



THE 21<sup>ST</sup> EDITION OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE  
EUROPEAN INTEGRATION  
REALITIES AND PERSPECTIVES

**New Trends in Psychology**

**The Power of Emotions in the Era of Fake News**

**Nicu Ionel Sava<sup>1</sup>, Brigitte Boboc<sup>2</sup>**

**Abstract:** This paper investigates how emotions shape individuals' vulnerability to fake news, affecting both the perception and the dissemination of false information, with particular attention paid to young audiences who grow up inside the digital attention economy. The study builds on research from the psychology of misinformation, dual-process cognitive theory, affective persuasion, the illusory truth effect, and recent neuroscientific findings about how the brain processes fabricated content; it also draws from media studies and post-truth theory. Methodologically, we conducted a narrative literature review and conceptual synthesis based on peer-reviewed international studies, meta-analyses, and neuroimaging research published between 2020 and 2025, including Romanian empirical contributions. The findings indicate that emotions act as central drivers of vulnerability to disinformation: they reduce critical reflection, reinforce illusory truth through repetition, help create false memories, and fuel viral redistribution across social networks, with important differences across age groups and levels of media literacy. The analysis offers useful insights for educators, researchers, policy makers, and platform designers who aim to strengthen emotional resilience, media literacy, and critical thinking, particularly among adolescents and young adults. The paper's contribution lies in an integrative psychological and neurocognitive framework that links individual affective mechanisms to the broader socio-digital dynamics of contemporary disinformation.

**Keywords:** emotional resilience; media literacy; disinformation; false memories; post-truth

**JEL Classification:** D83; I23; L82

## 1. Introduction

Truth and falsehood no longer occupy separate territories. Today they coexist, and they compete for the same attention. The phenomenon of fake news has grown well beyond the narrow label of “false news” and is now a global reality, with visible consequences for the way people think, communicate, and relate to the world around them. Social networks, together with the algorithms that power them, speed up this process; information flows continuously, and filtering it has become difficult, sometimes impossible. Inside this shifting landscape, emotions take on a guiding role. They direct attention, assign meaning to events, and often decide, without our awareness, what we remember and what we pass along to others.

<sup>1</sup> Associate professor, PhD, Dean of the Faculty of Life Sciences and Human Development, Danubius International University of Galati, Romania, Address: 3 Galati Blvd., Galati 800654, Romania, Corresponding author: nicuionelsava@univ-danubius.ro.

<sup>2</sup> Student, Faculty of Life Sciences and Human Development, Danubius International University of Galati, Romania, Address: 3 Galati Blvd., Galati 800654, Romania, Corresponding author: afterschool.ace@gmail.com.



Copyright: © 2026 by the authors.  
Open access publication under the terms and conditions of the  
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial (CC BY NC) license  
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)

Recent research shows that emotions influence two things at once: how people judge whether a message is true, and whether they decide to share it further. Fear, anxiety, and anger raise susceptibility to false content, because they create a sense of urgency that crowds out careful thinking. Positive emotions such as hope or enthusiasm work differently but with similar consequences; they make fake news feel attractive and easy to share. The strength of emotions, therefore, is not only personal. It is also social, since it turns information into a channel of influence and, frequently, of contagion.

The relevance of this analysis is particularly high when we look at young people, arguably the most exposed group to the flood of online information. Adolescents and young adults build their identity within what is called “the attention economy,” a space in which emotions are the primary instrument for attracting and maintaining interest. In such a context, how emotions influence their engagement with fake news becomes a practical necessity with direct effects on media education, critical thinking, and emotional resilience.

This paper aims to clarify how emotions increase human vulnerability to disinformation and how they shape its perception and dissemination. The analysis draws on theoretical foundations from psychology and communication sciences and integrates recent research showing how emotions influence receptivity to and processing of false information, with implications at individual, cognitive, and collective levels.

## **2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1. Defining Key Concepts**

To examine the relationship between emotions and fake news, it is necessary to clarify the key concepts, as these are frequently used interchangeably in both public discourse and academic discussions.

