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Media Trust Under Threat: Antecedents and Consequences of Misinformation Perceptions on Social Media

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Public concern over misinformation has reached worrying levels in recent years. This phenomenon stimulates a climate of information uncertainty under which individuals may also question high-quality information that is needed to sustain meaningful political debates. To address this issue, this panel study investigates antecedents of perceived misinformation exposure on social media and its consequences for media trust. We take a novel approach by examining 3 key factors that might lead to heightened perceived misinformation exposure (PME) among social media users: (1) their political knowledge, (2) their partisan strength, and (3) network characteristics. Even more importantly, we find that PME decreases media trust, and that this effect was especially pronounced among individuals with low political knowledge.

Keywords: misinformation, media trust, fake news, social media, social network

Much research from psychology and communication science stresses the harmful effects of inaccurate facts on democracies. Studies confirm that wrong and later corrected information has a lasting impact on citizens' beliefs and attitudes (Flynn, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2017), and distorts political decision making (Hochschild & Einstein, 2015). However, empirical data questions the prevalence of so-called fake news or misinformation—defined as information that lacks facticity (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017)—in individuals' newsfeeds (Guess, Nagler, & Tucker, 2019) and highlights country-specific differences (Humprecht, 2019).

Nevertheless, media outlets extensively covered and debated the "fake news" phenomenon (Carlson, 2020) and the general population voices concerns over the share of inaccurate information on social media (Nielsen & Graves, 2017). The awareness of potentially manipulated information in one's newsfeed increases

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the uncertainty over whom to trust and what constitutes a "fake" story, resulting in general distrust in the media landscape (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Van Duyn & Collier, 2019). Without trust from its audience, the key democratic function of media as gatekeepers, which transform "information about billions of events into a manageable subset of media messages" (Shoemaker, 1991, p. 1) and evaluate their truth status, is under threat.

Therefore, we seek to understand how people navigate the blurred line between facts and misinformation in a networked information environment and how this affects media trust. Our study shifts the focus from actual fabricated news stories to people's misinformation perceptions, since both unjustified and justified doubts in news stories have consequences for media trust. To further our understanding of this problem, we address three key factors that might drive individuals' PME on social media: (1) political knowledge, which enables elaborative reasoning processes; (2) partisanship, which induces motivated reasoning processes and could lead to more actual exposure to misinformation through distinct media repertoires; and (3) network characteristics. By network characteristics we mean the size of participants' networks on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram, and their perceived exposure to political content on these networks, which might influence the quality and nature of political content that individuals encounter. By using a panel design in the Austrian election context, our findings help to investigate which groups of individuals experience PME and how such exposure might extrapolate to a general distrust in traditional media.

Media Trust

Media is a so-called credence good (McManus, 1995, p. 319)—its quality cannot be assessed from the news consumers' subjective point of view as they will never have full insight into all the choices made in a newsroom. Thus, trust is a key constituent in the relationship between audiences and media outlets. Furthermore, trust in news media plays an important role in complex societal structures, as it enables citizens to access vital information about politics and social life despite their limited knowledge and resources (Kohring & Matthes, 2007). However, recent numbers by the Digital News Report (Fletcher, 2020) indicate that this trust in the media has fallen globally by an average of 5% between 2015 and 2019. Austria, the country under investigation, has witnessed an even more pronounced drop by 9%. Interestingly, however, other countries have shown stable or even increasing levels of trust in the news media. What might be the reason behind these diverging trends is still underexplored.

One reason for the erosion of trust in news media is the emergence of alternative information sources—most importantly, on the Internet. As Tsfati and Ariely (2014) argue, low trust in traditional media leads citizens to seek out alternative news online, but also the exposure to alternative news may increase their skepticism on the mainstream interpretation of events and facts. Moreover, citizens have become "more like consumers (instrumental, oriented to immediate gratifications, and potentially fickle) than believers" (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999, p. 210) and thus trust is more volatile. In an online environment, the judgement of these diverse and sometimes contradictive messages is primarily driven by endorsement by friends, family, or citizens with similar partisan attitudes, making it less important where information comes from as opposed to who shares and likes it (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Messing & Westwood, 2014).

In addition, the heightened reliance on online advertising has forced news outlets to increase their output, with less time to check facts and do research (J. Lewis, Williams, & Franklin, 2008). This development has made news media more susceptible to spreading misinformation, because they have to react quickly to recent events to remain competitive in accelerated online news circles (Schmuck, Heiss, Matthes, Engesser, & Esser, 2017). The reduced quality of news products might substantially contribute to people's skepticism, as news consumers are aware of these problems (Edelman, 2020; Schwarzenegger, 2020).

Misinformation and Misinformation Perceptions

While wrong information in the media is not a new phenomenon, scholars point to its alarming scope in recent years (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). A mix of unverified, misleading, and intentionally harmful mass-mediated messages found in citizens' media consumption condenses into what Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) describe as "information disorder" (p. 4). The authors broadly distinguish among information that is false and misleading (misinformation), information that is harmful (malinformation), and information at the intersection, which exerts harmful influence through fabricated content (disinformation). Alternatively, Tandoc, Lim, and Ling (2018) offer a categorization of the various forms of false content subsumed under the term "fake news." Their typology suggests to distinguish between the level of facticity and the author's intent to deceive.

