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Perceptions of misinformation salience: a cross-country comparison of estimations of misinformation prevalence and third-person perceptions

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ABSTRACT

Against the backdrop of mounting concerns about misinformation's destabilizing impact paired with growing distrust in established news, this study explores how people estimate misinformation salience in their news environment when engaging in comparative risk assessment with other countries. The study derives from two opposite lines of reasoning on risk perceptions: While research indicating the relative scarcity of misinformation might imply an overestimation of its significance within people's own information environments, the literature on third-person perceptions could counteract this perspective, suggesting a tendency toward underestimating the relative personal risk of misinformation exposure. A survey in seven countries ($N = 2,979$; the USA, the UK, The Netherlands, Germany, France, Poland, India) showed how perceptions of misinformation salience are not characterized by a systematic underestimation of relative personal risks, but rather reflect a general concern regarding news landscapes being undermined by misinformation. These findings highlight the importance of understanding and studying how audiences themselves make sense of misinformation salience, as these perceptions determine how people navigate a news environment that is perceived to be disrupted by the omnipresence of misinformation.



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Misinformation, characterized as a potentially pervasive threat to our information landscape and democratic fabric, has ignited concern among societies across the world (Pennycook et al., 2021). The omnipresence of misinformation in public and media discourse (Van Duyn & Collier, 2019) accentuates its status as a conspicuously perceived risk, capable of potentially reshaping individuals' cognitive processing and information assessment. This significance is further underscored by the contemporary challenge individuals face in distinguishing 'fake' from 'real' news (Luo et al., 2022). Therefore, citizens' perceptual level of misinformation as a prevailing risk becomes an important study

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object to understand how audience navigate and evaluate their news environments, especially since the perceived prevalence of misinformation is argued to not correspond with its actual proportion in online newsfeeds (Knuutila et al., 2022). Inaccurate assessments of misinformation salience, both in terms of underestimation or overestimation of its magnitude, can engender distorted risk assessments. Rather than actual numbers on the frequency of misinformation exposure, it might be people's subjective assessment of misinformation prevalence that shapes their evaluation of the dissemination of information, including reliable news (van der Meer, Hameleers, et al., 2023).

A rich body of research already provides valuable insights into how audiences respond to misinformation exposure, studying people's subjective risk perceptions regarding misinformation salience might provide a next step in understanding how they navigate their news environment. In general, people's formation of risk perceptions regarding unfavorable outcomes can stem from a biased or heuristic assessment instead of a systematic and elaborate risk estimation (Weinstein & Klein, 1996). The same could happen for the assessment of risk associated with encountering misinformation. Biased risk estimations can manifest in dual directions (Rothman et al., 1996), leading to either an underestimation or overestimation of personal threats. In the realm of misinformation, we converge two strands of research that diverge in their indications of subjective risk assessment, with the objective of offering novel insights into how citizens estimate the salience of misinformation within their personal contexts.

On the one hand, a prominent distortion within individuals' risk evaluations pertains to the consistent underestimation of personally relevant risks. The concept of third-person perceptions refers to perceiving a diminished probability of unfavorable impacts from media content on oneself in comparison to others (Davison, 1983). This tendency has similarly been related to citizens' assessments of susceptibility to misinformation (Jang & Kim, 2018; van der Meer, Brosius, et al., 2023). This phenomenon suggests a potential inclination among citizens to underestimate the salience of misinformation within the information environment that holds personal relevance to them.

On the other hand, despite the potentially detrimental implications of misinformation, research has indicated that false information constitutes often less than 1% of individuals' overall news consumption (Acerbi et al., 2022; Allen et al., 2020; Grinberg et al., 2019). These observed figures, suggest the existence of a discrepancy between perceived risks of audiences and scholarly communities. The finding that more than half of all citizens across the globe are (very) concerned about misinformation (Newman et al., 2023), might, for example, be driven by elites warning for the spread of misinformation, as well as weaponized accusations of 'fake news' (e.g., Egelhofer et al., 2022). Indeed, elite discourse about fake news (from journalists, political representatives, and activists) is found to lower citizens' media trust and accuracy of identifying real news (Van Duyn & Collier, 2019). This discrepancy may suggest that individuals tend to overestimate the prevalence of misinformation within their information environment, subsequently exaggerating the risk of being misinformed.

The contrasting trends as addressed above underscore the significance of examining the dissimilar directions that can potentially characterize citizens' risk assessments regarding misinformation salience. This survey study therefore aims to answer: How do citizens estimate the relative salience of misinformation in the news environment personally relevant to them? Investigating this query provides a comprehensive lens of

citizens' subjective perceptions regarding their comparative assessment of misinformation prevalence. Studying perceptions across various countries allows us to explore how citizens subjectively assess their likelihood of being exposed to misinformation relative to other contexts geographically and culturally closer or further away. In a seven-country survey, we ask respondents to estimate the percentage of news that contains misinformation for their national news environment (i.e., the information environment personally relevant to them) and the environment of the other six countries in the study. An own-versus-other-country asymmetric assessment can shed light on how citizens' risk estimation is formed in a comparative matter. Relative higher or lower estimates of misinformation within one's national news environment can hint toward an over- or underestimation of risk, providing a first step in understanding how and in what direction misinformation perceptions can potentially be biased.

This study additionally explores how political and media distrusts drive the direction of misinformation perceptions. Since extant research links distrust in both institutes to misinformation, our survey incorporates questions regarding people's media cynicism and political skepticism to test these variables association with respondents' misinformation estimation for their own country and other countries. Accordingly, this study aims to further unravel what primarily underlies estimates of the quality of different information environments when potentially little concrete knowledge and experience is available regarding misinformation salience in other contexts beyond those personally relevant (i.e., national context). These insights might indicate a more overarching assessment of people's information environment that is either more embedded in trust in the media or political system.