Fake news is commonly understood as content that is intentionally fabricated and designed to imitate the format of legitimate journalism, with the purpose of misleading audiences (Lemaire et al., 2025). Its visibility has increased significantly in the context of major socio-political events, including electoral processes, public health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and ongoing geopolitical conflicts.

Beyond its surface as a media phenomenon, fake news can be approached as a broader social and psychological mechanism that exploits cognitive and emotional vulnerabilities. One of the most relevant processes in this context is the illusory truth effect, whereby repeated exposure enhances perceived credibility. As Brashier and Marsh (2020) suggest, judgments of truth depend on several factors, such as prior knowledge, processing fluency, and the consistency of new information with existing memory structures. Within this framework, familiarity operates as a powerful cue for perceived accuracy.

A further conceptual distinction is necessary between misinformation and disinformation. Misinformation refers to inaccurate or false information that is shared without a deliberate intention to deceive, whereas disinformation involves strategically produced content aimed at manipulation (Schincariol et al., 2024). This distinction has important practical implications. While misinformation may be addressed through educational efforts and improved media literacy, disinformation usually calls for more complex responses, such as regulatory and institutional measures.

In addition, empirical evidence suggests that exposure to fabricated content can lead not only to inaccurate beliefs but also to the formation of false memories, with a substantial proportion of individuals reporting recollections of events that did not occur.

These processes unfold within a broader cultural context often described as the post-truth environment. In such a context, emotional appeal and personal beliefs tend to exert a stronger influence on opinion

formation than verifiable facts. This does not imply the disappearance of truth as a concept, but rather a weakening of its authority when confronted with emotionally resonant narratives and cognitive biases. Under these conditions, fake news becomes particularly effective, as it spreads not primarily because of its factual accuracy, but because of its ability to generate emotional engagement.

## **2.2. Emotions, Cognition, and Theoretical Models**

Understanding how emotions influence engagement with fake news requires a dual perspective: the affective dimensions shaping immediate reactions, and the cognitive mechanisms determining whether information is accepted, rejected, or passed on. These two levels do not function separately but intertwine in a way that makes disinformation persistent.

On the affective dimension, intense emotions, whether negative, such as fear and anger, or positive, such as surprise or enthusiasm, increase the likelihood that an individual will consider false information to be true. Chan and Albarracín (2023) show that emotional messages increase persuasion through the activation of automatic affective responses. When people evaluate news through the lens of affective experience, the criterion of truth is replaced by the criterion of emotional impact. Lahti et al. (2024) further confirm that negative emotions can reduce the cognitive availability needed for critical processing of information.

From the cognitive perspective, vulnerability to fake news is explained through dual-process theory, which distinguishes between an intuitive, fast, and affective system (“System 1”) and a deliberative, slow, and rational system (“System 2”). Individuals relying predominantly on intuition are more likely to accept false information, while activating deliberation reduces this vulnerability (Pennycook & Rand, 2021).

When individuals are prompted to reflect, belief in false news decreases and discernment increases. This capacity, however, depends on cognitive resources, which explains why young people in the midst of cognitive development remain vulnerable.

Another relevant mechanism is the familiarity heuristic: repetition of a message, even a false one, increases its perceived credibility. In a digital environment where algorithms promote emotionally impactful content, this heuristic becomes a catalyst for disinformation. The illusory truth effect is closely linked to emotional memory, affectively charged information is retained more easily and, through repetition, takes on an “air of veracity.” Exposure to fake news can thus lead not only to erroneous beliefs but to the formation of false memories (Schincariol et al., 2024).

Lazarus’s cognitive appraisal theory provides additional explanatory power: emotions are generated by the cognitive appraisal of the significance a situation holds for the individual. Fake stories become emotional triggers because they are perceived as relevant, threatening, or congruent with one’s own beliefs. The anger, fear, or enthusiasm accompanying fake news consumption are not passive reactions but the result of appraisal processes that determine the personal and social value of the message.