While the authors offer a valuable framework to map different forms of problematic content, those definitions are less informative in the study of people's own perceptions of misinformation. As stated by a participant in a qualitative study on perceptions of so-called fake news, "fake news is news you don't believe" (Nielsen & Graves, 2017, p. 7). In this first investigation of audience perspectives, citizens across countries voiced their concern over inaccurate information. Interestingly, only a small fraction of individuals refers to fully manufactured content. Instead, individuals express their discontent about key information sources, including news media, politicians, and social media platforms. A U.S. study similarly found that reporting by traditional news outlets, but also opinionated tweets by a politician might be perceived as problematic forms of inaccurate information by audiences (van der Linden, Panagopoulos, & Roozenbeek, 2020). In line with these findings, Schwarzenegger (2020) finds that a general discontentment with democratic institutions, and the declining quality of news reporting is strongly linked to individuals' perceptions of falsehoods in their information environment in Germany. Taken together, these findings suggest that citizens condense different perceptions of mis- and disinformation into a generalized feeling of a dysfunctional information landscape.

The current study on perceived misinformation therefore emphasizes the dimension of facticity and people's perception thereof. Consequently, we define PME as information that lacks facticity in the eyes of the individual, regardless of its actual facticity and the perceived intention behind its spread. While it is important to distinguish among different types of wrong and harmful information when analyzing their effects on attitudes and beliefs, this broader outlook on misinformation is still fruitful to investigate generalized and partisan mistrust in information environments.

The distinction between perceived misinformation and actual exposure to misinformation is important, since the reality and perception of encountering misinformation might greatly diverge. More crucially, the effects of actual exposure and perceived exposure might differ. Actual exposure to misinformation certainly is the most important predictor for questions of knowledge and attitudes about political issues, as the mere

exposure to misinformation can affect attitudes or lead to memory biases even in the presence of corrections (Walter & Murphy, 2018). However, when looking at questions of trust, perceived exposure might be a better predictor than actual exposure. On the one hand, individuals actually have to discover that a message is incorrect or aims to deceive them to activate defense mechanisms such as reduced trust in the sender of the message, as the rich literature on persuasion knowledge suggests (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Because the identification of misinformation is a highly difficult and effortful task, many individuals might not notice when being confronted with misinformation, which is why their trust in media might stay intact after actual exposure to misinformation. On the other hand, individuals might erroneously identify correct information as misinformation. This perception of being confronted with information that cannot be trusted might then affect their trust in the media. This notion of misinformation perceptions parallels hostile media perceptions, in which the perception of and not the actual bias in reporting drives subsequent effects (Schulz, Wirth, & Müller, 2020).

Perceptions of misinformation are especially relevant in the context of social media use. The rise of social media as an instrument of political communication fuels the spread of actual misinformation. While misinformation formerly had to pass the gates of traditional media to reach large audiences, social media enables its dissemination at small costs and with little interference from journalists enacting their watchdog function (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). In addition, the "people formerly known as the audience" (Rosen, 2006, para. 1) are now gatekeepers and disseminators for their own networks. While this may introduce more diverse viewpoints to public debates, it also opens the gates for misinformation that spreads along partisan lines (Del Vicario et al., 2016). In addition, social media use might also promote the misidentification of cross-cutting exposure as misinformation (Hameleers, 2020).

Antecedents and Consequences of Perceived Misinformation Exposure

In this study, we investigate driving factors and outcomes of PME. This is an important field of study because PME may lower media trust for some individuals and, as a consequence, may foster existing knowledge gaps and political polarization. We do so by building on two key factors derived from previous scholarship: (1) individuals' partisan motivation and (2) their ability to scrutinize information.

The Role of Partisanship

Motivations—that is "any wish, desire, or preference that concerns a given reasoning task" (Kunda, 1990, p. 480)—greatly influence how individuals access, evaluate, and memorize information. In the political realm, special attention has been placed on so-called partisan, directional, or defense motivated reasoning. Evidence shows that individuals are biased in their information search and information processing in ways that stabilize or strengthen their partisan identity (Bolsen, Druckman, & Cook, 2014; Taber & Lodge, 2006). This also greatly affects how they judge the trustworthiness of information and factual evidence. Individuals with strong partisan motivations invest cognitive resources and generate arguments to discount attitudinally incongruent information, resulting in a so-called disconfirmation bias (Taber & Lodge, 2006). The stronger the party attachment, the more it induces counterarguing against information that conflicts with citizens' ideological stance (Bolsen et al., 2014).

There are three main paths through which partisan ideology might affect PME. First, motivated reasoning processes may lead to a biased assessment of what constitutes misinformation. While only a minority of individuals may be exposed to actual misinformation (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017), strong partisans might perceive higher quantities of misinformation because of their increased motivation to reject attitude-incongruent new information. Qualitative studies support the notion that the labels of misinformation, disinformation, and fake news are being weaponized and especially used by politicized individuals to dismiss arguments that run counter to their worldview (Farhall, Gibbons, & Lukamto, 2019; Hameleers, 2020). As a result, partisan individuals may be more likely to perceive encountering misinformation when actually being exposed to correct information. Second, partisan individuals are also more likely to accept fact-checking messages that support their political attitudes and thus spot higher levels of actual misinformation (Walter & Murphy, 2018). Lastly, strong partisans might also use different information channels, which lead to higher exposure to misinformation. Studies from the United States confirm that individuals with strong preferences for proattitudinal information seek out content from less trustworthy websites (Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2020). While this study cannot disentangle these different mediating paths, the evidence unanimously points to the importance of partisanship for PME.

