

Navigating Narratives: The Dynamics of Disinformation Exposure and Believability to Information in Kosovo

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Abstract: This paper examines individuals' exposure to disinformation in Kosovo and how they judge its credibility. We investigated exposure to and belief in six of the most popular disinformation narratives through a survey of 600 respondents. The results show that trust in news media does not significantly influence disinformation belief, suggesting that cognitive and situational factors are more impactful. Although social media remains the main source of exposure, the source typically does not affect belief unless there are some high-salience political stories. Additionally, repeated exposure to a narrative increases the chance that it will be believed. Fact-checking and media literacy efforts have limited reach, as most respondents rarely verify information that aligns with their views. These findings highlight the need to improve media literacy and critical thinking education to help individuals become more discerning in how they evaluate information.

Keywords: disinformation, believability, exposure, narratives, trust

INTRODUCTION

The circulation of disinformation within any society poses a threat to the notions of truth and fact, thereby undermining the principles of informed deliberation at the heart of democratic life (McKay & Tenove, 2021). We define disinformation as intentionally false or manipulated content designed to deceive; disinformation differs from misinformation, which is misleading but circulates without the intention to deceive others (van der Linden, 2022). Disinformation is a threat

to transparency, institutional trust, and polarization because it blends facts and falsehoods (Iyengar & Massey, 2019). The circulation of misinformation and disinformation, particularly across digital platforms, has led to the current era being defined as the post-truth age, where truth becomes contingent on believability, not its evidential basis (Lilleker, 2018). Although the term post-truth has a short lineage, disinformation has long been a feature of the communication environment and is not purely a feature of politics in the digital age. Disinformation now reaches wider audiences and shapes public opinion by undermining their ability to distinguish truth from falsehood (Bastick, 2021). Our paper examines the ability of citizens in the Kosovan highly polarized environment where disinformation regularly circulates to determine what forms of disinformation are seen as believable, if there are socio-demographic or source-based explanations for belief in disinformation, and how repeated exposure impacts the likelihood of believability. We explore this specific context to develop more widely applicable findings to help understand the dynamics of post-truth environments. The disinformation in Kosovo is reflective of the trends worldwide, and the information landscape is polluted by the spread of manipulated information in almost every field, such as science (Scheufele & Krause, 2019), health (Suarez-Lledo & Alvarez-Galvez, 2021), and politics (Jerit & Zhao, 2020).

One essential component of disinformation is the narrative of a specific story and the fit within a broader meta-narrative, for example, low trust between ethnic communities, which enhances the believability of the single piece of disinformation (Bánkuty-Balogh, 2021). Such narratives have the capacity to persuade people and influence their beliefs and behaviors, making them effective in eroding people's trust in institutions and undermining the truth. Studies highlight how disinformation can prove sticky, through repetition, and through fitting to highly prominent myths or tropes, and thus can have destructive consequences on both individual and societal levels, such as undermining trust in democratic institutions (Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021) or increasing vaccine hesitancy during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pierri et al., 2022). Hence, examining the believability of these narratives offers insights into the quality and stability of pro-democratic attitudes.

KOSOVO: CASE STUDY CONTEXT

Kosovo is a country where ethnic tensions and political polarization are constant, and often, the political elites may use these divisions to their advantage (Qerimi & Gërguri, 2022). In Kosovo, the trend of low trust towards institutions remains stable, with 33% trusting the Kosovo Government and even less (25%) trusting the Assembly (Avdiu 2022). This paper analyzes how citizens navigate the complex

post-truth environment by examining key disinformation narratives that have been independently determined as false by fact-checkers, who aim to reduce the spread and impact of false information to the public (Kuś & Barczyszyn-Madziarz, 2020).

With few exceptions, there is limited research on how citizens read disinformation narratives (Suau & Puertas-Graell, 2023), as most research explores the spread of disinformation during elections (Chen et al., 2021; Pierri et al., 2020) or other major political or societal events (Perez-Escolar et al., 2023; Reddi, et al., 2023). Previous studies show that exposure to factual information related to major political or societal events can lead people to reject false claims (David, 2023; de Saint Laurent, et al., 2022), for instance, exposure to the debunking of conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 vaccination leads to a higher willingness to accept a vaccination (Buturoiu et al., 2021). However, in this study, we conducted the research at a point when there were no major socio-political events or controversies taking place and focused on narratives that regularly circulate within the Kosovar information environment. The study is interested in the way its citizens interact and analyze information during their daily media intake by studying disinformation under relatively normal conditions. It is concerned with the common patterns of information processing – how individuals evaluate the credibility and factuality of the news, whether they believe what they read, and the relationship with judgments related to the reliability of the media sources. These are the daily cognitive and behavioral reactions, exploring them indicates how disinformation can subtly influence public attitudes during their everyday consumption of news. Hence, this paper contributes to knowledge by showing how disinformation can impact citizens' evaluations of information accuracy, credibility, and trust in sources during a period of relative normality, within the complex Kosovar information environment. Rather than focusing on general political views or orientations towards distinct ideologies, the research explores the mechanisms that shape the believability of disinformation.

