voice might genuinely be sincere, and their body language and expressions might help people believe the fake stuff a little bit more' (P08).

The findings of this section highlight how both internal and external factors that impact the perceived significance of false information are an important influence in the emotional reactions caused by engagement with false information. Additionally, embodiment plays a role in this interaction through the embodied knowledge that additionally affects emotions (De Carvalho et al., 2018), as well as habitual practices linked to one's emotions and sense of self (Ashworth, 2003; Finlay, 2013).

### 5.3 Coming to the Senses

The following section explores in detail the sense- and decision-making processes involved in experiences with the phenomenon. This includes both the thoughts and subsequent actions that guide the sense-making of the participants as they encountered uncertainty to online information; vital in understanding how individuals differentiate between reliable and unreliable information on the platforms. Here, the analytical focus was to reveal what factors and prior experiences with the phenomenon influence and guide the participants' interactions with online false information, through an exploration of the dimensions of their lifeworld and how these elements influence the self and their behavior.

As identified in section 4.1, the way a piece of information is framed online impacts the perceived significance of that information for the individual. The findings demonstrate how this sense-making process is dependent on various characteristics of online content, and how individuals rely on these attributes to determine their understanding of the piece of information. Commonly, the findings from the literature suggest that gathering context is essential for this judgment (Lutz et al., 2024; Zade et al., 2023). In this research, the sense-making processes have been further explored to understand how the lifeworld is involved in the sense- and decision-making of individuals as they encounter the phenomenon.

Participants mentioned the presentation of a social media post as being vital in their judgment when encountering information (see chapter 7). Interpreting these findings suggests that trust to one's spatiality — meaning, the space the information exists within — is involved in judging the information, elaborating on this influence. This interpretation can be tied to existing literature of providing context (Bak-Coleman et al., 2021; Lutz et al., 2024), where, through the understanding of the lifeworld, a virtual space that provides meaningful and relevant context to the information would then impact the sense-making processes of the individual in assessing this information. 'This is so superficial but like when a post is pretty, for example like an infographic post I would like ... my brain is like "oh yeah that's true"' (P01, first interview).

The findings suggest that the framing of the information further encompasses the language used within the content. This demonstrates how wording and language is

used in judging information, supporting existing research where context-dependent fact-checking is found to be more effective (Liu et al., 2024). This can be tied to embodiment, as understood through the lifeworld, where linguistics are a part of one's selfhood and embodied knowledge (Finlay, 2013).

I think it's the way that people, they word some things. There's ... I don't know how to explain it, but there's a way that the fake media people word things. They use, like, really over-the-top words and pictures and ... anything they can, because it's supposed to draw your attention and it's not really supposed to be real. But some people still believe it anyway, so I feel like that's quite a big teller for the fake ones. (P08)

This supports existing literature exploring the linguistic cues that make individuals more susceptible to false information (Lutz et al., 2024), as well as generative 'memes' that are used to generate engagement through over-the-top statements and humor-oriented content (Chang et al., 2025). Additionally, the present findings emphasize the importance of language as embodied knowledge, and underline the role of linguistics in fact-checking interventions that emphasize the context of the information (Liu et al., 2024).

As the analysis progressed, the findings revealed that, when judging information, individuals often favor information sources they perceive to have higher authority. These involve news outlets, influential people, and experts in the relevant fields of information. Participant accounts further showcase that this priority is followed by a stronger emotional reaction and sense of betrayal when such sources end up being incorrect. The findings additionally indicate that this authority is essential in evaluating the credibility of information sources.

Because if Israel bombed Germany, then it would be everywhere. It would be in the news, and it would be quite a big headline if they did do something like that. But not in an Instagram post. (P08)

Academic papers were often mentioned for assessing the integrity of informative claims in social media posts. While these sources were considered to be the most credible, multiple participants acknowledged that merely viewing the references sufficed in their sense-making, and they do not necessarily go through the citations to assess the primary source itself. This signifies that, while these sources are considered the most credible, other, more time effective fact-checking or contextual support is preferred. This aligns with existing research on fact-checking interventions (Bak-Coleman et al., 2021). Instead, participants were likely to look up topics on Google, but even this requires a certain threshold regarding the significance of the information to motivate these practices. This threshold differed greatly from person to person and was not easily agreed upon.

I try to confirm by looking at other sources, aka. I Google it and see if it's true. [...] And then if I'm bothered, if I found out that it's wrong and if I'm bothered, then I would report a post or tweet. (P01, first interview)

Some participants were more comfortable engaging on social media than others; these participants mentioned often sharing posts if they were particularly reactive to the information. The motivations behind these practices were often dependent on the



significance of the piece of information, and are elaborated in section 6.1. Nonetheless, these findings introduce how sociality is related in interactions with false information, as the lifeworld dimension is closely connected to one's selfhood (Ashworth, 2003).

Further advancement of the analysis highlighted this close connection between social relations and judging information online, solidifying the role of sociality in the sense-making processes of individuals in encounters with false information. The participants reiterate the importance of diversity in their sense-making processes, emphasizing multiple information sources and differing views as helpful in developing their own opinions.

If there is multiple people saying that it's not true, or it is true, that's probably where I would look first to make sure. Because I always look at comments. I always look at comments. So if I were to see people commenting that, that would make me question if it's true or false. [...] I like to know what other people talk about or what other people think. (P05)

This is supported by existing work regarding media literacy and its role in education (Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022), where findings illustrate the importance of opposing views in developing critical thinking. Additionally, existing research highlights the importance of social discussion in the judgment of information online (Do et al., 2024). Through the dimensions of the lifeworld, this is further elaborated through how the individual uses these aspects of the social dimension of their lifeworld to develop their own opinions through the close connection between sociality and selfhood.

It helps to view the same topic from various people. It might be a video, it might be an article, it could be anything. But as long as there are different opinions, it helps you to sort of make your own opinion after a while. (P02)

This topic can additionally be tied to awareness, where realizing the multiple perspectives and social actors involved regarding a piece of false information guides the effectiveness of fact checking practices and improves coordination between the actors involved (Gross, 2013; Seelam et al., 2024). 'A lot of it is driven by the end user themselves, whether or not you choose to engage in content that maybe runs counter to your views.' (P09). Participants demonstrating an acknowledgment of this indicates a sense of self-awareness that may guide the sense-making processes. This is supported by existing literature regarding ways to increase media literacy (Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022; Seelam et al., 2024).

The analytical development of the findings suggest that, regarding political ideation and opinions — especially in participants who considered these within their definitions of false information — find information that is portrayed in more of a subjective way to be less credible. This indicates a preference for scholarly sources and can be tied to findings that show how more long-structured information such as news articles lead to cognitive processing (Lutz et al., 2024), which is tied to media literacy and awareness (Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022; Seelam et al., 2024).

The more it is kind of trying to convince me that there is a right and a wrong side, the less serious I take it and the more it needs validation. Which I probably won't try to look for, but for example in politics, the more it's kind of writing about how the other side is wrong and bad, the less trustworthy I find it compared to if it's trying to explain its own side. (P03)

Additionally, the findings demonstrate that temporality plays a crucial role in how individuals make sense of their interactions with false information, which subsequently affects their decision-making regarding the content. Several participants recounted instances where they questioned the credibility of a piece of information; however, instead of taking actions to verify the accuracy of the information, they chose to overlook it and passively await further validation or refutation through additional context emerging within their social media feed. While temporality affects the other factors of the lifeworld and how the experience is shaped over time, these findings additionally emphasize the way the temporal dimension is directly used in the sense-making of individuals as they evaluate information online through passive engagement.

I usually let it just simmer in my head I guess. If I have the extra energy for it I will look it up and try and find more information about it, but I usually just let it simmer because I know the topic will show up again, and at that point I have processed what I think about it so far, and again like build upon that and see where it goes from there. (P06)

The findings demonstrate that the sense-making processes of individuals when encountering false information are impacted by their lifeworld elements, and these elements further impact the selfhood and their experience with the phenomenon. Participants, while acknowledging the importance of media literacy for social media engagement, also made an effort to avoid certain spaces and discussions with opposing views from their own — depending on their goals and expectations at the time of engagement. However, they still recognize that challenging one's own beliefs is important to develop personal media literacy. This illustrates the importance of selfhood in developing media literacy, as self-awareness is a driving factor for critical agency and shaping perception and opinions (Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022). These findings are consistent with existing research on the role of awareness in context and communication within spaces (Gross, 2013; Heath et al., 2002; Schmidt, 2002; Seelam et al., 2024). Furthermore, the findings underline the affective toll as a drawback of this engagement, as there is often an emotional burden accompanying these practices which demotivates interaction with the phenomenon.

## 5.4 Final Remarks

The findings of this theme illuminate personal experiences of the phenomenon and delineates the human-centered aspects of these experiences that is missing from the current literature (Fernandez & Alani, 2018). It highlights how embodiment and selfhood are crucial in making sense of online information, and how it directly affects reactions and interactions with the phenomenon. These aspects of the self are further found to directly motivate the subsequent actions taken on the various platforms as they are related to other social actors and communities, highlighting how aspects of the self motivate community interaction. Lastly, these findings showcase a preference for social interaction in sense-making processes when encountering false information online. These finds underline the importance of communities and social interactions, introducing the following chapter presenting the theme relating to sociality.



## Chapter 6

# Social Aspects of Experiencing Online False Information

A large body of work explores how community interactions and social discussion are meaningful in the dissemination of information — thus also including false information — across the Internet (Allcott et al., 2020; Do et al., 2024; Wijenayake et al., 2020). The work of Ashworth (2003) and Finlay and Eatough (2012) regarding that of the individual at the center of the experience and the mutual impact between the selfhood and the phenomenon further support the role of sociality in this influence. This warrants a thorough exploration of the social factors that manifest in encounters with the phenomenon, and shape further aspects of the experience.

Throughout the data analysis, three distinct components have been identified as part of this theme and are considered essential in understanding the influence of social factors within the phenomenon. These are identified as (1) direct interactions with community members regarding false information, (2) social aspects — such as trust and emotional connections — that may impact the perceived credibility of a piece of information, and (3) personal connections and opinions that one may have towards sources of false information. These three components highlight the role of sociality in different ways, and the areas are interdependent, as they all engage with and impact each other.

This chapter introduces the data analysis that lead to the development of these components, exploring them in-depth, and the underlying aspects that make them up. Undeniably, sociality is closely related to selfhood (Ashworth, 2003). Therefore, the sense of self and how it impacts the situation through the intertwinement of sociality and the selfhood is explored, drawing on the previous chapter 5. To interpret these findings, theories on social presence and social conformity illustrate how the sense of self is shaped through our social interactions (Ning Shen & Khalifa, 2008; Weinel et al., 2011; Wijenayake et al., 2020). With a perspective of the lifeworld, the interconnectedness of these lifeworld dimensions in experiences with false information through the components that impact the relationship between communities and false information online are explored. This analytical focus explores social communication and community engagements as they occur on social media platforms in relation to false information, and investigates, through one's lifeworld, the social aspects involved in these interactions and how the platforms mediate them.

## 6.1 The Meaning of Community in Interactions with False Information

Progression through the analytical process reveals the importance of detailing how individuals engage online with their communities in order to understand how false information disseminates across the various online spaces. Due to the interconnected nature of sociality and selfhood as understood through the phenomenological lifeworld (Ashworth, 2003), this community engagement involves several aspects of the self and social identity; such as expectations, values, and goals — as well as how these aspects are related to relationships with other social actors, and how they mutually impact each other. Drawing on prior literature delineating social presence theory in online information sharing (Allen et al., 2022; Ning Shen & Khalifa, 2008; Weinel et al., 2011; Wijenayake et al., 2020), it is reasonable to conclude that the motivations of the users as they share posts and interact with online information is closely related to social interactions with their respective online communities. The findings of the present theme further suggests that, by understanding the lifeworld dimensions of participants encountering the phenomenon, this relationship can be elaborated through the interplay of the selfhood, as it is at the center of the experience (Finlay, 2013; Finlay & Eatough, 2012). This impact is understood through the reasons and goals one might have for sharing information with other social actors online, and provide insights into the sense- and decision-making processes as individuals choose to engage with information on social media.

It has been commonly noted by the participants engaged in the study that individuals share information topics they personally find to be significant with their peers (see sections 4.1 and 5.1). Further analysis indicates that these actions are often justified by the intention of encouraging what they consider to be appropriate information sharing through an attempt of educating their peers, as well as expressing their personal values. This self-expression is a vital aspect for the sense of self (Ashworth, 2003), introducing a demonstration of how social interactions are directly related to one's selfhood and personal identity.

If I see something interesting, I would share ... Or for example ... Ever since the war, if I see posts of what's going on in Gaza for example I would share it because I know that I have friends that are uneducated, so that would be my goal, I guess, to share. And on Twitter... also more for myself so that if I want to explain it to someone, I have all my retweets and likes on my page so that I can look back and read. (P01, first interview)

Due to the significance of the information and its correlation with emotions (see section 5.2), these interactions often relieve some of the emotional stress caused by interactions with false information: 'I just, I really needed to talk to someone about it because I was, I was kinda upset.' (P05). This same participant also mentions how they find it important to share experiences with others online in order to feel included in a community: 'The reason why it's important to me is because it's like, I like being able to keep up with those things so I can also, I guess, be a part of the- I guess the "clique".' (P05). Thus, findings indicate that social interactions are important for the self, and contribute to the sense of community. This aligns with existing work delineating the effects of community and shared language in mental well-being (Sharma & De Choudhury, 2018), as well as the role of on social presence in online communication (Wijenayake et al., 2020).

Further advancement in the analysis highlights other instances in which participants shared false information, where the primary goal of the discussion was to provide an engaging conversation topic. Despite a difference in the goal of these interactions, the findings demonstrate that these interactions also often are motivated by similar emotional factors — such as, the need for validation in a situation or an urge to express displeasure regarding the topic. These findings highlight the impact of emotions in interactions with false information, and underline the entanglement of sociality and the individual (Ashworth, 2003; Finlay, 2013). Additionally interpreting these findings through social conformity (Wijenayake et al., 2020), they demonstrate a need for the individual to feel validated by community members and other social actors in their sociality, where this validation in social settings display how social interactions influence our self-worth, experiences, and emotions.

If I think a video is controversial, I do tend to bring it up as a conversation just, you know, because I find it interesting and I want to listen to other people's opinions and I don't know, just to vent sometimes, if the video is really bad and I really didn't like it, I just, I want to bring it up sometimes. [...] It kind of feels nice to have that validity, if that makes sense, because at least I know that I'm not crazy and that I might actually be onto something. (P02)

Existing literature details how aspects of motivation impact online behavior with communities (Malki et al., 2024; Starbird et al., 2019). The findings of the present analysis elaborate on this by acknowledging how emotions and one's selfhood work with sociality in these motivations, and how they affect the dissemination of online false information. This influence is additionally related to how echo-chambers and manufactured realities develop in online environments through the influential role of partisanship in information sharing (Allen et al., 2022), and how credibility towards the information source — particularly regarding online influencers — are meaningful in reinforcing these constructed realities (Prochaska et al., 2023; Wijenayake et al., 2020).

The analysis of the findings concerning participants' recollections indicate that emotions play a role in impacting engagement with false information online through the way they influence aversion from the platforms after fatigue (see section 5.2). Further related to motivations for social engagement is how it motivates social discussion through the perceived severity of the information and the impact on one's emotions and selfhood. The negative emotions deriving from exposure to false information is thus found to drive individuals to seek social interactions with the aim of obtaining comfort or validation regarding these experiences:

I generally seek an understanding with the other person. I want to feel like I'm not the only one who has that opinion, but they may disagree if they want to, that's fine. That can make it an interesting conversation, too. But generally, I do kind of hope that they also agree with me, to be honest. (P02)

These findings further indicate that individuals use social discussion with peers as a personal fact-checking method. Accounts from the participants demonstrate that what they get out of these discussions are often more assurance of their viewpoints, where the discussion helps defer doubt or make sense of the information in front of them. This supports existing work that delineates collaborative action as essential information sharing across virtual spaces (Baumer et al., 2011; Prochaska et al., 2023), and is

consistent with findings demonstrating how social discussion is important for effective judgment of online information (Do et al., 2024).

Looking at these findings from a lifeworld perspective, the experience of the phenomenon makes evident its connection to the spatial dimension of people's lifeworld. In this way, they demonstrate how the physical environment of an individual impacts how they engage with false information on social media — a contribution warranted through the lack of existing research on exploring this matter (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). Participants exhibited different behaviors depending on the social actors within their physical space as they recounted instances of false information. Multiple participants mentioned how they are more likely to engage in discussions with the social actors close to them in their physical environment when they encounter false information online, and use these conversations in their fact-checking processes:

I like having discussions about the same topics in person. [...] I feel that conversations and discussions like this in real life often open my eyes to whether something I have consumed is wrong or not. I trust them much more than I do the Internet. (P04)

Meanwhile, when participants encountered false information as they were alone, they instead used other fact-checking methods such as Google, news outlets, browsing comment sections, and other sources. As such, I emphasize in this analysis the importance in one's physical space for how engagement with social discussion is motivated — or demotivated, linked to the aversion found in certain environmental circumstances (see section 5.2). Participants discuss the differences in their goals depending on their surroundings, interpreted as the basis for this difference, and highlights the importance of acknowledging one's environment at the time of the experience:

I think when you're with someone and you encounter information, it's easier to then, instead of sitting down and going, "let me go look for alternative sources", it becomes easier to go, "hey, look at this, look at what's being posted, what's being said". There is that human drive to share that information with someone else, regardless of if it's true or false. When you're on your own, I think ... It becomes easier, at least for me, to go "okay let me go look for some other news". (P09)

When interpreting the prioritization of these actions, it can be said that social interactions are usually preferred as fact-checking methods; an effect that underlines the important role of the community in encounters with the phenomenon. These findings are congruent with existing work of Do et al. (2024), exhibiting the important role of collaborative reflection within validation processes, as they encourage critical thinking. While their exploration is originally regarding the development of accurate mental models relating to AI-systems, this effect is visible through the sense-making processes of the participants of the present study in encounters with false information — and, in this context, are additionally elaborated through the involvement of the spatial dimension of one's experience. Combining these findings, as interpreted, allow for an understanding of how collaborative discussion is involved in the sense-making processes of individuals in order to encourage critical thinking. However, as mentioned, these discussions also at times lead to less incentive to fact-check using other means that are otherwise considered credible. Thus, this implies a distinction between individual and

collaborative sense-making and fact-checking processes, as they imply an influence on different aspects of the process.

Progression in the analytical process highlighted that the comment section of each platform is often used as a fact-checking method within the sense-making processes in isolated encounters. This additionally underlines the role of community discussion in making sense of false information for individuals. These findings support community-centered approaches to fact-checking, such as the Community Notes feature introduced to the platform X in 2021 — as information and discussions from peers are revealed to be valued (Chen et al., 2024; Chuai et al., 2024; Do et al., 2024). However, despite this general consensus of community discussion being valuable, the particular helpfulness of the comment section is revealed to vary from platform to platform due to the different communities harbored on the respective spaces (see section 7.1). The present findings are thus concluded to highlight a desire for discussion that directly impacts the behavior of individuals on social media, such as inducing browsing of comment sections in order to make sense of false information. Particularly, the role of the comment section is often to quickly provide context regarding the content of the original post: ‘If I’m unsure about something, I’ll always go in there to see if someone else has been like, “yes, this is fake, don’t worry, this isn’t real”.’ (P08).

My interpretation is that, due to the trust put into these social actors based on their role in the sense-making processes of the individuals, they possess an expectation of their peers to correct them when the information that they share with others turns out to be false:

If someone thinks something I say is false, I would love for them to tell me so that we can look it up together. Or if I think something someone else says it’s false, then I would want to bring it up to see if they will change their mind because it’s important for me to share correct information with other people. And I want them to be educated to the same degree that I am because I care about them. (P07, first interview)

Additionally, this seems to result in negative feelings of disappointment, comparable to that of the disappointment found to come after seeing an information source with a high perceived authority sharing false information, when they are not to be corrected. An example of this is a participant who recounts an instance where a friend presented them with false information unknowingly: ‘I mean to be honest, when I saw that it was actually not true, I did feel a bit upset that it seemed like he hadn’t looked it up beforehand before bringing it up to me.’ (P07, first interview). This arguably implies the experience of a perceptual similarity for individuals between directly spreading false information, and not correcting or validating instances of false information.

