



Exploring the Persuasiveness of Valenced Fake News: A Construal-Level Theory Perspective

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Abstract: This study explores how fake news messages impact readers' perceptions of credibility. By combining valenced framing and construal-level theory, the research examines how temporal, spatial, and mental construal dimensions can moderate the relationship between fake news and credibility. A quantitative method was adopted, applying repeated-measures ANOVA analysis. To measure framing effects, 16 negative and 16 positive fake news stories about China were selected from the fact-checking database of Snopes.com. The respondents were chosen from students in the northwestern part of Russia and Hungary, due to the proximity of these countries to China. The results indicate that valenced fake news can be more persuasive when evaluating credibility for proximal events rather than for distant ones. Additionally, negative fake news that contains concrete information is found to be more influential on perceptions of believability. The study suggests that the level of credibility is significantly affected by the interplay between the type of valenced fake news frame and how concrete and abstract information is presented in the message. Furthermore, the implications and future research directions in the field of fake news are discussed.

Keywords: Fake News, News Credibility, Message Persuasiveness, Construal-Level Theory, Valenced News Frames, China

1. Introduction

The "fake news crisis" has significantly impacted the fields of marketing, branding, and communication (Rothman, 2018; Berthon & Pitt, 2018; Peterson, 2019; de Regt et al., 2019; Visentin et al., 2019). This phenomenon is complex, involving multiple actors within the hybrid news system. Behavioral science research indicates that even brief exposure to fake news can alter unconscious behavior (Bastick, 2021). However, current measures to combat fake news remain insufficient, and fake news continues to spread faster than real news. Studies highlight emotional appeal as a distinguishing feature of fake news (Bessi et al., 2015; Ekman, 1992; Vosoughi et al., 2018). Additionally, fake news often contains less information, which can enhance attention (Heath, 2007; Lang, 2000), making it easier to disseminate (Shin et al., 2018).

Fake news about foreign countries is particularly concerning, as it often portrays these countries negatively while presenting the home nation in a more positive light (Stepchenkova et al., 2019; Christison, 2023). The fluid nature of fake news reporting on foreign countries is influenced by the proximity of the news event (de Vreese et al., 2001). Traditional indicators of newsworthiness, such as event closeness (Schaefer, 2003) and geographical proximity (Gerhards & Schäfer, 2014), affect reporting and communication dynamics (Nossek & Berkowitz, 2006). Information about foreign events (Wang, 2007) and opinions formed through mediated country identities (Shi et al., 2023) significantly influence perceptions of nations and their images (Willnat et al., 2022; Tang & Willnat, 2023).

Visentin et al. (2019) found that the impact of fake news on behavior is fully mediated by perceptions of the news' credibility, which, in turn, affects the perceived credibility of the sources. In an age of information overload, credibility becomes a crucial heuristic for content screening and selection. To understand the impact of fake news on perceived credibility, it is useful to analyze fake news frames related to foreign countries. These frames can vary in spatial and temporal dimensions as well as in construal levels (Eyal, Liberman, & Trope, 2004; Pennington & Roese, 2003). Geographically distant events and countries may be perceived differently, affecting a country's image. This study applies Trope and Liberman's (2010) concept of "psychological distance," which refers to perceived distance across various dimensions.

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The aim of this study is to enhance our understanding of how fake news content is processed and perceived in terms of news credibility. Specifically, the research investigates whether the perceived credibility of news after exposure to fake news varies based on construal. It also examines whether the construal of valenced fake news frames and proximity to an event or country significantly influence the perceived threats posed by fake news online, emphasizing the importance of credibility in news. Clarifying the impact of message frames and construal exposure is critical, as they significantly affect how content is consumed, processed, and shared (Taute et al., 2011). This, in turn, can potentially damage a country's image.

In today's digital landscape, mitigating the risks posed by the spread of fake news is challenging due to the prevalence of digital platforms, the ease of accessing fake content, and the availability of various software solutions (Verstraete et al., 2021). Therefore, understanding how the framing of fake news affects credibility can help marketers, communication specialists, and investment promotion agencies counter the adverse effects of fake news on a country's image and reputation..

2. Literature Review

The phenomenon of "fake news" is not new; it has persisted and resurfaced throughout various technological innovations, including the printing press, film, radio, and, more recently, the web. Social media and the abundance of user-generated content have facilitated the rapid production and dissemination of fake content, allowing it to reach vast audiences in a short amount of time (Mustafaraj & Metaxas, 2017).

2.1. Fake News Phenomenon

In modern literature, the nature of "fake news" is debated, as it overlaps with "misinformation" and "disinformation" (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). Ongoing disputes regarding its classification arise from its similarity to other misleading content, such as hoaxes and conspiracy theories (Di Domenico et al., 2021). Some definitions characterize fake news as "intentionally and verifiably false" (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Shu et al., 2017), while others describe it as false information disseminated through media, overlapping with disinformation, misinformation, satirical news, or even stories that are simply unpopular (Kshetri & Voas, 2017; Kucharski, 2016; Rubin et al., 2015; Golbeck et al., 2018).

All these definitions emphasize the intent to deceive (Pal & Banerjee, 2019), with fake news serving as a potent tool for disinformation, often masquerading as journalism (Tandoc et al., 2018). For this study, we adopt the definition provided by Xichen Zhang and Ali A. Ghorbani: "Fake news refers to all kinds of false stories or news that are mainly published and distributed on the Internet to purposely mislead, fool, or lure readers for financial, political, or other gains" (2020, p. 4).