NAVIGATING A 'DISORDERED' INFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

A large amount of research has been devoted to what is termed information pollution and information disorder. These terms describe a situation where inaccurate information circulates widely within a society and impacts the attitudes and behaviors of citizens. Citizens of democratic societies must be able to recognize the difference between facts, ideological interpretations of data, opinions, and outright lies. The problem is that in many societies, particularly polarized environments such as Kosovo, a variety of actors spread claims of fact that have some degree of inaccuracy, leading to a mistrustful and cynical citizenry.

There are debates regarding the scale of the problem of disinformation, although largely based on evidence from studies in Western Europe or America. There is evidence that disinformation is produced and shared by a limited number of users of social media, and the problem is exaggerated through the attention given to isolated but dramatic examples (Allen et al., 2020). However, the increased focus on disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that the spread of disinformation could have serious implications (Roozenbeek et al., 2020). The most serious cases are when preventative measures such as lockdowns or vaccinations become politicized (Lilleker et al., 2021). In nations with highly polarized political environments, low trust in political and media institutions, and where competing arguments were given equal weight within the information environment, there were higher degrees of uncertainty about core facts relating to the pandemic. The evidence from national studies of the spread of misinformation and disinformation during the pandemic reinforces long-standing notions of the problem when the information environment becomes polluted with false claims (Pérez Escobar et al., 2023). Citizens must have some form of mental schema for testing what facts and sources of facts are credible and reliable, perhaps based on their perceptions of what news sources are credible and trustworthy. However, where the media is highly mistrusted, the blurring of fact and fiction becomes prevalent and highly problematic, more so when that blurring is strategically manufactured for political gain. When there is low trust, citizens rely on confirmation and selection bias and strengthen already held opinions (Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2022). Within the polarized and low-trust Kosovar information environment, we hypothesize that:

- *H1: People who have a high level of trust in news media are more likely to believe in narratives that are disseminated by their trusted source.*

It is long observed that the trend is for more people to access news via social media (Nielsen & Schröder, 2014; Swart, 2023). However, this reliance introduces significant challenges for knowledge outcomes, and social media has also been found to be a significant source of disinformation (Olan et al., 2024). The studies show that although digital interventions can have a moderate positive effect on the capacity of a user to differentiate credible and fake news (Guess et al., 2020), the overall impact of social media use is mixed, and some of its consequences are harmful to digital literacy (Chen et al., 2021). The detection of disinformation remains underdeveloped and usually reliant on individual user reporting, and hence it can spread rapidly within information environments where the conditions are ripe (Diaz Ruiz & Nilsson, 2023). In low-trust environments, ordinary users are often more trusted than official sources and news shared by close peers is viewed as an endorsement (Karlsen & Aalberg,

2023). Arguably, when disinformation is shared by other users, it becomes more credible in an environment such as Kosovo, where societal trust is crucial. The digital environment provides a space where any individual, mainstream media organization, digital ‘alt-news’ outlet, or political actor can post or share content without gatekeepers. The individual alone decides which sources they use and what content they believe (Melchior & Oliveira, 2024). Although people tend to use digital/social and traditional media, we are particularly concerned with the inverse relationship between a major dependence on unverified social media platforms and the susceptibility to being misled by disinformation. Therefore, we hypothesize:

- *H2: Kosovars who are more reliant on gathering news from social media platforms are more likely to find disinformation more believable than those who rely on digital or traditional media (newspaper, radio, and TV).*

People are exposed to disinformation on different channels within the information environment: the broader media ecosystem encompassing traditional, digital, and social media platforms. However, extant research suggests that mere exposure does not always result in persuasion (Su et al, 2022). Thus, our study concentrates on the question of the socio-political environment’s mediating role: to what extent does a highly polarized environment predetermine the probability of repeated exposure to disinformation being converted into influence on citizens’ attitudes and beliefs. Recent work has found that emotions are shaped by exposure to certain frames (David, 2023) and that exposure can complement impulses for confirmation bias (Xu et al, 2023). The pre-existing beliefs and attitudes among individuals contribute to their selective exposure and selective attention, which direct human beings to content, including disinformation, which supports their prior held beliefs and attitudes (Stroud, 2008).

Repeated exposure to narratives over time leads them to be accepted as truths, regardless of how false the content is (Guess et al., 2020). Hence, repeatedly being exposed to false narratives can lead people to develop distorted worldviews, which become confirmed through their selective use of sources and desire for confirmation bias. These psychological factors, often shaped by lived experiences within a particular socio-political environment, can make certain forms of disinformation especially resonant if they circulate frequently. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

- *H3: Kosovars who have previously encountered a disinformation narrative are more inclined to believe it compared to those who are unfamiliar with it.*