Revealed in section 4.2 when exploring the impact of false information on the lives of the individual, social interactions with false information is seen to affect the relationships of the person at the center of the experience. This is elaborated in these situations, as, the way that actors go about correcting information is admitted by the participants to have an impact on their relationship. These findings highlight how, through the effect false information has on sociality and selfhood, the relationship between community engagement and the phenomenon of online false information is reciprocal as they influence each other. Additionally, these findings are supported by existing literature that details the vital role of social validation for personal well-being (Ashworth, 2003; Sharma & De Choudhury, 2018), and, in the context of experiences with online false information, demonstrate the negative effects on the individual that



accompany the phenomenon, and solidifies the community as an important stakeholder in these experiences.

It helps to actually care for that person. If you wish the best for them, I would advise them not to fall for that type of content. But again, that could happen to me too, so I expect the same from them. If I was watching something that had false information, I would definitely expect people to tell me, “hey, that’s not true”. (P02)

The analysis suggests that close social connections are an important aspect at the base of these interactions that play a role in how successfully these conversations go — regarding both goals of fact-checking and corrections. This is underlined by participant accounts, and emphasizes a degree of trust that is given through these connections, which comes forth in interactions with the phenomenon. Additionally, these findings introduces the importance of closeness to the involved social actors — including the information sources themselves, as this is indicated to impact their credibility — which introduces the topic of section 6.3.

I guess it has to do with the bond I also have with these people, they’re not really my friends or my family. If they were my friends and family I would have cared to actually put in some effort and tell them “Hey, this isn’t right, and I feel like you have to believe in me”, but ... they don’t know me, I don’t know them, so it’s like, I’m just gonna let them do their own thing and I hope someone else helps them if they believe this information. (P02)

These findings clearly illustrate the multiple ways social aspects are manifested in interactions with false information. The findings indicate that communities play an essential role in the sense-making processes of individuals, where social discussion is emphasized. Furthermore, they provide comfort and validation through the emotional reactions that are evoked by encounters with the phenomenon. After clearly establishing the role of social aspects in sense-making, the intricacies of how these aspects influence the perceived credibility of online content is explored in the next section.

## 6.2 Social Aspects of Trust and Emotional Connections on Perceived Credibility

The findings presented thus far have underlined how the perceived credibility of a piece of information online, due to the different aspects that make up the content, impacts the sense-making processes of individuals. Understanding these aspects and how they influence the sense-making processes of the participants provides insights into how individuals differentiate between reliable and unreliable information online, and, with a focus on the lifeworld dimensions, we see how social aspects of trust and emotional connections, tied to the entanglement of selfhood and sociality, impact this influence. Additionally, this impact can be seen to be largely affected by the lifeworld dimension of embodiment, where the situation is influenced by the individual in their bodies and emotions (Ashworth, 2003). Through this lens, actions users take on social media platforms can be interpreted to be embodied, through one’s hands and eyes, within the virtual space that is the social media platform (Svanæs, 2013). Thus, the ways individuals process and engage with information within these spaces are influenced by this dimension — and over time, our actions within the platforms become habitual and

ingrained in embodied action (Ashworth, 2003; De Carvalho et al., 2018). As such, the way information and media is perceived online is dependent on habitual embodiment and embodied perception, and the role of technology is acknowledged through what mediates these influences. The interface (e.g., article headings, news feeds, algorithmic suggestions) shape how we perceive these aspects, and thus influence how we perceive (false) information — and subsequently judge it based on how we perceive its credibility — as well as our habitual actions in engaging with the phenomenon. Understanding the embodied habits of the participants as they engage with false information is thus interpreted to be a vital aspect of exploring these interactions, due to the ingrained nature of embodiment within the experiences (Finlay, 2013; Langdridge, 2008).

Furthermore, the analysis suggests that aspects of embodiment may additionally influence the sense-making processes of individuals as they encounter the phenomenon of false information. This can be seen in previous findings that introduce differences between reactions dependent on the media format of the content, and how this difference impacts emotional reactions (see section 5.2). Interpreting these findings suggest that, as users encounter false information on the various platforms, embodied factors regarding the way the information is presented affect the way they judge the online content. This is supported by a body of work exploring false information mitigation that emphasizes how context is essential in assessing the credibility of information (Condran, 2024; Lutz et al., 2024; Zade et al., 2023), and, similarly, how awareness is important for the efficiency of fact-checking mechanisms (Seelam et al., 2024). The present findings add that embodiment is embedded within this relationship, demonstrated by findings from participant accounts:

I typically try to read the caption to see if there's any description of it there, because typically the person that posts it is the one that has some context. So, I was just looking for some context, but there was none, so I went to the comments. Which is always like a bad idea because they don't have context either and they just try to get some. (P03)

This particular instance demonstrates how participants exhibit habitual actions with the goal of searching for context in situations where they doubt the credibility of the information in front of them. Additionally, the present findings further elaborate on this influence by underlining how embodiment is significant in aspects of credibility with respect to the content:

Sometimes I would share the post with them, and sometimes I would like, text them and say “hey like did you know ...” but yeah. I think it's also nice to share the actual post with them so that they can analyze it on their own. (P01, first interview)

This preference stated by the participant can be interpreted to be due to a recognition of the embodied knowledge and implicit meanings that are tied to these particular aspects of the piece of false information; understood through literature detailing the embodied knowledge embedded within practices (De Carvalho et al., 2018; Finlay, 2013). These meanings, while they are important for our shared understanding, are harder to be aware of (Schmidt, 2002); and, as extracted from the present analysis, transcends to virtual spaces as well where meaning may be lost depending on how the information is relayed. Further interpretation elaborates on this by connecting it to the aforementioned findings of how certain forms of media may evoke more of an intense emotional reaction in the

individual when encountering false information (see section 5.2) — for example, videos being more emotionally provoking than text-based content. My interpretation is that the difference occurs due to the catering to embodiment within the information that gives a feeling of proximity to the selfhood, which are found to be meaningful in shaping these reactions. As certain affordances allow a piece of false information be more personal to an individual, through catering to one's embodied emotions and experiences, they feel closer to their sense of self: 'I think it's credible and if it's shared by people that ... are very close to what's happening.' (P01, first interview) and, mentioned by one of the female participants who admittedly feels more prone to believe other women: 'Also, it might have been because it was a woman. Because I have a slight bias when women are representing something that seems reliable.' (P04). This additionally highlights how gender studies can also influence the topic (Malki et al., 2024).

As introduced in section 4.1, when online information is framed through the use of AI, it is often considered to be false — and, depending on the conceptualization of the individual, evoke strong emotional reactions to the information. Existing research exemplifies how the framing of information guides individuals in sense-making processes, often through providing context to the user regarding the information topic (Lutz et al., 2024; Prochaska et al., 2023; Zade et al., 2023). The findings of the present analysis further highlights the role of embodiment in this influence. Here, the use of AI in social media content is found to be influential for individuals in deciding the credibility of a piece of information. This, based on participant accounts underlining the unnatural and deceptive nature of AI-generated content, can be interpreted to be through a lack of embodied aspects in the information, leading to a lower perceived credibility and decreased trust in the information. This amplifies the role of human and social aspects in communicating the context of a piece of online information, as they are important in the sense-making processes of individuals when judging the credibility of the information. Subsequently, due to their influence on perceived credibility, these aspects also impact future interactions; where some participants expressed that this directly affects their views towards the information source — a topic that is explored more in section 6.3.

So if I see anything that is AI-generated and trying to be passed off as real, I just scroll past it. [...] I immediately lose all respect for the person, and I just move on. You know, this is a deal-breaker to me, I would say, for information sources. (P07, first interview)

Conversely, the findings indicate that when information is portrayed in a way that aligns with one's humanity and embodied nature, it is justified through social, personal, and embodied means. These aspects of the content are interpreted to feel more natural for the individual, tending to a closeness to the selfhood as previously established (see section 5.1), and adds credibility to the information. This solidifies the role of embodiment in judging credibility online, as demonstrated through empirical findings where participants express personal accounts and descriptions of lived experiences to be more credible forms of information. For example, a participant states how they largely trust information regarding the conflict between Israel and Palestine — a topic admittedly important for them personally — from personal accounts and descriptions of events found directly from sources that are in close contact with the region of conflict, such as their Palestinian friends with family members in these areas: 'Like about Palestine, information sources from my friends that are Palestinian I find reliable. Especially if it's videos firsthand, or like, yeah, them sharing stuff that happened with their family' (P01, first interview). Analytical findings interpret that this is in part

due to the embodied nature of the information, where embodiment involves ‘to identify oneself with certain projects, and to be continually committed to them’ (Ashworth, 2003, p. 149).

The ability of different types of media to uniquely influence these embodied elements is further exemplified through participant accounts that highlight a preference for video-based content over other communication, as they are able to go into detail regarding opinions and experiences, providing the meaningful embodied context as desired: ‘There’s just like a wider range of stuff on YouTube and there’s like a lot of longer videos about the stuff I want to know, and it just has like more stuff in general. People’s experiences.’ (P08). This directly impacts their social media use as YouTube was considered more credible in gathering information, while the other platforms are more for entertainment for this participant.

Further related to the role of credibility of embodied factors, the findings suggest an influence in language as another social aspect of this influence that is related to embodiment. This highlights embodiment in perceived credibility, as, shared meanings — manifested in the way we speak and express ourselves with our bodily mannerisms and tone — caters to a sense of belonging (Sharma & De Choudhury, 2018), and effectively provides credible context (Liu et al., 2024). The findings explore the conceptualization of shared language within online communities as an embodied practice that increases the credibility of information when recognized. Multiple participants reflected on this:

Because if you recognize use of language, I think you have a bigger chance to think, “oh, we’re in the same community, and everything I think is of course true. So therefore, everything that my community thinks, I would also think is true”. (P04)

This can additionally be tied to existing findings of psychological and social aspects of false information engagement that details how false information can be easier to accept over the ‘uncomfortable truths’ of factual information, as they adhere to other aspects of information that are more ‘well-liked’ (Efstratiou & De Cristofaro, 2022).

Further advancement in the analysis illustrates that familiarity and frequency of contact with the information topic has an effect on the credibility of a piece of information as it is perceived by individuals. Participants describe the meaning of hearing repetitive information in judging credibility of certain viewpoints:

You know, there’s something about the quantity. If there’s many people saying the same thing in the comments, then I’m likely to believe it, I would think. But if it’s one random person claiming something with no reasonable backup, I’m not gonna believe it. (P07, first interview)

This influence is supported by existing work that reveals how repetitive information — for example, seeing the same viewpoint on a topic discussed multiple times — may make individuals more inclined to believe this perspective (Bak-Coleman et al., 2021; Starbird et al., 2018), directly impacting the dissemination of the information. This can additionally be tied to embodiment through the repetitive nature of developing familiarity, linked to the development of habitual embodiment regarding interactions with information topics and particular beliefs. Understanding this influence through embodied attributes of social media content elaborates on how credibility is assessed by users, and the underlying aspects of their reasoning. The familiarity to these embodied attributes which leads to increased credibility is closely related to how information is presented.

I remember that it didn't occur to me at all to fact-check it at the time, because the person was wearing a doctor's coat. And they said, "according to this study", and "this is something all doctors know". So, it was presented as if to be general knowledge. (P04)

This familiarity can be further tied to psychological aspects such as confirmation bias in how it influences the assessment of online information (Alatawi et al., 2021). As delineated in section 5.1, this effect may amplify the credibility of information through the establishment of a close connection between the information and the selfhood of the individual:

I had taken it at face value that it was true because there was something else in that video that had entered my confirmation bias, right? That I recognized from before and knew was true, so I was like — "I know this is true, So ... the rest of it must be true too, right?" (P04)

Lastly, this concept of familiarity can be broadened to encompass familiarity of the other social actors within the environment, including the sources of information encountered. Participants mentioned how sources they recognize and know from before are often expected to be more credible:

If it's people I have seen posts from before, that usually makes it like, "oh yeah, they're probably right". I mean, if it's a topic that's not within their field of knowledge I guess, then I'm like "okay they're probably right but I want to know why", right? But if it's people I know, I obviously want to trust them, so I do hope they are right. (P06)

This sub-theme, while exploring the correlation between embodiment and the perceived credibility of information, highlights the influence of this lifeworld dimension in impacting the processing of media and information on social media platforms. The findings indicate the influential role of embodiment in different areas; firstly, habitual practices on the platforms become embodied, and play a role in the processes and actions involved in experiences with false information. Furthermore, findings indicate a sense of familiarity between one's selfhood and embodied attributes of information, where these attributes can be seen to contribute to feeling of closeness to the sense of self (Ashworth, 2003). This, tied to existing literature on findings regarding familiarity and frequency in interactions of false information (Bak-Coleman et al., 2021; Starbird et al., 2018, 2019), illustrates how embodiment is further important for assessing the credibility of social media content. Finally, these findings elaborate on the intertwining of embodiment and sociality, where social validation and connections to information sources are found to play a meaningful role in the sense-making processes of individuals when encountering false information. This underlines the topic of the next section, where the nuances of these social connections are explored.

### **6.3 Role of Personal Connections in Perceiving Sources of False Information**

This sub-theme delineates the final identified component in exploring the influence of social aspects for the dissemination of online false information, being the connection individuals have towards the source of information. This connection includes both the

degree of their personal relationships, and their opinions towards information sources. This component highlights a mutual influence between embodiment and sociality as embodied emotions, attributes, and habits, are connected to the particular social actors and relationships of the individual experiencing the phenomenon. Interpreting these findings through the lifeworld illustrates that, together, they impact the self at the center of the experience, and social media platforms as virtual spaces mediating this experience further influence how the connections manifest. I find that these connections affect how individuals perceive, judge, and subsequently interact with false content they encounter on social media. This interpretation elaborates on existing work that highlights the impact of social presence in online information sharing (Ning Shen & Khalifa, 2008; Weinel et al., 2011) by further exploring the in-depth social connections — as explored through the lifeworld — in how they influence the experience. Additionally, this section investigates how the participants perceive the virtual space that is the Internet and its stakeholders, such as the platform owners, various news sources and influencers, and each individual source of information they engage with within these spaces.

Multiple participants expressed that they often trust the source of information more than the information in question when sharing information with other social actors. This highlights a direct correlation between the dissemination of (false) information and social connections with others. One such recounted instance is a participant who, after questioning the credibility of a piece of information after initially encountering it online, was later convinced of the piece of information being factual despite their doubts when it was confirmed by a friend. However, they later discovered that the information was in fact incorrect, leading them to have been falsely confirmed:

I actually met with a friend a couple of days after this incident and he had brought up the same topic, he actually mentioned like “oh did you see what happened to (celebrity)?” and I was like “oh yeah, she actually got arrested?” and that’s when I was like “so she is arrested”, you know, because my friend even says that, and so I trust my friend. (P07, first interview)

These findings are further consistent with work that illustrates the importance of partisanship and connections in trusting online information, explored in various contexts such as the mobilization of collaborative efforts of false information (Prochaska et al., 2023; Starbird et al., 2019) and the development of echo-chambers (Jones & Chandrasekharan, 2024; Starbird et al., 2018). In these instances, social collaboration is a driving factor for the credibility reiterating personal beliefs. This correlation is additionally reiterated by participants in situations where their past sense-making actions were deemed unsatisfying.

If I’m still unsure or if I don’t trust the comments, I would go to Google or I would ask a friend about it and go to Google. [...] I want to know it from a friendly source or someone who I legitimately trust, who I know isn’t trying to trick me or something, who I have an established relationship with already. (P07, first interview)

The justifications of this participant further demonstrate that a part of this emphasis comes from the uncertainty regarding the intentions of information sources, which is perceived to be more controllable when there is a closer familiarity or connection to the information source: ‘I think it is our connection, honestly, because they know that I don’t have the intention to spread misinformation.’ (P02). Thus, I highlight the importance

of intentions in the sense-making processes of individuals (see section 5.1), which is in agreement with existing literature (Prochaska et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023).

Additionally, these social discussions are often used in combination with other actions, emphasizing the past find of gathering information from multiple sources (see section 5.3) — or, in some cases, findings indicate that the social discussion is the practice that subsequently motivates other fact-checking actions. This encouragement relates to instances of correcting false information as well, where, a participant who discussed an encounter with false information — before they knew it was false — with their mother, in which this discussion was essential for the participant to recognize the true nature of the information:

I spoke to my mother and I asked her if it was smart to send over my banking information to someone on Instagram. And she gave me the dirtiest look and said, no. And then she asked if I did. And I said, yes, I did. And she actually smacked me upside the head and then told me I needed to get a hold of my bank and figure it out. (P05)

In this instance, the false information was a scam on Instagram. Thus, the conversation with their mother was vital in taking the necessary steps to handle the consequences of the encounter, and the close personal connection between these actors is interpreted to have played a role in the transparency and trust derived from the discussion that further guided the participant in their decision-making. This elaborates, through the role of personal relationships, on existing research regarding social discussion in accurate mental models and critical thinking (Do et al., 2024).

The findings additionally provide insight into the circumstances under which an individual chooses to share information to a specific personal connection. In these interactions, the participants share encounters with the phenomenon to other actors that have a shared relevancy to the topic, shared values, or shared communities.

So as soon as I saw- I see tweets about the presidential election, I would call out to (my roommate) and tell her. [...] She's (nationality) just like me, so we like to keep each other informed about what's going on with the elections. (P01, follow-up interview)

This highlights how shared values and meanings are important for such interactions, emphasizing shared meanings in CIS recontextualized to social media platforms (Schmidt & Bannon, 1992).

I brought it up to my girlfriend and I brought it up because I wanted to express how upset I was by it and I also do know that she also cares a lot about the situation. We both care a lot about the situation, the conflict, and so because we have that shared value, I believe, we like to update each other on different things that we see going on about it. (P07, first interview)

Related to the stronger informational influences that take place in online social interactions (Wijenayake et al., 2020), the present analysis elaborates on this effect in regard to instances of correcting false information. I find that there is a certain degree of trust towards the information source that renders the user more susceptible to normative influences. This underlines the notability of personal connections in how they influence the interactions that subsequently impact the dissemination of false information. Additionally, the nature of the conversation is also noted by participants to be meaningful in these instances.

### 6.3. Role of Personal Connections in Perceiving Sources of False Information

I've been corrected before. It depends on how they correct you too. I have an example where someone just straight up said "no, you're wrong", and then I'll feel attacked. Then it's a lot easier to reject what they're saying. It depends also what my relationship is with the person. (P10)

In this way, the analytical interpretation elaborates on the existing work of Wijenayake et al. (2020) by suggesting that, when corrections of false information are considered through the nature of the interaction to be trustworthy, informative, and respectful, they are easier to accept. However, when the interaction instead feels aggressive — as the participant states — it may instead lead the user susceptible to normative influences triggered by the dynamics of the discussion. This finding complicates informational and normative influences by elaborating how it may be displayed differently depending on the nuances of the personal connection, as well as the nature of the social discussion.

In section 6.1, the presented findings demonstrated that the credibility of certain social actors may override other fact-checking methods that are otherwise considered trustworthy. The findings of this section illustrate that, due to the nature of individuals sometimes trusting people over information, understanding the embodied trust and social connection towards a source is essential for how it affects the perception of online content, including their credibility. My interpretation is that information that caters to our embodied experiences and emotions make the information seem more 'real', and thereby more credible. Furthermore, the intertwinement between embodiment and sociality regarding this topic is demonstrated in the assessment of information through how critical opinions towards certain sources may impact actions with the information source. This is found in instances where, due to the authority or other aspects of the information source aligning with one's selfhood, the perceived credibility of the source is subsequently increased without necessarily having this close personal connection, indicating the same effect of trust in other situations:

I think it has to do with the kind of the ... importance? Or authority, because someone without authority can kind of say anything, and a lot of people can kind of hear it but just be like "oh yeah that's just ... that's just Emil he is a bit weird I don't care" but if it's a news platform, it has a lot of like loyal listeners and yeah, it has a different impact. But they definitely both go under misinformation. (P03)

This is further impacted by the views of the participants related to the greater issues of internet and media. The intentions of these stakeholders are also important in shaping the perceptions of the individual as they experience the phenomenon:

And people share that to kind of spread this narrative. And then the White House came out and said, "hey, no, this didn't happen". But that kind of got lost in the media. [...] Because Western media loves controlling the narrative. (P01, first interview)

Thus, I find that distrust towards particular sources and stakeholders within the broader context of the Internet — often built on assumptions and perceptions towards their intentions — influences one's online behavior in interactions with these sources. This distrust is also seen in existing literature of marginalized communities where news and media sources provide harmful information of the respective groups (Khan et al.,



2024). The present findings indicate that this distrust may lead to embodied, habitual practices within virtual spaces, including in encounters with pieces of false information. This is exemplified through multiple participants who stated their belief regarding platform governance, of how social media platforms prioritize boosting engagement within their platforms over other values; and thus, content on the platforms are often curated to generate negative emotions: ‘I know socials are made to make you angry just to keep you watching, you know? So you do have to be conscious about it all the fucking time which is annoying.’ (P06). This subsequently lead the participants to constantly criticize the information they see on the platform, as their distrust manifests in their use of the platforms.