Theoretical framework

Misinformation perceptions

In this paper, we understand mis- and disinformation as an umbrella term for false information that is not based on relevant expert knowledge or evidence (Vraga & Bode, 2020). In extant literature, a distinction is often made between unintentional and intentional deception. Disinformation is defined as false information that is created with the intention to manipulate or deceive, which can be done by, for example, the fabrication or decontextualization of information (Freelon & Wells, 2020). Compared to disinformation, misinformation is often used for information that (later) turns out to be false but never had the intention to mislead, this could thus also be honest mistakes that have no intention to mislead (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). The intention to mislead cannot always be crystalized in the absence of a full understanding of the context. In general, mis- and disinformation capture the spread of inaccurate information, which can potentially deceive or mislead people. Various empirical studies have documented how false information can lead to consequential misunderstanding which are not always easy to correct (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). In the remainder of the article, we use the term *misinformation* as an overarching concept that refers to false information and thus entails both intentionally and unintentionally spreading inaccurate information.

The assessment of information veracity, and thus the detection of misinformation, is not a straightforward task for citizens (Luo et al., 2022). For example, not every

piece of information comes with independent fact-checks, sometimes insufficient information is available for verification or falsification, initially accepted claims later turn out to be (partly) false, and opinion pieces, satire, or other less factual formats fall outside the strict labels of false versus accurate information. In that sense, misinformation prevalence lies partly in the eye of the beholder when conclusive evidence of its salience is absent. In addition, misinformation may use similar argument structures, expert references, and claims of objectivity as real news, which makes it difficult for citizens to assess the veracity of information based on claims of objectivity (Hameleers & Yekta, 2023). Especially in an overburdened online information setting where gatekeeping and watchdog roles of journalism are not present at all times, multiple truth claims on the same issues may compete for the audience's attention (Waisbord, 2018).

In this information context, it is not always evident what constitutes false or inaccurate information. Therefore, research should not only focus on to what extent misinformation is omnipresent in people's media diets and to what extent citizens are misled by false information. A growing body of experimental research has already provided valuable insights into how people respond to misinformation exposure. As a next step, studying people's risk perceptions of being misled might play an important role in understanding how they navigate their news environment. As such, perceiving misinformation as a prominent threat may result in a general predisposition regarding how audiences consume news and enter the process of assessing the veracity of each piece of information they encounter. Consequentially, it is essential to study misinformation and its omnipresence on the perceptual level, taking the context of subjective distrust, uncertainty, and risk perceptions into account. Citizens' mere perception of high or low misinformation prevalence, independent of real trends of misinformation spread, might determine how they navigate their information environment. In other words, no real numbers on the frequency of misinformation exposure, but people's subjective assessment of misinformation prevalence might determine if they, for example, have a healthy critical attitude toward information they encounter or rather tend to be cynical toward all information out of fear of being deceived.

Yet, it can be expected that the estimated and real risks of misinformation depend on a country's context, which underscores the need to conduct comparative research on the perceived prevalence of misinformation. In line with varying levels of vulnerability to the consequences of misinformation identified across different democracies (Humprecht et al., 2020), there may be different country-level factors that impact estimates of misinformation. Specifically, based on the 2023 Digital News Report by Reuters (Newman et al., 2023), it can be concluded that in some countries included in this survey, such as the Netherlands, people are less concerned about distinguishing between fake and real information online (30%). This increases dramatically for countries that are less resilient to misinformation, such as the US (64%), the UK (58%), and France (62%). Given that more polarized settings, such as the US or the UK, offer a more favorable opportunity structure for the dissemination of misinformation than less polarized and more trusting settings such as the Netherlands or Germany, it is important to study how citizens across these different settings arrive at (dis)proportionate estimates of the influence of misinformation in their own and other countries.

Subjective risk assessment

The estimation of misinformation salience in one's information environment can be understood as an assessment of the risk of being misinformed. For that reason, the current study relies on the literature of risk assessment to better understand misinformation perceptions. Important to note here is that risk perceptions are unlikely to be based on objective measures or rational assessments and should rather be seen as subjective constructs, which in turn are found to be strong predictors of risk-related behavior (Rittichainuwat et al., 2018). The subjective character of risk estimation leads to such processes being subject to systematic biases (Masiero et al., 2018). The question central to our empirical endeavor is whether certain biases also drive citizens' estimation of misinformation salience. The concept of bias is, however, a complex phenomenon to study here given that no clear base line of the actual presence of misinformation—i.e., percentage of news in any given information environment that is false—exists to compare perceptions with. In the absence of objective indicators informing risk assessments, research studying subjective risk perceptions, commonly tests perceived personal vulnerability by surveying individuals about how they assess their personal risk relative to that of others. Accordingly, the main aim here is to understand if citizens rate misinformation salience higher or lower in the news environment relevant to them (i.e., their national news environment) compared to that of others unlike them (i.e., news environment from other countries at a higher geographical or cultural distance).

In their risk assessment, people have a tendency to compare their personal vulnerability to that of others (Weinstein & Klein, 1996). In this comparative process, people are more likely to be overconfident and estimate themselves as less vulnerable to risk compared to others. This so-called optimistic bias (Weinstein, 1980) can be defined as a psychological predisposition where individuals tend to believe they are less susceptible to encountering negative outcomes and events while simultaneously deeming themselves more likely to experience positive outcomes than others (Gouveia & Clarke, 2001). This bias does not mean a complete disregard for personal risk but rather a failure to perceive risk as personally relevant when comparing one's own versus others' susceptibility to harm (Bränström et al., 2006). Such biased perceptions can serve a functional purpose by easing anxiety and bolstering perceived control (Taylor & Brown, 1988). However, such perceived invulnerability might undermine individuals' motivation to adopt protective behaviors (Cho et al., 2013).