## **2.3. An Interdisciplinary Perspective: Psychology – Media – Neurocognition**

The complexity of fake news calls for an interdisciplinary perspective that weaves together psychological, media-related, and neurocognitive explanations. Psychology provides the framework for understanding vulnerability: cognitive biases, the illusion of truth through repetition, and how emotions facilitate acceptance of false information. The media perspective shows how the structure of messages

and the algorithmic logic of digital platforms transform emotions into factors of virality. Fake news circulates not only because individuals are cognitively vulnerable but because the media space rewards what emotionally moves, shocks, or divides.

Neurocognition shows that emotions are not mere passing reactions but factors that determine how vulnerable we are to false news. Recent neuroimaging studies show that exposure to false information rapidly activates the amygdala and salience networks responsible for affective reactions, while areas of the prefrontal cortex supporting logical analysis remain less engaged. This imbalance explains why, in the presence of strong emotions, we are more prone to accept and propagate false news.

Using fMRI, Karanian, Thomas and Race (2024) demonstrated that a prior warning about possible misinformation changes how the brain encodes that information. Participants who received such a warning showed stronger activity in the lateral prefrontal regions responsible for source encoding and in the anterior cingulate cortex, which is involved in conflict detection. On the subsequent memory test, these participants were also more resistant to the misleading details.

Chen, Shi and He (2025) recently released a multimodal database that combines structural, functional, and behavioral brain measures with fake news stimuli. Their analyses suggest that activity in neural networks related to emotional salience correlates with whether a person believes or shares a false story. Read against the broader literature, these results point to the same conclusion: fake news exploits basic neural responses and gives emotion priority over reasoning.

### **3. Emotions as Vectors of Vulnerability to Fake News**

Emotions represent a channel through which false news quickly finds its way into our cognitive processes. When affective intensity is high, critical reflection decreases and the likelihood of accepting and spreading erroneous information increases. Specific emotions have distinct effects: anger favors belief in ideologically congruent content, while anxiety increases uncertainty and openness to discordant information. Positive emotions can amplify the illusory truth effect, making familiar messages appear more credible (Martel et al., 2020). Regardless of their valence, emotions function as a motor of vulnerability and dissemination, influencing what we retain, how we evaluate, and how willing we are to redistribute content (Pennycook & Rand, 2021; Chen, Shi & He, 2025).

One of the most subtle effects of fake news is its capacity to generate false memories and erroneous beliefs. Repeated exposure to fabricated news, especially when congruent with ideological convictions, can lead not only to acceptance as true but to integration into autobiographical memory. Studies show that nearly half of participants can come to “remember” events that never occurred if presented as credible fake news accompanied by images (Schincariol et al., 2024). These fabricated memories can subsequently influence attitudes, moral judgments, and social decisions.

Vulnerability to fake news is distributed unevenly, depending on age and social context. Adolescents, whose critical thinking is still maturing, struggle to separate credible sources from manipulative content, especially since most of their news consumption happens on social networks (Lemaire et al., 2025). Among university students, Lan and Tung (2024) found that TikTok users display variable awareness of fake news: they often acknowledge that false content circulates on the platform, yet the attractive visual format and the speed of consumption encourage superficial processing, and trust in online sources remains high where media literacy is low. The situation becomes more complicated among young adults, where problematic social media use raises not only the chance of believing false stories, but also the likelihood of passing them on (Meshi & Molina, 2025). In the Romanian context, Maftei, Cojocariu and

Dumitriu (2021) have connected emotional regulation to susceptibility to informational manipulation. Together, these findings imply that prevention and media education cannot be generic; they must be tailored to the developmental stage of each audience.

#### **4. Beyond the Individual: Psychological, Cognitive, and Social Impact**

Fake news does not affect only individual thinking but produces visible effects on emotions, cognitive processes, and social dynamics. On the psychological level, repeated exposure generates persistent emotions such as anxiety, uncertainty, anger, that affect emotional regulation and increase affective polarization. From a cognitive angle, disinformation alters how memory and information processing work; through repetition and emotional charge, false statements turn into what feel like genuine “memories”, and these impressions tend to persist even after factual corrections are presented. On the social level, communities’ fragment and trust in institutions erodes. Ștefăniță, Corbu and Buturoiu (2018) show that low trust in mass media favors the acceptance of false narratives, contributing to ideological polarization and, in some cases, radicalization.