Further analysis illustrates how this process is dynamic, where opinions towards news sources on social media and other references with authority may change depending on the current social and cultural context. This highlights the lifeworld dimension of temporality, encompassing the present time in which the experience takes place, and how it influences issues of development and anticipation of future instances. One participant mentions how, from the current political climate at the time of their experience as well as after-effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, they perceptibly encounter more false information regarding these topics, subsequently influencing their opinions of these information sources:

A lot, especially throughout the recent years. I mean, COVID was a whole thing of so much misinformation all the time. [...] Especially now since there’s been more extremist, or more right-wing people and stuff, there’s definitely been an increase of people keeping on spreading the misinformation and going out of their way to not interact or straight up ignore people who are like, “hey, you are wrong on this topic. This is all the sources I have.” So that’s definitely increased. (P06)

The findings delineated in this theme explore the interconnected nature of embodiment and sociality. In one’s lifeworld, these dimensions converge through emotional and social connections towards information sources in impacting how instances with online false information are handled. The aspects influenced by this are meaningful for participants in assessing the credibility of the content they encounter on social media platforms. Thus, I ultimately emphasize the importance of personal connections for interpreting, trusting, and subsequently engaging with online information; including the dynamic nature of this, as opinions and relationships change over time.

### 6.4 Final Remarks

This theme illuminates the role of social and community interactions in experiences with online false information, highlighting how social discussion is integral to sense-making processes of the participants, and how personal connections to information sources impact the dissemination of false information through online environments. Due to the intertwining of sociality and spatiality in one’s lifeworld (Ashworth, 2003; Finlay & Eatough, 2012), these motivations are also dependent on the virtual spaces that mediate the experience, introducing the forthcoming chapter.

## Chapter 7

# Issues of False Information Within Virtual Information Spaces

Information exchange and social media are deeply intertwined, as delineated when reviewing the effect of social media on societal developments; particularly in the implications they have had on the increase of false information (Allcott et al., 2020). As such, there is a pressing matter in exploring interactions with false information when it is disseminated through these arenas. Existing research has explored platform interventions and mitigation efforts in order to handle this issue, providing meaningful insights into technological characteristics of this phenomenon (Bak-Coleman et al., 2021; Chuai et al., 2024). This chapter elaborates on these findings in order to explore how false information navigates across the Internet, what features are impacted by this traversal, and how consistent platform interventions currently are across multiple spaces. In exploring the various features and attributes of the different social media platforms that may mediate experiences with false information, I draw on literature regarding CIS (Schmidt & Bannon, 1992) and an understanding of the spatial dimension of the lifeworld (Ashworth, 2003; Finlay, 2013). Using these concepts, the mediational role of social media platforms as virtual spaces that facilitate interactions with false information is emphasized within one's lived experience, understood from the participant's perspective — rather than merely technological variations. Correspondingly, these differences rely on the individual who is at the heart of the experience.

The theme of this chapter is composed of four sub-themes where the phenomenon, the virtual space that is the social media platform, and the person at the core convene to shape one another through the course of the phenomenon's experience. First, the chapter explores platform variations with the focus of the participant within their virtual spatiality in order to understand the various platforms as informational environments that mediate the experience within the lifeworld of the user. This exploration is understood from the user's perspective through the different affordances that are meaningful in shaping the experience as perceived through the eyes of the participant. Thus, this understanding of the differences within one's virtual space are dependent on the person at the center of the experience. Then — using these insights from the participants, the following section delineates in what ways these different affordances seemingly influence the phenomenon itself in how false information is experienced to navigate across the Internet. This investigation highlights the phenomenon within its virtual spatiality. Thirdly, the chapter depicts the relation of the phenomenon to the overall online experience of individuals, including how it subsequently impacts future interactions with online false information, as explored through the temporal dimension

of their lifeworld. And finally, the findings are correlated directly to specific technological affordances and their roles in facilitating the experience, exploring how the lifeworld can impact the mediating technology of social media platforms as understood through participant experiences.

This analytical focus of the chapter allows for an elaboration on how false information spreads as it is experienced by individuals, emphasizing the mediational role of social media platforms in accordance with the person at the center of the experience and their lifeworld. This investigates how false information travels across digital spaces, transforms throughout the differing environments, and how this navigation is shaped by the personal informational networks of individuals who interact with the phenomenon. Then, within this context, I identify the practices of the users in order to understand how media literacy can be facilitated in these instances.

### **7.1 The Meaning of Platform Differences in Experiencing False Information**

In order to analyze how the phenomenon appears across areas of the Internet, I find that exploring how it is understood in different virtual spaces, and how the affordances of these spaces affect the experience, is meaningful. Thus, this theme delineates how the distinct attributes present in one's virtual space affects the experience through the spatial dimension of one's lifeworld. This analytical process focuses on exploring perceived differences in the virtual environment of an individual, and how this affects the selfhood through the experience. Linked to one's selfhood, the analysis seeks to understand how these affordances impact the expectations and goals of individuals as they use the platforms. Since this influence is dynamic and may change over time, temporality is additionally related.

Through the present analysis, different features across social media platforms are found to provide boundaries for the content present within the space, which influences its use. For example, YouTube was preferred by multiple participants to learn new tasks and quickly gathering information about certain topics: 'I use it for education if I'm like stuck with something and need instructions or something like that. Maybe the vacuum cleaner isn't working. I don't know. So yeah, YouTube videos can be helpful generally.' (P02). This was in large part explained by video content being helpful in explaining things. Similarly, while X was noted by some participants in being preferred for gathering news about viral topics, the character limit of posts (max. 280 characters) was often mentioned to constrain the amount of context that is possible to be portrayed through the content on the platform: 'it is kind of hard to convey a lot of information with the short tweets you make.' (P02). However, what differentiates the text-based X platform from image- and video-based spaces like Instagram and YouTube is the simplicity of posting text-based content: 'I think also just because of the way that the platform is designed, Instagram is to share pictures and videos, whereas Twitter, like you can type anything when you want updates' (P01, follow-up interview). Additionally, pertaining to Instagram, the image-based nature of the content — providing a middle ground between the ease of textual information and the in-depth nature of video-based information — leads topics discussed on this platform to often forward users to other spaces in order to provide context: 'with Instagram, it's often, "oh, if you want to find out more about this, click this link", and it takes you to a separate website.' (P09).

This brings forth how the analytical process thus far has observed ways in which different media formats influence information interpretation and perception in different

ways. This effect is illustrated in existing literature exploring image-based false information (Wang et al., 2023), where such instances can be found to circulate for longer periods of time than factual imagery. The empirical findings of this thesis demonstrate that related influences are varying degrees of embodied knowledge and emotions derived from video-based, image-based, and text-based content (see section 5.2).

I saw a video in comparison to just a picture. So I feel like seeing a video, seeing someone actually talk and say false information is a lot more, I think, stirs up more reaction in me than just reading something or looking at a picture and then reading someone's tweet related to that. (P01, follow-up interview)

This finding demonstrates that individuals have different media preferred for different goals. This is demonstrated by the aforementioned participant quotes illustrating how individuals decide to use platforms depending on their affordances and their ability to fulfill their goals; i.e., watching tutorials on YouTube as it fulfills their need of a physical demonstration. While this impact is novel, there is a general consensus in existing literature on the topic that emphasizes the importance of context and environment in capturing awareness (Heath et al., 2002; Seelam et al., 2024) and mediating experiences with false information with the context needed by users in order to judge the information in front of them (Condran, 2024; Lutz et al., 2024; Zade et al., 2023). Thus, the nature of each individual social media platform is shown to have different connotations for the users, and influence the way they choose to use the various platforms.

The opinions individuals have towards different virtual spaces are further dependent on the communities present on the various platforms. The participants of the study acknowledge that the different social media platforms attract different communities, and how this impacts the other affordances of the space: 'I feel like maybe YouTube and Twitter don't have the same demographics and that might affect how the Community Notes are being written.' (P02). Various differences among the user base they have recognized are the following: different age groups, different cultures — such as, a focus on humor usually expressed on X, while Instagram is often blogging- and lifestyle-oriented, and YouTube is described to be the most informative and have the most diverse set of users — and the different interventions currently present on the platforms. This can also be tied to existing literature on CIS (Ackerman et al., 2013; Schmidt & Bannon, 1992), where the spaces are mediating shared meanings and information for a group of people — where in this instance of social media platforms, they may harbor communities that align with particular shared meanings, which subsequently shapes the informational environment of the platform.

I feel like on Twitter, everyone kind of takes it as a joke. Everyone just kind of mocks the post if it is fake, rather than maybe helping people that are kind of on the fence. I feel like Instagram is kind of a little bit more helpful, and then YouTube is a lot more helpful, because everyone on YouTube seem to be nice. (P08)

Additionally found to influence the goals and expectations of the users as they use the various platforms, is the availability of the Internet — introduced to impact the phenomenon in section 4.2. The way this accessibility simplifies information sharing (Allcott et al., 2020), influences the sources present on the platform, as accounted by the participants. This adds complexity to the space by blurring the lines between news and entertainment (Edgerly, 2017).

I notice it on Instagram. I follow them (a news account) there, because I sort of think, at least I'll get some news this way. But then, some of the news stories are kind of silly, in a way. And there's multiple news stories that have been about Internet phenomena to a greater extent than other things. (P04)

Another difference among the spaces as noted by the participants is variations in platform algorithms — both through the ways the platforms curate personal feeds, as well as how they suggest content outside of this personalization. Participants acknowledge that the platform X in particular often presents content that is outside of their curated feed. Additionally, Instagram and YouTube are mentioned to be quite easy to curate personally, however, YouTube in particular can occasionally suggest unrelated videos outside of this curation that, depending on the subject matter of this content, may evoke frustration for the individual:

On YouTube, it's quite easy to avoid if you've curated your feed, but at the same time, randomly you can get like a YouTube video with the obvious thumbnail and titling of someone saying the thing you very much don't agree with, like, very bluntly, and it's- it's just a random recommended YouTube tab, right? And it's like, how did that happen? [...] Then it's Instagram, I feel like it's better at not spreading it because once you've curated it, it's hard to get out of it. (P06)

Additionally, the ability of the various platforms to handle personalization and engagement with opposing views directly affects the use of the platforms. One of the participants who was not an active user of the platform X, mentioned their reasoning being tied to this:

I've always kind of stuck in the same algorithm for it (Instagram), so I've never really gone out of my comfort zone to follow other things, so the experience with that would be about the same. I get super overwhelmed with Twitter. I can't, I can't really use Twitter. (P05)

While this allows for a more comfortable online experience, it can be tied to literature detailing instances of echo-chambers, where similar beliefs are reiterated within informational environments (Alatawi et al., 2021; Starbird et al., 2018, 2019). Furthermore, this find highlights the emotional exhaustion that comes with interaction with false information and opposing views (see section 5.2).

My interpretation of these findings gives prominence to the ways in which differences between the various online spaces and their affordances as they are identified by the participants, directly influence their expectations of the interactions they will have on the spaces, and their goals with interacting with them.

Further advancement in the analysis additionally shows how this influence is found to change over time, thus being impacted by the temporal dimension of one's experience with the phenomenon: 'once you realize how much false information is really out there on the Internet you kind of lose some trust that you had in everything that you read.' (P03). The findings indicate that the expectations, purposes, and goals of using certain social media platforms can change over time based on their experiences and opinions towards the spaces. Moreover, the findings suggest that these expectations affect the ways individuals behave on the platforms in the future:

I don't normally go back onto the same platform and try and look for that, because I think I go "well I encountered this, I don't know if I can believe it, I don't know if I can believe other sources from this platform as well". (P09)

The findings illustrate, based on the cross-platform approach of this study, how people's experiences of the phenomenon vary according to their virtual spatial context. These findings elaborate on how the different affordances on the various platforms impact expectations, behavior, and goals one has with interactions on the platforms due to the contextual nature of information (Brisola & Doyle, 2019). Hence, I emphasize the importance of acknowledging one's virtual environment in understanding the experience. The affordances of the informational space directly influence these elements of the self, and, subsequently, shape how users use these platforms. This brings the topic to how the phenomenon is mediated in its spatiality.

## 7.2 Impacts of Virtual Spatiality on Perceived Falseness

False information, as it travels across the informational environment that is the Internet, navigates through different platforms, through different contexts, and thus is transformed to different framings and ways of communication of the content (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). This is a novel characteristic of information that takes place online, due to the nature of the technologies involved (Allcott et al., 2020; Livingstone, 2009). Acknowledging how information navigates through these various environments is the focus of this theme, providing insight into the natural circumstances and personal accounts of individuals as they experience the phenomenon through virtual spaces. Put differently, the analytical focus of this section is on the virtual spatiality of the piece of information, in order to provide an overview of both how individuals experience platform differences to affect their experience with the phenomenon, as well as how the virtual spaces affect the phenomenon as they conceptualize it.

In conceptualizations of online false information, the nature of the Internet and its effects on society and simplified communication (Allcott et al., 2020) were central in defining the phenomenon (see section 4.1). Therefore, it can be interpreted that the accessibility of information sharing and social media platforms enabled by the extensive reach and availability of the Internet is meaningful for how individuals handle encounters with false information; as they influence the expectations, purposes, and goals of engagement (see section 7.1). The way this accessibility simplifies information sharing is seen to affect the information sources present on the platform, which adds complexity to the space by blurring the lines between news and entertainment (Edgerly, 2017). This entanglement is revealed through personal accounts from the participants of this study to further complicate the judgment of reliable information, and in this context, is identified to impact the way the individuals choose to use the platforms based on their goals and expectations.

I don't use Twitter as news at all because it's very subjective. You can just say whatever you want. "I mean this", or "this happened". But unless they link me to a news article, it's impossible to know what's actually true. (P10)

The findings suggest that, due to this entanglement and the implications it has for how information is mediated online (Livingstone, 2009), some people abstain from using certain platforms for gathering credible information as it is often used for blogging

and entertainment. As a result, they view news sources on these platforms to be too intertwined with topics of entertainment to be considered credible:

My primary goal, again, with using social media, is entertainment, but I know that a lot of people use it to get news as well. And sometimes I use it to get information about news, but I would always look up news articles later on ... you know, because I just find them to be more reliable. (P07, first interview)

Further progression in the analysis related to this topic raises the issue of online anonymity, tied to the amount of people present on the various platforms. The findings of this exploration indicate that participants experience the social actors of the platforms — including the information sources — as overall less credible, where nearly every participant voiced concern and complaints about how ‘it can be anyone, and they can just say whatever they want’, playing a crucial role in what impacts them to perceive the platforms to be largely containing false information:

Because anyone can watch it and there could be so many more videos like that, and anyone can watch them and spread them and share them. [...] I feel like it gets spread a lot more and anyone can create accounts on anything and post whatever they want. (P08)

This is consistent with findings that illustrate the speed and reach of information as it flows through virtual spaces, and how this causes a fluency effect for false information, enabling it to disseminate rapidly and widely across the informational environment (Brisola & Doyle, 2019; Starbird et al., 2018). Thus, the way that information is mediated through technology impacts the experience as it is perceived by the participants.

You could also do other things to show information out in the physical world, but ... I just think that it requires a lot more effort. And the fact that the Internet is always there for anyone to say whatever they want, that makes it a lot easier to spread things that are just ... bullshit, essentially. And that availability of the Internet and technology I think is what makes it so desirable- or so tempting to share information like this. (P07, follow-up interview)

The analysis indicates that the way a piece of false information is presented continues to affect how it disseminates across different online spaces. Through an acknowledgment of the virtual spatiality in a person’s experience with the phenomenon, as well as how the phenomenon changes temporally; the findings establish how false information evolves as it navigates across different spaces over time. This is in large part found to be due to the differing context and assortment of affordances present on each of the spaces the information navigates through — where, as noted in section 7.1, the virtual environment directly affects the information. By elaborating on the differences identified by the participants in the previous section, the way these differences impact attributes of the information, and how these attributes continue to influence the individuals as they encounter the information on the different spaces, is illustrated. My analytical interpretation emphasizes that, depending on aspects of the self influencing how individuals choose to use a platform, content on the platforms are interacted with differently, highlighting how the various spaces where a piece of information is found within impacts how individuals interact with it.

Despite how I like to read, I feel like it's easier to consume video-format of information rather than reading a long text. Even if the translation, or the format- if they took something that's originally text-based and made a video, maybe some stuff could be lost through the transformation. [...] In video format, a person would have seen a news article, and then talked about it afterwards. And something objective could become subjective, based on the way they talk about it. Because they also have their own opinions. (P10)

Further analysis suggests that, depending on platform affordances and the interactions of the users, individuals disseminate information across various virtual spaces. Participants expressed how they sometimes share information on different platforms to communicate with their social media followers. This provides an understanding of how false information travels through one's personal informational network (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024).

Sometimes I take screenshots of it (a tweet), and then I post it on my Instagram. So that's it. That's a way because I know- I also know a lot of the people that would see what I post on Instagram, either do not have Twitter or have stopped using Twitter. (P09)

This finding additionally addresses the topic of how and where participants choose to discuss their experiences with false information. It reveals that these discussions are more often directed towards specific social actors, based on majority of the participants. In these interactions, a pattern was noticed in how people are found to often move to separate — and often more private — platforms and applications in order to share and discuss their experiences with the phenomenon; most commonly mentioned being the platforms of iMessage and WhatsApp. This demonstrates effects of social presence, and can be connected to existing literature regarding online social conformity and its relation to the topic (Wijenayake et al., 2020). Furthermore, while not explicitly being a part of the initial scope of the current research, these findings illustrate a meaningful difference between the use of private, closed off communication spaces, and public, open communication spaces. Thus, I emphasize how differences in one's spatiality impacts encounters with false information, and how the phenomenon may be mediated differently between these arenas.

I told her, I usually don't actually send the post itself. I usually, I text her. We text on iMessage. I text her and I'm like, "did you hear this?". And then, most of the time she has heard it. If she hasn't, I'll try to relay the story. (P07, first interview)

Combined, the analytical explorations of (1) people spreading information across platforms and (2) different media formats present on the platforms influence information interpretation, suggest that information may change meaning as it transcends platforms and media forms. Furthermore, as presented in section 7.1, these platform differences influence how individuals choose to use platforms through influencing the expectations, purpose, and goals of this use. The present analysis elaborates on this through how depending on the role that a platform has within their online experience and in the everyday use of the individual, they may assign different use cases to the various online spaces. The findings further illustrate that participants react and interact differently to the information depending on this assigned role of the present platform:



With Instagram, because I use it more for leisure, I don't really end up engaging with the same, I would say, the accounts that have the same goals as on X, and as a result I feel more comfortable curating- or more comfortable limiting my exposure on Instagram to certain accounts. Because when you're sort of . . . I think when I'm in an information seeking mode, I'm more willing to and I find it more important to engage with different accounts which might have different narratives or perspectives, whereas for leisure I think then it becomes easier to just go "well I don't care about what this account has to say, I'm just going to block it", you know. (P09)

Finally, the specific platform further impacts actions taken within the virtual space through the governance and overall experience on the platforms. This is found through participant accounts where opinions towards the platforms influence the behaviors of individuals as they interact with information within the space: 'I mean I'd probably maybe avoid it or block the page the post is from. But I mean- I would probably report it but I honestly don't bother anymore because nothing ever comes out of them.' (P08). In this instance, the participant has grown discouraged from engaging in corrective behavior of false information due to their perception that the platform does not resolve their efforts.

This sub-theme highlights the role of virtual spatiality of one's lifeworld in impacting the phenomenon through exploring how the various platforms of X, Instagram, and YouTube, have directly influenced the experiences of the participants in their encounters with false information. The virtual space the experience occurs within is shown to influence emotional reactions and attitudes towards the experience, sense-making processes, and subsequent actions taken with the piece of false information. Furthermore, the findings indicate that one's threshold may differ depending on the role that the individual has assigned to their platform within their overall online experience. This introduces the topic of the next section, where the influence and impact on one's general online experience is explored.

### 7.3 Situatedness of Online False Information Experiences

The lifeworld of the individual in experiencing the phenomenon is further connected to the temporal dimension (Ashworth, 2003), where findings demonstrate how past encounters — both with spaces and with the phenomenon — converge to define the online experience in interacting with false information. This convergence shapes the individual's understanding of the phenomenon, as explored through the several aspects influencing participant conceptualizations of online false information. Additionally, it shapes opinions and attitudes that subsequently influence the future interactions with false information as well as the informational environment it appears within. Thus, in what follows, the vital aspects in mediating the experience — understood through these past experiences — are delineated. A focus is laid upon situating the phenomenon within the online experience of the individual, and exploring the reciprocal influence of the phenomenon to the participants' encounters. Additionally, I preface how this process is found to be dynamic through the element of temporality within their lifeworld.