In the context of media exposure and information processing, the concept of third-person perception has been introduced as a related phenomenon to optimistic bias (but see also Salwen & Dupagne, 2003). The third-person perception, notably, involves underestimating (undesired) media effects on oneself and overestimating these effects on others (Davison, 1983) and have been found to manifest across various media contexts (e.g., Tsay-Vogel, 2016). This phenomenon primarily arises from self-motivated social desirability, where individuals downplay their vulnerability to media influences to distance themselves from others who are influenced (social-distance corollary; Davison, 1983).

Extant research has also observed third-person perceptions in connection to misinformation. Existing studies have indeed observed that individuals tend to think that fake news affects others more significantly than themselves (Jang & Kim, 2018), also for

misinformation on COVID-19 (Liu & Huang, 2020). Additionally, consistent evidence was found across four different countries (the USA, the UK, the Netherlands, and Germany) for distorted self-other asymmetry assessment where respondents estimated their personal influence of COVID-19-related misinformation to be lower for themselves when comparing themselves to others (van der Meer, Brosius, et al., 2023).

The studies above primarily address the individual-level likelihood of being influenced by misinformation, not the extent to which misinformation is generally salient. This general salience refers more to an indirect or overall perception of misinformation as an underlying threat that citizens take into account when navigating their information environment. Rather than the actual prevalence of misinformation, these subjective evaluations of one's news environment can distort people's acceptance of credible information (van der Meer, Hameleers, et al., 2023), which can become problematic when estimated salience is based on biased assessments. Thus, while extant research shows that on the individual level, people perceive themselves to be less vulnerable to misinformation, it remains unknown whether the biasing role of the third-person perception also applies on an aggregated level, where people compare their national news environment with that of others from different nations.

Two contradictory lines of argumentation can be brought forward here. Firstly, assessing salience on the level of one's information environment—here defined as the prevalence of misinformation in online and offline news in one's own country—might follow the same process as third-person perceptions—i.e., perceiving the national news environment as less disrupted by misinformation compared to that of other countries. When individuals engage in cross-country comparisons between their own nation and others, they might persist in seeking distance from countries they perceive as more likely to be susceptible to the undesired flooding of misinformation. Previous research has shown how the perceived biases in media are related to people's national identities (Golan et al., 2021). Yet, it is unknown if these individual-level egocentric rationales may potentially be less persistent in such assessment processes on the level where people assess the information climate of their country.

Secondly, recent empirical research hints that overall exposure to misinformation might be overestimated. Studies consistently show a low base rate of online misinformation consumption in both the United States and Europe (Acerbi et al., 2022). For example, in the United States, 0.7% to 6% of online news media consumption is considered misinformation (Grinberg et al., 2019; Guess et al., 2020; Osmundsen et al., 2021) and 0.15% of people's overall media exposure (Allen et al., 2020). Similar figures are observed in European countries: Germany 1% France 4% to 5%, UK 0.1% (Acerbi et al., 2022). Although some contexts, such as visual information on Facebook, may be more vulnerable to misinformation (Yang et al., 2023), it can be concluded that the majority of information people are exposed to is accurate. Despite its allegedly limited presence in citizens' average media consumption, misinformation is a highly salient topic in public discussion, and citizens' concerns about misinformation can be driven by warnings by politicians and media misinformation (Van Duyn & Collier, 2019). News channels and online discussions repeatedly discuss misinformation as a significant threat to different layers of society, potentially creating a discrepancy between citizens' risk perceptions and scholars' findings in terms of audiences' limited misinformation consumption. With the threat of misinformation so salient on the public and media

agenda, citizens might estimate the chances of the spread of misinformation in their news environment as disproportionately high.

To explore the comparative assessment of the subjective risk of misinformation exposure, we ask if perceptions of country-level misinformation salience are likely to be driven by a third-person mechanism or whether citizens are more likely to estimate salience relatively higher for their own country:

RQ1: Are citizens more likely to estimate misinformation salience higher in other countries compared to their own country? In other words, is the estimated salience of misinformation subject to third-person perceptions?

To further understand potential third-person perceptions comparatively, we ask whether these comparative misinformation salience perceptions show different patterns across countries. For example, it could be possible that countries geographically and culturally closer to one's own country are perceived as more similar in salience. Far-away countries are generally more unfamiliar to people and might therefore be more difficult to assess, which could increase biased estimations. Furthermore, countries that are characterized by, for example, lower levels of press freedom and more polarization (Humprecht et al., 2020), might be perceived, by both its own citizens and those of other countries, as more susceptible to the spread of false information than others. The second research question reads as following:

RQ2: How do third-person perceptions regarding misinformation salience differ per country?

Media and political distrust

As a next step, this study aims to delve into the intricate interplay between misinformation perceptions and the general levels of (dis)trust people hold toward the (i) media and (ii) politics as separate institutes. This study aims to explore if misinformation perceptions rather coincide with distrust in the media or political system. The concept of trust is central to the literature on misinformation. Misinformation is often considered to coexist with generalized mistrust in politics (Farkas & Schou, 2018). Additionally, those who actively question mainstream media tend to be more likely to label information as misinformation (Humprecht et al., 2020). A recent audience-focused study showed how misinformation perceptions are inherently related to the evaluation of the media and political realm (Kyriakidou et al., 2023). Firstly, these authors found, with the use of focus groups, that news consumers understood misinformation as a taken-for-granted part of daily encounters with news. This assessment was based on both the systematic limitations that come with news production and their perceptions regarding the nature of the relationship between journalism and politics. Secondly, political actors were described as often relying on misinformation in their communication. Politics' inherent link with misinformation did not only relate to ostensible lies but also to discreet manipulation, political spin, failing to give clear information. In sum, audiences understand misinformation occurrence as attributed to the inherent journalistic biases and the nature of contemporary politics (Kyriakidou et al., 2023).