The Role of Political Knowledge

Importantly, individuals not only need the motivation but also the ability to come to certain conclusions. As stated by Kunda (1990), "they draw the desired conclusion only if they can muster up the evidence necessary to support it" (p. 483). Specifically, knowledge plays a central role in the discounting of attitude-incongruent information (Taber & Lodge, 2006). A number of motivated reasoning studies has found that individuals' knowledge can enhance instead of limit motivational biases in information processing (Kunda, 1990; Kuru, Pasek, & Traugott, 2017). This is because highly knowledgeable individuals have a greater repertoire of arguments that they can use to come to their desired conclusion. In line with this reasoning, we argue that political knowledge as an argumentative resource and partisan strength as a source of motivation increase perceptions of misinformation in an election context.

However, on the other hand, political knowledge might also help individuals to identify actual misinformation. Political knowledge, which we measure as campaign knowledge in the context of the Austrian election,[1] is an important prerequisite to be able to understand, contextualize and assess the truthfulness of political information more generally (see Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel, & Sumida, 2018; Van Duyn & Collier, 2019). Only if individuals possess enough political knowledge, they may be able to engage in effortful reasoning processes in which they compare the presumed misinformation against factual information or information they find truthful. An experimental study by Bowyer and Kahne (2019) found that individuals with higher knowledge are better able to identify falsehoods that align with their own political ideology. Furthermore, knowledgeable individuals tend to hold less misperceptions (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010) and exhibit a greater repertoire of both attitude-congruent and incongruent arguments (Nir, 2011). In addition to their cognitive repertoire, individuals with higher knowledge have greater access to fact-checking information, including statistical information and

[1] Note that the knowledge measure we used asked questions about the issue positions of the major political parties that participated in the election. If individuals scored high in this knowledge test, we can expect them to have higher argument repertoire.

high-quality political content (Bonfadelli, 2002; Gottfried, Hardy, Winneg, & Jamieson, 2013). Thus, knowledge might increase PME on two levels: On the one hand, knowledge helps individuals to identify actual misinformation when the motivation to be accurate is high, and on the other hand, it helps them to find reasons why attitude-incongruent information could be labeled as misinformation when they are defense motivated.

Notably, Druckman and McGrath (2019) have outlined how biased processing, which might include the biased evaluation of information as misinformation, could stem from processes other than defense motivations (e.g., individuals with strong partisanship might generally place less trust in traditional media and simply consider them nonreliable sources of information). As a result, it would be unclear whether individuals actually engage in defense motivated processing or simply think they see more misinformation based on the fact that they find news media less trustworthy. To exclude this possibility, general media trust will be controlled for in our models. Thus, even though for different reasons, both the highly knowledgeable and strong partisans may experience stronger PME:

H1: Higher knowledge (a) and strong partisanship (b) increase perceived misinformation exposure across time.

The Role of Network Characteristics

Furthermore, we assume that the effects of knowledge and partisanship are conditional on individuals' network characteristics (Knoll, Matthes, & Heiss, 2020). Although there are strong reasons to believe that the exposure to misinformation depends on individuals' networks, this area of research still remains little understood (Weeks & Gil de Zúñiga, 2019). First of all, the perceptions of misinformation may depend on individuals' political exposure. We define political exposure as how frequently people see political information from the news media, political actors, and friends in their network. When individuals have weak political networks, their motivation and political knowledge has no impact—there simply is no content available to judge. Contrarily, the effects of political knowledge and partisan attitudes may be more pronounced when the political network is larger. This is because political knowledge is a prerequisite to navigate through the extensive political content in the network and to distinguish between low- and high-quality information and the trustworthiness of sources (Mitchell et al., 2018; Van Duyn & Collier, 2019). Furthermore, strong partisans are more likely to encounter political information that challenges their own political view and candidates, for example, because a likeminded person uncovers the information as misinformation or because a source with different partisan attitudes shares hostile information about a favored candidate. We thus expect that a strong political network may facilitate the proposed effects of knowledge and partisanship.

H2: The effect of political knowledge (a) and partisanship (b) on PME will be stronger for individuals with greater political exposure in their network.

Furthermore, we assume that a larger network size may boost the proposed effects of knowledge and partisan strength. On social media, individuals engage with many more individuals compared with offline settings (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). However, as the number of manageable contacts may hardly exceed 150 (Hill & Dunbar, 2003), most virtual contacts in large networks may be characterized as weak ties (Matthes, Marquart, & von Sikorski, 2021; Tang & Lee, 2013). Many weak ties can increase diversity, such as

exposure to challenging political views, but also the share of low-quality information from unreliable distant sources. In such a highly diverse and loose network, individuals can no longer rely on source heuristics to determine the trustworthiness of a source (e.g., a good friend). In fact, individuals with many distant contacts have to rely on their own political capacities to evaluate, contextualize, and understand the content in their network. Thus, knowledge may become more important. Furthermore, many weak ties may increase the likelihood of cross-cutting opinion exposure in the network (Tang & Lee, 2013). Because individuals are less likely to be persuaded by weak ties (compared with strong ties), they may be more likely to label such information as fake (Weenig & Midden, 1991). Taken together, the effect of knowledge and partisanship on PME may be facilitated by a larger network size.

H3: The effect of political knowledge (a) and partisanship (b) on PME will be stronger for individuals with larger network sizes.

Consequences of Perceived Misinformation Exposure for Media Trust

Next, we want to investigate the potentially harmful consequences of increased misinformation perceptions on media trust. An experimental study shows that the salience of the elite discourse on "fake news" in people's minds can lead to what the authors call "media nihilism" (Van Duyn & Collier, 2019, p. 43). That is, recipients develop a general distrust in news articles and consequently label stories by trustworthy outlets such as *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal* as "fake news." However, Van Duyn and Collier (2019) only found small and non-robust effects of this "fake news" prime on general media trust. The reason might be that participants were only exposed to nine elite tweets on the topic of "fake news," which may be insufficient to affect individuals' attitudes about general media trust.