Extant research demonstrates that those who mistrust institutions, rely on social media for news, and are frequently exposed to disinformation will find it more believable. However, some agencies actively attempt to combat the spread of misinformation and disinformation and attempt to debunk specific claims while inoculating citizens to reduce their future susceptibility (Van der Linden et al., 2017). Fact-checkers are a key defence against the spread of false content and attempt to ensure their results gain publicity. There are limits to how many claims can be checked, hence, fact-checkers focus on high-profile individuals and claims, attempting to prevent some false claims from gaining traction (Birks, 2019). However, often the repetition of a claim is sufficient for it to be more memorable than the counterargument; also, counterclaims can be dismissed by citizens when the original claim confirms their existing beliefs. Hence, any form of debunking, including the work of fact-checkers, is not wholly successful (Hameleers, 2024). Brautovic and John (2023) also found that fact-checkers were ineffective, as their website and social media pages were rarely visited. Media literacy initiatives attempt pre-bunking strategies, making people aware of common tropes or sources of disinformation, and are designed to engage the critical faculties of citizens (Bertolotti & Catellani, 2023). The challenge for initiatives countering the spread of disinformation is reaching sufficient numbers of the population (Birks, 2019) and engaging with those who have low trust in societal institutions (Su et al., 2022). Disengagement with systems designed to protect the information environment is much more likely within societies where trust is low, and polarization is high, spaces where selection bias and confirmation bias are equally likely to be high, such as Kosovo.

Individuals tend to fact-check information that opposes their preexisting opinions but not that which supports them, which is also in line with motivated reasoning theory (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). Meanwhile, prior beliefs also influence perceptions of the accuracy: people are more likely to believe information that supports their worldview even though it may not be factual (Gërguri, 2022). To differentiate these two processes – behavioral engagement (fact-checking) and cognitive evaluation (believability), we hypothesize:

- *H4: Kosovars are less likely to verify information that supports their existing views.*

METHODOLOGY

To find the most relevant disinformation narratives, an analysis was conducted during a period of relative normality in Kosovo; there were no election campaigns, controversies, or tensions in the situation on the border with Serbia. For 18 days, from 10th to 28th April 2023, 86 fact-checked articles were collected from Kosovo's two IFCN-affiliated fact-checkers, *Krypometer*¹ and *Hibrid*².

The initial stage involved analyzing the articles and identifying the six most repeated disinformation narratives during this period (see Table 1). To measure the prominence of disinformation narratives, we conducted a content analysis, exploring how frequently those narratives appeared within fact-checked claims during the analyzed period. Of 86 fact-checked articles, 49 articles were related to Kosovo-Serbia relations, including the topic of ethnic and political conflicts, and foreign actors' involvement.

A survey was then conducted, which tested the familiarity and believability of the six most prominent disinformation narratives. Following an initial set of sociodemographic questions (including party identification, ideology), respondents were asked about media consumption sources and the frequency of news consumption in order to measure media engagement. Media trust was measured by asking "do you trust the information published by news media/digital media/social media?" using a 7-point scale (1 = never trust, 7 = always trust). In the second part, for each narrative, there were four questions asking respondents about exposure, source and believability following our hypotheses. Each narrative was followed by the questions: (1) Had the respondent read the narrative before? (2) Does the respondent agree with the statement; on which media or platform did they read it, choosing only one option (if this was the case)? and (3) Had they shared related content?

The identified narratives are representative of common disinformation themes. Unsurprisingly, four of them (1, 2, 4, & 5) were concerned with Kosovo-Serbia relations, ranging from political claims to religious issues. Stories relating to relations with Serbia are a constant theme of news, and disinformation relating to these issues is a permanent feature of the Kosovar information environment, even when there are no obvious tensions between the two countries. The other repeated narratives are about migration (N6), relating to job opportunities for young people thinking of migrating into the EU, and celebrity gossip (N3) related to the arrest of a celebrity and reinforcing the narrative that celebrities often enjoy privileges when dealing with state institutions and so this narrative indirectly undermines trust in institutions.

¹ Krypometer was launched in December 2016 and is part of the online media, Kallxo.com.

² Hibrid was founded in September 2020 by the NGO "Action for Democratic Society"

Table 1. The six most repeated disinformation narratives

| Number | Narrative | Code | |
|--------|---|-------------------------|--|
| 1 | The West was an accomplice in the ethnic cleaning of Serbs in Kosovo | Kosovo-Serbia relations | Political issue |
| 2 | Russian group, „Wagner”, fights against Kosovo police in the North | Kosovo-Serbia relations | Political issue |
| 3 | The famous designer Valdrin Sahiti was arrested and is in custody in Turkey | Celebrities | Celebrity Gossip |
| 4 | Orthodox churches in Kosovo are under political attack | Kosovo-Serbia relations | Political issue/ Religion issue |
| 5 | Serbs in Kosovo face intimidation, physical attacks and are targets of crime in Kosovo meanwhile institutions don't deliver justice | Kosovo-Serbia relations | Political issue |
| 6 | A company is looking for workers in Germany, the company will organize work visas | Immigration | Employment issue/ Immigration issue |

The narrative headlines were inserted into a survey, which was conducted online during June 2023. The survey was completed by 600 respondents among Kosovar internet users between 18 and 65 years old from seven main regions. In Kosovo, daily use of the internet is 95.6%, the highest in the region and higher than the 84% average for European Union member states (Eurostat 2023). There are variances in internet usage between different age groups and different education levels, with older and less educated people being less active online (STIKK 2019).