Despite the association observed by extensive research between disinformation's effect and trust in the media or politics, we lack research that has explored this relationship in the context of third-person media perceptions. In general, people's lack of trust in these

knowledge disseminators may be associated with higher perceptions of the overall risk of encountering misinformation. After all, when the media or politicians cannot be trusted to inform the public in an honest and accurate manner, people may associate their information environment with high levels of misinformation (e.g., Hameleers et al., 2020). Accordingly, in the context of third-person perceptions: higher levels of distrust amongst citizens may be a predictor of higher estimation of misinformation salience in one's own information environment rather than in that of others. On the contrary, those with higher levels of distrust may perceive that misinformation may be all around, believing that most others face this threat. Being aware of the untrustworthiness of the media and political actors may give people the feeling they are equipped to circumvent high-risk contexts of misinformation.

A cross-country comparison promises unique insights into the determinants shaping varying levels of misinformation perception across countries. Potentially diverse patterns will emerge, delineating countries offering either a resilient or vulnerable context for the proliferation of misinformation (Humprecht et al., 2020). For instance, countries entrenched in two-party political systems and challenged by more pronounced political divisions might exhibit a stronger correlation between overall trust in the political system and the estimation of misinformation. Yet, in countries where the media landscape is less diverse and seems more aligned with specific political ideologies, lower trust in the media may be closely associated with higher levels of misinformation perception. Additionally, in settings where trust in the media or press freedom is reported as relatively low (Newman et al., 2023), perceptions of misinformation could be more strongly linked to trust in media sources. Acknowledging that misinformation perceptions may be a multifaceted phenomenon, the inclusion of these media and political variables in tandem is aimed to offer insights into variations in misinformation perceptions on the country level. We therefore pose the following research:

RQ3. How are third-person perceptions regarding misinformation across countries related to media and political trust perceptions?

Method

To understand how citizens perceive misinformation salience in their own and other countries, we rely on an original survey study conducted in seven countries. The following countries were included in the survey: US, UK, The Netherlands, Germany, France, Poland, and India. With this sample, we aimed for a distribution across western, southern, and eastern European countries and included the US as one of the most central countries to the public debate and academic research on misinformation, and India as a culturally and geographically more distant country from the global south and the Asian continent. The included countries also vary in the extent to which they offer a resilient or vulnerable context for misinformation (see Humprecht et al., 2020). These different countries are selected to get a wider range of nations which allows a richer exploration of differences in misinformation perceptions. For example, countries like the US, India, and the UK, could be seen as more polarized settings where trust in the media is also relatively low (Newman et al., 2023), compared to Western European settings, such as The Netherlands and Germany. Moreover, it could be that France—being characterized by higher distrust in

knowledge dissemination—may be more vulnerable to misinformation perceptions than other European countries (also see Hameleers et al., 2022). Poland, in turn, may be more threatened by lower levels of press freedom and higher levels of populist success—making it a lower resilient context (Humphrecht et al., 2020). Spanning the Global North and South, as well as a diversity of countries when it comes to expected resilience to misinformation, we aim to explore how consistent third-person risk perceptions are across different settings. The survey was pre-registered here.

Sample

For data collection, we rely on the services of the international panel company Kantar. Kantar has pools of respondents in all the countries included in this study. To ensure the diversity of the sample composition and to approach national representativeness, we relied on quota sampling. Based on country-specific census data provided by the panel company, soft quotas were incorporated for age, gender, and education for each country individually. The survey was professionally translated from English to the respective languages of each country, only the Indian survey was distributed in English given the large English-speaking population in India. Speeding respondents were excluded from the survey and those who failed an attention check early in the survey received a warning message where they were asked to pay close attention to the remainder of the survey. To determine whether respondents were speeding, we calculated the median response time (16,47 min) and removed respondents who completed the entire survey below 6.60 min (lower 40% of the median). In total, 2,979 respondents were completely the survey: US (N = 545), UK (N = 411), The Netherlands (N = 393), Germany (N = 394), France (N = 389), Poland (N = 408), and India (N = 439). The average age of participants was 48.31 (SD = 17.00), of which 55% identified as female, 44% as male, and 1% as other, the distribution across education was as follows: 31% low, 38% medium, and 31% high.

Perception of misinformation salience

As the main factor central to this paper, we are interested in how respondents assess the risk of being misinformed in the news environment directly relevant to them—i.e., misinformation salience in their own country. Respondents were asked to make an estimation of the percentage (0-100) of the news (both online and offline) that consists of misinformation. Here, in line with the definition followed in this paper, misinformation was defined in the survey for the participants to read as false or deceptive information, also known as fake news. We kept the description as general and broad as possible to avoid priming more specific forms of deception, ensuring that we measured respondents' personal opinions. Since this paper aims to understand citizens' comparative assessment, we did not only ask them to rate misinformation salience for their own country, but also for the other six countries involved in the study.

Media and political distrust

Media trust was measured by asking four items on a 7-point Likert scale regarding how respondents distrust the media and are cynical toward media content (Quiring et al.,

2021) ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 1.69$, Cronbach Alpha's = .93). To capture lack of trust in the political system, we provided respondents with statements about how distrusting and skeptical they are regarding politics (Bos et al., 2013) ($M = 4.97$, $SD = 1.45$, Cronbach Alpha's = .86). Appendix 1 shows the mean scores for media and political distrust per country and Appendix 2 details the survey items including the demographic items.