Here, we situate the self within the virtual space as it mediates the phenomenon. The findings illustrate how the aspects of different spaces are found to attract different people (see section 7.1). Building on this, it can be interpreted that the majority of the user base within a space helps shape this environment, and this influence in turn affects the

online experience within this space for the individual. This shaping of the space impacts how individuals choose to use the platforms, where one's online experience is highly dependent on the other social actors within the space — tied to how social relations and interactions are closely tied to one's social identity (Ashworth, 2003). This is supported by existing literature that delineates how social aspects are important for well-being and information processing (Khan et al., 2024; Sharma & De Choudhury, 2018). The analysis suggests that the attitudes towards the communities of a certain platform is influential of the decision-making of users as they engage within the space. One such example as demonstrated by a participant of this study, is how from what they have perceived to be general behavior of the user base of a social media platform has made them less motivated to engage with instances of false information, including corrections of such content when they recognize it as false:

I feel like there's so many trolls online ... or, they may not be trolls, and they may just disagree with you, but personally I feel like I don't have the energy to sit there and debate with them. And be like "no this is- I'm being right, please trust me" you know? (P02)

This finding, combined with existing exploration of the meaning of personal connections (see section 6.3), implies that there is a certain threshold of familiarity with an information source or community that motivates engagement with online information. This coincides with work that delineates the effect of community recognition and shared values in trust and information sharing (Aghajari et al., 2023; Chen et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2024).

Further advancement in the analysis suggests that past experiences within a virtual space play an essential role in shaping one's opinions towards the platforms and their respective online communities. This is understood as a result of the influence that these encounters — with other social actors on the platforms — have on the overall online experience of the user. These findings illustrate how past experiences shape opinions that are vital in shaping the behaviors of individuals in encounters with false information on the respective platforms. In recounting their use of social media platforms, the participants describe how their understanding of the communities harbored on X, Instagram, and YouTube is grounded in their past engagement on the platforms, and how these experiences encourage the seeking of different types of information dependent on the space.

I definitely think that, for example, stan Twitter is a big thing, right? I don't think that's as prevalent on Instagram anymore. I think that's kind of different in a community way, because, I like (celebrity), but I don't use Instagram to keep up with (celebrity). I use Twitter to keep up with (celebrity) because there are more accounts that give updates about her. And there are more fan accounts on Twitter compared to Instagram. (P01, follow-up interview)

Thus, the analysis suggests that depending on their recollection of existing experiences — in combination with the varieties delineated in section 7.1, such as the communities and opinions towards the platforms — platforms accompany different roles for the users, which correspondingly fulfill different aspects within a person's online experience. This elaborates on the flow of false information as it navigates different spaces, and is interacted with depending on what role this space has for the individual.

One's engagement with others within their online experience is further related to how they present themselves within the virtual space, which is linked to how the platform mediates issues of social identity (see chapter 5). According to the findings, some people express a need to create a distinction between their personal identity and how they portray themselves otherwise in online situations — where, certain participants explained how they have multiple accounts on the same platform in order to split their experience. This observation demonstrates how the virtual space mediates the online experience of individuals through how the self is manifested within the spatiality (Ashworth, 2003):

I have so many accounts for like a specific thing, and the fact that people have become more vicious on the Internet . . . like they go out of their way to find information about you that they should have no reason to find honestly, that's why I have like separate private accounts and art accounts, because I don't want them to intertwine. I don't want people to find me because I value my privacy. (P06)

While this works as a way for the individual to control and organize their online experience in a novel way that is unreachable in in-person interactions, it can be linked to issues of anonymity enabled on the Internet (Wijenayake et al., 2020) in how it may ease the pressure of social interactions from the distinction of one's social identity, inducing less worry about social conformity and the burden on social relationships and personal connections. This issue is further related to concerns of the participants in how online anonymity and the detachment of personal identity through social media may encourage behavior less focused on social conformity (Wijenayake et al., 2020), and render certain actors with the ability to avoid responsibility in situations pertaining false information:

When individuals post now, they can really just say anything. And when they do, they don't present it with any risk for anything at all. They don't lose anything if they're wrong. So, they can say, "this is my truth, and in my opinion, it's correct, and therefore, I'm presenting it as if it is true." as I've seen several people do. (P04)

These findings indicate how past experiences are essential in developing media literacy by shaping their sense- and decision-making practices of individuals as they encounter false information. This effect is consistent with existing literature where familiarity and education shape critical thinking and guide an effective understanding of how to handle future experiences (Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022), complicating how social media platforms and their various affordances mediate social conformity and identity. This thesis additionally elaborates on this influence by highlighting the element of temporality in how it shapes the sense of self over time through these past experiences (Ashworth, 2003). Thus, it is worth emphasizing the importance of how social actors and virtual spaces influence the individual at the center of the experience dynamically. Participants themselves reflected around their past encounters with the phenomenon and with technological spaces, and what meaning these have had for their current interactions with the phenomenon:

I would think that after being on the Internet from such a young age, and being familiar with the way that people speak online and what people do online has made me better at navigating the Internet in general, and I believe

that is also why I know that some elderly people may have a difficulty with this, because they're simply- the Internet hasn't been a big part of their lives as much as it has ours. (P07, follow-up interview)

Based on these findings, it can be said that past memories and recollections of experiences with the phenomenon as well as the informational environment through which it is mediated (social media platforms) are meaningful in interpreting online information and developing media literacy.

Further solidifying the role of temporality in the sense-making processes of individuals in engagement with online false information, we see how the concept of time continues to influence the behaviors of the participants in section 5.3, where participants passively awaited further updates on instances of unreliable information through continuous engagement with the platform. Further interpretation of these findings suggests that individuals express a desire to slow down the media consumption through a more deliberate approach than what is currently normalized within social media. This can be tied to work that explores how different types of online information may engage more cognitive processing than others (Lutz et al., 2024). Thus, this interpretation emphasizes — through understanding the temporal element of individual experiences with false information — that acknowledging the time needed to process and evaluate information is an essential, and often overlooked, aspect of sense-making processes in interactions with online false information.

The findings in this chapter elaborate on how the self and one's understanding of the phenomenon is impacted over time through an exploration of the temporal dimension of one's lifeworld. These findings illustrate how online experiences subsequently influence and shape how content on social media — including that containing false information — is received, processed, and handled by individuals, how this influences future experiences with the phenomenon, and how this shapes the way these interactions should be mediated by social media platforms.

## 7.4 Technology Affordances and Constraints in Regard to False Information

This facet of the theme explored in this chapter covers current accounts from participants of how social media platforms are facilitating the dissemination of false information as they perceive it, and what features they consider to be meaningful in easing this. Here, we specifically tie the interface of the platforms to the sense- and decision-making processes of the participants in interactions with false information.

Existing work within the topic of technological affordances of social media platforms in handling false information has, as mentioned in section 2.2.3, largely connected the issue to displaying context and how this is a vital aspect for fact-checking — where additionally, the awareness enabled through this is meaningful (Gibson, 2014; Seelam et al., 2024). Existing displays of this are such as the presentation of the trajectory of online content (Zade et al., 2023) and the use of natural language pertaining to the relevant context and community of the information (Liu et al., 2024), the latter of which emphasizes the use of shared values in such spaces, similar to that of common information spaces (Ackerman et al., 2013; Schmidt & Bannon, 1992). The findings in this section explores how this mediation can further acknowledge the embedded social structures, connections, and interactions in the sense- and decision-making processes of individuals as they encounter false information, as understood through their lifeworld. Thus, the

elements of embodiment, sociality, spatiality, and temporality — and additionally, the self at the center of the experience — can be brought together within this context in order to contribute to an understanding of the phenomenon that is grounded in the accounts of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon.

The analysis delineated in section 6.1 introduced how social interaction and discussion is vital in the sense-making processes of the participants in this study. This find explicitly relates to the entanglement of sociality with selfhood, as social identity is closely related to one's connections and interactions (Ashworth, 2003; Finlay, 2013). Further tying this to the informational environment of social media platforms mediating the experience, analysis suggests that the comment section of the platforms are an outstanding functionality that many participants use in order to evaluate the content they encounter in these spaces:

I questioned the validity of what the post was saying, so I checked the comments, and then a lot of the comments were saying “oh this is fake I looked it up and this post is not on their account”. [...] Sometimes I even go and check myself, but that's a bit rare, because usually I can find out a lot quicker by just checking the comments. (P07, first interview)

Hence, it can be argued that sociality is behind motivation for platform engagement with features that mediate social engagement and discussion. This find can therefore influence platform design through how social interactions are found to inform individuals in encounters with false information by providing context and collaborative discussion regarding the content; demonstrating how platform design such as the comment section, mediates natural use through one's lifeworld.

Correspondingly, another way platform design is found to provide context regarding the social engagement with a piece of online information, is functionality as dislike bars and like/dislike ratios. The dislike bar was a past feature on YouTube that has in recent times been removed off of the platform. However, one participant was particularly disappointed in this development as they deemed the feature to be vital in their assessments of content within the platform. As a result, they downloaded a third-party program in order to add the functionality back and provide the meaningful context towards the information they encounter within the space:

I have an extension that lets me see the dislike bar, which is why I find it sad that YouTube removed it. Because the dislike bar tends to help you actually to gauge if the video is actually helpful or not. (P02)

This demonstrates how the topic of social engagement may be mediated through technology affordances within the informational environment. Namely, drawing on findings from section 6.1 that delineates how social engagement is seen to influence the credibility of a piece of online content, where positive reactions are meaningful in order to provide the user with an overview of how the content has been received by other platform users. This additionally is in agreement with existing work that underlines the role of social discussion and awareness in effective fact-checking (Do et al., 2024; Seelam et al., 2024), and clearly highlight the importance of social presence and sociality in sense-making processes, the development of media literacy, and how this is to be manifested through platform design.

Advancement in the analysis suggest that the technical aspects of a platform that the user interacts with, such as the platform layout and interface, affect the habitual

actions of individuals as they engage within the informational environment. The findings highlight the lifeworld element of embodiment in this interaction, where the embodied habits are meaningful in shaping the opinions and practices of individuals as they engage with the content social media platforms; such as the habits of routinely scrolling their curated feeds, and instinctively checking comment sections in the search for context regarding a post (see section 6.2). These habits, ingrained within the interaction between the self in the virtual space, are mentioned to be influencing attitudes towards news and media consumption (Edgerly, 2017; Livingstone, 2009), as stated by the following participant:

Whereas on Instagram, if you look at some things relating to news or to information, even if you're just scrolling without giving a thought to it, you will come across it. At the same time, what this promotes is that a lot of the times people take these bite-sized sort of chunks of information, and they look at it, and that's it. You know? They process it at that level, and that's it. Right, and so a lot of context behind a lot of things are lost as well. (P09)

This participant acknowledges the importance of bringing awareness to the issue, aligning with the world of Seelam et al. (2024) that has found this to be effective in fact-checking mechanisms. These findings, as tied to the role of past experiences for developing media literacy as identified in section 7.3, call for an elaboration of design implications towards technology affordances that encourage the user to deconstruct the established habitual practices — understood through the embodiment of one's lifeworld — in how they affect information gathering and media consumption online. Thus, the platform design would focus more on facilitating cognitive engagement within the informational environment that is social media, in agreement with existing work (Ning Shen & Khalifa, 2008). This is further related to prompts and nudging interventions; identified as effective interventions for false information, describing a type of mitigation effort that encourages critical thinking before sharing information (Bak-Coleman et al., 2021).

The more exposure you have to something like that, and the more you're able to be exposed to it in a controlled environment, I think, especially is important. Because if you just get exposed to it, and then you don't get prompted afterwards, like, "hey, was that real or was that fake?" Sometimes you don't go through that process. You just go, "oh, I consumed a piece of content". Sometimes people don't even recognize that they have. So, having it pointed out as well is important, where it's like, okay, try and notice what's off about this. (P09)

Further analysis supporting these interventions uncover how certain participants experienced their involvement in the study itself as a contribution to their understanding of the phenomenon and fact-checking motivation. One such instance is illustrated through how a participant looked up the existing fact-checking efforts of Instagram before partaking in the interview, as they noticed they did not have prior knowledge on this, and their participation in this study made them curious regarding the topic:

I wanted to make sure that they were getting on top of people and trying to get information- or that are spreading false information. I was curious if they were getting on top of that or if they were just still allowing it to continue

how it was. [...] When you brought up the interview, it's actually what made me curious to check to see if they were getting on top of that or not. (P05)

This find additionally illustrates an uncertainty regarding existing platform efforts in mitigating false information, which was found to be unanimous among all of the participants, and is interpreted to highlight a lack of transparency or information to the users platform-side. This uncertainty was most of all notable regarding YouTube, despite being the platform often perceived to contain the least amount of false information among the three. This find, combined with that of nudging interventions, exemplifies how increased awareness of efforts can influence the efficiency of fact-checking on the platforms (Seelam et al., 2024). Additionally, X was the platform criticized the most regarding recent responsibility concerns and increased exposure to false information. These issues were often reflected by the participants to be tied to the governance of the platform as presented in section 4.2, thus including platform owners into the discussion. Additionally, they trusted comments here less, tied to information source trust dependent on the communities on the platforms — which aligns with similar findings of how sponsored or promoted content is found to be less credible (Malki et al., 2024).

If you see those comment sections (on X), they're often ... How should I say it? Not democratic. People with that check-mark are boosted upwards. So, often, people who have paid for something — a privilege in the app, are pushed up more than, for example, people with rightful information. (P10)

Finally, the analysis highlights that acknowledging the current societal and cultural context of a piece of online information is vital in mediating the sense-making of users. Multiple participants recounted how timestamps on posts are meaningful in gauging the relevance of a piece of information based on its current temporal context: 'I wish they (Instagram) would clearly show when something is from, cause there's been multiple times where I've seen something, and I've thought to myself — "did this happen today? No... Oh, it's from 2018!"' (P04). In this same vein, the timing of when corrective information is presented seems to have implications for how the original content is processed: 'On Twitter, for example, these Community Notes pop up at the bottom of the post. If they were to be placed first, maybe that could make a difference.' (P07, follow-up interview). Therefore, it should be stressed that the timing of platform affordances as well as time-related features are meaningful in assisting the media literacy of a certain post, as they acknowledge the temporal context of the information, providing insight into the relevancy of the content.

The findings of this chapter elaborate on how interactions with technology-mediated information is closely tied to the affordances of the virtual space — and the experience can be facilitated through one's lifeworld dimensions in order to promote media literacy among its users through these arenas. I find that these dimensions influence the ways that an individual goes about their engagement with online false information, and these elements should consequentially provide a basis for how to mediate the experience.

## 7.5 Final Remarks

The findings presented in this chapter make up a holistic perspective of the participant's online experience and situate instances of false information within this understanding. Such a perspective allows for insight into how the various online spaces mediate false

information differently through their features and affordances; how they may navigate across spaces, how this navigation may affect the information, and how this fits into the greater context of a user's online ecosystem. This concludes the findings of this thesis with an emphasis on the spatial mediation of social media platforms and their role in the dissemination of online false information. The next chapter elaborates a discussion on the implications of the findings presented across chapters 4 and 7 for the design of features and mechanisms to allow people to properly handle encounters with false information, with the goal of mitigating its spread. The discussion also reflect upon how the findings presented in this thesis advances that state of the art and open up new research directions concerning the role of technology mediation in the spread of false information.





## Chapter 8

# Towards Platforms with Enhanced Support to Media Literacy and Mitigation of the Spread of False Information

As illustrated by the literature review carried out for the thesis, a substantial amount of existing work has explored online false information within greater contexts such as its societal impacts (Ghafouri et al., 2024; Jones & Chandrasekharan, 2024) and its relation to the mobilization of physical events (Prochaska et al., 2023). However, focusing on the day-to-day conditions in which the phenomenon occurs has remained underexplored (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024).

False information spreads within social networks and is shaped by social interactions, trust, and collective behaviors through the inherent social nature of the phenomenon (Efstratiou & De Cristofaro, 2022). Thus, understanding it requires examining the broader social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions that drive its creation, dissemination, and reception. Addressing its impact requires considering both the micro- (individual) and macro- (systemic) dimensions of its context (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). As such, this research has explored the micro-level through the individual experiences of the participants, and the macro dimensions through how the phenomenon is manifested within their greater personal contexts and how it impacts societal aspects and human lives.

The current study has worked to situate online false information within everyday interactions understood through the lifeworld of participants who have encountered the phenomenon under natural circumstances. The implications of these findings offer novel insights into how the phenomenon manifests in daily exchange, and the role of the virtual spaces and their affordances in mediating the situation. Additionally, the findings of this work correlates the phenomenon to how it appears in the aforementioned greater contexts, elaborating on how online false information develops through these arenas (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024).

This chapter discusses the implications that the findings presented across chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 have to the current HCI and CSCW literature on online false information, and how they extend the state of the art on the subject. This is done by firstly elaborating on how the phenomenological focus of this work is innovative in relation to the existing body of literature regarding technology-mediated false information, particularly within the fields of CSCW and social computing. It can hence be argued that the correlation

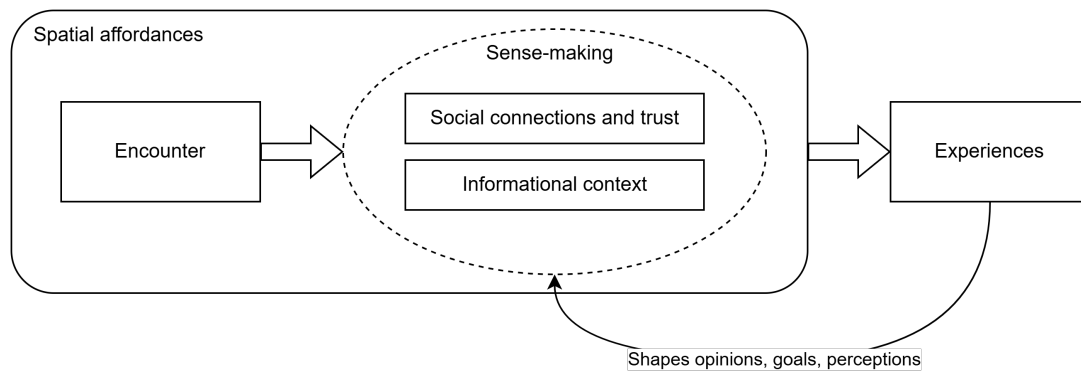
between the lifeworld aspects and people's engagement with false information online is one of the novel contributions of this work. These lifeworld aspects further highlight the differences between encounters with false information online and in person, providing deeper insights into how the phenomenon is mediated by technology. The virtual spaces themselves, encompassing their features and affordances, also have their influence on false information dynamics (Zade et al., 2023), thus exploring the media literacy aspect in this study. In so doing, the findings are used to identify design opportunities for social media platforms in regard to helping people handle false information by supporting their sense- and decision-making processes particularly through promoting their media literacy. This chapter delineates these implications as they are contextualized within the existing literature on the topic, where this discussion is used to answer the research questions presented in the introduction.

The remainder of the discussion is structured as follows: First, section 8.1 introduces a representation for understanding the sense-making process of individuals as they encounter false information, garnered from the phenomenological interpretation of this work — central in the investigation of the first research question of this thesis. Then, this understanding is further interpreted through the various fragments of the lifeworld. This includes section 8.1.1 regarding embodiment, section 8.1.2 encapsulating sociality — where the second research question has been explored in particular through community- and social interactions — section 8.1.3 encompassing spatiality, and section 8.1.4 regarding temporality. Each of these dimensions elaborate on aspects of the research questions using the sense-making process and how media literacy can be supported through the micro-dimensions of day-to-day interactions with the phenomenon. This understanding has then been used in the development of the essence of the phenomenon of experiencing false information online, discussed in section 8.2. Finally, section 8.3 elaborates empirically grounded design implications emphasizing how platforms can be designed for enhanced support to media literacy and the mitigation of false information online, in reference to the answer for the third research question.

## **8.1 A Phenomenological Take on Online False Information Across Social Media Platforms**

One of the questions driving the investigation of this thesis was to do with exploring the ways individuals differentiate between reliable and unreliable information online as presented by the platforms. Examining this through the fragments of their lifeworld reveals the nuances of the experience that may otherwise be overlooked, and illustrates how all of these dimensions influence the self at the heart of the experience (Ashworth, 2003; Finlay & Eatough, 2012).