Table 2. Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample

| PLACE OF RESIDENCE | % | AGE | % | GENDER | % | EDUCATION | % |
|--------------------|------|--------------|------|--------------|------|--------------------------|------|
| Ferizaj | 9.5 | 18-29 | 44.7 | Man | 50.3 | Elementary school | 1.3 |
| Gjakova | 6.7 | 30-44 | 44.2 | Woman | 49.3 | High school | 13.5 |
| Gjilan | 8.8 | 45-64 | 11.2 | Other | 0.3 | University degree | 67.0 |
| Mitrovica | 10.7 | | | | | | |
| Peja | 9.3 | | | | | | |
| Prishtina | 45.0 | | | | | | |
| Prizren | 10.0 | | | | | | |

The digital divides by age and education are reflected in the sample of respondents (see Table 2). There is an imbalance when it comes to age and education, with a lower number of elderly people and also individuals with lower education included in the sample. However, the sample reflects Kosovars who are heavy users of social media platforms and so are most likely to be exposed to disinformation online as part of their daily information diet.

FINDINGS

TRUST IN MEDIA AND BELIEF IN DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES (H1)

The data demonstrates varying levels of trust and distrust in different narratives, reflecting the diversity of public attitudes on the issues and differing levels of critical thinking and fact-checking, which might be used to assess the credibility of information. Some respondents fall into the group of undecided, indicating a degree of skepticism or uncertainty about the accuracy of the disinformation, which sometimes is the main goal of those who disseminate these narratives (Gërguri, 2022). The narratives regarding international or political events (e.g., involvement of the West, Russian group “Wagner”) tend to have higher levels of distrust, while the narrative about the company offering jobs and work visas in Germany has a more balanced distribution of trust levels, with a notable percentage of respondents believing the story.

In Kosovo, there are considerable differences in how much individuals trust the news media. The majority do not trust the news media, with 47.5% having very low or low trust, while only around 20% have high or very high levels of trust in the news media. To examine whether this trust influences susceptibility to disinformation, a series of chi-square tests of independence was conducted to test Hypothesis 1, which posited that individuals with higher trust in news media are less likely to believe in disinformation narratives. Trust in news media was dichotomized as tend to trust (scores 5–7) versus tend to distrust (scores 1–4) on a 7-point scale, and belief in each narrative was coded as believes (scores 5–8).

The results are presented in Table 3 and Figure 1. No significant associations were found between media trust and belief in any of the disinformation narratives (all $p > .29$), with uniformly small effect sizes (Cramér’s $V < .05$). The largest—but still non-significant—difference was observed for the “Orthodox churches” narrative, where 12.5% of high-tend to trust respondents believed the story compared to 9.3% among low-tend to distrust respondents. Figure 1 illustrates these findings, showing near-identical belief rates across trust levels, with overlapping 95% confidence intervals.

Complementary correlation analyses, using continuous trust scores, reveal modest but statistically significant positive correlations for certain narratives. Specifically, trust in media correlated positively with belief in Narrative 1 (“The West was complicit in the ethnic cleansing of Kosovars”) ($r = .128^{**}$, $p < .01$) and Narrative 5 (“Discrimination against Serbs”) ($r = .089^{*}$, $p < .05$). These findings suggest that higher media trust may, in some instances, coincide with greater belief in particular disinformation narratives, possibly reflecting trust in domestic rather than international media sources or differing perceptions

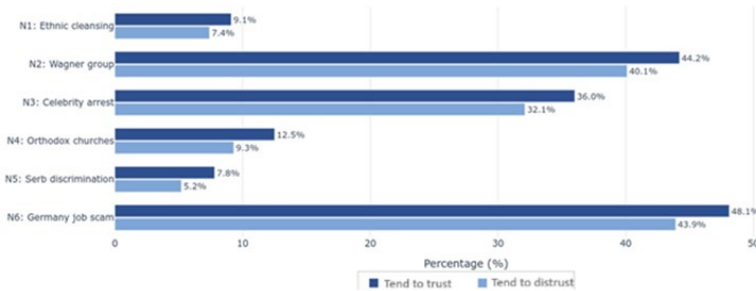
of what constitutes credible information. However, these exploratory linear correlations do not translate into significant categorical differences when the hypothesis is tested using binary trust and belief variables. Accordingly, the chi-square analyses provide no evidence of a robust relationship between media trust and belief in disinformation narratives.

Table 3. Association Between Media Trust and Belief in Disinformation Narratives

| | Tend to trust (5-7) | Tend to distrust (1-4) | χ^2 (df=1) | <i>p</i> |
|----|---------------------|------------------------|-----------------|----------|
| N1 | 9.1% | 7.4% | 0.42 | .517 |
| N2 | 44.2% | 40.1% | 0.81 | .368 |
| N3 | 36.0% | 32.1% | 0.71 | .399 |
| N4 | 12.5% | 9.3% | 1.12 | .290 |
| N5 | 7.8% | 5.2% | 1.01 | .315 |
| N6 | 48.1% | 43.9% | 0.79 | .374 |

Overall, H1 was not supported. Trust in news media does not reliably predict belief in disinformation narratives among respondents in Kosovo. This finding suggests that belief formation may be shaped more by other psychological or contextual factors, such as exposure to misleading content (H3) or ideological congruence with the narrative (H4), than by general levels of trust in traditional media institutions.