Results

Third person effects of perceived misinformation's salience

RQ1 aimed to assess the perceived salience of misinformation in participants' own country versus other countries. To test this, we constructed a variable that measured respondents' estimation of their own country's general proportion of misinformation and a mean score of all the other six countries they rated (more detailed country-level differences are discussed under RQ2). On average, respondents estimated that 53.39 ($SD = 26.47$) percent of online and offline news in their own country consists of misinformation. This estimation suggests that participants perceive that half of the news in the news environment relevant to them consists of misinformation, which hints at a structural overestimation. Other countries' perceived misinformation salience was, on average, estimated to be 47.76% ($SD = 19.43$). Based on a paired-sample t-test, respondents' estimation of misinformation salience in their own country was significantly lower than their estimation of other countries ($t = 13.603$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = .265$). This difference suggests that misinformation salience on the country level is not subject to third-person perceptions, but rather the other way around: on the aggregated level, people are more likely to perceive their own media environment to be characterized by more misinformation than the news media environment of people in other countries.

RQ2 further asked about the self-other country asymmetries regarding misinformation salience. Figure 1 shows the average scores of respondents' estimation of misinformation salience in their own country versus the other countries separately for each country. The variable 'other countries' is again measured as the average score of respondents' estimation of the percentage of misinformation in all the countries combined, excluding their own country. Inspecting Figure 1 highlights how especially in the US ($M_{diff} = 16.3$), India ($M_{diff} = 12.6$), and Poland ($M_{diff} = 8.9$), misinformation is estimated significantly higher in one's own country than in the other countries. For the other countries, we see that their estimations do not differ significantly between their own and the average of the other countries.

Figure 2 further splits up the country estimations for all individual countries. The bar charts show the estimation across countries for respondents for each country included in the survey. The grey bars indicate the estimation of misinformation's salience in the participants' own country. The figures show that the included Western European countries perceive their own country to be equally threatened by misinformation as other countries in the same region. Hence, across the countries Germany, France, and The Netherlands, no significant differences arise in the estimates of misinformation salience within the cluster of Western European countries. Respondents from the UK, however, estimate the misinformation salience of their own country similar to that in India and Poland,

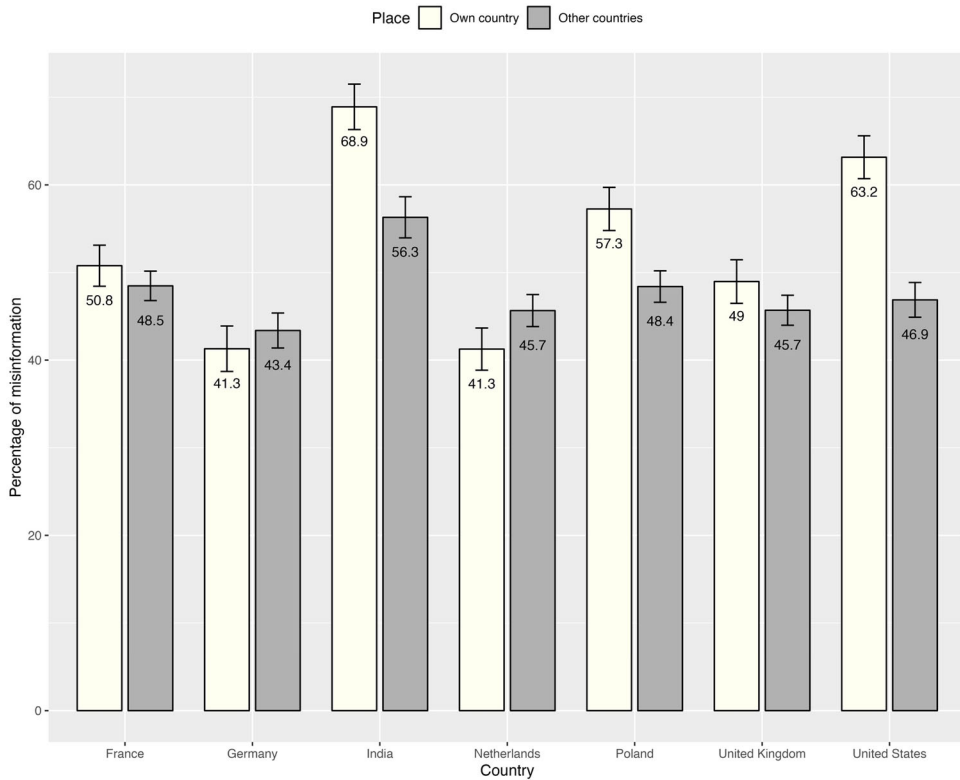


Figure 1. Estimation of misinformation salience in own country and the other countries.

and they rate the threat as significantly higher than in the other Western European countries. Yet, the US is still rated as more likely to be characterized by misinformation than the UK. Thus, in some cases, a third-person perception can be identified, where Western European countries perceived their countries to be less threatened by misinformation than countries potentially less resilient to misinformation threat. Individuals from these countries (i.e., Germany and The Netherlands), seem to generally estimate the block of Western-European countries as less threatened by misinformation than countries at a higher geographical or cultural distance (i.e., India and US, and Poland as well for respondents from the Netherlands). On the contrary, the countries US, India, and Poland showed a different pattern. In these three countries, respondents estimated the salience of misinformation in their own country was significantly higher than in all the other countries.