##### **4.1. The Role of Social Networks: Algorithms as “Engineers of Emotions”**

Social network algorithms prioritize content that maximizes affective reactions, which leads to an over-representation of news with strong emotional impact. In this context, media literacy interventions have been shown to be effective in counteracting such dynamics, with Jeong, Cho and Hwang (2012) demonstrating through meta-analysis that such interventions significantly increase knowledge, criticism, and media-relevant skills that help audiences resist manipulation.

In the specialized literature, this mechanism has been described metaphorically as the role of algorithms as “engineers of emotions”, emphasizing their capacity to shape not only access to information but also the affective states of users. Selective exposure reduces the diversity of perspectives and amplifies polarization, creating an environment favorable to disinformation.

The attention economy specific to social networks favors rapid and superficial consumption of information. Users tend to skim headlines and images only cursorily, and impulsive reactions — likes or shares — often occur without prior verification. Over time, this fragmented experience reduces critical vigilance and consolidates the illusion that the intensity of emotion can substitute for objective criteria of truth validation.

##### **4.2. Connections with Emerging Phenomena: Deepfake, Memetics, Post-Truth Politics**

Fake news cannot be understood in isolation but in connection with emerging trends that amplify its impact. Deepfake technologies, based on artificial intelligence, produce images and videos indistinguishable from reality for ordinary users, further weakening the boundary between truth and falsehood. Memetics transforms disinformation into a rapid and viral form of cultural communication, where manipulative messages are simplified into easily shareable images and slogans. Memes, through their simplified character, become vehicles for propagating complex and often distorted ideas, consolidating false memories and beliefs through repetition and integration into popular digital culture (Schincariol et al., 2024). During the COVID-19 pandemic, disinformation spread through manipulative images and memes with high emotional impact circulated faster than official communications (Meshi

& Molina, 2025). All of these phenomena are inscribed within the climate of post-truth politics, where emotions and identity loyalties weigh more heavily than verifiable facts.

## **5. Implications, Resilience, and Directions for Intervention**

Faced with the increasingly visible impact of disinformation, the essential question is not whether we can eliminate fake news, but how we can develop resilience mechanisms that limit its psychological, cognitive, and social effects.

At the individual level, emotional resilience serves as a first line of defense against manipulation. The ability to handle fear, anger, or excessive excitement, combined with the habit of critical thinking, helps people filter content with more care. Here media education plays a central role; it offers practical tools for evaluating information and, in a sense, supports the mental hygiene of the digital citizen. At the collective level, public policies and educational programs can reduce vulnerability by introducing mandatory digital literacy modules, calibrated to developmental stages. Teacher training matters just as much, because critical thinking skills should be integrated into regular school subjects rather than confined to standalone “media education” courses. State institutions and civic organizations can also run awareness campaigns that name explicitly the emotional mechanisms through which fake news shapes behavior.

Digital platforms, in turn, have their own responsibilities to assume. Transparent algorithms are necessary, but they are not sufficient; platforms also need clear procedures for verifying, labeling, and limiting the distribution of manipulative content. Fact-check notifications should come with short, accessible explanations, and recommendation systems could be redesigned to reward source diversity rather than only the intensity of emotional reactions. Building a digital culture of discernment, where emotion is no longer the single criterion for validating information, is the realistic horizon for a more balanced public space. The purpose, after all, is not to erase fake news for good, since that is not possible in an open digital environment. The purpose is to reduce its influence and strengthen society’s ability to push back.

## **6. Conclusion**

The analysis shows that fake news cannot be reduced to mere inattention or user superficiality but represents a complex process in which emotions, memory, reasoning, and digital environments mutually reinforce each other. Emotions emerge as central factors of vulnerability, influencing perception, memory, and sharing behaviors. Repetition, the illusory truth effect, and memory distortions transform false information into “memories” difficult to correct, while algorithmic logic favors the circulation of emotional content, amplifying disinformation.