Figure 1. Belief in Disinformation by Media Trust Level



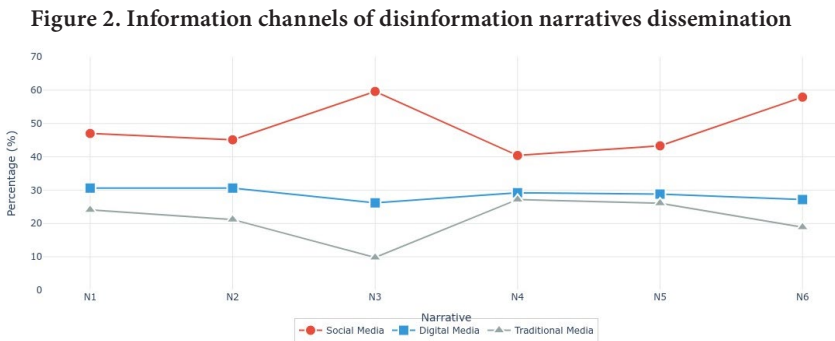
SOCIAL MEDIA’S ROLE IN SPREADING DISINFORMATION (H2)

Despite the data representing a range of different topics, including disinformation, and that we know disinformation can be manifested in various forms and be disseminated through a range of media channels, it is striking that those who use social media to be informed are most likely to find these narratives familiar. Across all the narratives, social media consistently emerges as a primary channel for exposure to these disinformation narratives. This finding indicates

a significant portion of the audience encountered these narratives on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and underscores the potential influence of social media in shaping public perceptions and discussions on various topics.

To test Hypothesis 2, a chi-square test was conducted among respondents who reported prior exposure to each narrative (n = 1,308 exposed responses). Belief was dichotomized (5–8 = believes on 8-point scale), and primary source was categorized as Social Media (Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, etc.), Digital Media (online news portals), or Traditional Media (TV, radio, newspapers).

Figure 2 presents the percentages of each of the six narratives viewed on different channels. On the horizontal axis are the six narratives (1 to 6), while the vertical axis is the percentage of respondents who learned about the story from each source.



As shown in Figure 2, dissemination channels are extremely varied but social media proves most dominant exposure, with a 59.6 percent encounter with the celebrity arrest (N3) and 57.9 percent with the Germany job scam (N6), both non-political and high-salience topics. Geopolitical narratives (N1, N2, N4, N5), in their turn, feature a more balanced pattern of exposure. Television remains relevant as a source of exposure, especially when it comes to political issues, respondents heard the narratives more on TV (13% to 19.9%) than the celebrity arrest (N3 is 5.4%) and work opportunity (N6 is 2.3%). Respondents were exposed to the four political issue narratives somewhat less on social media and found this information via traditional or digital channels.

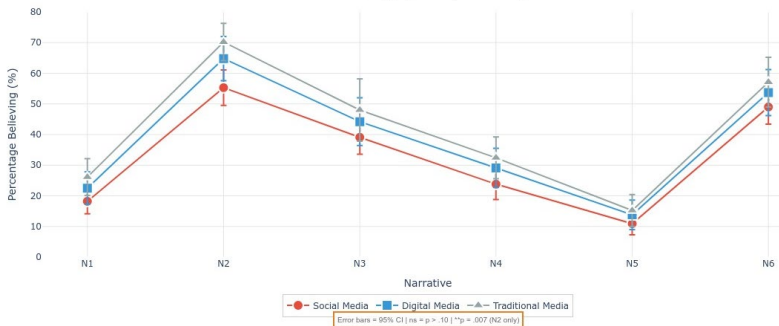
Although social media dominated exposure, the chi-square tests gave no empirical evidence to Hypothesis 2. Table 4 shows belief rates based on source-weighted using the exposure proportions. In five of the six stories (N1, N3-N6), the type of source did not have any relationship with belief (all $p > .34$, Cramer $V < .09$). In the story about the Wagner group (N2), there was a significant correlation but in the opposite direction to the hypothesis, which indicated that social media users were less likely to believe the statement (55.3) than those who used digital (64.8) and traditional media (70.2).

Table 4. Results of chi2 tests, association between primary source of exposure and belief in disinformation narratives (among exposed respondents only)

| N | Topic | Social media | Digital media | Traditional media | Association measures | |
|----|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------|
| | | Believe (Exposure %) | Believe (Exposure %) | Believe (Exposure %) | Cramer's V | p-value |
| N1 | Ethnic cleansing | 18.2% (47.0%) | 22.5% (30.6%) | 26.1% (24.1%) | .091 | .343 |
| N2 | Wagner | 55.3% (45.1%) | 64.8% (30.6%) | 70.2% (21.2%) | .198 | .007 |
| N3 | Celebrities | 39.1% (59.6%) | 44.2% (26.2%) | 48.0% (9.8%) | .088 | .366 |
| N4 | Orthodox churches | 23.8% (40.4%) | 29.1% (29.2%) | 32.4% (27.2%) | .087 | .372 |
| N5 | Serbs discrimination | 10.9% (43.3%) | 13.8% (28.8%) | 15.2% (26.1%) | .074 | .484 |
| N6 | Work in Germany | 49.0% (57.9%) | 53.7% (27.2%) | 57.1% (18.9%) | .082 | .413 |

Figure 3 shows that the Wagner narrative (N2) was the only narrative to display a significant difference across media sources ($\chi^2(1) = 8.21, p = .004$, Cramér's $V = .179$). No other narrative exhibited a significant effect of source.