Moreover, qualitative evidence suggests a close link between people's concern about misinformation and their trust in the information landscape (Nielsen & Graves, 2017; van der Linden et al., 2020). Even though the sources of misinformation may vary, they might negatively affect media trust through different routes. First, individuals could perceive that misinformation stems from news media because they feel that journalists try to influence them for political purposes or that news media is prone to make unintended reporting mistakes in the race for breaking news (Nielsen & Graves, 2017; Schwarzenegger, 2020). When citizens have repeated negative experiences with (perceived) unintended and intended misinformation from traditional media, trust is reduced (Luhmann, 1968).

Second, a heightened perception of misinformation could undermine certainty in the trustworthiness of all publicly available information, including news media. As Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) note, based on their negative experiences with inaccurate information, audiences could soon "have little trust in the information they find online, dismissing any image, video, or audio clip as potentially fabricated or manipulated" (p. 79). Spreading confusion and uncertainty is one of the prime goals of disinformation (Bennett & Livingston, 2018): The strategic spread of contradicting narratives induces doubts about the truth status of messages coming also from established sources such as political institutions or the news media. Therefore, also seeing supposedly manufactured news by other sources could negatively affect media trust.

Lastly, media trust is also inherently linked to trust in other institutions (Freitag & Traunmüller, 2009; J. D. Lewis & Weigert, 1985). When individuals have negative experiences in trust situations—for example, because politicians act untruthfully—this might indirectly undermine trust in media by eroding trust in elites and institutions more generally (see also Jones-Jang, Kim, & Kenski, 2020). Therefore, we want to revisit this relationship by investigating the over-time relationship between PME and media trust in our panel study.

H4: PME decreases trust in news organizations over time.

For some citizens the effect of PME on media trust might be more pronounced than for others. Specifically, we want to explore the role of citizens' political knowledge and partisanship in this process. High political knowledge might inhibit a spill-over of distrust from singular stories in one's newsfeed to the general media landscape. Educated elites have sustained higher levels of trust in news outlets compared with the general public (Edelman, 2020). Moreover, a recent report by the Pew Research Center shows that political awareness helps citizens to draw the line between factual information and opinions and correlates with more trust in news media (Mitchell et al., 2018). The reason might be that higher educated and more politically aware individuals are better equipped to assess the source of the potential misinformation, the reasons for it and where they can find fact-checking information (Gottfried et al., 2013). In line with these findings, knowledgeable individuals are significantly less likely to mislabel news from trusted media outlets as fake (Van Duyn & Collier, 2019). Hence, we expect to find a more pronounced effect of PME on media trust for those scoring low on political knowledge.

In line with the theory of motivated reasoning, individuals with strong political affiliation might be more motivated to resist unfavorable news coverage on their preferred political candidate (Redlawsk, 2002; Taber & Lodge, 2006). If strong partisans experience frequent PME, they may develop a feeling that the news media is reporting in a biased way and disseminate lies about their favorite political party or candidate. However, since this is a first test of the moderating role of political knowledge and partisanship on individual's generalization of distrust, we pose a two-part research question:

RQ1: How does perceived misinformation exposure affect changes of trust in news organizations among individuals with different levels of political knowledge (a) and party affiliation (b)?

Method

We conducted a two-wave panel survey in the context of the Austrian national election 2017. We defined representative quotas for age (M = 44.49, SD = 12.61, Min = 16, Max = 65), gender (50.27% female) and education (19% college degrees, 27% college-bound high school degrees, 48% apprenticeship or vocational school degrees, remaining 6% compulsory school only).[2] Of 14,688 invitations that were sent out by the survey provider SSI, 953 individuals opened the link to the online survey. Because the questionnaire

[2] Note that college degrees are less common in Austria compared with other countries (e.g., the United States). The original quotas, which we defined according to information provided by the Austrian statistical office, were 18% college-bound high schools, 13% college degrees, 44% apprenticeship/vocational school, and 25% compulsory school only.

was mainly concerned with SNS use, we sampled 18- to 65-year-old people who are (even if just infrequent) users of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, or Instagram. We used these SNS as reference because they are most widely used for political purposes (see Matsa & Shearer, 2018). Some 180 participants dropped out because they did not complete the survey, because of full demographic quota, or because they reported to never use social media at the beginning of the survey (58 individuals). Furthermore, eight individuals were excluded because of unusually long or short response times. Some 73% of the remaining 765 individuals responded in the second wave, leaving us with a final sample of $N = 559$. The first wave was conducted between August 29–September 2, 2017. The second wave was implemented one week before the actual election between October 5–October 12, 2017.

The Austrian Context

Before the Austrian national election, several instances of misinformation were revealed. Investigative journalists of the magazine *Profil* and the broadsheet *die Presse* uncovered a link between Tal Silberstein, an advisor of the democratic party SPÖ, and two fabricated Facebook pages spreading misinformation around Sebastian Kurz, the lead candidate of the conservative People's Party (ÖVP). Not long after this instance, also chat messages between the ÖVP and Silberstein were published that hinted at undisclosed PR activities. However, the ÖVP denied ties to Silberstein, leaving an unclear picture of how exactly these events unfolded. In addition, the FPÖ frequently questioned the balance and objectivity of the public broadcaster, while at the same time using alternative media to put forward their messages (Atzara, 2017). The term "fake news" was also used by the Greens to attack their opponents (Temel, 2017).

Measures

All variables were measured in Wave 1, except the dependent variables (PME and media trust), which were measured in both waves (which is why we provide Wave 2 statistics only for these two variables). If not stated otherwise, items were measured on a 7-point scale (1 = *lowest level*, 7 = *highest level*). All variables related to SNS (i.e., PME, network size and heterogeneity, SNS skills and SNS use for news) were related to Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube.