This vulnerability is far from uniform. It depends on age, social context, and the levels of emotional and cognitive resilience that individuals bring to the digital environment. Adolescents, university students, and young adults show different patterns of exposure and response, which in turn justifies the need for interventions adapted to each developmental stage. A realistic way forward rests on strengthening several protective mechanisms at once: emotional resilience, media education, critical thinking, and a clearer sense of responsibility on the part of digital platforms. Together, these contribute to what can be described as a digital culture of discernment. In line with this view, Valeanu et al. (2024) argue for integrating emotional education into media training programs. A more resilient public space, in which

emotions no longer dictate the perception of truth on their own, can only emerge from collective effort that brings together individuals, communities, and institutions.

In a world where emotion tends to become the main currency of information, discernment remains the safest form of defense.

## References

- Brashier, N. M., & Marsh, E. J. (2020). Judging truth. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 71, 499–515. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-010419-050807>
- Chan, M. S., & Albarracín, D. (2023). A meta-analysis of correction effects in science-relevant misinformation. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 7(9), 1514–1525. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-023-01623-8>
- Chen, W., Shi, J., & He, Q. (2025). China's social fake news database release with brain structural, functional, and behavioural measures. *Scientific Data*, 12, Article 538. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41597-025-04901-4>
- Jeong, S.-H., Cho, H., & Hwang, Y. (2012). Media literacy interventions: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Communication*, 62(3), 454–472. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01643.x>
- Karanian, J. M., Thomas, A. K., & Race, E. (2024). Warning before misinformation exposure modulates memory encoding. *Cognitive, Affective, & Behavioral Neuroscience*, 24(3), 440–452. <https://doi.org/10.3758/s13415-024-01183-y>
- Lahti, H., Kokkonen, M., Hietajärvi, L., Lyyra, N., & Paakkari, L. (2024). Social media threats and health among adolescents: Evidence from the Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children study. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, 18, Article 62. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13034-024-00754-8>
- Lan, D. H., & Tung, T. M. (2024). Exploring fake news awareness and trust in the age of social media among university student TikTok users. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 10(1), Article 2302216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2024.2302216>
- Lemaire, M., Ye, S., Le Stanc, L., Borst, G., & Cassotti, M. (2025). The development of media truth discernment and fake news detection is related to the development of reasoning during adolescence. *Scientific Reports*, 15, Article 6854. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-025-90427-z>
- Maftai, A., Cojocariu, N. A., & Dumitriu, A. (2021). How do children and adolescents perceive and relate to fake news? A qualitative approach during the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Education and Psychology in the Community*, 11(1–2), 195–210.
- Martel, C., Pennycook, G., & Rand, D. G. (2020). Reliance on emotion promotes belief in fake news. *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications*, 5, Article 47. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41235-020-00252-3>
- Meshi, D., & Molina, M. D. (2025). Problematic social media use is associated with believing in and engaging with fake news. *PLOS ONE*, 20(5), Article e0321361. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0321361>
- Pennycook, G., & Rand, D. G. (2021). The psychology of fake news. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 25(5), 388–402. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2021.02.007>
- Schincariol, A., Otgaar, H., Greene, C. M., Murphy, G., Riesthuis, P., Mangiulli, I., & Battista, F. (2024). Fake memories: A meta-analysis on the effect of fake news on the creation of false memories and false beliefs. *Memory, Mind & Media*, 3, Article e17. <https://doi.org/10.1017/mem.2024.14>
- Ștefăniță, O., Corbu, N., & Buturoiu, R. (2018). Fake news and the third-person effect: They are more influenced than me and you. *Journal of Media Research*, 11(3), 5–23. <https://doi.org/10.24193/jmr.32.1>
- Valeanu, A., Mihai, D. P., Andrei, C., Puscasu, C., Ionica, A. M., Hinoveanu, M. I., Predoi, V. P., Bulancea, E., Chirita, C., Negres, S., & Marineci, C. D. (2024). Identification, analysis and prediction of valid and false information related to vaccines from Romanian tweets. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 12, Article 1330801. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2024.1330801>