

Title: To share or not to share, are there differences offline than online?

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Executive Summary

Objectives: While there is considerable work examining how people decide whether to share different types of news stories on social media platforms, there has been next to no work looking at whether this behaviour differs from offline sharing (i.e. in social face-to-face situations). By investigating similarities and differences in sharing behaviour across the two contexts - one as old as humanity, the other very recent - we are better able to assess the magnitude of the assumed problem of sharing inaccurate news content online.

Analytic/Methodological Approach: A nationally representative sample (n = 1116) of UK respondents were asked to choose from a range of topics (Business Scandal, Sport Scandal, Popular Culture Scandal, Political Scandal) which they would share, if they were to share them online (n = 265) or offline (n = 400). Respondents were also asked to make appraisals about the story that they chose to share.

Key Findings: Many respondents declined to share any of the stories (451 out of 1116 respondents) and that was much more the case when sharing online (52%), than when sharing offline (28%). A political scandal was the most popular of the four shared, but again there were differences between rates of sharing offline (33%) and online (18%). Additional factors that provide further insights come from examining demographics (e.g., age, gender, level of education). Depending on which demographic is the focus, the pattern of choices for offline vs. online sharing are either highly similar (non-graduate vs. graduate) or considerably different (e.g., digital natives [born post-internet] vs. digital nomads [born pre-internet]). When deciding to share a story online or offline, the credibility of the source and the judged accuracy of the story mattered to a greater proportion of people than the emotional reaction the story might invoke. More people considered it mattered that there was challenge from the audience regarding the sharer's reaction and interpretation of the story online compared to offline.

Conclusions: Overall, finding differences or similarities in choices made for sharing online vs. offline depended largely on which demographic was the focus of interest. Fewer people selected from the four topics to share online compared to offline, and while the most popular of the four to be shared was political scandals the rate was far lower online than offline.

Recommendations: Attempts to address problems regarding the sharing of news content that is inaccurate and/or false requires an understanding of what people are typically prepared to share online vs. offline. Both mediums are where news is discussed, yet for one there appears to be no wide scale concern or alarm. The findings make clear that people likely adopt different strategies for what they choose to share, and that demographics are informative in understanding the propensity towards certain news stories, where level of education is not a prominent factor as compared to age. Any policy making around addressing concerns regarding sharing needs to consider more carefully what kind of approach is taken given the complex profile of how and with whom people engage online and offline.

Background

Research in the 2000 to 2010's examining the potential adverse effects of social media centred around two factors. The first was data privacy, and the second was the uncritical adoption of inaccurate and harmful content. In the latter case, there was some effort to differentiate the likelihood of adoption in young adults [digital natives - those born in the digital age]^{1 2} and older adults [digital nomads - those acquiring skills in information technology usage in their adult life]³. In both groups the worry was susceptibility to information shared online that could trigger emotionally charged reactions⁴.

Since the work conducted in the early 2010s, there has been a rich picture developing of the profile of motivations for sharing information on social media platforms. In particular, a lot of emphasis has been placed on identifying the sharing of content that is inaccurate or false (misinformation)⁵, as well as that which is deliberately designed to mislead (disinformation/fake news)^{6 7 8}. By understanding the types of distortions in news content, this can be coordinated with an understanding of the cognitive processes and social motivational factors that explain the sharing process. For digital natives [born post-internet] as well as digital nomads [born pre-internet]⁹ social media frequently entails an anxious trade-off between fear-of-missing-out (FOMO) and Social Media Fatigue (SMF)^{10 11}. FOMO motivates excessive usage because engagement allows access to content that is deemed of social and personal value¹². SMF is the consequence of excessive usage, of being overwhelmed with excessive volumes of information, requiring some form of attenuation¹³. The relationship that this has

¹ Leung, L. (2013). Generational differences in content generation in social media: The roles of the gratifications sought and of narcissism. *Computers in human behaviour*, 29(3), 997-1006.

² Madden, M., Lenhart, A., Cortesi, S., Gasser, U., Duggan, M., Smith, A., & Beaton, M. (2013). Teens, social media, and privacy. *Pew Research Center*, 21(1055), 2-86.