Dependent Variables

We measured *PME* ($\alpha = .96$, $M = 3.29$, $SD = 1.78$; $\alpha_{(w2)} = .96$, $M_{(w2)} = 3.31$, $SD_{(w2)} = 1.79$) with three items asking individuals how often they have encountered political information on SNS in the past month (i) that turned out to be wrong after further investigation, (ii) that did not match the facts according to third sources, and (iii) of which the content proved wrong after checking it. The end points of the scale were marked as *never* and *very often*. *Media trust* ($\alpha = .95$, $M = 3.19$, $SD = 1.47$; $\alpha_{(w2)} = .94$, $M_{(w2)} = 3.13$, $SD_{(w2)} = 1.41$) was measured as trust in news organizations using three items. Individuals were asked whether they agreed that the political coverage in newspapers, TV, and radio was (i) fair, (ii) fact-based, and (iii) trustworthy (see Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). We used confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to test the distinctive nature of our dependent variables. The CFA produced a good model fit (CFI = 0.998, RMSEA = 0.041, SRMR = 0.011), $\chi^2(8) = 15.429.810$, $p = .051$, with loadings above .70 on the proposed factors (Media Trust: .90, .94, .96; PME: .96, .89, .96). The correlation between the two factors was −.03.

Network Characteristics

Political exposure (α = .76, *M* = 3.37, *SD* = 1.59) measured how often participants encounter political posts from (1) friends, (2) media organizations, and (3) political actors in their newsfeed. Again a 7-point scale was employed (1 = *never*, 7 = *very often*). *Network size* (*M* = 3.98, *SD* = 2.96) was measured as the number of people participants estimated to be connected to on SNS (see Tang & Lee, 2013). We used 11 predefined categories (lowest = 0, highest = 1000+ contacts), resulting in a numeric scale ranging from 1 to 11.

Knowledge and Partisanship

To measure *political knowledge* (*M* = 4.03, *SD* = 2.25), respondents evaluated eight statements (four correct, four incorrect) about the issue positions of the four major parties (true, false, or don't know). Correct responses were summed up, resulting in an additive index (range: 0 to 8). *Partisanship* (*M* = 5.19, *SD* = 1.96) was measured with a single item asking respondents whether they have a strong preference for a candidate or political party in the election (1 = *no preference*, 7 = *very strong preference*).

Control Variables

General news use (*M* = 4.50, *SD* = 1.76) was measured by asking respondents how often they seek news on the current election. Political interest (α = .91, *M* = 4.90, *SD* = 1.81) was measured with two items asking how much respondents were interested in (a) politics and (b) the current election. SNS news use (*M* = 2.75, *SD* = 1.87) was measured by asking respondents how frequently they used SNS to get news on the current election. To assess individuals' income (*M* = 3.92, *SD* = 1.71), respondents indicated their monthly net income out of seven categories (lowest: below 500EUR, highest: above 3000EUR). We included income as a numeric 7-point scale.

Age was measured as a continuous variable, gender as a dummy variable (female = 1) and education with two dummy variables (high education representing college degrees; medium education representing college-bound high school degrees, reference category: lower).

Results

We ran autoregressive panel models (i.e., we predicted the dependent variables at Wave 2, controlling for the same variables at Wave 1). All predictors in our models were measured in Wave 1. Thus, our models predict changes in the dependent variable from Wave 1 to Wave 2. Even though such panel models reduce problems related to reversed causation and sample bias, they do not cancel out potential confounders. Thus, we also control for potentially influencing variables, including demographics, political interest, and news use. In a larger model, we also controlled for individuals' social media use (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube), however, we have omitted these variables in favor of a more parsimonious model and because they did not add much explanatory power after controlling for network characteristics (political network, network size). To test and plot the conditional effects in the moderation analyses, we used the jtools package in R (see Long, 2018; Hayes & Matthes, 2009).

Table 1 shows the results of the analysis. Hypotheses 1 suggested that political knowledge and partisanship would predict PME. We did not find evidence for this hypothesis (H1 rejected). However, we did find conditional effects of political knowledge and partisanship. H2 suggested that the effect of knowledge and partisanship may be conditional on the degree of political content in individuals' network.

Table 1. Linear Regressions With Autoregressive Effects Predicting Perceived Misinformation Exposure (PME) and Media Trust.

	Outcomes (Wave 2)		
	PME (M1)	PME (M2)	Media trust (M3)
	b (*SE*)	*b* (*SE*)	*b* (*SE*)
PME (H4)	0.42*** (0.04)	0.43*** (0.04)	−0.08** (0.03)
Media Trust	−0.08+ (0.05)	−0.07 (0.05)	0.59*** (0.03)
Network Size	0.05* (0.02)	0.05* (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)
Political Exposure	0.08 (0.05)	0.07 (0.05)	0.02 (0.04)
Political Knowledge (H1)	0.02 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)	−0.02 (0.02)
Partisanship (H1)	−0.04 (0.04)	−0.002 (0.04)	−0.02 (0.03)
Knowledge × Network Size (H3)	0.02* (0.01)		
Partisanship × Network Size (H3)	0.01 (0.01)		
Knowledge × Political Exposure (H2)		−0.004 (0.02)	
Partisanship × Political Exposure (H2)		0.06** (0.02)	
PME × Knowledge (RQ)			0.03* (0.01)
PME × Partisanship (RQ)			0.01 (0.01)
Age	0.002 (0.01)	0.002 (0.01)	−0.002 (0.004)
Female	0.13 (0.14)	0.10 (0.14)	−0.05 (0.10)
Medium Education	0.004 (0.16)	0.02 (0.16)	−0.12 (0.11)
High Education	−0.02 (0.18)	−0.0003 (0.18)	0.13 (0.13)
Income	0.09* (0.04)	0.09* (0.04)	−0.03 (0.03)
Political Interest	−0.01 (0.06)	−0.01 (0.06)	0.06 (0.04)
News Use	0.14* (0.06)	0.13* (0.06)	−0.04 (0.04)
SNS News Use	0.08+ (0.04)	0.07 (0.04)	−0.01 (0.03)
Constant	2.25*** (0.42)	2.24*** (0.42)	1.39*** (0.30)
Adjusted R^2	0.30	0.30	0.39