Misinformation perception and distrust

RQ3 asked whether misinformation salience perceptions across countries are rather driven by media or political distrust. To answer this RQ, we ran different OLS regression models per country, relating media and political distrust to three dependent variables: (i) respondents' estimation of misinformation in their own country (Figure 3), (ii) respondents' estimation of misinformation in the other countries (Figure 4), and (iii) a

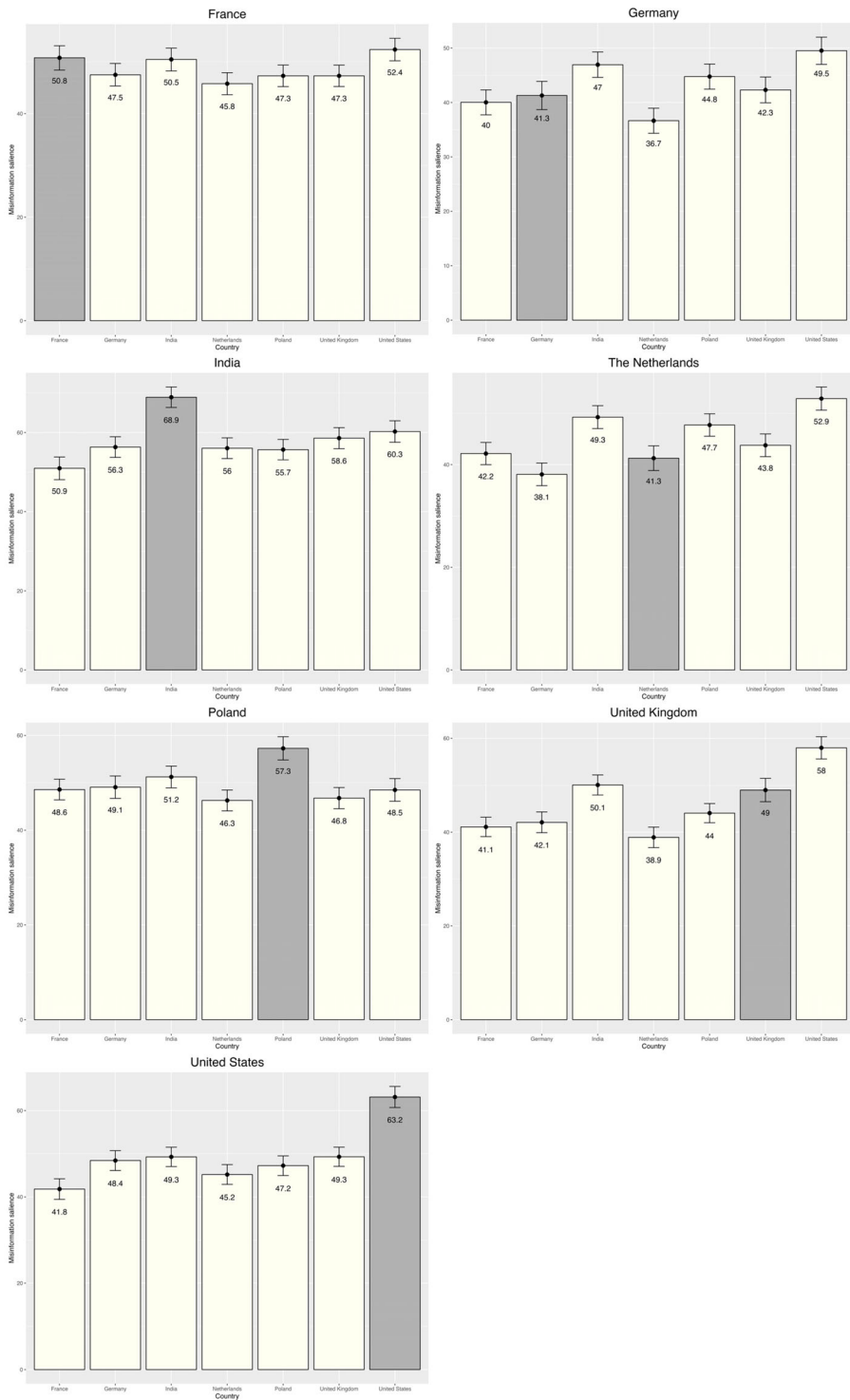


Figure 2. Estimations of information salience across countries per country.

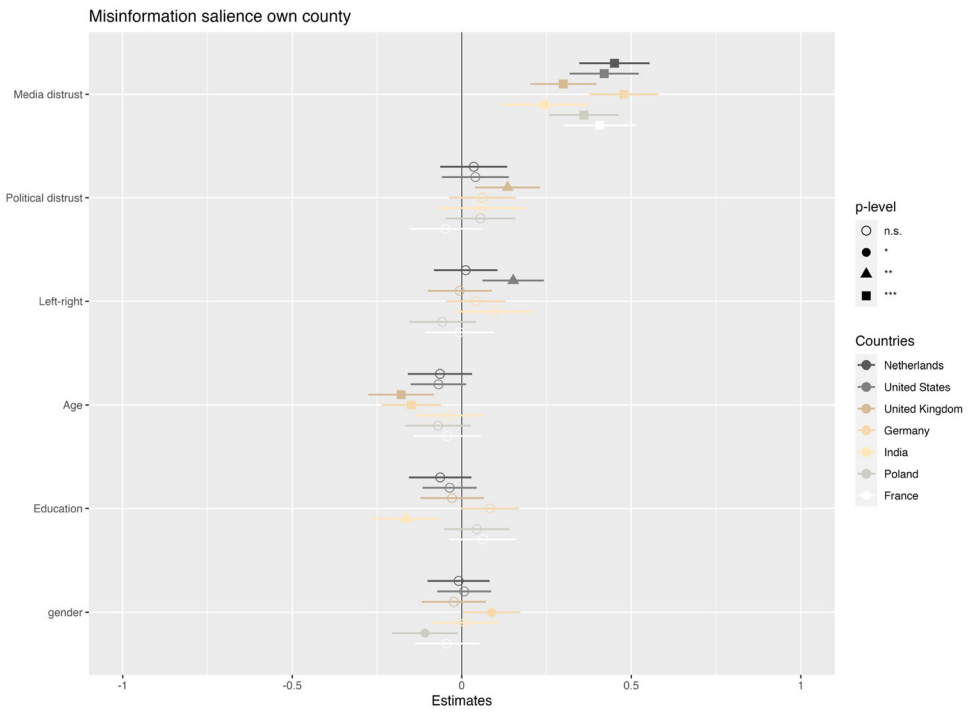


Figure 3. Standardized regression estimates predicting misinformation salience in people’s own country.