³ Leist, A. K. (2013). Social media use of older adults: a mini-review. *Gerontology*, 59(4), 378-384.

⁴ Stieglitz, S., & Dang-Xuan, L. (2013). Emotions and information diffusion in social media—sentiment of microblogs and sharing behaviour. *Journal of management information systems*, 29(4), 217-248.

⁵ Allen, J., Howland, B., Mobius, M., Rothschild, D., & Watts, D. J. (2020). Evaluating the fake news problem at the scale of the information ecosystem. *Science advances*, 6(14), eaay3539.

⁶ Lazer, D. M., Baum, M. A., Benkler, Y., Berinsky, A. J., Greenhill, K. M., Menczer, F., ... & Zittrain, J. L. (2018). The science of fake news. *Science*, 359(6380), 1094-1096.

⁷ Pennycook, G., & Rand, D. G. (2021). The psychology of fake news. *Trends in cognitive sciences*, 25(5), 388-402.

⁸ Zhou, X., & Zafarani, R. (2020). A survey of fake news: Fundamental theories, detection methods, and opportunities. *ACM Computing Surveys (CSUR)*, 53(5), 1-40.

⁹ Ahn, J., & Jung, Y. (2016). The common sense of dependence on smartphone: A comparison between digital natives and digital immigrants. *New media & society*, 18(7), 1236-1256.

¹⁰ Miguel, C., Lutz, C., Majetić, F., Perez Vega, R., & Sánchez-Razo, M. (2023). It's not All Shiny and Glamorous: Loneliness and Fear of Missing Out among Digital Nomads. Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences.

¹¹ Sharma, M., Kaushal, D., & Joshi, S. (2023). Adverse effect of social media on generation Z user's behaviour: Government information support as a moderating variable. *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 72, 103256.

¹² Abel, J. P., Buff, C. L., & Burr, S. A. (2016). Social media and the fear of missing out: Scale development and assessment. *Journal of Business & Economics Research (JBER)*, 14(1), 33-44.

¹³ Bright, L. F., Kleiser, S. B., & Grau, S. L. (2015). Too much Facebook? An exploratory examination of social media fatigue. *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 44, 148-155.

with particular forms of content is of interest, in particular news content, and its adverse corollary, inaccurate information disguised as news. Digital natives now depend on social media platforms as their primary access point for daily news¹⁴. From 2018 to 2022 the general trend across all generations is disengagement with traditional news media via newspapers, radio, or television^{15 16}. Social media platforms being the primary source of news for all generations indicates a positive trend in engagement with the news, but leads to exposure to ever more sophisticated methods for disguising factually inaccurate or false information as news content¹⁷.

The increasing dependence on social media for news has brought increased scrutiny of the motivations for sharing, in the hope of providing the points of entry that require intervention to attenuate the spread of distorted or false news. Besides examining self-reports of motivations for sharing inaccurate news content, there has also been interest in characterising the news content itself to identify core properties that explain what people share and in which conditions^{18 19 20 21 22}.

News cycles, particularly around major political events account for the narrowing of specific themes of content that will become popular at any given time²². News headlines, judged as successful based on views, are ones that are general and short, contain negative emotional words²³, and make use first-person singular and third-person pronouns¹⁸, along with being humorous^{20 24}, and controversial^{20 25}. Identifying cues that can signal credibility of the news story include the source, especially established news outlets (i.e. traditional news media)

¹⁴ Shin, J. (2020). How do partisans consume news on social media? A comparison of self-reports with digital trace measures among Twitter users. *Social Media+ Society*, 6(4), 2056305120981039.

¹⁵ Rothschild, N., & Fischer, S. (2022, July 12). News engagement plummets as Americans tune out. *Axios*. Retrieved from <https://www.axios.com/2022/07/12/news-mediareadership-ratings-2022>

¹⁶ Wagner, M. C., & Boczkowski, P. J. (2019). The reception of fake news: The interpretations and practices that shape the consumption of perceived misinformation. *Digital Journalism*, 7(7), 870–885.

¹⁷ Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. *Journal of economic perspectives*, 31(2), 211-236.

¹⁸ Gligorić, K., Lifchits, G., West, R., & Anderson, A. (2023). Linguistic effects on news headline success: Evidence from thousands of online field experiments (Registered Report). *Plos one*, 18(3), e0281682.