Note. All variables that are included in interactions were mean centered. N = 559. Sig. Levels: +p < .1; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

The interactions in Model 2 indicate support for H2b, but not H2a. Figure 1 indicates that partisan strength positively affects PME, but only among individuals with a strong political network, that is, a political network greater than 5.90 (or 1.59 * 1 *SD* above the mean). Furthermore, partisanship negatively predicts PME among individuals with a political exposure level lower than 2.15 (or 0.77 * 1 *SD* below the mean).

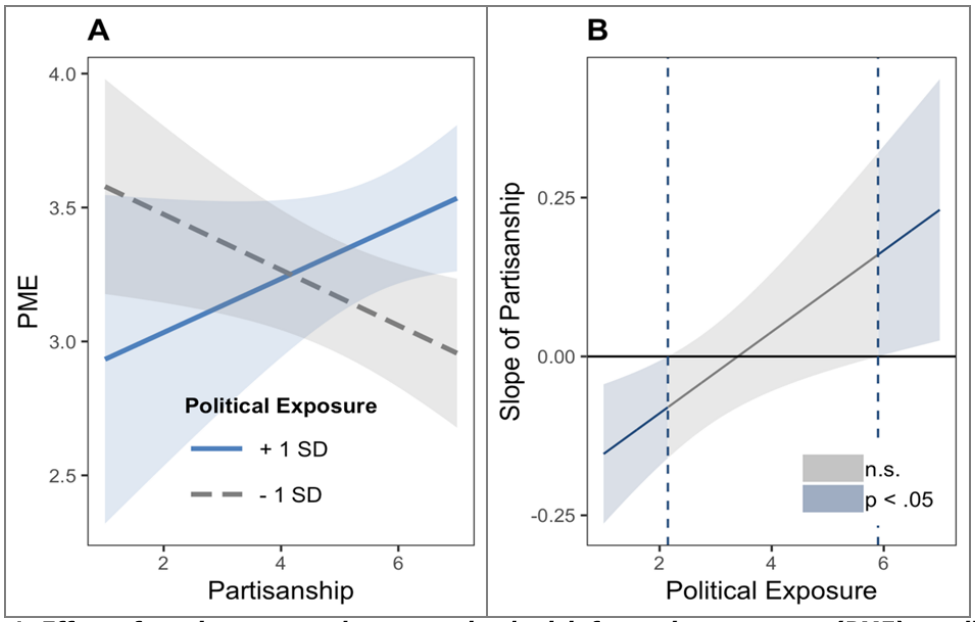

Figure 1. Effect of partisan strength on perceived misinformation exposure (PME) conditional on different levels (±1 SD) of political exposure (Panel A). Panel B indicates the Johnson-Neyman intervals of significance. Shaded areas indicate 95% confidence intervals. The results are based on Model 2 in Table 1 (but without mean centering).

Furthermore, we found that political knowledge increases PME among individuals with larger network size (H3a). Figure 2 indicates that political knowledge positively affects PME, but only if individuals have a large network. Simple slope analysis indicates that the effect is significant for network size larger than 6.94 (or one *SD* above the mean). We did not find support for H3b (i.e., an effect of partisanship conditional on network size). Additionally, Table 1 indicates also a significant positive main effect of network size on PME.

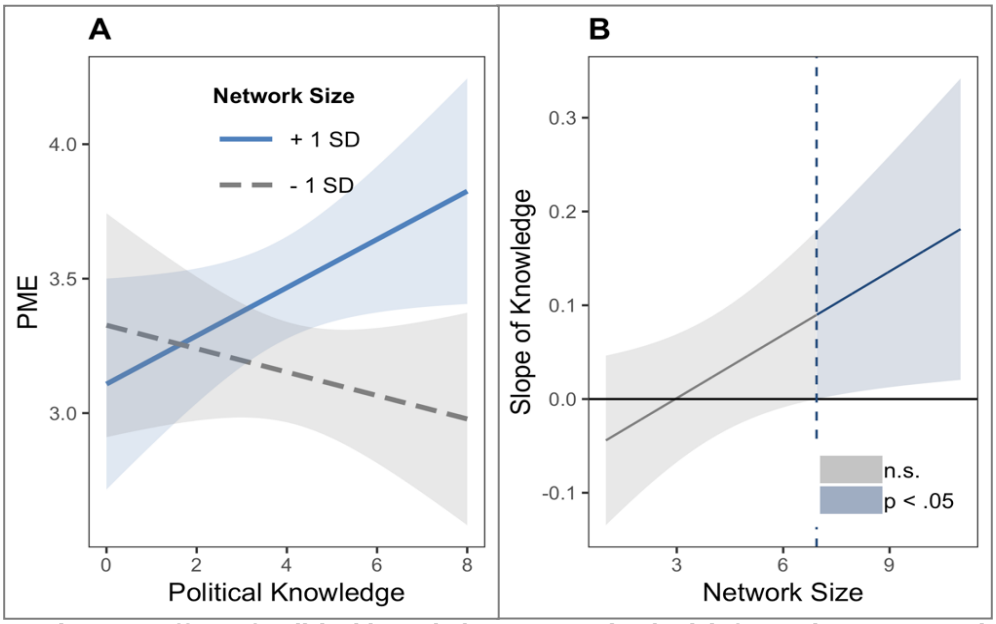

Figure 2. Effect of political knowledge on perceived misinformation exposure (PME) conditional on different levels (±1 SD) of network size (Panel A). Panel B indicates the Johnson-Neyman intervals of significance. Shaded areas indicate 95% confidence intervals. The results are based on Model 1 in Table 1 (but without mean centering).