Some of the findings of this research exploring the relationship between the lifeworld dimensions of embodiment, sociality, and selfhood, indicate that depending on how close a piece of information feels to the self, they have different thresholds for judging the information (see section 5.1), which then has implications for what features of a platform are used within the sense-making process in relation to that information. When understanding the experience, it could then be argued that; first, the encounter with the false information occurs within an enclosed virtual space and, then, the sense-making process ensues — where the individual judges the information based on a set of aspects tied to the online content. These aspects are influenced by the technological affordances of the virtual space within which the encounter takes place. This whole interaction in



**Figure 8.1:** A diagram illustrating the ways individuals are found to judge false information they encounter on social media platforms. Within the sense-making process, the closer the aspects are perceived to be to the selfhood, the more significant the information seems (see section 8.1.1). This can lead to more susceptibility to the false information.

turn leads to a personal understanding of the experience, which will continue to shape future encounters with the phenomenon.

Three aspects are particularly prominent in this interaction, and are displayed in a diagram in figure 8.1. Firstly, people use their *existing social connections and relations* in order to judge information (see section 6.3), which aligns with prior literature of how communities and collective action influence the dissemination of false information (Efstratiou & De Cristofaro, 2022; Starbird et al., 2019). It further elaborates this work by highlighting how this is done through the role of social discussion within sense-making processes, which is also consistent with prior work delineating the positive effect of social discussion for fact-checking and critical thinking (Do et al., 2024). Secondly, individuals make sense of a piece of information dependent on their *current informational context*; linking it to societal structures, events, developments, as well as their own personal lives (see section 4.2). In order to do this, they seek out the context of the content in their sense-making of the information, highlighting how awareness of one's surroundings is used for effective evaluation (Seelam et al., 2024). This indicates that platform features that provide contextual cues for the users support their sense-making, as is consistent with the findings of such existing interventions for media literacy (Liu et al., 2024; Zade et al., 2023). Lastly, the *affordances of the virtual space* in which the phenomenon is encountered — also including the connections the user has to this space — are essential for how this sense-making plays out; an aspect that is seemingly more subconscious than the others. An example here is the meaning of media-formats as they portray information differently, particularly tied to how they facilitate varying embodied knowledge (De Carvalho et al., 2018). All of these three aspects come together to shape a person's understanding of the encounter with online false information, creating past experiences with the phenomenon that are essential in developing media literacy (Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022). Overall, the findings highlight that the arenas where technological mediation can intervene to facilitate the dissemination in these day-to-day interactions are through the following aspects; how personal connections and informational context are communicated in these issues, in addition to being impacted by the various other affordances of the platforms.

In regard to the *second research question* of this thesis, the role of the community in the dissemination of false information as well as the ways social media platforms facilitate these meaningful interactions are understood by how they are motivated through both

intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Additionally, in the use of communities and social interactions for extrinsic motivation for providing information, there is a differentiation between individual and collective sense-making practices, in which other social actors are important for both of these. This is elaborated in section 8.1.2.

Finally, in addressing the *third research question* of how platforms can contribute towards media literacy for mitigating false information, the work of this thesis has resulted in a set of design implications (see section 8.3). These implications are based on an understanding of the essence of the phenomenon as one that unfolds over time (see section 8.2), and encounters with it should be mediated to support media literacy in future encounters with the phenomenon.

The remainder of this chapter elaborates on the answers to these research questions; deepened through existing literature, how each of the lifeworld dimensions contribute to this understanding, and the correlation of these dimensions in their intertwinement to one's selfhood (Finlay, 2013). Each of these dimensions — embodiment, sociality, spatiality, and temporality — highlight ways of providing context to information (Zade et al., 2023), generating novel insights in the development of design implications for mitigating false information. The dimensions are explored in connection to how they impact the ways that technology mediate people's experiences with the phenomenon in question, and how media literacy can be emphasized in these interactions. Then, the essence of the experience is summed up from the lifeworld elements, providing grounds for how the phenomenon is to be mediated through platform design.

### **8.1.1 Embodied Aspects in Shaping the Sense-making of Online False Information**

The existing body of literature on knowledge and expertise sharing emphasizes how knowledge and practice are closely related, particularly through one's context and surroundings (Ackerman et al., 2013; De Carvalho et al., 2018); which is tied to embodiment as 'having a body is, for a living creature, to be involved in a definite environment' (Ashworth, 2003, p. 149). Prior work in this field has detailed the embodied nature of knowledge and information sharing with a focus on industrial settings, where these findings can be recontextualized to encompass social media and online communication spaces. In this conceptualization, embodiment can be understood as a channel in which interactions between technology and human behavior are expressions of one's selfhood (Ashworth, 2003). Accordingly, this lifeworld dimension manifests in the ways people behave online; encapsulating both the interactions people have with the interface (Svanæs, 2013), and how they influences emotions, opinions, and thoughts about the body. Consequently, embodiment has implications for how individuals judge and differentiate between reliable and unreliable information online, as well as how they communicate through their social identity with the other actors in the informational environment (Ackerman et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2024) — hence an undeniable underlying aspect of the experience through its relation to both the development of media literacy and community interactions with false information.

Regarding the sense-making process of individuals as is explored in the first research question of this study, the findings demonstrate that embodied habits are embedded into practice in social media use (see section 5.2), and that these habits are based on the features of the platforms (Allcott et al., 2020; Livingstone, 2009). This demonstration is emphasized by how the nature of technology has created a prevalence of short-form and fast-paced media consumption that decreases the opportunity for cognitive engagement (see section 4.2); discussed as an embodied habit developed

from learned social media usage and modern-day media consumption. This pattern is seen in existing work surrounding the implications of online informational mediation and advancements in information technology (Adams et al., 2023; Livingstone, 2009), where such advancements are at grounds for understanding the dangers of online false information. It can be argued that the growing preference towards shorter content on social media — as displayed by some of the participants of this study — aligns with prior findings examining the different ways of processing information depending on its presentation; such as how certain linguistic cues influence cognitive engagement: ‘users engage more in cognitive processing of fake news articles when they are longer and written with lower complexity. In contrast, we find that users experience affective processing when fake news articles are written with more words linked to analytic thinking.’ (Lutz et al., 2024, p. 2). As such, the present discussion discerns that parts of the sense-making and judgment processes when encountering false information online is rendered to an embedded, ingrained aspect of social media use; in which this distinction can guide media literacy interventions by intervening in habitual interactions.

Embodiment has additionally been meaningful in determining which aspects of online informational content affect an individual’s perception of its significance, which is also found to have implications for the sense-making process. In exploring this, a differentiation between internal and external factors have been identified.

*The internal factors* (see section 5.1) consist of (1) the information topic, particularly in how important it is for the person; (2) the individual’s connections to the specific information source; and (3) personal beliefs, values, and background. These internal influences are often found to be subconscious, and affect more emotional reactions to the experience. In the existing literature, findings exploring emotional reactions to instances of online false information demonstrate patterns of intense emotional reactions and fatigue due to overexposure to the phenomenon — which is particularly prevalent in situations linked to social identity and personal topics of marginalization and oppression (Khan et al., 2024; Malki et al., 2024). The present discussion elaborates on these aspects by identifying these internal factors as what is often found to influence the negative emotional effect in interactions with the phenomenon, and how emotional reactions are further found to influence engagement with the content (see section 5.2).

*The external factors* (see section 4.1) consist of (1) the authority of the information source, (2) the intentions of the information source, and (3) the way the information is presented. These factors are based on patterns recognized on behalf of the information that influence how participants of this study judged the false information they encountered. The significance of these factors are also visible within prior explorations delineating the importance of understanding intent in differentiating cases of online false information (Prochaska et al., 2023), and the role of platform features in processing false information (Zade et al., 2023). While existing work emphasizes the characteristics of technology in defining the development of the phenomenon (Adams et al., 2023), the present research elaborates on this body of literature to highlight how these external factors influence individual conceptualizations of the phenomenon — i.e., defining it as mis-, dis-, or malinformation — which then motivates subsequent actions taken with the piece of information — i.e., extrinsic motivation to social discussion (see section 8.1.2).

In both of these internal and external influences, the role of embodiment lies in its role as a channel between the selfhood and the technology. As such, it can be argued that embodiment, through embodied features and experiences, shapes the perceived proximity of information to the selfhood; subsequently influencing whether the information is

perceived as personally relevant for an individual, or detached — which then impacts how significant it is for the person. This study emphasizes the importance of this personal significance, suggesting that it influences the threshold of which users choose to engage with the information (e.g. through fact-checking, reporting posts, and engaging in social discussions); a novel contribution from the phenomenological exploration of this study.

Elaborating on how these factors influence sense-making, they were used in the identification of particular effects in which the aforementioned proximity to one's selfhood were particularly influential in impacting credibility judgments of online false content. Worth mentioning from the personal accounts of this study are three key amplification factors in this effect: personal experiences, closeness to the information source, and the mediation of embodied knowledge. These can all be tied to the aspects of sense-making portrayed in figure 8.1.

Firstly, the use of personal accounts in increasing the credibility of information is a way for the *informational context* to affect the perceived credibility of online information. This can be tied to how context-specific information is more effective in corrections of false information (Liu et al., 2024; Zade et al., 2023), and implies how natural circumstances and human contexts are more trustworthy for users. This influence is also solidified by how unnatural aspects of online information is considered less credible, especially highlighted by opinions of AI-generated content (see section 4.1). Secondly, in a similar vein, false information from specific social actors can be more convincing than other fact-checking methods as they cater to embodied emotions and existing social relations (see section 6.3). This highlights a way for *social connections and trust* to influence the perceived credibility of the content. This resonates with the existing discussion of how social interactions and collective sense-making is important for the effectivity of fact-checking and cognitive engagement with online information (Bashardoust et al., 2024; Do et al., 2024). Lastly, the existing discussion of how false information instances online differ between media formats is relevant. While differentiations have been made between image- and text-based false information online (Chang et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2023), this study elaborates on how the different media formats can express varying degrees of embodied knowledge (De Carvalho et al., 2018), which complicates this relationship. The focus of this study on platforms concentrating on different media — X, on short texts, eventually associated with short videos and images conveying memes; Instagram, on visual elements; and YouTube, on video-based content — was a deciding factor for reaching an understanding on the rationale of multiple participants behind preferring one of the other for information gathering (see section 7.1). This demonstrates how the *virtual space itself and its affordances* can affect the perceived credibility of the content found within it.

This study discusses that embodied elements of online content give people something to cater their humanity to, making it seem closer to their selfhood (Ashworth, 2003). Thus, these interactions can seem more natural and thereby more credible in online information sharing and media consumption. Since a lot of these aspects involve social connections and trust to information sources and social discussion, this exploration brings the discussion to the following topic of sociality.

### 8.1.2 Communities and Social Interactions in Motivating Engagement with False Information

In exploring the second research question regarding the role of communities and how social interactions linked to online false information are mediated through social media platforms, the topic is contextualized within the existing body of literature concerning

social and psychological aspects of knowledge sharing, particularly that of motivation (Bashardoust et al., 2024; Efstratiou & De Cristofaro, 2022; Weinel et al., 2011). Elaborated through the present discussion of the lifeworld aspect of sociality, this helps understand how communities impact the spread of online false information using a familiar framework in the literature for understanding online social presence. Social discussion is motivated through intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as portrayed through motivational theory. Elaborating on this within their multidimensional social presence theory, Ning Shen and Khalifa (2008) identify aspects that go into online social presence as being *awareness*, *affective social presence*, and *cognitive social presence*. Therefore, the discussion regarding sociality in this context is explored through each of these factors. This additionally encapsulates a phenomenological understanding of the experience as it addresses the ‘social and cognitive-affective’ dimensions within the lifeworld of individuals (Finlay, 2013, p. 181).

**Awareness** and media literacy are intricately connected. Prior research has solidified the role of awareness in contextual perception (Svanæs, 2013), which contributes to the development and effectiveness of fact-checking skills (Seelam et al., 2024). Through the lens of multidimensional social presence theory (Ning Shen & Khalifa, 2008), awareness details the degree to which the user is aware of the presence of other social actors and available activities within their environment (Schmidt, 2002). This acknowledgment of one’s surroundings brings forth the issue of spatiality, and emphasizes the intertwinement between the social and spatial dimensions of one’s lifeworld (Finlay, 2013). The connection to the virtual space influences how awareness can inform social discussion and collaborative community behaviors by rendering individuals aware of the other social actors in the informational environment to provide in an assessment of the available options within their context. As awareness is an important aspect of maintaining social connections through informal interactions and shared cultures (Schmidt, 2002), context cues and mediational technology that allows awareness is important for providing social media users with the appropriate functionalities to enable and motivate actions with false information, such as discussion about credibility, fact-checking, and correcting incorrect information (Adams et al., 2023; Do et al., 2024; Prochaska et al., 2023).

Interpreting the accounts of this exploration illustrates that a lack of awareness regarding the informational context of a piece of online content provides extrinsic motivation for community participation in order to fill this contextual gap in evaluating the information (see section 6.1). This need is often fulfilled through either individual or collective fact-checking, in which *individual* fact-checking encompasses isolated actions people take in making sense of information, and *collective* fact-checking details interactions with other social actors. However, in both of these efforts, the presence and opinions of other social actors are found to be meaningful for evaluation of the information; in individual efforts through browsing available public responses and likes or dislikes, and in collective efforts through collaborative discussions with other actors. This finding supports existing literature that details the role of social discussion in critical thinking mechanisms (Do et al., 2024; Wijenayake et al., 2020). Tying this to the previous discussion of embodiment, the findings of this research suggest that the type of media that the information is expressed through can enable varying degrees of awareness. Put differently, platform features that present and encourage social discussion (such as comment sections and re-post functions), as well as features that portray social engagement (such as viewer count and likes/dislikes) are meaningful in judging the credibility of information online. They influence both sense-making processes



and corrections of established false information, which both in turn increase the critical thinking when encountering a post on social media, thus influencing the media literacy of the person (Zade et al., 2023). This illustrates how the acknowledgment of awareness in one's informational context additionally provides insights into how individuals judge and differentiate between reliable and unreliable online information from social engagement, tied to community interaction in how it is related to both individual and collective fact-checking mechanisms.

**Affective social presence** refers to the perceived connection individuals assign to other social actors within their environment (Ning Shen & Khalifa, 2008); where the authors of the theory highlight the frequently subconscious nature of this dimension, as it is not explicitly evaluated, but relates to one's affective presence. Throughout the present study, this dimension of social presence is observed to tie closely to how people emotionally connect to online platforms — particularly through social connections towards the various communities harbored on each platform — as well as their individual sociality, embodiment, and awareness. Relevant work for this understanding is that of the embeddedness between knowledge and practice (De Carvalho et al., 2018; Finlay, 2013), as well as the ways in which emotional reactions influence the judgment and subsequent actions within the social environment (Alatawi et al., 2021; Malki et al., 2024), directly affecting interactions with the phenomenon (Ning Shen & Khalifa, 2008). The research of this thesis elaborates on these topics by exploring them as aspects of the lifeworld dimension of sociality and how it contributes to particular interactions with online false information. Specifically, findings of section 6.1 present the intertwining of sociality and emotions through the impact that social interactions and relations have on the sense of self (Ashworth, 2003; Finlay, 2013), and elaborate on how this affects sense-making and credibility judgments. Furthermore, findings presented in section 6.2 show the additional entanglement between sociality and embodiment, relating to how this lifeworld dimension in combination with community interactions impacts the perceived credibility of online information — both clear influences of the *social connections and trust* aspect of the sense-making process as presented in figure 8.1. This influence is evident in the ways personal experiences seem more 'real' to individuals, often garnering more intense emotions, as it is arguably more aligned with one's selfhood. Therefore, this research extends the existing findings delineating the significance of social discussion on affective social presence, by exploring the nuances of this relationship.

Affective social presence can note how emotions are exploited through embodied ways of presenting online content, subsequently impacting the judgment of individuals as they encounter such pieces of false information (see section 5.2). This resonates with existing literature that describes manufactured realities that are reiterated through instances of false information (Alatawi et al., 2021; Prochaska et al., 2023), and highlights the exploitative nature of such realities on the affective social presence. The findings of the present thesis elaborate on this effect through how such an exploitation can be based upon one's embodiment and selfhood, emphasizing the effect these instances can have on individuals as understood through their lifeworld (Ashworth, 2003). Additionally, these affective aspects shape the experiences with online false information, thereby impacting their memories and recollections of it (see figure 8.1), which continue to affect their future interactions with the phenomenon. This emotional impact is additionally central in echo-chambers, where the affirmation of pre-existing beliefs and values outweigh the willingness to confront refutations or otherwise conflicting viewpoints (Ghafouri et al., 2024; Jones & Chandrasekharan, 2024; Starbird et al., 2018). This effect is also

illustrated through participant accounts of this study stating discomfort of challenging personal beliefs (see section 5.2). Furthermore, this discussion reveals an additional role of the community in these interactions; being to provide a sense of comfort and emotional validation for the individual as sprouted from the intense emotional reactions from encountering the phenomenon, similar to existing findings delineating the positive effects of community language for subjective well-being (Sharma & De Choudhury, 2018). Within the multidimensional social presence theory, this illustrates intrinsic motivation for people to engage in social interactions linked to experiencing the phenomenon (Ning Shen & Khalifa, 2008). This research advances the existing literature by highlighting that it continues to affect dissemination after initial encounters. This is interpreted to align with existing findings that highlights the continuous effect instances of false information have when they are facilitated through information technology (Nyhan & Reifler, 2015), which is elaborated in section 8.1.4. In order to facilitate the intrinsic motivation of such interactions that ease these emotional impacts of false information, it is important to enable awareness of the social environment, rendering users aware of their options for engagement (Do et al., 2024).

**Cognitive social presence** is tied to the cognitive, deliberate perceptions and understandings an individual has regarding their social relationships as extracted from the shared informational environment (Ning Shen & Khalifa, 2008). Contextualizing this within the dissemination of online false information and development of media literacy, a connection with the degree of critical thinking when encountering information from specific sources on social media platforms can be made. Namely, low or absent cognitive engagement tied to social presence can be understood to enable the acceptance of information at face value without critical evaluation of the source, a social occurrence also found in the existing research of Allen et al. (2022). Based on participant accounts, factors that influence one's cognitive social presence are connections to the source of information as well as information that is framed through personal experiences (see chapter 6). This resonates with existing findings on the importance of social connections (Sharma & De Choudhury, 2018) and active discussion (Do et al., 2024; Weinel et al., 2011) in prompting critical thinking, an important aspect of media literacy development (Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022). Additionally, this discussion contributes to the understanding of how the affective social presence — through one's emotional responses to instances of false information — are often exploited in misinformation campaigns and deliberate attempts of disseminating false information (Alatawi et al., 2021). The findings of this research elaborate on this through how emotions are found to influence subsequent interactions with the content, and highlight the need for cognitive engagement through active discussions relating to the information.

Further contextualization of cognitive social presence within the present findings illustrates how the concept influences relationships to other social actors within the informational environment. Exploration of social presence has delineated how it shapes interactions with false information (Wijenayake et al., 2020). This is expanded upon through a noticeable pattern in the present findings where people judge when to engage in the correction of online false information based on issues of social status and personal connections to the actors (see section 6.3). Namely, one's personal connections to social actors influence motivations to engage, particularly when correcting of false information, and especially when the information is considered to be controversial. This is found to be due to the perceived potential impact of such interactions on the relationship with the person in question. Accordingly, this effect is less of a concern when disputing

information from unknown sources. Thus, this behavior highlights how social platforms can reinforce social norms — bringing in the relevancy of social conformity.

Hence, tied to social presence, this research also contributes to advance discussions on *social conformity* relating to online false information through the extent of which social connections impact perceptions of reality. Existing research finds that social connections can override factual accuracy, particularly in peer discussions and public responses. Wijenayake et al. (2020) explain how online social conformity takes place more often when peer discussion and public responses are available. This, along with other research emphasizing the importance of collaborative discussion in assessing information (Do et al., 2024), is supported through the findings, where the participants use the comment section in depth in their sense-making processes; underlining the important role social conformity and discussion play in interactions with false information. This discussion further enhances these insights through the role of sociality and embodiment in how the presentation of information shapes deep narratives, subsequently reinforcing the establishment and persistence of manufactured realities as it is driven by these lifeworld dimensions; and highlighting how social conformity is meaningful for sense- and decision-making in interactions with false information.