¹⁹ Hagar, N., Diakopoulos, N., & DeWilde, B. (2022). Anticipating attention: on the predictability of news headline tests. *Digital Journalism*, 10(4), 647-668.

²⁰ Karnowski, V., Leiner, D. J., Sophie Kümpel, A., & Leonhard, L. (2021). Worth to share? How content characteristics and article competitiveness influence news sharing on social network sites. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 98(1), 59-82.

²¹ León, E. D., Vermeer, S., & Trilling, D. (2021). Electoral news sharing: a study of changes in news coverage and Facebook sharing behaviour during the 2018 Mexican elections. *Information, communication & society*, 1-17.

²² Trilling, D., Tolochko, P., & Burscher, B. (2017). From newsworthiness to shareworthiness: How to predict news sharing based on article characteristics. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 94(1), 38–60. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699016654682>

²³ Robertson, C. E., Pröllochs, N., Schwarzenegger, K., Pärnamets, P., Van Bavel, J. J., & Feuerriegel, S. (2023). Negativity drives online news consumption. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 7(5), 812-822.

²⁴ Kalsnes, B., & Larsson, A. O. (2018). Understanding news sharing across social media: Detailing distribution on Facebook and Twitter. *Journalism studies*, 19(11), 1669-1688.

²⁵ Martin, F., Dwyer, T., & Martin, F. (2019). What We Share: Genre and Topicality on Facebook and Twitter. *Sharing News Online: Commendary Cultures and Social Media News Ecologies*, 129-156.

which are still relied up for accessing details on major events. In addition, another relevant cue to the credibility of the story are situations where multiple competing news outlets, with differing political slants, each cover the news story in similar ways^{20 22}. What has also been shown in analyses of reposting or retweeting news stories, is that what is shared is most commonly politics (e.g. government policy) and public affairs (e.g., corporate strategies) focused stories rather than non-public affairs-oriented stories (including celebrity and sports news, or gossip)^{22 24}. One important distinction that has been made in work examining properties of news content itself is that viewing and sharing behaviour are related, such that viewing will predict sharing, though this happens to varying degrees. For instance, there is a distinction between political and non-political stories²⁶ journalistically, which is reflected in viewing and sharing. Typically, stories of a gossip or scandalous nature, human interest stories, and offbeat events are viewed more than stories that concern politics, economics and social matters. In fact, where studies have done comparisons, stories generally related to political stories including political scandals, are proportionally viewed less in absolute terms than non-political stories. However, when looking at sharing behaviour, there is an advantage of stories that concern domestic issues and special interest stories over political and economic ones^{22 27}, but there are peak political events for which there is a substantial rise in sharing of political news.

Besides content, there is variability in the predictiveness of sharing behaviour between the various social media platforms (e.g., Twitter and Facebook). There are differences based on the specific news outlet from which the news stories are written by which reflect different overall appetites favoured by platform communities^{20 22 28}. Moreover, there are differences in the systems (e.g., algorithms for promoting content, mechanisms for identifying and removing false information) employed by different social media platforms that also impact what is viewed and consequently what is shared^{27 29 30}.

²⁶ Lehman-Wilzig, S. N., & Seletzky, M. (2010). Hard news, soft news, 'general' news: The necessity and utility of an intermediate classification. *Journalism*, 11(1):37–56.

²⁷ de León, E., & Vermeer, S. (2022). The News Sharing Gap: Divergence in Online Political News Publication and Dissemination Patterns across Elections and Countries. *Digital Journalism*, 1-20.

²⁸ Trilling, D., Kulshrestha, J., De Vreese, C., Halagiera, D., Jakubowski, J., Möller, J., ... & Vaccari, C. (2022). Is sharing just a function of viewing? The sharing of political and non-political news on Facebook. *Journal of Quantitative Description: Digital Media*, 2.

²⁹ Gritsenko, D., & Wood, M. (2022). Algorithmic governance: A modes of governance approach. *Regulation & Governance*, 16(1), 45-62.

³⁰ Meel, P., & Vishwakarma, D. K. (2020). Fake news, rumor, information pollution in social media and web: A contemporary survey of state-of-the-arts, challenges and opportunities. *Expert Systems with Applications*, 153, 112986.