Recent studies have highlighted the harmful effects of fake news, including its potential to cause crises (Ewing & Lambert, 2019), influence attitudes and behavior (Bastick, 2021; Ioannidis, 2020), and shape beliefs and biases that impact decision-making and society (Di Domenico et al., 2021). Additionally, fake news has a negative economic impact (Fedeli, 2020). However, these studies primarily focus on the consequences of fake news without exploring the specific content features that lead to such outcomes. Understanding the factors that influence the acceptance of fake news as truthful is essential, especially since the credibility of news is crucial for successful communication (Mahamad et al., 2021; Schweiger, 2000). In an age of information overload, credibility serves as a key heuristic for content selection.

Previous research has emphasized the important role of media credibility in influencing users (Metzger, Flagin, Eyal, Lemus, & McCann, 2003). However, Shin et al. (2018) found that repeated exposure to false information can create a perception of truthfulness, even when the source lacks reliability. This raises questions about the sole focus on media credibility, particularly given the widespread nature of misinformation on social media platforms.

Kümpel (2019) highlighted that both the source and content of a news article are crucial for user engagement. Similarly, Traberg et al. (2022) pointed out that not only source credibility but also framing and content play significant roles. However, there is limited research directly connecting these findings to fake news. For example, Nedelcu (2021) demonstrated that media reputation influences source credibility but does not always affect the credibility of the message itself in the context of fake news engagement. These studies often overlook an in-depth examination of the quality and characteristics of the message content and whether outcomes vary based on content range. Since emotion enhances news credibility (Rocklage & Fazio, 2018), framing messages in specific ways can effectively persuade consumers in different ways (Florence et al., 2022).

Studies underscore the importance of distinguishing between source credibility, media credibility, and message credibility (Thielsch & Hirschfeld, 2019; Tandoc et al., 2018) when analyzing fake news. This study focuses on the credibility of fake news, defined as an individual's assessment of the truthfulness of the content (Appelman & Sundar, 2016), which can vary depending on how the message is framed.

2.2. Fake News Framing

According to Entman (1993, p. 52), framing involves emphasizing certain aspects of a perceived reality in a text to promote specific problem definitions, interpretations, evaluations, and solutions. Research identifies three types

of framing: risky choice, attribute, and goal framing (Levin et al., 2002). This study, however, focuses on how positive and negative frames affect perceptions of news credibility (Baden et al., 2018; Van Duyn & Collier, 2018). Valenced news frames highlight aspects that range from positive to negative (León et al., 2015). Megalakaki, colleagues, and Baccino, (2019) assert that positive or negative framing guides readers' thoughts in opposite directions, as information is encoded differently based on its valence (Yao et al., 2019).

Research indicates that fake news strongly influences believability and behavior (Gross, 2017), largely due to the prominence of negative emotions (Newman et al., 2003; Bastick, 2021). Fake news often triggers higher levels of anger and disgust and lower levels of joy compared to real news (Paschen, 2020). Negative framing in fake news captures attention and enhances recall (Sari & Tawami, 2023). Moreover, negative emotions affect message processing, making shocking content more effective in breaking through information overload and improving recall (Paschen, 2020; Taddicken & Wolff, 2020). Studies on framing show that positive or negative outcomes influence behavior depending on individual differences and situational contexts (Heiss, Schmuck, & Matthes, 2019).

While these studies extensively explore emotional exposure, there is limited research on how these emotions affect perceptions of truthfulness. The question of whether individuals are more likely to believe fake news with negative or positive framing remains underexplored. However, one study has demonstrated that the type of emotional framing in fake news significantly influences perceived credibility (Novoselova et al., 2023), and the level of belief in fake news fluctuates based on this framing (Onofrei, Filieri, & Kennedy, 2022).

It is essential to expand research that examines not only exposure to positively or negatively framed fake news but also other content factors that influence perceived credibility. This is particularly important given that the effectiveness of framing often depends on the topic and context (Levin et al., 2002; Loroz, 2007).

This study primarily focuses on fake news related to foreign countries. Therefore, the application of construal-level theory is appropriate, as it encompasses dimensions such as time and space. It investigates how the perceived credibility of concrete and abstract valenced fake news frames about a foreign country changes with varying levels of temporal and geographical distance.

Applying these theories together is crucial for understanding news about foreign countries. People typically do not base their judgments on comprehensive knowledge but use shortcuts, to assess easily recalled information (Ross Arguedas et al., 2024). Chernobrov (2022) found that news coverage influences how people think about issues and events, shaping perceptions of races or ethnic groups and significantly affecting the country's image (Willnat et al., 2022; Tang & Willnat, 2023).

Researchers (Yang & Yun, 2020; Christison, 2023) have shown that news coverage quickly influences how people view other nations. This is crucial for the country's image, as its intangible nature complicates transparency. Countries are complex and dynamic (Beckett, 2000), and news about events in other countries (Niu & Relly, 2021; Devkota et al., 2024) forms opinions through media-created national identities (Shi et al., 2023). Foreign nations are often portrayed negatively, while the home nation is viewed more positively (Stepchenkova & Shichkova, 2019; Christison, 2023). This underscores the need to study how spatial and geographical factors affect the credibility of news, especially fake news.