The work of Prochaska et al. (2023) identifies three key mechanisms that lay at grounds for and amplify the effects of a manufactured reality; namely the involvement of influencers in engaging with and spreading information, the credibility of the information sources, and the framing of the information. Wijenayake et al. (2020) further elaborate on the online effects of social conformity in these environments by highlighting that informational influences; being the need to be correct in a discussion, are noticeably stronger than normative influences; described as the need to be liked — in which this effect is suggested to be due to the anonymity that is enabled from the Internet. The findings of this thesis elaborate on this effect of social conformity, noting that engagement with false information in this sense is highly relational; while generally informational influences were indeed stronger through participant accounts, some of the participants also adjusted their values and responses depending on their social ties to the information source, highlighting that this difference in values comes from the way that social relationships are mediated online compared to offline.

In elaborating on the first research question, as mentioned in section 8.1.1, experiences with the phenomenon are impacted by the closeness of the relationship with information sources, implying another influence of sociality in the sense-making of online information. Through an exploration of one's sociality viewed through social presence, the closeness to the selfhood in relationships can be attributed to social conformity (Wijenayake et al., 2020). According to the findings presented across chapters 4 to 7, it can be argued that social media platforms may mediate this relational infrastructure — including elements of trust, affect, and perceived closeness — through design (likes, shares, DMs, story reposts) and elaborates that information is a social act; not just online content, but a tool for maintaining ties and social connections. This is supported by how individuals often bring up instances of false information as conversation topics with peers (see section 6.1), elaborating on existing research that emphasizes community discussion in sharing and knowledge and the credibility of information (Ackerman et al., 2013; Allen et al., 2022) — while also acknowledging that these interactions build trust and shared meanings with social actors over time, as is important for CISs (Schmidt & Bannon, 1992). Furthermore, additional literature on social conformity details how linguistics encourage social meaning and how it is important for mental well-being, as linguistic accommodation is a way to provide social support (Sharma & De Choudhury, 2018).

This body of literature resonates with the findings of this thesis, in that participants demonstrate more trust to false information when it is from their community, using a shared language, and impacted by a sense of belonging that reinforces the credibility of the information. This can additionally be tied to how information gets reinforced in echo-chambers, where existing beliefs and opinions are supported, and other viewpoints are excluded and discredited (Cinelli et al., 2021; Ghafouri et al., 2024; Moore et al., 2024) particularly regarding political polarization and conspiracy theories (Alatawi et al., 2021). This emphasizes the importance of cognitive engagement regarding issues of social presence to engage critical thinking in such situations (Do et al., 2024). Hence, this perspective emphasizes the importance of personal connections to social actors when interacting with the phenomenon as an underlying aspect of the factors that influence motivations to engage with online false information.

In conclusion, this research demonstrates that platform features mediating community interactions can have implications for how individuals differentiate between reliable and unreliable information online, through the role of comment sections and reposts in the sense-making processes of individuals. These channels can additionally carry ‘secondary’ sources of false information, where the phenomenon can occur in comment sections rather than the original content. This highlights a difference between connotations of poster and commenter; something that can be likened to the work of Baumer et al. (2011) in delineating the relationship between bloggers and readers. This points towards an understanding that the value of comment sections and such social discussion is often found in the quantity of the statements, which is what renders them credible (see section 6.1). This is consistent with prior findings of frequency and familiarity to information increasing credibility (Starbird et al., 2018).

Furthermore, as findings from section 6.2 demonstrate, the individual level of authority of each of these sources are perceptibly lower than other information sources. Due to this, it can be argued that the secondary sources of false information in these channels are not taken as seriously as primary cases, again highlighting how connections to the information source — in this case, through the authority it holds — influences sense-making of the content. It additionally discerns the different arenas in which false information can be encountered, and how they further have differing expectations and social perceptions, as well as highlighting another way that false information travels across personal networks (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). As such, these factors are dependent on the space in which the encounter occurs, which sets the stage for the following discussion regarding lifeworld spatiality.

### 8.1.3 False Information Shaped by the Space

The existing work of Ning Shen and Khalifa (2008) illustrates through the relation between social presence and social environments that one’s physical surroundings affects cognition, self-perception, and consequently behavior within the context. As such, this work advances current discussions in the literature to suggest a distinction between two types of spatial environments that influence interactions with online false information: *physical spatiality* — pertaining to a person’s immediate physical surroundings at the time of the experience, and *virtual spatiality* — encapsulating the online spaces in which the instances of false information are encountered and mediated. This differentiation encompasses the totality of the spatial surroundings of an individual that are relevant for an exploration of the phenomenon through their lifeworld, where these aspects of their spatiality describe how one’s perceptions of the spaces and environment they engage and interact with are affected by the situation (Ashworth, 2003). While one’s

physical spatiality is harder (or arguably, impossible) to control from a platform design standpoint, its inclusion in this distinction provides insights into what circumstances influence an individual as they encounter false information. An acknowledgment of the virtual spatiality further elaborates on how false information manifests within their online experience, and how the particular online space influences the phenomenon.

According to the findings of this research, aspects of one's physical space when encountering false information online have a meaningful impact on the course of the encounter, elaborating on an understanding of the first research question. Section 6.1 illustrates how the inclusion of other social actors within one's physical surroundings strongly impacts how individuals choose to engage with online false information, where participants exhibit motivation to initiate social discussions with their surrounding social connections. Similar to the sociality-driven exploration of how awareness impacts the interaction (see section 8.1.2), these instances illustrate how social discussion is motivated by uncertainty regarding a piece of information, and outlines how the intricacies of one's physical environment directly influence the course of the sense-making process. The specifics of one's environment raises further implications as a noticeable difference is found between online and offline social interactions with the phenomenon — where, online, participants were found to be less willing to engage in corrective behavior due to the lack of connection to online strangers, while also caring more about informational factors (i.e., what is right or wrong); meanwhile offline, the focus was more on the relationship with the person they are conversing with. This highlights a difference in values between online and physical interactions with the phenomenon, which illustrates how technological development has changed the way of sharing information (Adams et al., 2023; Allcott et al., 2020), and elaborates on findings of the difference between normative and informational influences regarding online and offline social presence (Wijenayake et al., 2020). This additionally provides meaningful insights into what circumstances someone is rendered more vulnerable to instances of online false information (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024), based on their physical surroundings — through factors of avoidance, emotional burden, and fact-checking behaviors. Combined with the previous findings of needing both individual and collective thinking for sense-making practices, this revelation can deduce that depending on one's circumstances, different approaches are preferred or needed when handling false information — particularly through the social actors within these surroundings. This can be tied to the analysis of (Adams et al., 2023) who suggest that a defining issue of online false information through advancements in information technology is the way it enables people to 'do it alone'; namely, isolating interactions — in which they propose a notion of *intersubjectivity* for this context, being 'a coordination effort by two or more people to interpret entities in the world through social interaction' (Adams et al., 2023, p. 1437); aligning with the present conceptualization of collective sense-making.

Spatiality continues to affect judgment of false information through the virtual dimension, as highlighted in the diagram of figure 8.1 where technological affordances are shown to influence the sense-making process. Interpreting the virtual spatiality that is these platforms as CIs provides an understanding from existing literature that elaborates on this conceptualization through elements of shared meanings and cooperation (Ackerman et al., 2013). In these instances, awareness of social actors through features such as social engagement metrics and the way platforms mediate social identities is relevant. The results of this work through such an understanding show how shared meanings are vital for sense-making, also supported by existing literature of context-dependent language and community interactions in online information sharing

(Aghajari et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2024).

The way in which the virtual space and its features are laid out is further relevant. Participants mentioned the presentation of the post as being vital in their judgment when encountering information (see section 5.3). The findings presented across this thesis suggest that trust to one's spatiality — meaning, the space the information exists within — is involved in judging the information. This can be tied to existing literature of providing context (Bak-Coleman et al., 2021; Lutz et al., 2024), where, through the understanding of the lifeworld, a virtual space that provides meaningful and relevant context to the information would impact the sense-making processes of the individual in assessing this information. Thus, this presentation is meaningful in the individual judgments of whether the piece of content is reliable or unreliable.

The virtual space continues to elaborate on the topic of the second research question of this work by influencing how community and social interactions are mediated on the platforms. This study emphasizes that information navigates across the platforms within a user's personal network of online spaces. The work of Fawzi and Magdy (2024) demonstrates the predictability of user behavior on social media in regards to fake news, identifying a distinction between different types of users who interact with fake news online. In this distinction, the different types of users are found to interact with different information sources and online material on the investigated platform. The findings of this thesis elaborate on this topic; while the work of Fawzi and Magdy (2024) emphasizes the significance of personal networks in this way, there is an added aspect of one's personal ecosystem that further complicates these interactions, showing an impact based on the roles that a platform has in the personal network of one's online experience. This suggests that different platforms or spaces have different requirements or expectations by the users which add another layer to this personalization through that of the spatial dimension.

This introduces one of the main findings of the thesis, namely the one referring to how users give different platforms unique roles to fulfill various goals within the ecosystem of their online experience (e.g., entertainment vs. gathering information), and set expectations to the platforms based on these roles (see section 7.3). Accordingly, their subsequent behavior on those platforms is shaped by the role assigned to the platform. For example, multiple participants mention their main use of a social media platform as entertainment, and thereby believe that news on these platforms should not be treated as reliable sources of information. Furthermore, when one is expecting entertainment, the tolerance for false information seemingly decreases. Because of this, some participants avoided certain online spaces they believed from prior experiences to harbor false information, due to the emotional burden that comes with its exposure; an effect that resonates with existing findings of emotional reactions to false information (Malki et al., 2024). Furthermore, implications are raised in regards to the issue of online echo-chambers (Alatawi et al., 2021; Cinelli et al., 2021; Jones & Chandrasekharan, 2024), where some participants — in expecting entertainment — expressed a desire not to engage with differing perspectives due to the discomfort it brings.

Similarly, findings highlight how individuals are likely to utilize other online spaces for correcting information rather than the platform that the false information was encountered on. This conclusion is reached through several accounts of participants using search engines such as Google for fact-checking (see section 5.3) as well as sharing the information with peers through different platforms (see section 7.2). This illustrates the novelty of a holistic perspective in how false information may travel across different parts of one's online ecosystem. Additionally, it is interesting to note how

private communication platforms (e.g., WhatsApp, iMessage) are often preferred for personal interactions such as these. Some participants also stated that encountering false information on a particular platform decreased their likelihood of using that same platform to seek further details about the specific information topic. This experience can discourage use of the platform overall, or at the very least, cause them to approach the content on the platform with increased caution and skepticism (see section 7.4). These interactions highlight how future experiences are shaped dynamically, and platform use is highly dependent on one's opinion towards the online space; even motivating avoidance — elaborating on the impact of one's personal network and online behavior on platform use (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024; Fawzi & Magdy, 2024).

In investigating the third research question of this work, it became evident that an understanding of issues of spatiality can provide novel insights into how false information is experienced within the greater context of one's online experience, and what effects this has on personal lives. By basing the conceptualization of the phenomenon on the experiences of these individuals, an understanding of how the practices and interactions with the phenomenon are shaped by one's online experience is provided. This manifests in how the users use the various social media platforms. These findings are relevant in identifying how false information navigates across spaces and how it is dependent on the various *active* participants that engage with it. This is important in order to fill in the research gap of false information detection across different informational environments, and how the phenomenon disseminates through personal communication networks (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024).

An important issue to mention regarding one's online experience is the entanglement of news and entertainment or informal communication and the impact it has on individual social media use (Edgerly, 2017). Some of the participants mentioned the platform X primarily as a space to share opinions — interestingly, X was also the platform unanimously ideated to contain the most amount of false information from the perceptions of the participants in this study. This primary focus of sharing opinions within the online space leads to difficulties in false information detection and mitigation for users, as illustrated by the findings of section 7.2. Applied to the diagram in figure 8.1, one's conceptualization of the content in question would in turn influence the whole sense-making process, as their conceptualization is the basis for how they categorize these experiences. Put differently, depending on their understanding of the content, they may not categorize the experience as an instance of false information at all. As put by one of the participants of this study (from section 7.4): 'If you just get exposed to it, and then you don't get prompted afterwards [...] You just go, "oh, I consumed a piece of content". Sometimes people don't even recognize that they have (consumed false information).' (P09). This continues to be complicated through platform affordances, as the framing of the content influences their conceptualizations. An example of this as found through participant accounts is how jokes and humorous content are less included than formal information in personal definitions of false information, and can thus more easily fall between the cracks of false information detection (see section 4.1). This interpretation further elaborates on existing literature, where false information spread through 'memes' is often more engaging than other online ways of communicating information (Chang et al., 2025), something that has been enabled both through the increased use of AI-generated content, as well as the entanglement of news and entertainment on social media (Edgerly, 2017). While this literature illustrates that the simplification of information portrayed through this framing allows for novel engagement within areas such as political communication, the findings of the thesis at hand demonstrate that these topics may not

be taken as seriously as if they were communicated otherwise — highlighting implications of information perception.

To conclude, the space and how it frames and presents information — while being influenced by the role that an individual has assigned to a particular virtual space — influences their conceptualizations of false information that is encountered on those spaces, and subsequently influences their sense-making process. The cross-platform results of this research shows that experiences and expectations to false information may differ across the platforms, being highly dependent on past experiences and opinions towards the platforms and their individual affordances and aspects; including algorithms, communities, and their governance (see section 7.1). Due to the way these factors in relation to the various spaces can change over time, the next discussion of temporality is brought forward.

### 8.1.4 An Experience Unfolding Over Time

This study emphasizes how the temporal dimension of experiencing the phenomenon is impacted in multiple ways. Through the contextualization of the phenomenon within a virtual environment (see section 4.2), a particular characteristic of online false information is revealed: these instances remain permanently accessible on the Internet. Prior work on the dangers of online false information has highlighted how individuals can continuously be susceptible to debunked instances of false information, where their beliefs and attitudes can be influenced if the debunking is not accompanied by an alternate causal explanation (Brindha et al., 2022; Nyhan & Reifler, 2015). This research elaborates on and raises further implications of the permanence of false information when it is technologically mediated. The way that online content is framed and subsequently recorded on the Internet, combined with the fluency effect identified when examining the rapid spread of online false information (Shu et al., 2017; Starbird et al., 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018), is a vital aspect of online false information that highlights how aspects of the information affect experiences over time.

Unfolding the discussion of the first research question of this study through the temporal dimension demonstrates how users of social media platforms exhibit an expectation of having information that they are uncertain regarding the truthfulness of be either validated or disputed over time through continuous engagement with the platform, instead of taking deliberate actions to fact-check the information on their own. This is a behavioral pattern most notable in the participants who expressed fatigue from the amount of encounters of false information within their online experience, signaling a link between the two that leads to a decreased motivation in engaging with the phenomenon (see section 5.2). Thus, repeated exposure to instances of false information online is demonstrated in this study to contain a duality. The first aspect of this duality — resonating with existing work — demonstrates that false information, when encountered repeatedly, leads to fatigue (Malki et al., 2024) and renders the information to be at risk of being normalized and reinforced through familiarity towards the topic rather than corrected (Alatawi et al., 2021; Cinelli et al., 2021; Starbird et al., 2018). Additionally, participants in the study also expressed a growing mistrust toward informational spaces and the platforms that host them (see section 8.1.3), highlighting the effect of temporality on platform use particularly as their negative emotional responses to false information accumulate over time and shape future interactions. The second aspect of this duality highlights how past experiences with false information, depending on the salience and general way of the experience, can lead to the development of media literacy through increased familiarity with the phenomenon



and cognitive engagement (Brisola & Doyle, 2019; Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022; Zade et al., 2023).

Elaborating on this positive effect of interactions with the phenomenon, participants reported that classifying information as false made the experience more pertinent to the user; an effect that reinforces the role of self-awareness in media literacy development (see section 6.3). Many participants noted that their engagement in this study resulted in heightened awareness concerning issues of false information; suggesting that deliberate, structured interventions can guide future interactions with digital content — resonating with findings of how media literacy can be integrated in education in order to guide awareness and familiarity to the concept (Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022). Furthermore, participants expressed frustration with the fast pace of online information dissemination and reported a desire for more time to reflect before engaging with content. This aligns with research suggesting that slowing down information flow on social media can enhance critical thinking and media literacy (Brindha et al., 2022).

The findings from this research emphasize the temporal dimension of the experience in how the various aspects impacting interactions with online false information, including both the significance of the information (internal and external, see section 8.1.1), as well as the aspects influencing the sense-making process (see 8.1), are dynamic and change over time. This influence is pertinent when viewing the phenomenon through the lens of its greater context, namely that of its societal environment and effect on personal lives of the individuals engaging with it (see section 4.2). The implications are that interactions with false information online go under specific patterns during certain waves of societal developments. Participant accounts highlight this by emphasizing how the experience notably varies during moments of distress, i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic. This justifies the exploration of event-specific instances of the phenomenon (Pennycook & Rand, 2021; Wang et al., 2023), in addition to clearly highlighting how the experience differs in these situations, demonstrating how there is a difference between such instances and the day-to-day interactions with the experience (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). This is additionally evident in connections to information sources as they can change over time, affecting how individuals interact with their informational environment (see section 6.3). That is to say, that future interactions with the phenomenon are shaped by ongoing experiences, solidifying the phenomenon as a fluid, dynamic concept that takes place over time and is impacted by the active participants in their engagement.

While critical evaluation of media and information is a learned process that takes place over time through awareness and familiarity, a holistic perspective of one's online experience provides a basis of understanding which circumstances influence engagement with online false information. The findings presented across this thesis emphasize self-awareness, highlighting the willingness of participants to engage with opposing views to encourage critical thinking, but outlines that this willingness is dependent on the platform in question and their individual goals of interacting with the space (see chapter 7). These goals have implications according to when they feel like they can handle the emotional toll accompanying encounters with false information and conflicting views, or when they are interacting with a space with the goal of seeking information. Here, acknowledging existing literature that emphasizes the role of awareness is fact-checking and detailing how awareness of one's surroundings contributes to seamless cooperation between actors (Gross, 2013; Schmidt, 2002; Seelam et al., 2024), self-awareness is referred to in encouraging media literacy through one's selfhood. It can be argued that media literacy can thus be developed dependently through education (Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022), awareness (Seelam et al., 2024), and past experiences (see figure 8.1).

The findings of this thesis indicate that the temporal dimension of one's lifeworld plays a large part in how social media platforms can facilitate and support media literacy. This is through how the sense-making process, as displayed in figure 8.1, is one that continues to take shape over time, emphasizing the dynamic nature of the involved arenas; the societal informational context, one's relations with other social actors as well as the space themselves — dependent on the role that a space may have for a user's online experience — and the general set of opinions, views, and perceptions of the person. This brings forth the question of what can be done to mediate these experiences in how they develop over time, introducing the next section of this discussion that identifies a set of design implications based on the extracted phenomenological essence of this topic.

## 8.2 The Essence of Experiencing Online False Information

The story told from the themes elaborated through the analysis carried out for this research is one that starts broad in contextualizing the phenomenon of interest, and gets more intricate as the exploration focuses on how the experience manifests in its micro-dimensions. Therefore, this investigation began with the implications of personal conceptualizations, and situated the phenomenon within the lifeworld of the participants (chapter 4). Then, personal processes in regards to the false information were explored; including emotional reactions and sense-making processes when encountering it (chapter 5). These aspects were seen to motivate meaningful interactions; which brought forth the exploration of the specific actions taken towards the phenomenon that included other actors and social aspects (chapter 6). Lastly, the phenomenon was understood through how it manifested within the online experience of the participants — including the particular characteristics, features, and affordances of the spaces mediating the experience that influenced its dissemination (chapter 7). Overall, this study has allowed for the structuring of a description of the phenomenon of experiencing false information online through the lived experiences of the participants of this study, providing the *essence* of the phenomenon in these circumstances (Finlay, 2014).

Across participants, experiencing encounters with false information on social media included issues of trust and self-doubt — directly impacted by how various aspects of this experience amplified or otherwise impacted these issues. Such tensions unfolded within embodied habits (chapter 5), social interactions and discussions (chapter 6), and the intricacies of the virtual spaces defined as the social media platforms mediating the experience (chapter 7). Despite individual differences, all participants portrayed similar patterns in their sense-making (figure 8.1), and in exploring these processes further, revealed common vulnerabilities within their various aspects — that of an embodied and emotional negotiation of credibility, shaped by spatial, temporal, and social contexts, all impacting their sense of self at the center of this experience.

The experience of the phenomenon does not stop after the sense-making process. Various elements of this process in turn evoke motivations to engage in additional social discussions, which further disseminates the information. Additionally, the essence of the phenomenon is one that is deeply contextualized, being shaped over time by the experiences of the individuals encountering it. Hence, it is important to emphasize the dynamic nature of online false information as it manifests through these experiences. Drawing on the findings of this work, it can be argued that online false information is not static, but an ongoing interaction that takes place between individuals and their selfhood, other social actors, and the technological affordances of social media platforms in which the phenomenon takes place. As such, the everyday person using social media

and encountering false information through these means is not a passive recipient of these interactions, but rather an *active participant* in its interpretation, dissemination, and mitigation. The accumulation of their lived experiences, encompassing their recollections and understandings of past encounters (Brisola & Doyle, 2019), their expectations and connections to both platform affordances (see section 7.2) and information sources (see section 6.3), and their evolving trust in the virtual spaces in which they encounter the phenomenon (see section 7.3) all convene to contribute in the dissemination of false information and how it circulates online.