Figure 3. Belief by Primary News Source (Among Exposed)



Taken together, Figure 3 and Table 4 present consistent evidence that exposure to disinformation and belief are subject to different media dynamics. Although the primary exposure channel, especially in the case of non-political, high-engagement stories (N3 and N6), is social media, it does not determine belief. Indeed, the most geopolitically provocative and broadly shared statement (N2) is believed less by those exposed to the narrative on social media (55.3%) than among users who were exposed via traditional media (70.2%). The lower level of belief might be due to corrective diffusion occurring quickly within social media ecosystems due to peer commentary, algorithmic counter-narratives, or exposure to other perspectives, especially among younger and digitally literate individuals. In Kosovo’s case, social media spreads disinformation

widely, but does not necessarily persuade—and may even foster greater skepticism toward implausible or externally driven claims. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was rejected. Although the majority of narratives failed to demonstrate any substantial connection between news source and belief, the narrative about the Wagner group (N2) reported the reverse influence to the predicted finding: it was respondents who mostly used social media that were less likely to believe the statement than traditional or digital media. The finding indicates that in some high-stakes geopolitical stories, social-media consumers can become more skeptical and less vulnerable.

FREQUENCY OF EXPOSURE AND BELIEVABILITY (H3)

Our data shows that the reach of narratives and the frequency of exposure vary widely across the six pieces of disinformation. Some of the narratives were encountered virtually every day or are similar to highly familiar tropes that circulate. However, we could also suggest that familiarity can also relate to the fact that some topics are of higher interest or significance to respondents, as recall can indicate the salience of a story to the individual. Narrative 6, concerning career prospects in Germany, is the narrative most frequently seen or recalled, perhaps indicating a high level of salience among respondents. Other narratives, such as those about the Russian group “Wagner”, were found to have moderate recall, indicating the level of interest in this individual story could be lower. Familiarity, therefore, reflects not only information circulation but also issue salience and personal relevance within the Kosovo context.

To test H3, chi-square tests were conducted for each narrative (see Table 5), comparing belief rates (5–8 = believes) between respondents who had previously encountered the claim (exposed) and those who had not (not exposed).

Table 5. Results of chi2 tests, association between prior exposure and belief in disinformation narratives

| N | Topic | % Believes (Exposed) | % Believes (Not exposed) | Association measures | |
|----|----------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|---------|
| | | | | Cramer’s V | p-value |
| N1 | Ethnic cleansing | 21.5% | 8.3% | 0.281 | 0.000 |
| N2 | Wagner | 61.8% | 42.4% | 0.570 | 0.000 |
| N3 | Celebrities | 42.5% | 34.4% | 0.352 | 0.000 |
| N4 | Orthodox churches | 27.7% | 11.0% | 0.361 | 0.000 |
| N5 | Serbs discrimination | 12.8% | 6.6% | 0.233 | 0.000 |
| N6 | Work in Germany | 52.7% | 46.2% | 0.332 | 0.000 |

The findings indicate that there is a statistically significant relationship between previous exposure and belief for all six disinformation narratives. The chi-square tests were very significant (all $p < .001$), and the effect sizes (Cramer’s V) were found to be between .233 and .570. This trend shows that recalled exposure is a good predictor of belief, supporting the mere exposure effect, where repeated exposures positively influence perceived credibility despite the implausibility of claims.

The findings are somewhat mixed, with a higher level of belief when recalling exposure (21.5%-12.8%), despite generally a lower baseline of belief levels for some storylines (Ethnic cleansing 8.3%; Serbs discriminating 6.6%). The impact of exposure is significant in other situations, such as the Wagner group in Kosovo (61.8% vs. 42.4%, $V = 0.570$), highlighting how security-related narratives may quickly gain credibility once they start to spread. These results show substantial empirical evidence to support Hypothesis 3. The effects of prior exposure are significant in believing disinformation, as cognitive accounts of familiarity and truth bias expect. This is strongest on the geopolitically charged stories (N2, N4), where repetition can make unrealistic assertions but support polarized identities. Even in the case of less political stories (N3, N6), the exposure-belief relationship is high, that is, repetition, no matter the subject matter, increases credibility.

MODELING BELIEF IN DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES (H4)

Table 6 below shows the only significant correlations between the sociodemographic variables and believing each of the disinformation narratives. For the narrative related to the Russian group, “Wagner”, males are more likely to believe this narrative (.155**), and also the more educated (.112*). In the case of the celebrity narrative, females find this more believable (.150**), and the more educated (.081*), but the latter is statistically weaker.