2.3. The Moderating Role Of Construal Level

The Construal-Level Theory (CLT) posits that people's evaluations and preferences regarding objects or events are shaped by their perceived psychological distance, which encompasses dimensions of time, space, and social relationships (Trope & Liberman, 2003). Spatial proximity refers to the physical distance between an individual and the location of an event (Stephan et al., 2010), while social proximity relates to how closely one perceives another person, either as an individual or as part of a group (Nan, 2008). Temporal proximity, on the other hand, pertains to the temporal closeness of an event and how it influences people's perceptions and thoughts about that event (Trope & Liberman, 2010).

While psychological distances such as temporal and geographic proximity can overlap (Pronin et al., 2008), this study specifically investigates how these factors influence the acceptance of fake news frames as either true or false. The social dimension is not examined separately here because the focus is solely on news related to foreign countries, which inherently positions such news outside the respondents' social boundaries or "out-groups" (Trope & Liberman, 2010). The study does not aim to measure the personal closeness between nations.

According to CLT, the perception of distance can reduce situational uniqueness and influence social categorization and stereotyping processes (Kwon et al., 2017). Recent studies have demonstrated that the way people interpret events significantly impacts their decision-making and evaluations. High-level construal involves abstract, general, structured, superordinate, and decontextualized thinking, whereas low-level construal focuses on concrete, unstructured, subordinate, incidental, and contextual details (Liberman & Trope, 1998; Trope & Liberman, 2000, 2010). In the context of CLT, individuals tend to use low-level and concrete construal to represent psychologically close events, while high-level and abstract construal is employed for psychologically distant events (Trope & Liberman, 2000, 2010).

Despite the relative lack of empirical studies on the effects of CLT in messaging, several studies have found that CLT plays a significant role in determining the persuasiveness of marketing messages (Da Costa Hernandez et al., 2015), health campaign messages (Brennan et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2016), and news related to terrorism (Kwon et al., 2017). Furthermore, previous research has explored the interaction between message content and design (White et al., 2011; Eyal et al., 2009; Lutchyn & Yzer, 2011), as well as the relationship between design and message processing (Lee, 2019). However, there is a noticeable gap in the application of this theory to fake news, particularly in examining how CLT influences messaging in the context of distant countries.

The CLT framework is crucial for understanding why fake news about foreign countries affects perceptions of credibility. Geographical location could impact the degree of exposure to such news, and it is essential to investigate whether country proximity matters in this context.

2.4. Hypothesis

Integrating CLT with framing, this research explores how psychological distance influences the "abstractness" of fake news messages in discussions about a country's image. Rather than focusing on specific types of framing, the study examines the persuasiveness of positive versus negative framed messages, revolving around their valence (Baden et al., 2018; Van Duyn & Collier, 2018) and the impact of such framed message exposure on credibility. Gain-loss framing, a particular type of message framing, is employed to investigate how positive frames convey gains and negative frames depict losses in persuasive communication (Levin et al., 2002; Chang, 2007; Loroz, 2007; Yi & Baumgartner, 2008; O'Keefe et al., 2006).

According to CLT, individuals perceive the world through two types of construal: high-level construal, which encompasses abstract and general information, and low-level construal, which consists of contextualized and concrete details (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Previous research has demonstrated that gain frames (positive frames) are typically associated with high-level construal, while loss frames (negative frames) are linked to low-level construal (Nan, 2007; White et al., 2011; Pennington & Roese, 2003).

Therefore, this study posits that the way people perceive fake news about foreign countries—whether in a more concrete or abstract manner (Liberman & Trope, 1998; White et al., 2011)—plays a crucial role in how credible they find negative or positive news. Based on this premise, we propose the following hypotheses:

- **H1:** *Negative fake news will seem more credible to readers when it presents detailed, concrete information compared to when it is more abstract.*
- **H2:** *Positive fake news will seem more credible to readers when it presents abstract information compared to when it is more concrete.*

According to CLT and the definition of temporal construal by Trope and Liberman (2010), a positive frame is associated with a higher construal level than a negative frame, as it promotes compliance with a persuasive message. Some studies (Nan, 2007; Eyal et al., 2004; Pennington & Roese, 2003) have found that positive frames are more persuasive for distant entities or events than for proximal ones. Therefore, we hypothesize that negative fake news frames will be more persuasive for proximal events in foreign countries than for distant ones. These propositions are summarized as follows:

- **H3:** *Positive fake news will seem more credible to readers when it pertains to distant events rather than near ones.*
- **H4:** *Negative fake news will seem more credible when it pertains to events that feel closer rather than distant.*

According to CLT, objects or events that are far away tend to be viewed in more abstract terms, even if the specific details do not change with distance. Similarly, high-level, abstract thinking creates a sense of distance from an object, regardless of whether the object itself is physically distant. Research on how messages influence people (Kim et al., 2016; Kwon et al., 2017) supports this notion, showing that abstract features in messages are more appealing to individuals who are farther away compared to those who are closer.