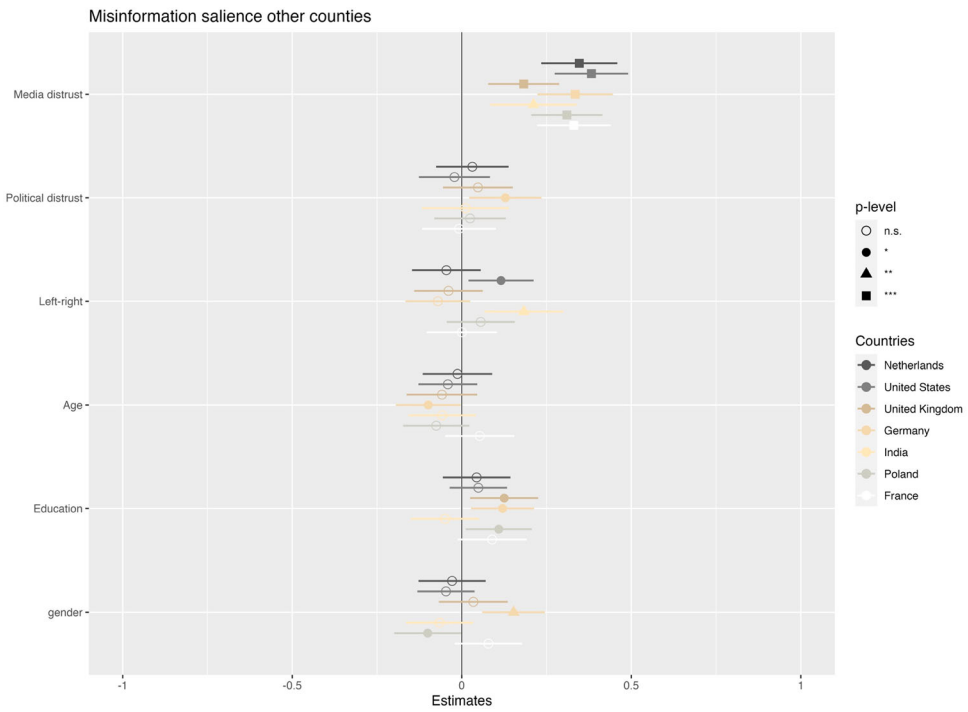


Figure 4. Standardized regression estimates predicting misinformation salience in the other countries.

third-person score (subtracting average score for other countries from own country) (Figure 5). In Appendix 3 the regression models with unstandardized estimates are shown. Figures 3 shows how, across the countries, it is primarily media distrust that is significantly related to perceived misinformation salience in one own country, higher distrust relates to higher estimations of misinformation. Only for the US, the relation between political distrust and misinformation salience was significant. Looking at the estimation for other countries (Figure 4), a similar picture arises. For all countries the association with media distrust is significant, only political distrust is significant for German respondents. Finally, the third-person scores (Figure 5) are negatively associated with media distrust, except for the US and India, indicating that misinformation salience in these countries is estimated as relatively lower in one's own country when media distrust is high. Only in the US, the third-person score is negatively associated with political distrust.

Discussion

Across the globe, more than half of the population is concerned about online misinformation and their ability to detect it (Newman et al., 2023). Despite the salience of risk perceptions relating to misinformation, many empirical studies across the globe conclude that misinformation may make up less only a small portion of people's online media diets (Acerbi et al., 2022). Against the background that perceived misinformation may be informed by biases and not proportional to its actual risks (Knuutila et al., 2022), and research that indicates that warning about the threats of misinformation may lower

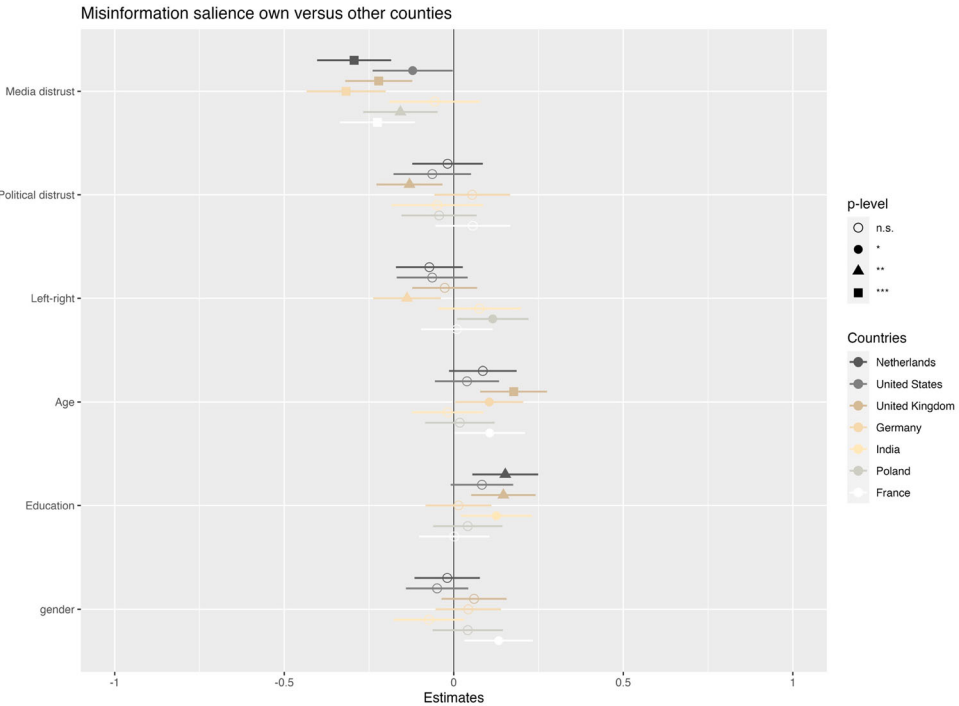


Figure 5. Standardized regression estimates predicting third-person perceptions (own minus other countries salience).