Motivation of Present Study

From the work discussed thus far, we identify two themes that have yet to be explored in depth: sharing online vs. offline and whether this is associated with differences in the choices of what type of news story is shared. The evidence to date suggests that there are spill over-effects where news encountered online influences the later sharing and discussion of news content offline – where people meet face to face in social settings³¹. Surveys conducted for political news content³², in both online (i.e., social media sites) and offline (live face to face social occasions) settings, indicate that political interest is equally high in both³³. This is taken to imply that engagement and sharing behaviour are comparable between the two contexts. However, no work has directly examined experimentally what is chosen to be shared when interacting with others online vs. offline.

In general, when it comes to determining general preferences for news stories and the level of engagement with those stories, survey work suggests that the level of engagement of political discussions surrounding stories rises and tapers off in response to social interest online, particular resulting from counter-attitudes to the political story that is spreading online³⁴. Taken together with the work reviewed earlier, the general findings, at least regarding what generates interest for later sharing online is that what is viewed most often is not a predictor of what is shared most often. As mentioned, what is most likely to attract interest are news stories of a sensational nature (e.g., popular culture gossip or scandalous stories) as well as human interest stories. Moreover, if there is variability in the profile of news stories typically shared on different social media platforms, then there is little reason to expect similarities in what is chosen to be later shared offline compared to online, given the many differences between these media.

Thus, the present study specifically addresses the following: What, if any, are the differences in the choice of what is shared online (social media) compared to offline (direct face-to-face interactions)?

³¹ Kim, E. M., & Ihm, J. (2020). Online news sharing in the face of mixed audiences: context collapse, homophily, and types of social media. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 64(5), 756-776.

³² Lane, D. S., Kim, D. H., Lee, S. S., Weeks, B. E., & Kwak, N. (2017). From online disagreement to offline action: How diverse motivations for using social media can increase political information sharing and catalyze offline political participation. *Social Media+ Society*, 3(3), 2056305117716274.

³³ Oser, J., Grinson, A., Boulianne, S., & Halperin, E. (2022). How political efficacy relates to online and offline political participation: A multilevel meta-analysis. *Political Communication*, 39(5), 607-633.

³⁴ Kwak, N., Lane, D. S., Weeks, B. E., Kim, D. H., & Lee, S. S. (2022). Now we're talking? Understanding the interplay between online selective and incidental exposure and their influence on online cross-cutting political discussion. *Social Science Computer Review*, 40(3), 579-597.

Methodological set up

A total of 1116 participants took part in the study, which was ran by IPSOS, collecting data from a representative sample of participants in the UK based on gender, age, employment status, marital status, and education. The inclusion criteria for taking part in the study were that participants were born in and are current residents of the UK (for full details of the sample see Appendix Table **x**).

Participants had to be a minimum of 16 years to take part in the study (age restrictions were 16 to 75 for all sample). Ethics approval was undertaken within the Market Research Society Code of Conduct and as such no separate specific ethics approval was required. All participants were required to give informed consent at the beginning of the web survey before participating.

The present study had several stages to it, which included manipulations regarding the presentation of social feedback, and objective feedback regarding the status of a new stories that could be potentially shared with others, either offline or online³⁵. For the purposes of the present report, the focus is on the first main manipulation which directly addresses the following research question: What, if any, are the differences in the choice of what is shared online (social media) compared to offline (direct face-to-face interactions)?

In order to enable a direct comparison between offline and online sharing behaviours, participants were randomly allocated to one of these contexts, after which they were required to respond as if in typical online or offline social context.

Once randomly assigned to either the Social Media condition (Online sharing condition) or the Face-to-Face condition (Offline sharing condition), respondents in the Online sharing condition were told to imagine "...you are going to share on your preferred social media platform, keeping in mind the people that will read your post. Beforehand, you come across 4 news stories involving a scandal or gossip. Which one story, if any, are you most likely to share on your chosen platform?". Participants in the Offline sharing condition were told to imagine that "... you are going to meet your friends, family or colleagues soon. Beforehand, you come across 4 news stories involving a scandal or gossip. Which one story, if any, are you most likely to share with your friends, family or colleagues when you see them?".