Since positive messages usually involve high-level thinking and negative messages involve low-level thinking (Nan, 2007; White et al., 2011; Pennington & Roese, 2003), we propose the following hypotheses:

- **H5:** If a country is a relatively near destination:
 - (a) *People are more likely to believe negative fake news if it is described with specific details.*
 - (b) *People are more likely to believe positive fake news if it is described in general, abstract terms.*
- **H6:** If a country is a relatively far destination:
 - (a) *People are more likely to believe negative fake news if it is described with specific details.*
 - (b) *People are more likely to believe positive fake news if it is described in general, abstract terms.*

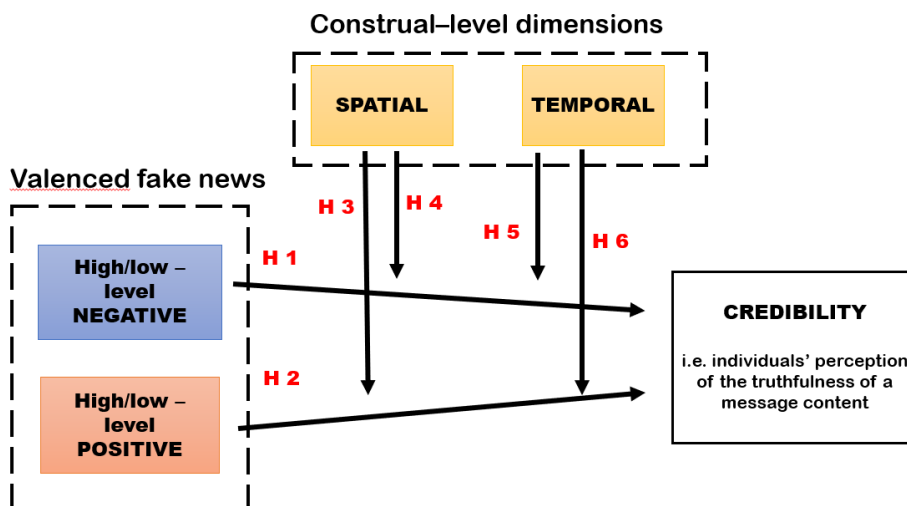


Figure 1: Hypothetical Framework Source: Authors’ research.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design

To study the impact of fake news on public opinion, we focused on China. Recent data indicates that negative views of China have increased in advanced economies, largely due to COVID-19 and related misinformation (Silver et al., 2020). We sourced fake news articles from **Snores.com**, a credible site known for identifying and flagging fabricated content. Additionally, we utilized online fact-checking software, similar to those developed by Jiang & Wilson (2021), to detect and categorize various types of fake news.

Given that this investigation examines the effects of distance and time, **CLT** is particularly well-suited for our study. CLT addresses dimensions such as time and space, making it ideal for exploring how the perceived credibility of concrete versus abstract fake news frames about a foreign country shifts with different levels of temporal and geographical distance. Recent studies suggest that the construal level associated with positive frames may differ from that of negative frames (Eyal et al., 2004; Pennington & Roese, 2003).

In summary, our research aims to understand how fake news about China influences public opinion, leveraging credible sources and established theoretical frameworks to analyze the dynamics at play.

3.2. Stimulus Materials

The study utilized fake news for both experimental and control conditions, with one group exposed to negative frames and the other to positive frames. We selected 16 negative and 16 positive fake news stories related to societal issues in China. The negative stories encompassed topics such as social conflicts, international tensions, crime, and disasters (Gieber, 1955). In contrast, the positive stories were designed to resonate with local readers, featuring a generally uplifting tone (Hartung & Stone, 1980).

To test our assumptions, we employed **Sentiment Analysis** using **MeaningCloud** software, which is widely utilized in various studies (Öztürk & Ayvaz, 2018). This online tool supports multiple European languages and can analyze sentiment at both the document and aspect levels. It also allows users to define custom dictionaries and models. To identify the framing (positive or negative), we applied sentiment values within the MeaningCloud software. Additionally, to assess levels of abstractness and concreteness, we utilized **Subjectivity (S)** and **Objectivity (O)** evaluations.

The analyzer provided sentiment data for each article, as shown in Tables 1 and 2, including:

- **SCORE**: Sentiment values (none, N+ for very negative, N for negative, neutral, P for positive, P+ for very positive).
- **Subjectivity (S)** and **Objectivity (O)** evaluations.

Table 1. Results of sentiment analysis of chosen fake news items with negative connotations.

No	Article title	Polar-ity	Subjec-tivity
1	DHS Report: China Hides an appearance of new Virus’ Severity to Hoard Supplies	N	O
2	Is China Building a hospital in 10 Days to Treat new stamp Coronavirus Patients?	N	S
3	‘Corrupt’ Politicians are going to be executed in China	N	O
4	Chinese Restaurants Granted Permission to Sell Dog Meat	N+	S
5	Teriyaki sauce in couple years will be made from hairs in China	N	O

6	Is China Seeking Approval to Kill 20,000 Coronavirus Patients since 2023?	N+	S
7	Have Health Experts 'Predicted' New Coronavirus Could Kill 65 Million People 2023?	N+	O
8	Hong Kong Shop will offer 'Tear Gas' Flavor Ice Cream in mass production by 2024	N	S
9	Is China Genetically Engineering 'Super Soldiers'?	N	O
10	Activists are skeptical and concerned about reports of China's "emotion monitoring" technology implementation by 2030.	N	S
11	Will China's Three Gorges Dam Slow Rotation of Earth by 2035?	N	O
12	Will Clone Monkeys by Chinese scientists will bring new types of viruses by 2035?	N	S
13	Was Charles Lieber Arrested for Selling the COVID-19 Coronavirus to China?	N	O
14	No, China Isn't Amassing Troops in Canada To Invade the US	N	S
15	Are Crabs Imported from China Injected with Formalin?	N	O
15	Are People Collapsing in the Street from Coronavirus?	N+	S

Source: www. snopes.com

Table 2. Results of sentiment analysis of chosen fake news items with positive connotations.