Finally, this study helps understand media literacy as a process that takes place over time within one's lifeworld, shaped by how false information is experienced through the various lifeworld dimensions. Thus, realizing how media literacy development is personal, acknowledging how these aspects are highly socially contextualized (Brisola & Doyle, 2019; De Carvalho et al., 2018; Seelam et al., 2024), dynamic (see section 8.1.4), and based on both internal and external aspects of sense-making processes (see section 8.1.1), a holistic view of how false information manifests in one's online experience is underlined. This brings the discussion to some design implications that encompass this essence, presenting recommendations that are noted to have contributed in the particular circumstances described by participant accounts of this exploration.

### **8.3 Design Implications Towards Supporting Media Literacy**

This section connects the discussion thus far to practical outcomes grounded in the phenomenological findings of this work. The essence of the phenomenon acts as a pivotal understanding of the experience with online false information. Based on the thematic findings presented in the findings chapters 4-7, design implications are elaborated with regard to how the essence of the phenomenon of handling false information online can be mediated through the design of social media platforms.

In accordance with participant experiences, some platform features are deemed to be particularly helpful in guiding their experiences with the phenomenon of false information. These elements can be tied to each of the elements within one's lifeworld as they experience the essence of the phenomenon. Due to the nature of this essence, these elements are context-dependent and dynamic, and in order to promote media literacy, they encourage critical reflection and cognitive engagement of online media consumption and information. The design implications resulting from this work are presented in table 8.1, and further elaborated in the sub-sections to come.

#### **8.3.1 Balance Individual and Collective Sense-making**

Using the findings relating to one's sociality, it is important to highlight both individual and collective sense-making; a novel find resulting from the phenomenological exploration of this study. This distinction is additionally solidified through the findings of one's physical spatiality, in which collaborative sense-making through interactions such as social discussion are often preferred in engagement with false information. As such, exploring in-depth the experiences of the participants of this study reveals that situations where the individual is aware of other social actors — particularly in which they have close relations with — they will often prioritize social discussion with these actors over other fact-checking methods. This demonstrates how awareness is important to guide sense-making decisions, while also giving insight into under what circumstances people are motivated to engage with collective fact-checking methods over more isolated,

Design implications	Empirical evidence
Balance individual and collective sense-making	Findings indicate a differentiation between individual and collective sense-making processes, in which awareness of other social actors are meaningful for both of these (see chapter 6). It is therefore necessary to integrate mechanisms that balance and support judgments based on social awareness and interactions.
Make ongoing experiences salient	Awareness and familiarity are shown to increase cognitive engagement relating to the phenomenon (see section 7.2). Timely prompts and nudges interrupt habitual engagement (see section 6.2) and make the experience more salient, shaping future interactions through supporting critical thinking and media literacy.
Integrate spatial separation and contextual awareness	Willingness to engage cognitively with information is dependent on one's prior experiences (see sections 4.1, 5.2, 7.1) and current circumstances (see sections 4.2, 6.1, 7.3). Spaces should allow for an organization of this in order to mitigate discouragement from cognitive engagement with online information.

Table 8.1: Design implications derived from empirical findings

individual methods. While this distinction provides insights into the prioritization of sense-making approaches in people, this work further elaborates that a common aspect in both of these sense-making approaches is one of emphasis on social presence and conformity (Wijenayake et al., 2020), highlighting how these processes can be mixed through design implications on the platforms. Put differently, this work notes how social interactions and other social elements are vital in both individual and collective sense-making processes of individuals online. This has implications for how the space can be designed, in which the following platform implications are presented: platform features should enable a balance between individual and collective sense-making processes, and support social interactions in encounters with the phenomenon in question. In the diagram of figure 8.1, collective sense-making can be tied to the first aspect of *social connections and trust*, while individual sense-making can be tied to the second aspect of *informational context*. Platforms should balance the support of both individual and collective sense-making, something that can be done through the implementation of options for social engagement within these means, via social engagement metrics (likes/dislikes, view count), comment prompts, perspective prompts, and structured dialogues. Additionally, platforms should consider highlighting if any peers (e.g., from current following lists) have interacted with the content in question, facilitating more awareness and encouraging meaningful discussions between social actors and community members. In short, this work emphasizes platform design that enables the socially contextual nature of information (Brisola & Doyle, 2019; Chen et al., 2024). Additionally, this justifies existing platform interventions that are context-specific, such as research on issues of social conformity suggesting that NLP models could support collaborative fact-checking by integrating community-specific linguistic cues to enhance

trust in factual information (Liu et al., 2024). Ultimately, the role of these platforms should be to enable credible fact-checking interactions built on trust, that emphasize the same values as those of the communities within the context (Liu et al., 2024; Weinel et al., 2011). These design features allow for discussions and awareness of other social actors that are shown to increase cognitive engagement and critical thinking, as well as the accuracy of these judgments (Bashardoust et al., 2024; Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022; Do et al., 2024).

### 8.3.2 Make Ongoing Experiences Salient

The participants of this study mentioned a perceptibly increased familiarity to false information and heightened ability to differentiate between reliable and unreliable information from their past encounters with the phenomenon, as well as their ongoing experiences in contact with the various virtual spaces. This is resonating with existing literature tied to media literacy and how past experiences play a crucial role in the development of this literacy (Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022). The findings of this thesis additionally elaborate the meaning of this familiarity and how it is based on the technological affordances and aspects of the platforms (Gibson, 2014; Svanæs, 2013), as well as the contextualization of the phenomenon within both societal and personal circumstances, and connections to information sources. All of these aspects are ones that are dynamic, changing over time.

Hence, the findings concerning temporality and how past experiences are vital in developing more familiarity to the phenomenon point towards how an individual's recollections of encounters with the phenomenon should stand out in their memory in order to continuously support future interactions. These encounters can be highlighted through features of the platform, presenting the next design implication of this work: platforms should integrate the use of nudging and prompting interventions, implementing deliberate delays in information consumption to make these experiences more salient; subsequently shaping the effectiveness of future interactions with the phenomenon. Such interventions are demonstrated by existing research which have concluded that these reduce false information spread by prompting individuals to consider accuracy before engaging (Bak-Coleman et al., 2021; Brisola & Doyle, 2019). The work of this thesis elaborates on the effect of such interventions by highlighting how this timely reduction interrupts embodied, habitual engagement (see section 6.2), counteract impulsive interactions driven by platform affordances, and prompting cognitive and reflective engagement with online content (Lutz et al., 2024). While nudging interventions have been explored before with notable effectiveness, their particular role in making the experience more salient and shaping future interactions through its affect on media literacy is a novel contribution of this thesis. As such, these interventions prompt the experience for the user, making the encounter stand out in their memory, and work towards reinforcing critical thinking and media literacy over time — contributing to support future interactions with the phenomenon.

Furthermore, due to repeated exposure of false information consequentially discouraging people from taking steps to verify information online, such behavioral aspects conditioned by temporality encourage platform integration of corrective mechanisms that are simple and available alongside the content itself. This additionally underlines the importance of the framing of information in its digital mediation, as found by prior literature (Bak-Coleman et al., 2021; Prochaska et al., 2023). As such, within these encounters, it is also important to acknowledge the emotional toll, negative feelings, and fatigue resulting from exposure to false information over time. This brings forth

the next design implication, and emphasizes that these design features should be used in combination; a collective approach to platform design that is shown by Bak-Coleman et al. (2021) to improve their effectiveness.

### 8.3.3 Integrate Spatial Separation and Contextual Awareness

Existing research on platform interventions already delineate how providing context is crucial for supporting media literacy and prompting cognitive engagement with social media content (Bak-Coleman et al., 2021; Brindha et al., 2022; Zade et al., 2023). Still, the work of this thesis finds that participants often miss an ability to structure their platform use and online experience, a vital aspect of their platform use as this shapes their behavior on virtual spaces. This omission is shown to be meaningful in the dissemination of false information, as the findings of this work demonstrate that the role that a platform has within a person's online experience is impacted by prior experiences while also shaping their goals and expectations in interacting with that platform. As such, using the findings of one's virtual spatiality and ways in which the space — including its affordances — mediate the phenomenon of interest, this work presents the following design implication: Platforms should provide users with mechanisms to help organize their day-to-day interactions as they appear in their online experience. Furthermore, elaborating on the existing emphasis on providing context through platform interventions, platforms should integrate these interventions in ways people can organize their online experience in order to improve the effectiveness of these interventions — making them more personalized for the individual sense-making processes of individuals and their current circumstances, goals, and expectations. Such an approach additionally utilized the strategy of combining multiple interventions for increased effectivity (Bak-Coleman et al., 2021). In this way, platforms can enable users to structure their online experience by organizing content by purpose (e.g., news vs. entertainment); integrating spatial separation in the platforms that supports the differentiation between content types, and works towards mitigating some of the challenges around false information detection in these instances. This is additionally tied to community- and social interactions as organization of one's online experience includes an acknowledgment of social presence and social conformity — and understanding how identity is mediated online can impact these interactions and have implications for the difference in normative and informational influences (Wijenayake et al., 2020).

## 8.4 Final Remarks

As demonstrated across this discussion, the findings presented in this thesis are consistent with existing research that emphasizes the importance of social discussion in sense-making (Do et al., 2024), providing contextual support (Glöss, 2012; Jahanbakhsh et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2024; Seelam et al., 2024), and the effectiveness of nudging interventions (Bak-Coleman et al., 2021) on handling instances of false information. The work of this thesis additionally elaborates through different dimensions of how these aspects contribute to media literacy by exploring the phenomenon through the lifeworld, and providing design implications that are catered to the understanding of these experiences. In combining and implementing these design implications, virtual spaces mediating false information such as social media platforms could shift their approach from one that is reactive (e.g., false information detection and corrective mechanisms) to a more critically engaged approach of managing the spread of online false information — one

that deliberately fosters media literacy and agency in their users. Accordingly, this work highlights the importance of the user-end of the interaction, particularly emphasizing the meaningful role of past experiences and personal critical thinking in developing media literacy. In the following, the conclusions drawn from the analysis and discussion of the findings are laid out, summarizing the main take-aways from this thesis and the relevance of its contributions.

## Chapter 9

# Conclusion

This thesis has investigated the role of everyday individuals and their day-to-day online interactions in the dissemination of false information across online spaces, using their personal accounts to extrapolate the essence of how this complex phenomenon is experienced under natural circumstances. Through in-depth interviews with ten participants, the qualitative phenomenological analysis helped to shed light on new aspects of these interactions based in the fragments of one's lifeworld, while also reinforcing existing research on motivation and social discussion as key dimensions of engagement with online content (Brisola & Doyle, 2019; Do et al., 2024; Wijenayake et al., 2020). Through this exploration, meaningful insights into how false information is encountered, processed, and remembered over time to shape future experiences, emerged. These findings garnered insights into the sense-making process of individuals encountering false information, and pointed to broader implications for platform design that highlight the need for interventions that support critical reflection, slow down impulsive engagement, and provide contextual cues to help individuals assess credibility (see section 8.3). This chapter rounds up the work of this thesis by going through a series of topics, circling the back to how the research goals and objectives were addressed, summarizing the empirical findings and the resulting design implications, before some reflections on limitations and directions for future work addressing the topic are noted. Then, some final remarks conclude the finale of this thesis.

### 9.1 Summary of Contributions

The work of this thesis has illuminated a novel, in-depth understanding of how false information is received, interpreted, and propagated within the virtual spaces of social media platforms through the phenomenological framework of the users' lifeworld (Finlay, 2014). This exploration has provided an understanding of how the phenomenon is experienced within natural circumstances, and spreads through day-to-day interactions of individuals and their personal networks. These social interactions are particularly important for exploring the phenomenon of false information due to the social nature of the phenomenon (Vosoughi et al., 2018). These experiences have been explored in how they manifest across the platforms of X, Instagram, and YouTube, impacted by the various affordances of these spaces (Gibson, 2014). As a result, through an identification of the intricacies of these interactions with the phenomenon, an understanding of where platform design can intervene and mitigate the spread is provided.

Through this thesis, attention was brought to the surroundings of the user when interacting with information, providing insight into the particular circumstances that



may affect vulnerability to false information (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). These topics have implications for both theory; through topics such as social presence (Ning Shen & Khalifa, 2008; Weinel et al., 2011), social conformity (Sharma & De Choudhury, 2018; Wijenayake et al., 2020), and CISs (Boden et al., 2014; Schmidt & Bannon, 1992), as well as practice; through design implications for social media platforms that better mediate collaboration between social actors in correcting false information (Baumer et al., 2011; Do et al., 2024; Starbird et al., 2019) and for platforms to increase media literacy of their user base (Brisola & Doyle, 2019). Provided are also insights into different ways context can be enabled through social media platforms, abiding by key social and psychological affordances to guide appropriate mediation of this interaction (Bak-Coleman et al., 2021; Brindha et al., 2022; Efstratiou & De Cristofaro, 2022).

The phenomenological approach of this study is an essential driving factor in the in-depth nature of the experiences of this work. This perspective has solidified the experience of online false information as one that is situated within its context and reliant on multiple human-aspects of the user that have previously remained underexplored (Fernandez & Alani, 2018). The hermeneutic phenomenological approach also provided an essentialist perspective to the interpretive research rather than just a descriptive understanding of the phenomenon. Drawing on existing phenomenological findings within the field of Informatics regarding embodied perception in interaction design that highlights the importance of perception in behavior (Svanæs, 2013), as explored through Merleau-Ponty's notion of the lived body — the present thesis further elaborated on this exploration through other fragments of one's lived world (Ashworth, 2003) and how they intervene.

While existing literature has explored issues of false information in connection to particular events (Lemmon, 2024; Prochaska et al., 2023) — demonstrating the dangers of the phenomenon in its influence on societal developments, the empirical findings of this thesis elaborated on the micro-dimensions of these instances, identifying what interactions platform mediation can intervene through. These dimensions provided an understanding of the sense-making process of individuals as they encounter false information online, and how this process impacts subsequent actions taken to disseminate the information. What follows is a description of how the work of this thesis answered the initial research questions detailing this topic, emphasizing the novel contributions of this exploration.

### 9.1.1 Answering the Research Questions

In answering the first research question, this thesis has illuminated on the sense-making processes of individuals as they encounter information in day-to-day exchange. This details in which ways individuals judge online content as reliable and unreliable, including which platform features affect this judgment. Particularly notable are three key aspects of this sense-making: (1) social connections and trust, (2) informational context, and (3) spatial affordances (see section 8.1). This understanding was essential in identifying central aspects of the essence of the experience, and provided a basis for the design implications developed in this thesis.

In answering the second research question that sought out to understand the community- and social aspects of (false) information sharing, this work explored how social media platforms facilitate the dissemination of false information through technology-mediated social interactions. In this exploration, a distinction between individual and collective fact-checking emerged, where collective methods are often prioritized (see section 6.1). Linked to the inclusion of personal social connections and

relations as an aspect in the sense-making process when encountering false information (figure 8.1), features on the platforms that present social engagement are important for one's individual evaluation, and provide an awareness of the other social actors within the informational environment. These metrics for social engagement provide a representation of the majority opinion towards the piece of information, which is often used for individual fact-checking actions when individuals are in situations void of other social actors to engage with for collective sense-making. Additionally, the emphasis on collective fact-checking emphasizes how social discussion is used in sense-making, aligning with existing literature of how social discussion increases critical thinking and may mitigate the dangers of online false information (Adams et al., 2023; Do et al., 2024). In the circumstances of this study — on social media platforms — this is often done through the use of comment sections. The implications of social discussion in fact-checking is explored in existing research pointing towards a bias towards community members (Allen et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2024), and is additionally supported by the findings of this work elaborating on how familiarity to certain aspects of the post — including the source, and how this relation is closely tied to one's self and thus more credible — impacts sense-making in these instances.

Social interactions were found to be additionally meaningful for the dissemination of false information outside of one's sense-making process, after a piece of information has been recognized to be untruthful. To understand this, an acknowledgment of one's motivations for social interactions in encounters with false information are necessary. This motivation is found to be two-fold; in order to provide context regarding the information (extrinsic motivation; sense-making), and to ease the emotional burden of the experience (intrinsic motivation; see section 5.2). A sense of fatigue and negative emotional reaction here is noted, particularly in instances where the false information is related to sensitive topics, which is also seen in prior qualitative findings (Khan et al., 2024; Malki et al., 2024). Often times, participants are found to go to different platforms in order to conduct these social discussions, subsequently disseminating the information to other spaces. The way people choose which space to spread the information through is dependent on the role that the platform has within their greater online experience (see section 8.1.3). Consequently, this makes clear how the everyday individual is an active participant in these interactions, the implications of their personal network and platform use, and henceforth — how day-to-day community interactions on social media are meaningful to understand how false information navigates across areas of the Internet.

In answering the third research question, this work found through the exploration of people's lifeworld that platforms can contribute towards media literacy for mitigating false information through three particular ways, resulting in three such design implications. These implications emphasize the importance in defining and highlighting the phenomenon for the users in order to shape and support their future encounters with false information, resonating with existing findings of how media literacy is shown to play a meaningful role in addressing the issues of false information on the Internet and is a development that must be learned over time (Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022). For the platforms themselves to harbor media literacy, this discussion refers back to the diagram of figure 8.1; in which the visualized sense-making emphasizes how past experiences increase one's familiarity to the phenomenon and continue to develop literacy through its dynamic nature that is dependent on the conceptualization, opinions, and perceptions of the individual encountering the phenomenon (Brisola & Doyle, 2019; Zade et al., 2023). This warrants exposure to the phenomenon and adequate awareness in these experiences in order to develop such literacy (Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022; Seelam et

al., 2024). Furthermore, with an emphasis on how platform use is dependent on the individual's overall online experience, the findings of this thesis concur that platform features that render the user available to organize their online experience on the platform support their experiences in regulating encounters with false information. The summary of the contributions of this work will thus move to summarize these design implications.

### 9.1.2 Summary of Design Implications

The exploration of the third research question resulted in design implications providing recommendations for how media literacy can be supported in these circumstances. The presented design implications emphasize and reflect this nature of the explored experiences of online false information through the totality of the research contributions resulting from the research objectives.

The first implication states that platforms should balance individual and collective sense-making for their users. As social discussion is evidently important for the sense-making of individuals online, platforms should mediate these interactions for collective fact-checking, while also integrating awareness of social actors for the support of individual sense-making approaches (Adams et al., 2023). This awareness can be facilitated through social engagement metrics (likes/dislikes, viewer count), comment prompts, and features that encourage engagement with peers regarding online content.

The second implication states that platforms should make ongoing experiences with false information salient to support future encounters with the phenomenon. This finding emphasizes the dynamic nature of such experiences. These prompts should emphasize timely engagement and delays in media consumption in order to interrupt the embodied habits of individuals through the interface (Svanæs, 2013; see section 8.1.1), and increase cognitive engagement as found in existing literature (Brisola & Doyle, 2019; Lutz et al., 2024).

The third and final implication states that platforms should integrate spatial separation and contextual awareness, elaborating on existing interventions highlighting contextual cues, while addressing some of their limitations. This spatial separation should help the user organize their online experience in a way that allows for more personalization of contextual support, combining findings of context-specific interventions concerned with social and human aspects of the experience (Liu et al., 2024) and providing context concerned with the clarity and awareness accompanying the informational content (Bak-Coleman et al., 2021; Zade et al., 2023).

## 9.2 Limitations and Future Directions

Based on the novelty of the contributions of this work, it can motivate some future explorations — as, naturally, there are some limitations concerning the results of this study. Firstly, the participants involved are largely within same age group and have similar educational backgrounds grounded in the Western world, which can imply some biases in the conceptualizations of the work. Additionally, while this study involved a purposive sampling method, the recruitment process did not target particular demographic characteristics or aspects of one's identity such as age, gender, and geographic background. However, over the course of the recruitment and data collection process, a pattern emerged: one where young adults expressed the most interest in the study (thus recruited through self-selected sampling), and had access to particularly rich accounts of past encounters with the phenomenon (as per the purposive sampling

requirements). While the participant pool of this study has provided valuable insights in exploring the topic, future research could extend on how other demographic groups may vary in their experiences with the topics raised in this work. This is important as from the findings of this research it can be implied that prior experiences are important for shaping media literacy, and age groups and populations are meaningful in defining these past experiences (see section 8.1.4); which is additionally seen in existing literature exploring the phenomenon as it occurs in other geographic locations (Seelam et al., 2024).