³⁵ This report draws on a set of questions that was part of a longer survey that had originally been designed for a longer form paper. The additional questions were not included as the final versions did not align sufficiently closely with the original intention of the study. Further details of this as well as accompanying questionnaire and data are available upon request.

For both the Offline and Online sharing conditions each respondent was presented in random order four topics, one for each news story: Business, Pop culture, Sports, Politics. No details were provided about the news stories. The aim here was to simply determine stories of which theme participants would be most comfortable sharing with others. Moreover, by not presenting specific details of actual scandals or gossip, respondents were free to call to mind their own ideas. By doing so, we tried to limit any potential influencing factors regarding the details of the stories themselves that may have impacted sharing behaviour independent of the critical manipulations introduced in the experiment. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that even with limited details, the topics themselves may still not be ones that participants would be interested in sharing. We additionally included the following options: None of these, Would rather not say, Don't know. If any of these three options were selected the experiment was terminated given that the remainder of the experiment depended on the influence of feedback on the durability of sharing behaviour.

Those participants that had selected a topic for a news story to share were then asked a series of questions that required them to make general appraisals of the story and then specific appraisals that took into account the audience that the story would be shared with.

The general appraisals were as follows:

1. To what extent does it matter to you that the news story comes from a credible news outlet?
2. To what extent does it matter to you that the details of the news story might not be completely accurate?
3. To what extent does it matter to you that the news story is surprising to you?
4. To what extent does it matter to you that the news story creates a strong emotional reaction in you?

The specific appraisals were as follows:

1. To what extent does it matter to you that [depending on condition: your friends / family / colleagues, Followers on social media] experience the same emotional reaction (e.g., sadness, joy, disappointment, surprise) to the news story as you do?
2. To what extent does it matter to you that [depending on condition: your friends / family / colleagues, Followers on social media] challenge your reaction to the news story?

3. To what extent does it matter to you that [depending on condition: your friends / family / colleagues, Followers on social media] challenge your interpretation of the details of the news story?
4. To what extent does it matter to you that [depending on condition: your friends / family / colleagues, Followers on social media] react to the news story with the same intensity as you do?

For each question, respondents could select from these options: It matters a great deal, It matters a fair amount, It matters a little, It does not matter at all, Would rather not say, Don't know; responses to options "Would rather not say" and "Don't know" were summarized under a single classification.

Findings

Choosing what to share: Do people select the same type of stories if they are going to be sharing them online or offline?

The answer is not quite. There are two patterns worth noting (Table 1). First, while political scandals are the most commonly selected topic of story to share overall, most respondents did not select any of the four news stories to share, which indicates that what they might commonly discuss is not reflected in the options presented to them. Second, while the political scandal story was the most selected of the four topics for sharing offline and online, there was a clear difference given that it was close to twice as popular for sharing offline than online. Third, when sharing online the majority of respondents did not select any of the options presented to them which also reflects the fact that whatever the content of sharing is, the scandals of the types presented here is not what people opt to share most of the time.

Table 1. Topic of story chosen to share either offline (face-to-face) or online (social media) (weighted %)

Topic of news story	Overall	Face to Face	Social Media
Business Scandal	5.8	5.6	6.0
Political Scandal	25	33	18
Popular Cultural Scandal	16	19	13
Sport Scandal	13	14	11
NONE (incl. none of the above, would rather not say, don't know)	40.6	28.4	51.8

In addition, while the rates of selection of the topics for sharing was lower than anticipated, nonetheless we could examine whether there were patterns in the choices based on demographics (see Tables A1 and A2 in the Appendix). What we find is that the majority of participants between the ages of 16-24, whether offline or online, did select one of the four topics to share, but beyond this age group (i.e., 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65-75) about 30% didn't select any of the topics to share offline. For sharing online, the older the age bracket the less the options are selected – ranging from about 40% not selecting the topics, to about 65%. In the latter case this may not be a surprise, since it is likely that for older adults engaging online is likely to be infrequent and so the nature of the engagement is likely to reflect sharing of details outside of news stories, particularly scandals. Put another way, if digital nomads are less likely to be on social media, as well as less frequently exchanging with others online, then they may only be sharing photos or news updates of what they and their family members are doing. Whereas by contrast, if digital natives are on social media often, and exchange with others frequently, then they are likely using social media in a variety of ways, including sharing of news as well as updates of their own activities.