NO	Article title	Polar-ity	Subjec-tivity
1	"Communist China" will have been an owner of DreamWorks by 2023	P	O
2	Pandas in China will Devour Ice Cake to Celebrate 50 Years at National Zoo	P	S
3	Space Junk on 5,800-MPH Collision Course with Moon will be prevented by Chinese rocket	P	O
4	Will China's 'Panda Bear Solar Farm' be launched?	P	S
5	China will have Launched an Artificial Sun by 2030?	P	O
6	2030 model Chinese Aircraft Carrier	P	S
7	How China will Get Blue Skies	P	O
8	Are Robots Ballroom Dancing at Shanghai Disneyland?	P	S
9	Will the Great Wall of China become Visible from the Moon?	P	O
10	Will a Pagoda Flower be used in treatment of cancer That Only Blooms Once Every 400 Years?	P	S
11	Will Garlic Water Cure Coronavirus?	P	O
12	China is going to prohibit animal Testing Conducted by cosmetics companies by 2030?	P	S
13	15. Did Corona Beer Sales Increased Sharply in China Due to cure the Coronavirus?	P	O
14	China Halts Work by Team on Gene-Edited Babies	P	S
15	Do Thousands of People in China Witness a Floating City Mirage regularly?	P	O
16	Was a Chinese Miner Found Alive After 17 Years Underground?	P	S

Source: www. snopes.com

Temporal distance in the context of fake news was manipulated based on the timing of events. Near-future fake news described events projected for 2022 (the year of the survey), while far-future fake news outlined events anticipated for 2030. Each pair of fake news articles—one concrete and the other abstract—shared a common topic, dates, and some accompanying images. The experiment included 8 near-future articles (4 concrete and 4 abstract) and 8 far-future articles (4 concrete and 4 abstract).

Two established frames address the level of abstractness: episodic and thematic (Iyengar, 1994). The episodic frame provides concrete details about specific events, while the thematic frame presents more abstract, generalized views. Messages were crafted in either a concrete, detailed style (e.g., "to be executed on 07 February 2022, where 11 prisoners," or "The restaurant is allowed to slaughter up to 35 dogs per week") or an abstract, vague style (e.g., "punishment for those who would follow the pro-democracy movement," or "they found numerous tins with harmful food") to manipulate the construal level (Yang et al., 2015).

To ensure the technical accuracy of these construal levels, **MeaningCloud** software was used to perform sentiment analysis on all fake news articles. Respondents rated the abstractness or concreteness of their thoughts about China on a 7-point scale, where 1 represented "very concrete" and 7 represented "very abstract."

Spatial distance was manipulated based on the respondents' locations relative to China. We selected Russia, a relatively close country, and Hungary, a relatively distant country, based on research indicating that geographic proximity influences the impact of information (Meyners et al., 2017; Bell & Song, 2007; Garber et al., 2004). These studies have shown that the influence of information is stronger when the sender is geographically closer (Meyners et al., 2017).

3.3. Participants

Respondents were selected from Russian regions within 4,000 km of China and from Hungary, 7,300 km away. There were 388 Hungarian respondents (49% female, 51% male) and 514 Russian students (51% female, 49% male). Most had never been to China (93% of Russians and 98% of Hungarians). These students, enrolled in Bachelor's and Master's programs, relied solely on news information, not personal experience.

3.4. Procedure

The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first collected personal information, including previous visits to China, gender, and age. The second section presented respondents with high/low-level valenced fake news messages with positive or negative connotations about China, its people, and its products.

Participants rated the perceived credibility of the fake news, indicating how true or false they believed each news item to be on a 7-point scale (1 = "not true at all" to 7 = "completely true"), a method used by Koch & Peter (2017).

4. Results

4.1. The Match Control Of Perceived Abstractness And Concreteness By The Respondents

Before testing the research hypotheses regarding the alignment of perceived abstractness and concreteness, we conducted descriptive statistics and paired t-tests. Table 3 presents the means, standard deviations, and significance levels for both positive and negative fake news.

Participants rated the perceived abstractness and concreteness on a scale from 1 to 7, where lower mean scores indicate a more concrete perception and higher mean scores indicate a more abstract perception of the fake news. The results displayed in Table 3 show that all pairs of fake news analyzed significantly corresponded with lower means (indicating a concrete perception) and higher means (indicating an abstract perception). This finding suggests that the framing of fake news in terms of abstractness and concreteness aligns with respondents' perceptions of the news.

Table 3. The means, Std deviation and significance for positive and negative fake news.

			Mean	Std. Dev	Sig
Positive fake news	near future	Concrete	4,07	1,53	
		Abstract	4,15	1,54	,002
Negative fake news	near future	Concrete	3,65	1,47	
		Abstract	4,52	1,37	,004
Positive fake news	near future picture	Concrete	3,86	1,50	
		Abstract	3,94	1,63	,091
Negative fake news	near future picture	Concrete	3,94	1,52	
		Abstract	4,18	1,75	<,001
Positive fake news	far future	Concrete	3,87	1,74	
		Abstract	4,38	1,51	<,001
Negative fake news	far future	Concrete	4,95	1,79	
		Abstract	4,99	1,75	<,001
Positive fake news	far future picture	Concrete	3,67	1,65	
		Abstract	4,44	1,65	<,001
Negative fake news	far future picture	Concrete	4,16	1,49	
		Abstract	4,62	1,73	<,001
Positive fake news	1 textual	Concrete	4,14	1,64	
		Abstract	4,73	1,57	<,001
Positive fake news	2 textual	Concrete	4,06	1,44	
		Abstract	4,53	1,56	<,001
Negative fake news	1 textual	Concrete	3,78	1,53	
		Abstract	4,45	1,60	<,001
Negative fake news	2 textual	Concrete	4,32	1,50	
		Abstract	4,32	1,64	<,001
Positive fake news	1 pictural	Concrete	4,55	1,46	
		Abstract	4,83	1,55	<,001
Positive fake news	2 pictural	Concrete	4,53	1,58	
		Abstract	4,61	1,63	<,001
Negative fake news	1 pictural	Concrete	4,54	1,76	
		Abstract	4,68	1,64	<,001
Negative fake news	2 pictural	Concrete	4,28	1,62	
		Abstract	4,33	1,69	<,001