Finally, we tested our additional research question. PME significantly decreased media trust (see Table 1, Model 3). Because interactions are included in the same model, the main effect in Model 3 represents the effect when knowledge and partisanship are set to their mean values. However, the effect also remains significant when omitting the interaction terms from the model. Furthermore, this negative effect was especially pronounced among individuals with low knowledge. Figure 3 shows the nature of the interaction effect.

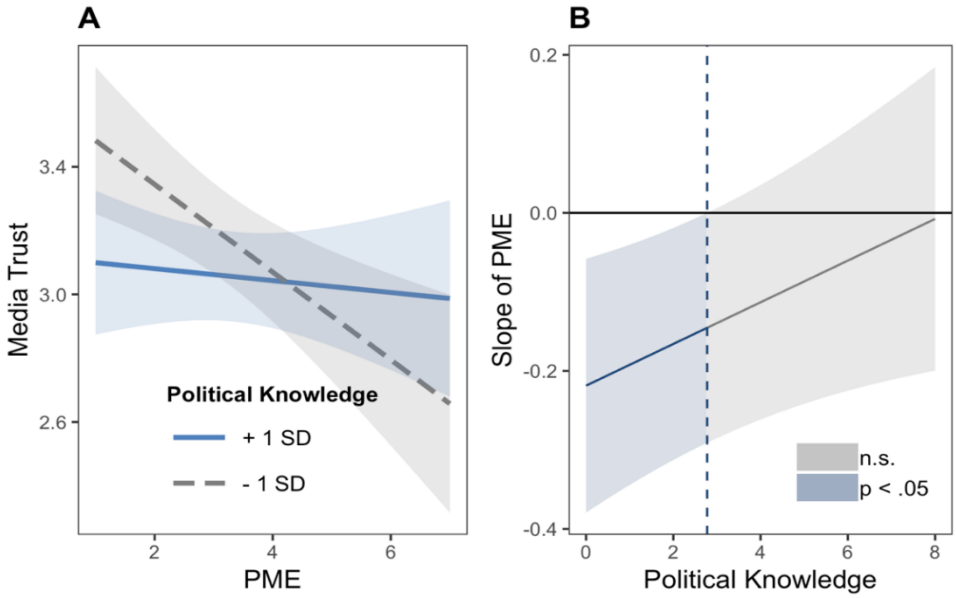

Figure 3. Effect of perceived misinformation exposure (PME) on media trust conditional on different levels (±1 SD) of political knowledge (Panel A). Panel B indicates the Johnson-Neyman intervals of significance. Shaded areas indicate 95% confidence intervals. The results are based on Model 3 in Table 1 (but without mean centering).

An additional slope analysis indicates that the effect is significantly negative for individuals with a knowledge level below 2.78 (or 0.56 * 1 *SD* below the mean).

Finally, it should be noted that we imputed the interactions according to the hypotheses posed (i.e., in pairs). However, we have also tested the robustness of the interaction effects by including them individually in the models and by including all interactions at the same time. The effects remain robust and significant in all model variants.

Discussion

This study investigated antecedents and consequences of misinformation perceptions on social media. In sum, our findings provide support that individuals' abilities and partisanship in conjunction with network characteristics determine who is susceptible to the notion of encountering misinformation. Furthermore, we found evidence that increasing misinformation perceptions on social media decrease trust in traditional media.

Specifically, we find three main factors that may influence whether or not PME decreases trust: knowledge, partisanship, and network characteristics. First, knowledge might be a robust protector against the trust eroding effects of PME. While citizens with higher knowledge show increased distrust toward information on their SNS newsfeeds with growing network sizes, this distrust does not extend to their general media trust. Second, the less knowledgeable might be partly at danger to lose their media trust. While they are less likely to label information as misinformation in larger networks, they are especially vulnerable to loosing trust in

traditional media when facing high levels of perceived inaccurate information in their newsfeed. Third, partisan citizens are at risk to increase their misinformation perceptions since they exhibit higher levels of PME when they have a highly active political network on social media and, as a result, become more skeptical of traditional media.

Our findings reveal that knowledge plays an important role for both the emergence and the effects of PME. Our results indicate that generally, individuals with high knowledge did not score higher on PME. However, in line with our hypothesis, knowledge interacted with individuals' network size on social media, indicating that knowledge increases PME among individuals exposed to large-size networks. We reasoned that high knowledge helps to identify less trustworthy sources and to compare and evaluate political information from distant sources in large networks. Individuals with lower political knowledge may be exposed to similar content, however, may lack the political capacities to navigate through such content and assess its credibility. Recent research lends support to this notion, as individuals high in knowledge perform better in distinguishing quality news from "fake news" and opinions from facts (Mitchell et al., 2018; Van Duyn & Collier, 2019). However, according to Taber and Lodge (2006), more knowledgeable individuals are also better equipped to successfully defend their worldviews. Thus, the more knowledge a person possesses, the better he or she may become at critiquing unfavorable content and thus dismiss it as inaccurate. As a result, it remains unclear whether highly politically aware citizens are better at spotting actual inaccurate information or at finding reasons to label a post by their weak ties on social media as "fake."