In addition, if we look at selection rates by gender (see Tables A3 and A4 in the Appendix) then we find that for offline sharing, more men than women will share a story that refers to a political scandal (39% vs. 26%), and more women than men will share a story that refers to a popular culture scandal (31% vs. 8.7%). For online sharing, more women than men will share a story that refers to a political scandal (39% vs 24%), and approximately the same proportion of men and women will share a story referring to a popular culture scandal (male = 21%, women 18%). Of note also is that offline, more women than men don't select any of the options to share (32.2% vs. 23.8%), and online, more men than women don't select any of the options to share (35.8% vs. 22.9%). So, this implies nuances in potential differences by gender depending on what is shared, and where it is shared.

Finally, another main demographic to consider is education, in which the sample were divided into graduates and non-graduates (see Tables A5 and A6 in the Appendix). For offline sharing, more graduates than non-graduates will share a story that refers to a political scandal (39% vs. 24%), and with approximately similar rates for the next most popular topic, popular culture scandal (non-graduates 21% vs. graduate 18%). For online sharing, the rates were similar for sharing a political scandal (non-graduates 17% vs. graduate 20%), and a popular culture scandal (non-graduates 13% vs. graduate 11%). Of note was that those that did no select any

of the options for sharing offline were lower (non-graduates 35.8% vs. graduate 22.9%), than online (non-graduates 55.3% vs. graduate 50.2%).

Evaluating what is being shared: Do people appraise what they choose to share in the same way depending on whether they are sharing online or offline?

In general, appraisals of the story whether shared online or offline are quite similar (Table 2). It seems that the majority consider that the credibility of the source matters as a basis on which to consider sharing, be it offline or online. In addition, it does also seem to matter that the story might be inaccurate which would inform the sharing of the story. Whether the story is surprising or provokes an emotional reaction also matters for the majority, but it is proportionally less than respondents considering the credibility of the source and the possibility the story might be inaccurate. This does suggest that more people consider properties of the story itself as more significant than the proportion of people that consider emotional reactions to the story, though clearly both appear to matter.

In addition to the general appraisals of the story according to source, possible inaccuracy and associated emotional reactions that could be invoked, respondents also appraised the stories according to the audience the story would be shared with. Here the patterns of appraisals made were similar for those sharing offline and online when it came to how many considered it mattered that the audience were aligned in their emotional reaction and intensity of the reaction to that of the sharer (Table 3). Proportionally more considered it mattered that sharing the story provoked challenge from the audience to the sharer's reaction to the story as well as the interpretation of the story offline than online.

Table 2. General appraisal of the stories that people choose to share given the audience that is being engaged with offline (face-to-face) or online (social media) (weighted % combining "matters a great deal"/"matters a fair amount").

Topic of news story	Overall	Face to Face	Social Media
Credibility of source the story	77	77	78
Possibility of inaccuracy of the story	71	75	65
Surprising nature of the story	59	57	61
Emotional reaction the story provokes	51	48	53

Table 3. Specific appraisal of the stories that people choose to share given the audience that is being engaged with offline (face-to-face) or online (social media) (weighted % combining “matters a great deal”/”matters a fair amount”).

Topic of news story	Overall	Face to Face	Social Media
The story will invoke the same emotional reaction in others as you had	46	44	49
That the story will involve the same level of intensity of reaction from others as you had	44	41	48
That you will invoke challenges to your reaction to the story from those you share it with	34	30.2	40
That you will invoke challenges to your interpretation of the story from those you share it with	38	31.2	47

Conclusions

Overall, there are two salient findings revealed from the study. The first is that of four different topics referring to scandals the one most commonly selected was associated with a political scandal, a large minority did not select any of the options to share, with even higher rejection rates for online sharing than offline. The findings add further context by showing that generally when it comes to sharing, it is likely that the content of what people share is not captured by the options offered to people in the study. The second is that demographics are clearly informative, because they also indicate where there might be a general propensity for sharing (e.g. more offline vs. online) which contextualises the basis on which decisions are made as to what to share.