4.2. The Moderating Role Of Construal-Level Theory

Our study investigates how the interaction between the valence of fake news and two types of construal affects perceived credibility. H1 predicts that negative fake news presented with concrete information will enhance credibility, while H2 suggests that positive fake news paired with abstract information will have a similar effect.

To test these hypotheses, we conducted a repeated-measures ANOVA. The results, as shown in Table 4, indicated a significant difference in credibility only for negative fake news valence: $F(1, 413) = 11.747, P < 0.001$, with a small effect size (partial eta squared = 0.028). Pairwise comparisons revealed that credibility increased significantly when negative fake news was presented with concrete information ($M = 4.425$) compared to abstract information ($M = 4.323$), thereby confirming H1.

In contrast, we found no significant difference in credibility based on high versus low construal for positive fake news: $F(1, 474) = 0.115, P = 0.735$. Consequently, H2 was not supported, indicating that the interaction between positive fake news and concrete or abstract information did not significantly influence credibility.

Table 4. Results of the interaction between the valence of fake news and two types of construal on credibility.

	F-test	Sig	Pairwise Concrete information	Pairwise Abstract information
Negative fake news frames	11.747	0.001	4.425	4.323
Positive fake news frames	0.115	0.735	4.102	4.085

Source: results of the study

Our study investigates how the credibility of fake news is influenced by the interaction between news valence and the temporal distance of events. H3 and H4 propose that the credibility of positive and negative fake news varies depending on whether the events are perceived as temporally near or far.

To test these hypotheses, we conducted a repeated-measures ANOVA analyzing credibility ratings for near and far future events, with news valence as the independent variable. The analysis, presented in Table 5, revealed significant differences in credibility based on temporal distance for both negative valence: $F(1, 413) = 33.247, P < 0.001$, partial eta squared = 0.075, and positive valence: $F(1, 474) = 97.729, P < 0.001$, partial eta squared = 0.17.

Pairwise comparisons indicated that credibility significantly increased for negative fake news when events were depicted as near future ($M = 4.077$) compared to far future ($M = 3.76$), thereby confirming H4. However, for positive fake news, credibility did not significantly differ between near future ($M = 4.057$) and far future ($M = 3.57$) events, which does not support H3.

Table 5. The results of the interaction between the news's valence and temporal dimension

	F-test	Sig	Pairwise Near future	Pairwise Far future
Low-level Negative fake news frames	33,247	0.001	4.077	3.76
High-level Positive fake news frames	97,729	0.001	4.057	3.57

Source: results of the study

H5 and H6 examine how perceptions of credibility differ based on the concreteness or abstractness of negative and positive fake news, depending on the proximity of the country in question. Specifically, H5(a) and H6(a) predict that negative fake news is more likely to be perceived as credible when presented concretely rather than abstractly, regardless of the country's proximity.

To test these hypotheses, we conducted a repeated-measures ANOVA, using credibility ratings for concrete and abstract presentations as dependent variables and country proximity as the independent variable. The analysis, detailed in Table 6, revealed a significant difference in credibility only for negative fake news, both for near destinations: $F(4, 127) = 55.157, P = 0.043$, partial eta squared = 0.054, and far destination: $F(10, 167) = 20.258, P = 0.002$, partial eta squared = 0.074. The effect sizes, as indicated by the partial eta-squared values, were small according to Cohen's guidelines (Cohen, 1988).

Pairwise comparisons showed that credibility significantly increased for negative fake news when presented concretely compared to abstractly, both for near destinations ($M = 4.459$ vs. $M = 4.384$) and far destinations ($M = 4.351$ vs. $M = 4.139$). This confirms that concrete information enhances the perceived credibility of negative fake news, thereby supporting H5(a) and H6(a).

However, for positive fake news, there is the absence of any significant difference in credibility based on country proximity for both cases where Russia represents $F(0,060) = 37,748, P = 0.807$ and Hungary: $F(0, 313) = 91,158, P = 0.576$. This means that H5(b) and H6(b) have not been confirmed.

Table 6. Results of the interaction between spatial dimension and negative fake news with two types of construal on credibility.

	F-test	Sig	Pairwise Concrete information	Pairwise Abstract information
Near destination	4.127	0.043	4.449	4.384
Far destination	10.167	0.002	4.351	4.193

Source: results of the study

To summarize the supported hypothesis of this research, Figure 2 provides a visual representation of the findings.