Table 6. Correlations of sociodemographic data with believability of each narrative

| Narratives | Ethnic cleansing | Wagner | Celebrities | Orthodox churches | Serbs discrimination | Work in Germany |
|------------|------------------|--------|-------------|-------------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| Age | -.152** | .085 | -.013 | .035 | .001 | -.069 |
| Gender | .051 | .155** | -.150** | .031 | .050 | .053 |
| Education | -.008 | .112* | .081* | -.035 | -.052 | .010 |

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

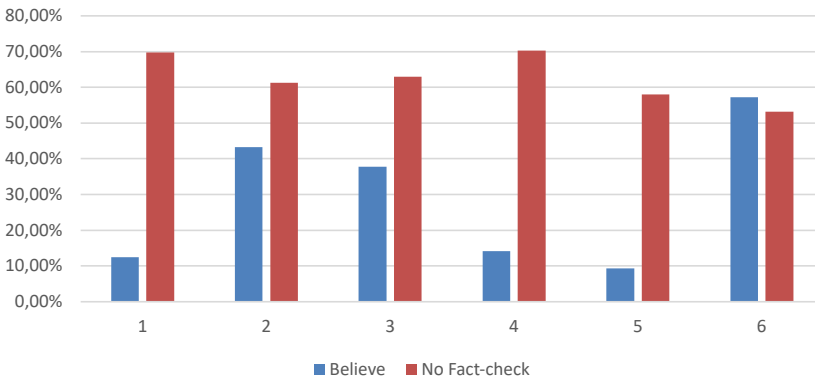
** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

This shows that different forms of disinformation, on different topics, are more or less believable to differing internet users across the Kosovar community. Perhaps they tend to be less likely to believe disinformation about the Serb/

Kosovo tensions unless it is something new and links to a wider context (i.e., the Wagner group), but they can be taken in by celebrity-related disinformation due to its novelty and the globally pervasive interest in celebrity gossip. The premise of inoculation theory is that people will become more resistant to disinformation if they learn narratives are misleading. In the Kosovo context, only a minority of respondents believe the disinformation associated with Kosovo-Serbia relations (N1, N2 & N5); therefore, due to the sheer level of disinformation and its exposure as false by fact-checkers, it seems likely that some Kosovars have built up an innate skepticism of stories that inflame relations with Serbians. If true, then it is positive for this highly contentious political issue if Kosovars have become more resistant to accepting false claims when they see similar stories. For instance, the narrative that the West is supporting Kosovo institutions for the ethnic cleansing of Serbs is believed only by 12.4%, however, exposure can still prove to be significant for the believability of these narratives, suggesting the circulation of disinformation can have an impact on beliefs, and consequently, behavior.

A related problem, which may exacerbate the impact of disinformation, is that Kosovars say they are largely very unlikely to refer to fact-checkers, confirming the findings of previous studies in the region about fact-checkers being ineffective at reaching wider audiences, as often these sources are not visited frequently, if at all. Our data (Figure 4) shows that for most narratives, Kosovars believe the disinformation without referring to any fact-checking systems. This can be explained by confirmation bias as well as selective attention bias. However, while believable and confirming negative attitudes of Kosovars towards Serbia, these narratives may not be seen as consequential or novel and so are unlikely to impact attitudes or behavior. This is relevant when considering how Kosovars view stories about the relations with Serbia. For example, the narrative about the involvement of the Russian paramilitary group, Wagner, was believed by 43.3% of respondents, even though the majority of respondents did not fact-check the story. We surmise that people who have strong pre-existing beliefs that a new war with Serbia is possible, and that Russia will support Serbia over Kosovo, fueled by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, are more inclined to accept narratives that align with their existing view and do not fact-check them. However, greater attention and critical thinking are devoted to narratives that are of immediate consequence. This is quite evident with N6, the narrative related to work opportunities in Germany. A majority of respondents believed it, but some, due perhaps to its relevance, visited a fact-checker to search if it is debunked. Hence, where information may be of benefit to them directly, like N6, they will fact-check it, suggesting that the decision to fact-check might be influenced by the perceived importance of the information and whether it is true.

Figure 4. Percentages of believing and no fact-checking the information



CONCLUSIONS

This study provided insights into the multifaceted nature of information consumption in Kosovo. Through an exploration of six prominent narratives, we show the evidence of how living under a polarized and low-trust society, people learn to live in a complicated information landscape where false information mixes with news.

A key assumption drawn from the data is the substantial potential influence of cognitive biases, including confirmation bias, on people’s inclination to accept disinformation narratives, especially if they are familiar to them. Exposure frequency emerged as the most consistent predictor of belief, confirming that repetition normalizes even implausible claims. People are more inclined to accept some material without giving it critical examination or fact-checking when it supports pre-existing views. This is likely a strong factor in Kosovo, where negative narratives relating to Kosovo–Serbia relations have been circulating for decades. However, our analyses also show that belief is not simply a product of bias or trust—but of repeated exposure. This suggests that familiarity itself can make information appear credible, especially when tied to national identity or geopolitical themes.