One important point to note is that while the aim of this work was to compare online vs offline behaviour, one inevitable confound is that the different communication media imply different audiences, not only quantitatively but also qualitatively. When we share news or stories online on social media platforms, we're not only sharing it with a much bigger audience, but also with people with whom we have less rich interactions, people that know us less well. Offline sharing on the other hand means relaying a story to what is usually a small group of individuals with whom we usually maintain stronger links, i.e. with "friends and family". So, when we asked participants whether they would share a headline online or offline, they were likely thinking about broadcasting to strangers in one case, versus multicasting to friends in the other.

A second aspect of our experimental setup is that it focused exclusively on a particular type of news stories, namely scandals. The main rationale for this is focus on aspect of news stories that

typically draws interest³⁶, both in views and shares, namely stories that are salacious and report on scandals. In this way, while past work shows that different topics (e.g. political, economic, popular cultures) are shown to vary in views and sharing, the present study examined the extent to which sharing would be impacted if each topic was reporting on a scandal. .Due to their moral dimension, there are several reasons to communicate news stories about scandals³⁷, beyond their truthfulness, e.g. they are useful in smear campaigns, click-baits or just gossip³⁸. It is not a stretch, furthermore, to expect that people are aware of this, and thus treat news about scandals as possibly more entertaining but, on average, less truthful, compared, to, say, news about agricultural production^{39 40 41}.

The above two points, taken together, imply that people may have interpreted the task as asking for their willingness to share a relatively doubtful scandal story either with a large group of relatively unknown individuals in one condition, or with a smaller group of friends in the other. If that is so, the main finding that participants were far more likely to share a doubtful story in the latter condition (72%) compared to the former (28%), means that people are more liberal with respect to truth when communicating with friends compared to strangers. Given that sharing false information can incur reputation costs⁴², the above finding may be explained by people's expectation to be able to safeguard their reputation more easily when interacting with close contacts. In such interactions, it is possibly easier to control how a piece of information is communicated and how it is being interpreted, e.g. ensure that the communicative act is interpreted as primarily ironic, or intended to entertain rather than inform etc. This is further supported by the finding that participants were more concerned about a challenge to the credibility of the story when that challenge was imagined to take place online rather than offline. Perhaps, in the offline case, participants share the story with the expectation of a challenge or in contexts where challenging is irrelevant due to the implied pragmatics of the communicative act.

³⁶ Ekström, M., & Johansson, B. (2008). Talk scandals. *Media, Culture & Society*, 30(1), 61-79.

³⁷ Allern, S., & Pollack, E. (2012). Mediated scandals. *Scandalous*, 9-28.

³⁸ Jerslev, A., & Mortensen, M. (2022). CELEBRITY NEWS ONLINE. *The Routledge Companion to News and Journalism*.

³⁹ Norrick, N. R. (2005). The dark side of tellability. *Narrative Inquiry*, 15(2), 323-343.

⁴⁰ Gajda, A. (2020). What newsworthiness means. In *Comparative Privacy and Defamation* (pp. 169-180). Edward Elgar Publishing.

⁴¹ Zakharchenko, A., Peráček, T., Fedushko, S., Syerov, Y., & Trach, O. (2021). When fact-checking and 'BBC standards' are helpless: 'fake newsworthy event' manipulation and the reaction of the 'high-quality media' on it. *Sustainability*, 13(2), 573.

⁴² Altay, S., Hacquin, A. S., & Mercier, H. (2022). Why do so few people share fake news? It hurts their reputation. *new media & society*, 24(6), 1303-1324.

A similar approach can be followed when interpreting the demographic differences between participants. We found that participants in the youngest age group (16-24 years) were more likely compared to the other groups to select one of the scandals stories to share, either online or offline. The same was true for women but only in offline contexts, whereas men were more likely than women to share a story online. Interestingly, the least salient difference, at least for proportions selecting stories from the options, are those that are non-graduates and graduates, where the rates of selections are similar. So, it appears that age and gender are more informative when attempting to predict who is willing to share news scandals and where. Moreover, if we assume, once again, that participants conceptualise scandal stories as low-accuracy information, the decision to share or not apparently does not hinge so much on the ability to discern truth (possibly related to one's educational level) but on lifestyle characteristics and the importance of safeguarding one's reputation, properties that could be thought to be associated with age.