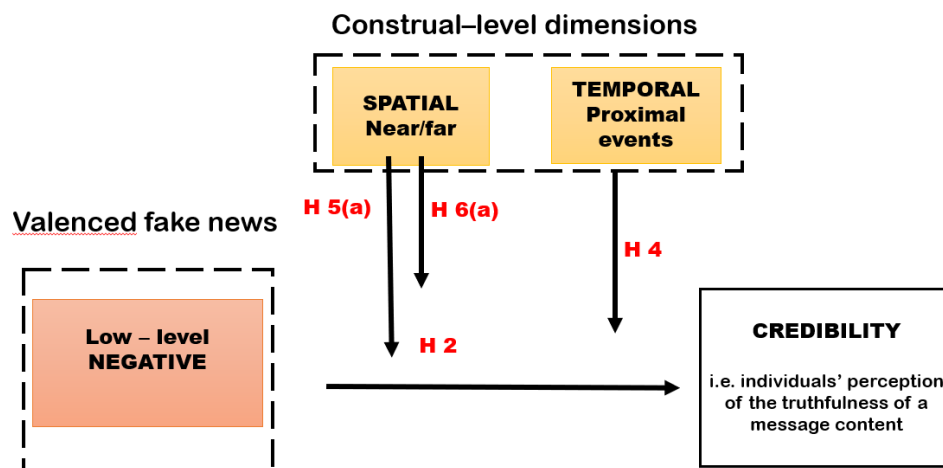


Figure 2: Hypothetical Framework Source: Authors' research.

5. Discussion

5.1. Differences From Previous Research

In response to Zach Bastick's (2021) call for cross-sector research on the characteristics of false information, we conducted a study aimed at addressing and mitigating the risks associated with widespread behavior modification through online social networks. Traditionally, valenced news frames have been employed to assess the impact of persuasive news communication on perceived credibility and judgment (Price et al., 1997; de Vreese et al., 2003). Given that these frames vary in their construal levels (Eyal et al., 2004), we integrated valenced frame theory with CLT to investigate how temporal and geographical distances influence the credibility of fake news related to a country's image.

A key contribution of our study is the application of valenced frames and CLT to the realm of fake news. We identified two primary dimensions—temporal and spatial—within fake news messages and evaluated how these factors impact readers' perceptions of credibility based on the news's positive or negative framing. By utilizing CLT, we examined how these dimensions influence perceived credibility in relation to a country's image, thereby addressing a critical gap in communication research. By linking valenced frame theory with CLT, our study illuminates how the framing of fake news affects credibility, providing insights into the differing effects of positive and negative frames.

5.1. Main Findings

While this study focuses on a specific aspect of fake news, its primary concern is how the unique content of messages influences people's judgment formation, particularly through the effects of valenced frames and CLT. Although the topic and perceived truthfulness (real or false) of news may vary across different contexts, the cognitive processes underlying credibility judgments adhere to general principles of human cognition.

The empirical results revealed that, although the effect size of negative fake news frames and their interaction with "abstractness" is not large, it is significant in terms of credibility. Credibility increases with concrete information in fake news; however, positive fake news frames interacting with "abstractness" show no significant effect. This small direct effect suggests that other variables, such as visualization specifics and stereotypical thinking, may contribute to this variation. Thus, these results provide a foundation for further research that considers additional variables.

These findings align with existing literature, which suggests that negative information generally exerts a stronger influence than positive information (Coutts, 2019; Talwar et al., 2021). However, this study contributes to our understanding by indicating that emotional responses may not be driven solely by the positive or negative outcomes presented in the news. Instead, the level of concreteness or abstractness in the content plays a crucial

role. As demonstrated, fake news has a greater impact on credibility when the information is presented concretely rather than abstractly, significantly shaping people's perceptions, judgments, and decisions. This aligns with the findings of Chang (2008) and Wang (2007), who explored similar effects in advertising messages and corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices.

This study deepens our understanding of how the temporal dimension in valenced fake news frames influences credibility, specifically examining how the proximity of events in fake news about countries affects reader belief. Our findings are consistent with prior research on the impact of temporal distance in CLT on perceptions and judgments. Alternative theories also explain how frames influence judgments; for instance, Nan (2007) argued that positive frames have a stronger effect on the credibility of socially distant entities compared to socially proximal ones. However, their study did not confirm a significant effect of negative frames for proximal entities.

In contrast, our analysis of fake news clearly shows that negative frames for proximal events exert the most influence. Positive frames, however, did not show a significant effect for distant events. Both proximal and distant events trigger the effects of positive and negative fake news frames, encouraging valence-congruent elaboration that subsequently impacts credibility perceptions.

Based on our results, we argue that the valence of fake news frames does not merely serve as input for credibility judgments with minimal cognitive effort. The temporal dimension, as explained by CLT, carries significant weight, but the relationship between positive or negative frames and this dimension (whether the event is distant or near) depends on the specific context being studied. In other words, when individuals encounter messages framed in positive or negative terms, they likely assess the temporal proximity of the event before deciding whether to believe the information.

Specifically for fake news, both positive and negative frames significantly impact credibility when describing proximal events, reinforcing the idea that proximity plays a crucial role in how news is perceived (Nossek & Berkowitz, 2006; Kwon et al., 2016). This suggests that the closer an event feels—whether in time or location—the more likely individuals are to engage with and believe the framed content, regardless of whether the fake news is positive or negative. This further underscores the power of proximity in shaping perceptions of credibility in news coverage.

Moreover, it is not just the valence of fake news frames about countries that matters; geographical proximity also plays a critical role. Evidence from experiments shows that the credibility of fake news frames is influenced by how far or close the country is. The impact of fake news on credibility is stronger when the news is negative, regardless of the country's proximity, whereas positive frames do not significantly affect credibility across both spatial dimensions.