One unclear aspect of these findings is the threshold of certain social and psychological effects that are delineated in this discussion. For example, while personal connections to information sources are found to have a meaningful impact in motivations to engage, the intricacies of these relationships are not thoroughly identified — i.e., how close do you have to be in your relationship with an information source to create a meaningful impact on the interactions with false information? Some of these results varied from person to person, implying personality-based differences; which can warrant a psychology-oriented research approach in order to explore related patterns in this. Furthermore, this study emphasizes the role of a person’s online experience and network in the dissemination of online false information (Broda & Strömbäck, 2024). However, as made clear through the findings, this online experience includes both private and public virtual spaces in acting as channels for discussing instances of the phenomenon. The platforms explored in the current study (X, Instagram, YouTube) are all primarily public spaces, which warrants an exploration of private spaces and how the experience potentially differs within these arenas.

Finally, the findings of this study can be used to tie together day-to-day interactions with how the phenomenon manifests within larger developments and events shrouded in false information. Specifically, future research can explore how the specific aspects of the sense-making process and factors influencing the significance of information can be exploited through deliberate acts of disinformation dissemination. The insights provided from such an exploration can bring awareness to exploitative strategies and demonstrate how these instances are to be handled and regulated differently, due to the acknowledgment of differentiation between source intentions (Prochaska et al., 2023).

### 9.3 Final Remarks

By addressing the gaps identified in the literature review of chapter 2, this study advances existing contributions regarding the topic of false information and work within HCI and related fields. The findings of this investigation reinforce the importance of user experiences in designing systems and within social media, particularly noting the importance of social interactions and discussion in assessing information (Do et al., 2024) and the nature of the experience as it unfolds over time. Ultimately, this thesis contributed to a more human-oriented, situated understanding of how people make sense of false information as they encounter it on social media platforms — identifying it as a deeply embedded, embodied, contextual, and relational phenomenon.



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## Appendix A

# Interview Guide

Topic	Aspects to explore
Introduction	
Information	Introduce study and research purpose Consent of participation
Main	
Icebreakers	Participants' use of social media platforms What platforms Frequency of use
Typical platform use	Typical use of [Twitter, Instagram, YouTube] What does the participant use them for Information sources Most used platform functionality Information sharing practices with friends/peers
Community	Part of any online communities How do they interact Impact on communication habits Shared meanings or values within communities
Experience with false information	Participants' definition of false information Types of false information encountered over the past months Means through how participants got in touch with such information Ways how participants figure out that something refers to false information Different experiences across the platforms
Emotional and psychological reactions / aspects	Any actions taken to assess validity — confirming / denying Any actions taken to communicate Sharing with community — [How do you warn your peers about misinformation] Platform functions used to communicate with peers

## Appendix A. Interview Guide

Platform mitigation efforts	Platforms' efforts to combat false information Current ones used Participants' ideas How well do the platforms promote media literacy The extent to what they are prepared to support users to deal with false information
Conclusion	
Final additions	Thank for participation Opportunity for participant to ask questions or share information they find relevant in the context of the interview

## Appendix B

### Table Overview of Code Scheme

	Code	Description	Type	Origin
1	Platform use	Code captures the type of platform and frequency of use from participant. Differentiates between the different type of medium and the use behavior.	Apriori	Broda and Strömbäck, 2024
2	Outstanding functionalities	Code captures information on the participants' most used functionalities of a particular platform. Seeks a better understanding of the functionalities that participants value.	Apriori	Broda and Strömbäck, 2024
3	Information sharing practices	Code records how participants engage in sharing information, when/how often, and which rules and norms they follow, cf Schmidt's definition of practices.	Apriori	Button and Harper, 1995; Schmidt, 2011
4	Correcting false information	Information sharing practices that are directly related to correcting false information in interactions with others. Helpful in understanding how the participant handles false information when it is directly introduced in a social interaction - correlating false information with community interactions.	Empirical	Transcript 5 participant 4 (P04)

5	Community membership	Information on the communities that the participant is part of, as well as what makes a the participant feel as they are part of a community. Relevant to identify implications in how we understand the spread of false information across different platforms and how emotions may impact community involvement.	Apriori	Finlay, 2013; Langdridge, 2008
6	Community behavior	Code records how participants interact with other community members, how they communicate, which values and meanings they share, etc.	Apriori	Finlay, 2013
7	Conceptualization of false information	Code captures the participants' understandings and conceptualizations of the phenomenon of false information. Used to understand the perspective of the participant, if their conceptualizations may impact their experiences with the phenomenon.	Empirical	Transcript 1, participant 1 (P01)
8	Anticipated societal impact of false information	Code captures how participants understand the future potential impact false information has on society and how they assess this. Seeks to understand if participant see the issue as a societal problem which needs to be mitigated, and how critical of an issue it is.	Empirical	Transcript 3, participant 3 (P03)
9	Current accounts of societal impact of false information	Code captures how participants understand the current impact false information has on society. Who is affected by it, power dynamics, issues of authority and influence, and other aspects of society that are meaningful in the spread of false information online.	Empirical	Transcript 3, participant 3 (P03)
10	Perceived reach of false information	Code captures the reach of false information as it is perceived by the participant. How widespread is it? Connected to understanding the societal and experienced impact of false information.	Empirical	Transcript 3, participant 3 (P03)



11	Recounted instances of false information	Code captures participants' recounts of specific pieces of false information they have come across (domain of information, medium, and generally what the information was regarding) to get an overview of the experience.	Empirical	Transcript 1, participant 1 (P01)
12	Isolated actions and interactions with false information	Accounts for how often participants came across false information and how they dealt with it by themselves; e.g., actions taken to report false information. Does NOT include checks made to verify a piece of information.	Empirical	Transcript 1, participant 1 (P01)
13	Sensemaking thoughts on false information	Records the ways participant come to realize that they encountered false information and how they reflected on it. Aims to understand the thought processes as they are attempting to make sense of the information in order to better understand their actions.	Empirical	Transcript 1, participant 1 (P01)
14	Sensemaking actions on false information	Records the actions that participants take to guide them in identifying a piece of information as true or false. Includes any checks that they have done to verify a piece of information.	Empirical	Transcript 1, participant 1 (P01)
15	Long term emotions towards false information	General feelings a participant expresses regarding false information and their experiences with it in the long-term. Helpful to understand their general view and opinion on false information, as this may impact how they interact with it.	Empirical	Transcript 1, participant 1 (P01)
16	Emotional reactions to specific instances	Captures what the participant felt in the moment they interacted with a specific piece of false information. Helpful in identifying if there are certain aspects of a piece of information that trigger a certain emotional response in the participant, and if this impacts the ways they interact with it.	Empirical	Transcript 5, participant 4 (P04)

17	Emotional responses to AI	Emotional responses specific to AI-generated information to understand whether participants react differently when encountering AI generated information and how it correlates to false information. Could signify a difference in the false information and AI generated information should be handled.	Empirical	Transcript 3, participant 3 (P03)
18	Attributes of false information	Records elements that participants would associated with false information, i.e., make them suspicious of something, so that they feel compelled to check whether it is true or false. Concerns triggers for the sensemaking process.	Apriori	Brisola and Doyle, 2019
19	Elements of trust	Captures attributes that would make participants refuse that a piece of information is false, e.g., knowing and trusting the source, resonating with knowledge shared within their communities.	Apriori	Do et al., 2024
20	Media literacy promotion	Accounts for how platforms are currently supporting users assess the quality of information that they are consuming and the extent to what they are prepared to support users to deal with false information.	Apriori	Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022
21	Gaps on promoting media literacy	Includes critiques on how platforms currently handle the issue of false information and fail to promote media literacy to their users. Does NOT include suggestions, but criticism on current media literacy efforts.	Apriori	Brisola and Doyle, 2019
22	Suggestions for mitigation efforts	Captures the ideas and suggestions of the participant on features that they perceive to be helpful for mitigating the spread of false information.	Empirical	Transcript 2, participant 2 (P02)
23	Platform limitations	Captures references to platform features that may make it difficult to convey information. Might give insights on how false information can be associated with difficulties to convey proper information and differences across platforms.	Empirical	Transcript 2, participant 2 (P02)

24	Attitudes towards platform users	Captures the attitudes and personal perceptions towards the users of platforms. Can give insights into how the participants use to interact with the communities on the specific platforms, why someone uses the platform, and their trust in other people within the community.	Empirical	Transcript 2, participant 2 (P02)
25	Attitudes towards platform itself	Captures the attitudes and personal perceptions towards the platforms and platform owners. Could give insights into why the participant uses the platform, their opinion of the platform, and how they believe the platform owners are handling the spread of false information.	Empirical	Transcript 1, participant 1 (P01)
26	Platform purpose	Captures what participants use the particular platforms for. Interested in understanding whether this affects attitudes of the platforms, trust, and practices on the platforms and functionalities used.	Empirical	Transcript 1, participant 1 (P01)
27	Emotional responses to community interactions	Captures the emotional responses participants have during and after community interactions. Used to understand what emotionally motivates one to engage in communities and how this affects them emotionally.	Empirical	Transcript 3, participant 3 (P03)
28	False information impacts on personal life	Captures the ways experiences and interactions with false information online may impact participants' personal lives and their relationships.	Empirical	Transcript 2, participant 2 (P02)
29	Background and personality traits	Captures the ways personality traits as well as one's background and other individual social aspects may impact their interactions with false information.	Empirical	Transcript 5, participant 4 (P04)
30	Platform comparisons	Encompasses the participant's own reflections and comparisons of the different platforms. Used to help understand perceptions regarding differences in the spaces.	Empirical	Broda and Strömbäck, 2024

31	Effects of community	Created to understand how one's community and relationships impacts the way they act when encountering and interacting with false information as well as other community members regarding false information.	Empirical	Transcript 2, participant 2 (P02)
32	Correlating AI and false information	Created after noticing a pattern of AI-generated content playing an important role in identifying false information online. AI seems to be closely related to false information in the perception of the participants.	Empirical	Transcript 3, participant 3 (P03)
33	Physical environment	Captures the surrounding environment of the participant when they interacted with false information. Will be helpful to understand the experience of the participant during the interaction.	Apriori	Finlay, 2013
34	Perceived intention of information sources	Captures the participant's reflections and perceptions surrounding the intentions of the information sources they interact with. Helpful to understand if intention has an important say in their sensemaking process, and patterns in what decides these perceptions.	Empirical	Transcript 3, participant 3 (P03)
35	Secondary false information	Used to identify "secondary" cases of false information - false information spread through comments or other sharing practices connected to "primary" instances of information. Helpful in understanding where and how false information spreads.	Empirical	Transcript 3, participant 3 (P03)
36	Anxiety around Internet use	Anxieties and hesitations regarding Internet use that may impact the ways participants interact with (false) information online.	Empirical	Transcript 2, participant 2 (P02)
37	The meaning of mediums	Reflections regarding the false information in relation to the medium of the information (text, image, video). Helpful in comparing false information across the platforms.	Empirical	Transcript 4, participant 1 (P01)

38	Views on Internet and media	Preconceived views towards the Internet that may affect their opinion of it, and thereby their opinions on the content they interact with online.	Empirical	Transcript 4, participant 1 (P01)
39	Cultural aspects of sense-making processes	Ways in which the participant's culture - values, beliefs and shared practices for the participant and their community, may impact their sensemaking and decision making processes when encountering content online.	Empirical	Transcript 4, participant 1 (P01)
40	The role of authority in perceiving information	Ways in which differing levels of authority may affect the way the participant perceives pieces of information. Related to ambivalence - related to codes regarding sensemaking and cultural aspects.	Empirical	Transcript 5, participant 4 (P04)
41	Uncertainty of platform efforts	Encompasses instances that signify any sort of uncertainty the participant expresses regarding a platform's efforts on increasing media literacy to its users or mitigating false information on its platform.	Empirical	Transcript 4, participant 1 (P01)
42	Framing of information	Ways in which the framing of a piece of information may affect the experience of the participant when interacting with the information.	Empirical	Transcript 5, participant 4 (P04)
43	The role of familiarity in perceiving information	Ways in which a sense of familiarity may affect the way the participant perceives pieces of information to understand whether the feeling of familiarity may impact the way participants interact with and perceive information online.	Empirical	Transcript 5, participant 4 (P04)
44	Information sources	Created to keep track of the information sources mentioned that the participants use on the platforms. Says something about what they use the platform for.	Empirical	Transcript 5, participant 4 (P04)
45	Society impacting false information	Ways in which the participant thinks the general development of society has impacted the concept of false information on social media. Helpful in understanding where the participants believe the fundamental cause lies.	Empirical	Transcript 6, participant 5 (P05)

46	Evolution of information sources	Instances where the participant describes a change in their information sources. Helpful in understanding if these instances impact the trust they have towards the sources and in turn the threshold for their trust.	Empirical	Transcript 7, participant 6 (P06)
47	The meaning of the information topic	Ways in which the specific topic or domain of the false information encountered may impact how they interact with it. Helpful to see if certain topics are perceived as more crucial than others, which may provide insights into future research that focuses on one domain.	Empirical	Transcript 6, participant 5 (P05)
48	Views on news sources	Attitudes and opinions on news sources, as they play an important role in the dissemination of information online. Created after noticing a pattern of news sources being held to different standards from other information sources.	Empirical	Transcript 4, participant 1 (P01)
49	Goal of interaction with information source	Instances the participant mentions specific goals towards their interactions with information sources, as their goal of the interaction may impact their feelings and actions when encountering false information.	Empirical	Transcript 8, participant 7 (P07)
50	Personally curated algorithm	Platform's algorithm as it has been curated by the participant; what the participant does in order to control what information is presented to them on social media platform, and anything this would affect.	Empirical	Transcript 7, participant 6 (P06)
51	Platform presented content	Platform's algorithm as it is presented by the platform itself - the way the platform decides what information is presented to the participant.	Empirical	Transcript 7, participant 6 (P06)
52	Implications of platform censorship	Captures instances where the participant describes censorship that takes place on the platforms and if this affects the way information is understood or how false information is experienced on the platform.	Empirical	Transcript 7, participant 6 (P06)

53	Differences online and in person	Relevant situations where the participant realizes a difference between how it is handled or experienced online and in person.	Empirical	Transcript 5, participant 4 (P04)
54	Consequences of spreading false information	Accounts for when the participant mentions particular consequences that spreading false information has had, that they have witnessed or experienced. Helpful to identify if certain types of false information are considered to be more severe.	Empirical	Transcript 8, participant 7 (P07)
55	The role of frequency in perceiving information	Created to identify how the frequency that a piece of (false) information is presented to a participant may influence their sensemaking process. Created as existing literature highlight that the more often something is processed the more likely it is to be perceived as reliable.	Apriori	Starbird et al., 2018
56	Ways of giving context	Created as contextual cues and context has been shown to be meaningful in how users understand and validate false information online. Understanding how the participants look for context is helpful for understanding how to improve this experience.	Apriori	Zade et al., 2023
57	Assigned responsibility of information sources	Code created to capture the responsibility the participant assigns to the information source within an instance of false information.	Empirical	Transcript 5, participant 4 (P04)
58	Relaying communication platforms	Created after noticing that participants often correct / share instances of false information with peers through private means of communication. Could say something about how these interactions are preferred to be had and experienced.	Empirical	Transcript 8, participant 7 (P07)
59	Availability of the Internet	Accounts for topics regarding the availability of the Internet — the ease of access and scope, connectivity... Helpful to account for differences between online false information and the meaning of technology in the dissemination.	Empirical	Transcript 8, participant 7 (P07)

60	Characteristics of technology	Properties of technology and the Internet that may be meaningful in the way they affect experiences and interactions with false information in the virtual world. Meaningful in identifying the way the phenomenon of false information is experienced online.	Apriori	Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022; Livingstone, 2009
61	Comparing communities across platforms	Comparisons between the differences in communities across the different platforms. Important for identifying how the phenomenon may differ in different online spaces.	Empirical	Transcript 7, participant 6 (P06)
62	Reactions across Internet spaces	Code highlights any differences in the way participants react on the different platforms and if there is a particular difference of this. Explanations as to why these reactions are different are not included here, but rather under "meaning of mediums" or "platform comparisons".	Apriori	Broda and Strömbäck, 2024
63	Online presence and identity	Code highlights the sense of self in the interaction online or particular issues regarding identity and how the participant acts online in regards to this. Helpful in understanding the embodiment and selfhood of the participant in their experiences.	Empirical	Transcript 7, participant 6 (P06)
64	Past experiences for media literacy	Highlights issues of media literacy online - how content online is consumed by the participant, how their habits are shaped by their literacy and their past experiences.	Empirical	Transcript 9, participant 7 (P07)
65	False information impact on the online experience	Ways in which experiences with false information may impact the general experience of the participant when they are online. How instances of false information impact the bigger context of their online experience and perhaps the role the platforms have in the participant's social experience.	Empirical	Transcript 8, participant 7 (P07)





# Appendix C

## Table Overview of Themes and Their Structure

First-order Theme	Description	Second-order Theme	Description	Code list
<i>The Omnipresence of False Information</i>	Connects the phenomenon to society, anticipated impact, and the meaning of the phenomenon	The bigger picture	Getting an understanding of how digitally mediated false information impacts lives, and how this in turn influences online behavior.	False information impacts on personal life Differences online and in person Anticipated societal impact of false information Society impacting false information Current accounts of societal impact of false information
		Participant's conceptualizations	Exploring what the participants understand of the phenomenon of online false information and how this may affect their experiences with it.	Secondary false information Correlating AI and false information Conceptualizations of false information Recounted instances of false information Attributes of false information Characteristics of technology

First-order Theme	Description	Second-order Theme	Description	Code list
<i>My lived experience</i>	This theme accounts for patterns in the data illustrating how the experiences impact and are impacted by the person and their emotions, values, and expectations — correlations between the person and the experience of online false information	Selfhood and the significance of false information	Explores, through lifeworld dimensions, perceived significance of the information and how this impacts actions and sense-making.	Perceived reach of false information The role of authority in perceiving information Assigned responsibility of information sources The meaning of the information topic Background and personality traits Consequences of spreading false information
		Embodied emotions	Correlates emotional reactions and embodiment to the experiences and how this impacts interactions.	Long term emotions towards false information Emotional reactions to specific instances Emotional responses to AI Anxiety around Internet use Goal of interaction with information source
		Coming to the senses	Detailed exploration of the sense- and decision-making processes in experiences with the phenomenon.	Sense-making thoughts on false information Sense-making actions on false information Cultural aspects of sense-making processes Isolated actions and interactions with false information

First-order Theme	Description	Second-order Theme	Description	Code list
<i>Social aspects of experiencing online false information</i>	Explores sociality and its intersubjectivity with other dimensions of our lifeworld in interactions with false information, including sense- and decision-making processes	Meaning of community in interactions with false information	Behaviors sparked from community membership, exploring the correlation with actions taken in interaction with false information on social media.	Community membership Community behavior Emotional responses to community interactions Correcting false information Effects of community Physical environment
		Social aspects of trust and emotional connections on perceived credibility	What issues impact the trust one has to information as it affects one's sensemaking processes and embodied habits.	Elements of trust Ways of giving context Information sharing practices Framing of information The role of frequency in perceiving information The role of familiarity in perceiving information
		Role of personal connections in perceiving sources of false information	Explores how social connections are important for the sensemaking process and perception of information online.	Information sources Perceived intention of information sources Views of Internet and media Views on news sources Evolution of information sources

First-order Theme	Description	Second-order Theme	Description	Code list
<i>Issues of false information within virtual information spaces</i>	Both physical and virtual spaces, connecting the phenomenon to spaces and how it is mediated by technology	Meaning of platform differences in experiencing false information	Differences in virtual spaces and how this leads to different experiences and expectations regarding false information.	Personally curated algorithm Platform presented content Attitudes towards platform itself The meaning of mediums Platform comparisons Reactions across Internet spaces
		Impacts of virtual spatiality on perceived falseness	How the different spaces affect the phenomenon and how false information may navigate across different spaces.	Platform use Platform purpose Relaying communication platforms Availability of the Internet
		Situatedness of online false information experiences	Exploring the role of online presence, everyday use, and past experiences.	Comparing communities across platforms Attitudes towards platform users Online presence and identity False information impact on the online experience Past experiences for media literacy
		Technology affordances and constraints in regard to false information	Understanding how the affordances and aspects of the platform impact the experience, and what this has to say for platform design.	Platform limitations Media literacy promotion Outstanding functionalities Gaps on promoting media literacy Implications of platform censorship Uncertainty of platform efforts Suggestions for mitigation efforts