Recommendations

When considering policy questions related to online news sharing, it is particularly fruitful to compare people's online and offline behaviour. The fact that we are far less concerned about the impact of offline sharing isn't because people don't spread rumours, inaccuracies and outright lies offline, but because as a form of communication that is as old as humanity itself, it is considered safe or at least normal. As such, it can serve as benchmark against which we can assess how people communicate online, e.g. whether they share more or less information, whether they are more or less liberal about the quality of information they share, whether they are more or less likely to believe the information they come across, etc. In the current study, for example, we find that, perhaps in contrast to popular belief, people are more selective when they share news online. This may be taken to suggest that the dangers of online misinformation aren't as pronounced as commonly assumed. Of course, given that this information often reaches a much larger audience, this isn't necessarily sufficient reason to celebrate. In any case, the current study illustrates the importance of establishing a baseline when evaluating people's behaviour.

Secondly, policy interventions ought to take into account the demographics of the targeted audience, which could be predictive of the communicative aims when sharing information and, relatedly, the way they evaluate the information they come across. For example, even if one's educational level might be thought to play a role when the factual basis of a news item is being evaluated, our study indicates that other demographic factors are more important when one

focuses on properties such as the entertainment value of information. Interventions should consider the complex profile of the targeted group, their variable conceptualisations of online and offline interactions, as well as their aims and motivations.

Appendix

Table A1. Topic of story chosen to share by age (weighted %) Offline

Topic of news story	16-24 (80)	25-34 (103)	35-44 (91)	45-54 (108)	55-64 (111)	65-75 (66)
Business Scandal	8.8	4.9	9.9	4.6	5.4	4.5
Political Scandal	26	24	25	40	37	41
Popular Cultural Scandal	29	35	24	12	9.9	7.6
Sport Scandal	20	15	11	15	12	12
Other (incl. none of the above, would rather not say, don't know)	16.2	21.1	30.1	28.4	35.7	34.9

Table A2. Topic of story chosen to share by age (weighted %) Online

Topic of news story	16-24 (81)	25-34 (105)	35-44 (107)	45-54 (108)	55-64 (102)	65-75 (54)
Business Scandal	15	5.7	10	3.7	3.9	0
Political Scandal	22	16	17	13	20	28
Popular Cultural Scandal	19	27	10	8.3	2	5.6
Sport Scandal	16	11	12	11	6.9	1.9
Other (incl. none of the above, would rather not say, don't know)	28	40.3	51	64	67.2	64.5

Table A3. Topic of story chosen to share by gender (weighted %) Offline

Topic of news story	Male (277)	Female (279)	In another way/prefer not to say (3)
Business Scandal	6.5	6.1	0
Political Scandal	39	26	N = 1
Popular Cultural Scandal	8.7	31	0
Sport Scandal	22	4.7	N = 1
Other (incl. none of the above, would rather not say, don't know)	23.8	32.2	N = 1

Table A4. Topic of story chosen to share by education (weighted %) Online

Topic of news story	Male (261)	Female (293)	In another way/prefer not to say (3)
Business Scandal	5.2	7.1	0
Political Scandal	24	39	N = 1
Popular Cultural Scandal	21	18	0
Sport Scandal	14	13	0
Other (incl. none of the above, would rather not say, don't know)	35.8	22.9	N = 2

Table A5. Topic of story chosen to share by education (weighted %) Offline

Topic of news story	Non-Graduates (249)	Graduates (310)
Business Scandal	5.2	7.1
Political Scandal	24	39
Popular Cultural Scandal	21	18
Sport Scandal	14	13
Other (incl. none of the above, would rather not say, don't know)	35.8	22.9

Table A6. Topic of story chosen to share by education (weighted %) Online

Topic of news story	Non-Graduates (270)	Graduates (287)
Business Scandal	3.7	9.4
Political Scandal	17	20
Popular Cultural Scandal	13	11
Sport Scandal	11	9.4
Other (incl. none of the above, would rather not say, don't know)	55.3	50.2