Against our expectation, there was no interaction between individuals' knowledge and their political exposure in their network. In other words, being exposed to more political content on social media did not lead to higher PME among knowledgeable citizens as we would have expected. The reason might be that individuals with high knowledge may be specifically careful in selecting their political information sources, and may hence not increase the PME when building a more politically active network.

Lastly, we tested whether knowledge also moderated the effects of PME on media trust. We found that if the levels of knowledge were moderate or high, there was no relationship between PME and media trust. Only for those low in political knowledge, PME lowered media trust across time. The reason might be that individuals with low knowledge and frequent misinformation perceptions may be less capable of identifying the societal actors and the complex communication networks that are often linked to misinformation. Thus, even though politically knowledgeable individuals might be more likely to spot alleged misinformation in large size networks, exposure to such information did not affect their levels of media trust. These findings are in line with the media trust gap between the politically informed and the general public found in survey data (Edelman, 2020; Mitchell et al., 2018).

Next, we investigated the role of partisanship. Against our expectations, partisanship per se did not emerge as a predictor of PME. Similarly, we did not find an interaction between partisan strength and network size. We would have reasoned that in the context of a larger network, strong partisans would experience more PME, because they are exposed to diverse information sources and thus potentially conflicting viewpoints. Even though the coefficient of the interaction in Table 1 (Model 1) points in the expected direction, the effect did not reach statistical significance. The reason might be that partisans choose

their network selectively and may generally avoid political information that conflicts with their existing views (see Iyengar & Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2010).

Next, we examined the moderating role of political exposure on social media, as we expected that higher levels of political content attenuate the effects of partisanship on PME. In support of our hypothesis, stronger partisanship increased PME among individuals who were frequently exposed to political information in their network. There are three different explanations for this finding: First, such individuals may engage in directional motivated reasoning processes, which may result in preferred rather than correct conclusions about the information at hand (see Redlawsk, 2002; Taber & Lodge, 2006). In other words, they might be motivated to label not only incorrect but also counterattitudinal information as "fake" or untrustworthy, resulting in increased PME. Second, partisans might also be more likely to accept corrections about actual misinformation if it confirms to their worldview (Walter & Murphy, 2018). Lastly, there is also evidence that partisans might be more likely to follow websites that spread untrustworthy content and therefore are more frequently exposed to actual misinformation (Guess et al., 2020). Further research is needed to detect the exact mechanism that is at play. Nevertheless, the findings point to the importance of partisanship as a contributing factor to PME.

Unexpectedly, we found that, in individuals with low political exposure, partisan strength decreased PME. The reason might be that individuals with strong partisan attitudes and little political exposure in the network may follow very few and selected political information sources at best, such as their favorite party or candidate, but avoid other information, such as attitude-challenging political information (see Del Vicario et al., 2016). Lastly, in contrast to political knowledge, partisan strength did not affect the relationship between PME and media trust.

Taken together, this study provides first interesting insights into how political knowledge and partisanship may affect individuals' PME and how PME in turn may affect media trust. As lower levels of media trust may drive citizens to more alternative news sources and therefore partly into the hands of disinformation agents, possible societal consequences of a potentially widening trust gap need to receive further attention in future studies.

Limitations and Future Research

In our study, we took a broad perspective, focusing on misinformation perceptions implying an array of wrong and biased information. A broad view on the phenomenon of information disorder is important; however, it might also leave differences among the effects of specific types of misinformation undetected. In addition, national (in our case, Austria) and temporal (in our case, electoral period) contexts certainly matter when analyzing complex phenomena such as media trust and misinformation. Therefore, future studies may be applied to different political and media systems and also nonelectoral time periods. Furthermore, also different types of social media (e.g., WhatsApp, Snapchat) may incorporate different features and should hence also be investigated. On a methodological level, our research relied on self-reported measures of misinformation. This is sensible in regard to our interest in perceptions of wrong information on SNS as well as SNS use more generally (see Scharkow, 2019). However, to better assess the societal implications of misinformation it could be fruitful to know how much of the distrust we observed

was justified and directed against actual dis- or misinformation. While certain difficulties in the operationalization have to be expected, overcoming such obstacles could greatly profit scholarship on this topic.

In regard to the operationalization of PME, it is also important to note that this study took a conservative approach and only asked participants to report about encountering inaccurate information which was wrong according to third sources or which they have fact-checked. This strict measurement likely underestimates the actual amount of perceived misinformation, since some pieces of information on social media might be judged as misinformation by citizens without further verification. Future studies might therefore measure the perception of misinformation at face value as an additional dimension of PME. Moreover, triangulation with experimental research designs, mobile experience sampling designs (see Schnauber-Stockmann & Karnowski, 2020), and also a more detailed look at the actual SNS content could validate our findings and rule out alternative explanations.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, this study sheds first light on the antecedents of misinformation perceptions and their consequences for citizens' media trust. Results indicate that such perceptions can decrease trust in traditional media and that this is especially true for individuals with low knowledge. Furthermore, strong partisan attitudes drive misinformation perceptions in politically active networks. Thus, there is reason to believe that such individuals are frequently experiencing PME, lose media trust and may hence be more likely to turn to alternative channels (e.g., partisan, information channels; see Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). Taken together, these findings might suggest an increase in existing trust gaps among the more and less knowledgeable.

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