The tests of Hypothesis 1 did not find a significant relationship between trust and belief when measured on a categorical scale and showed that media trust in itself does not predict disinformation acceptance. This upholds the fact that in societies where there is low trust, the formation of belief may be significantly influenced by existing cognitive/ideological beliefs rather than institutional confidence. Hypothesis 2, which predicted that users of social media were more likely to believe disinformation, is not supported. Although social media was

the most used source of exposure, it did not have a positive effect on perception. The narrative of social media users having even lower belief than traditional media, as seen in one reported case, the Wagner Group. These results indicate that social media increases exposure but is not likely to persuade. The data show strong support for Hypothesis 3, which assumes that repetition of exposure enhances disinformation belief. The most predictable and strong predictor of belief was exposure frequency. The more someone was exposed to a narrative, whether or not it is factual, the more it seemed to be truthful. Acceptance was often boosted by familiarity as opposed to trust or accuracy. This mechanism supports the existing worldviews and normalizes disinformation in the situation in Kosovo, where ethnicity and politics are historically enshrined. Lastly, Hypothesis 4, showing Kosovars are much more likely to confirm information when it fits with their political worldview, is proved by the findings. The level of fact-checking was also very low, and respondents would only confirm information that would be of interest to them, like the migration or employment opportunities. Verification declined drastically when content conformed to their beliefs. This is an expression of motivated reasoning and confirmation bias, in which the process of fact-checking takes on the quality of an identity-based process, instead of becoming an accuracy-based process.

Our data confirms the theoretical viewpoint of much post-truth literature (Lilleker, 2018; McKay and Tenove, 2021) because it shows that disinformation can influence the thinking of the citizens by involving the use of emotions and the mediation of trust instead of rational thinking. In Kosovo, the dynamics are especially noticeable in the polarized, low-trust society, where the repetition of disinformation narratives, particularly in the context of Kosovo-Serbia relations, intensifies the divisions that were already present, and shapes the way citizens perceive political and social realities. The acknowledgment of the relationship between exposure, belief, and trust in such an environment provides insight into how citizens process information in post-conflict democracies. Finally, the research paper is part of a larger debate on the topic of disinformation resilience, which proposes that enhancing media literacy and critical thinking is crucial not only to Kosovo but to the rest of transitional democracies struggling with the same issues.

Comprehending the complexities of disinformation in Kosovo, including its dissemination, sources, and the impact of cognitive biases, facilitates consideration of more efficacious ways to counteract disinformation and foster an educated, media-literate society. This work, by relating the empirical findings to the larger theoretical paradigm, contributes to the research on the origins of belief in disinformation, at the point of exposure, trust, and motivated cognition, and has implications not only for Kosovo but also for other low-trust, transitional democracies. To increase media and digital literacy in Kosovo, it is important

to implement a multi-level solution as the country is characterized by a polarized media space and institutional mistrust. The involvement of media literacy as a mandatory course from elementary through high schools would equip the young generations with the necessary tools to evaluate sources critically and being able to identify manipulation. For the moment, media literacy is taught in some schools across Kosovo as an elective subject (Jahiri et al., 2024). It can also be important to have civil society organizations and media organizing the public awareness campaigns, community workshops, and journalist training programs that are centered on disinformation identification and countering. Besides, the partnership between educational institutions, fact-checking organizations, and media might serve as a good solution to the existing disparity between the practice of verification and the daily intake of information. With such activities backed by uniform policy-backed public communication strategies, this might slowly foster a more critical and resistant citizenry who may handle the intricate Kosovo information space.

While the present research highlights the specific challenges within the Kosovar information environment, a post-conflict society with low institutional trust and high political polarization, the results, especially the influence of media trust, frequency of exposure, and motivated reasoning in the development of disinformation belief, are not exclusive to Kosovo. They can provide important clues into how citizens of other societies, where there are similar low trust levels and polarized media systems, may react to false information. Therefore, the empirical range of the study is context-dependent, whereas theoretical implications apply to the larger discourse of disinformation resilience in weak democracies and transitional information environments.

Whereas our study provides valuable information, certain limitations should be considered. First, the research is focused on a single country context defined by certain historical and political processes, and thus, the findings are to be applied with caution to other societies that possess different media and institutional trust rates. Second, because the study relied on an online survey, younger and more educated respondents were more accessible and likely overrepresented in the sample. This may have influenced the overall belief and verification patterns observed, particularly if these groups display higher digital literacy or political engagement than the general population. Third, the research has examined six narratives, which, though varying in subject matter and ideological inclination, may not capture the full spectrum of disinformation circulating in the Kosovar media environment. The future studies ought to include larger and more diverse collections of narratives focusing on differing national contexts to determine the broader applicability and robustness of the results. These limitations can be addressed in future studies by using longitudinal designs, experimental manipulations, or cross-country comparisons to test more fully the results found

here. Regardless of these limitations, the current results provide useful insights regarding how people determine credibility when exposed to disinformation in a low-trust and post-conflict information environment.

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