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The findings of this study only partially align with previous research. For instance, Kim et al. (2016) suggested that concrete descriptions are more persuasive for nearby destinations, while abstract descriptions are more effective for distant ones. Similarly, Kwon et al. (2017), studying terrorist news, supported the idea that greater distance encourages more abstract storytelling. However, they did not find a strong effect for concrete information in close-proximity contexts. In contrast, this study on fake news about foreign countries reveals that negative fake news with concrete details significantly influences credibility judgments, regardless of geographical distance. Thus, the results highlight significant interactions between the area of study and the effects of fake news framing.

While previous research has shown varying responses to concrete and abstract information depending on proximity, this study specifically reveals that, in the context of fake news about foreign countries, negative fake news with concrete details consistently exerts a strong influence on credibility, regardless of geographical distance. This suggests that the impact of fake news is shaped not only by proximity but also by the nature of the information presented, particularly when it comes to negative framing.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study have several key theoretical implications. First, this research enhances our understanding of how the nature and volume of fake news messages impact their credibility by integrating CLT and valenced frame theories. Additionally, the study introduces competing hypotheses regarding the effects of message

abstractness versus concreteness on the credibility of fake news, particularly concerning foreign countries. This adds nuance to our understanding of how different framing techniques influence perceived truthfulness.

Finally, the study extends CLT by exploring its application alongside valenced frame theory in relation to country image. It demonstrates how dimensions such as temporal and spatial distance interact with the positive or negative framing of news to affect credibility judgments, offering new insights into the theoretical framework of CLT.

5.3. Managerial Implications

These findings hold significant implications for tourism and marketing from a managerial perspective. Numerous studies have shown that fake news can trigger crises or crisis challenges (Ewing & Lambert, 2019), shape human attitudes and behavior (Ioannidis, 2020; Kouzy et al., 2020), and foster beliefs and biases that impact decision-making and the well-being of a country's population. However, few studies have pinpointed the specific characteristics of fake news that lead to stronger or weaker effects.

This is particularly important in the fields of tourism and country branding, where engaging with international audiences from diverse cultures is crucial. Understanding how fake news frames influence perceptions of a country can inform the development of more effective anti-crisis communication strategies aimed at mitigating the negative effects of declining international perceptions or preventing such consequences altogether. Such efforts are vital for protecting a country's economic and socio-cultural wealth.

Country brand managers must acknowledge the influence of valenced fake news frames, particularly their temporal and spatial dimensions. This study suggests that a country's geographical location does not directly alter how people perceive the abstractness or concreteness of fake news content. Only concrete fake news messages with negative framing have a powerful impact on readers. These types of messages are particularly effective in capturing attention and influencing perceptions, regardless of the geographical distance of the country being discussed.

The specificity and detailed nature of the content make negative fake news more believable and emotionally engaging, leading to a stronger response. This highlights the need for targeted strategies to counter the spread of fake news, especially those that are concrete and negative, as they tend to have the most substantial influence on public opinion and decision-making. Understanding these dynamics can help brand managers develop more targeted and effective strategies to protect a country's image and reputation in the face of misleading or harmful information.

5.4. Limitations

The study has several limitations. It only considers credibility as a dependent variable, neglecting other indicators of persuasion such as message comprehension, knowledge gain, recall, and affective and cognitive responses. Additionally, only short-term effects were evaluated, with long-term effects potentially varying. The study did not measure prejudice or stereotypes, which are crucial components of country image. Furthermore, it only involved Russian and Hungarian respondents, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Responses from other countries could provide additional insights into the impact of fake news.

All these factors can influence the extent to which the dimensions of CLT and valenced frames of fake news interact. Depending on how proximity, concreteness, and the valence of the news are perceived, they may either amplify or diminish the overall impact of fake news on credibility. These interactions are complex and can vary based on the aforementioned factors.

6. Conclusion

The study finds that concrete negative fake news significantly increases perceived credibility, while positive fake news framed abstractly has little effect. This supports existing research indicating that negative information generally has a stronger impact than positive information (Coutts, 2019; Talwar et al., 2021), particularly when presented concretely. Both positive and negative fake news influence credibility, especially for proximal events, aligning with prior findings on the importance of proximity in news (Nossek & Berkowitz, 2006; Kwon et al., 2016).

Notably, spatial dimensions and construal levels only affect credibility in the case of negative news with detailed information, showing no significant effect for positive fake news based on proximity.

This study enhances our understanding of the fake news phenomenon and its impact on credibility by integrating CLT with valenced frames. The findings offer valuable insights for communicators and marketers in three key ways. First, marketers must be aware of how fake news messages are framed. Second, regardless of a country's distance, only concrete negative fake news has significant potential to cause harm. Third, negative disinformation about nearby events can lead to particularly damaging consequences. Recognizing these factors can help anticipate potential risks.

For country branding or international events with high risks, adopting tailored framing strategies may mitigate the damage caused by fake news. Ultimately, the level of risk posed by fake news and the nature of its content can influence the success of promotional campaigns and strategies.

This research paves the way for several future studies. First, there is a need for a more systematic exploration of how cultural differences influence the construal level of fake news. A key question is how individuals from different cultures mentally process information about foreign countries and whether their interpretations vary in terms of construal level (concrete vs. abstract) and valence (positive vs. negative). Second, future studies, particularly in strategic communication, should investigate both the short- and long-term effects of high- and low-level construals and valenced frames.

This is important because long-term exposure to false information can lead to the perception of its truthfulness, even when the source's credibility is in doubt (Shin et al., 2018), potentially exacerbating the harmful impact of fake news. Future research should either replicate the current findings or apply alternative methods to examine construal levels and valenced fake news frames, such as focusing on different message characteristics.

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