trust in accurate information (van der Meer, Hameleers, et al., 2023), this study relied on a comparative survey study in seven countries to explore risk perceptions related to misinformation exposure, with a specific focus on third-person effects. As a major theoretical contribution to existing audience-centered approaches (e.g., Osman et al., 2022), we assessed how risk perceptions of misinformation's salience are not made in isolation but as a relative assessment in the context of other countries.

Our main findings indicate that citizens across the globe perceive misinformation to be very salient: They contend that about half of all the news available online and offline contains misinformation, which is a substantially higher rate than suggested by recent research (see Acerbi et al., 2022 for an overview). These findings suggest a potential overestimation of misinformation as a threat in one's own news environment as well as that of others. Even in light of potential shortcomings of existing research in mapping the scope of misinformation, we do believe that these high-risk perceptions related to people's news environment are inflated, and supportive of disproportionate risk perception on both the first and third-person level. This relatively pronounced risk perception corresponds with survey research emphasizing that people find it difficult to determine what is true and what is false online (Newman et al., 2023). Our findings also lend support for a deception bias in information processing. In contrast to the truth-default-theory postulating that citizens are more likely to rate incoming information rather as honest than as dishonest (Levine, 2014), our findings suggest that people may be disproportionately concerned about deceptive and false information in their media ecology. These findings contribute to our understanding of how the perceptual level of misinformation can be an inaccurate reflection of reality and therefore might distort how people evaluate the credibility of information and navigate their news environment.

We did find relevant cross-country differences in the perceived threat of misinformation. Generally, people in contexts that arguably offer a more vulnerable setting for misinformation due to high levels of polarization and (media) distrust (Humphrecht et al., 2020), also perceive that misinformation makes up a larger proportion of their news environment. Specifically, participants in Western European countries where polarization is relatively lower and media freedom and trust higher arrive at lower estimates than participants in more polarized or less free settings (i.e., India and the USA). When testing for third-person perception, we found little evidence for such underestimations of personal risk. For countries that could be identified as less resilient regarding the impact and prevalence of misinformation based on the study of Humphrecht et al. (2020) (i.e., US, Poland, India), respondents estimated that their own country was more at risk than other countries, showing a pattern that contradicts third-person perceptions. For the other countries, they rather estimated the misinformation salience as similar to their own country. Yet, when looking at the differences across individual countries, some third-person perception can be identified, where some Western European countries (Germany and the Netherlands) perceived their countries to be less threatened by misinformation than countries potentially less resilient to misinformation threat (i.e., Poland, India, the USA). Yet, these estimations might not be based on biased risk assessment but rather an accurate estimation of which countries are truly more at risk. Overall, this study contributes to the literature on third-person perceptions, by exploring people's assessment of comparative risk on the level of the entire news environment. While third-person perceptions have been observed on the individual level when asked whether others are more susceptible to misinformation effects (Jang & Kim, 2018), these comparative underestimations

seem less prominent when people engage in comparison across country level or media landscapes. Perception of misinformation salience seems to not be characterized by a systematic underestimation of personal risks but rather reflects a general concern regarding news landscapes being undermined by misinformation.

When relating political and media distrust to the perception of misinformation salience, media trust was found to mainly relate to these perceptions of salience. Misinformation perceptions seem to be inherent to how media are evaluated. It thus seems to be an overarching assessment of the news environment, where misinformation perception and distrust align, rather than a problem that is inherent to perceived political malfunctioning. When people are more cynical and distrusting toward media, we observed that this is related to higher concerns about misinformation in people's own country and in other countries. Those who reported having higher levels of distrust in the media were also less likely to assess their news environment as more flooded with misinformation compared to other countries (i.e., third-person perception).

The high perceptions of misinformation salience in people's news environment highlight the importance of further consider people's subjective perceptions in the context of misinformation. These perceptions seem to be uniquely complex since they do not follow commonly found patterns of relatively underestimation of personal risk when engaging in comparative risk assessments. Previous audience-centered approaches already showed how audiences' struggle with defining the scope of misinformation. Crucially, as audiences may classify different forms of problematic information as misinformation, whilst disagreeing on what deception and facticity imply, they may conflate misinformation with other forms of biased information. For example, Osman et al. (2022) conclude that audiences find it difficult to agree on the defining features of misinformation. Although most people agree that deception is a defining feature of disinformation, they apply a much broader understanding of what deception entails than scholarly definitions. In line with this, Kyriakidou et al. (2023) showed how audiences might hold a broader and more fluid definition of misinformation that encompasses more than only false and deceptive information. If phenomena like media bias, misrepresented information, and sensationalism are understood to fall under the umbrella of misinformation, the observed high misinformation perceptions among news users might be more accurate and less alarming. Yet, seeing also more minor flaws in news processes (e.g., negativity bias) as part of misinformation, might make people disproportionately skeptical to the quality and distortion of news. Especially the link between media distrust and misinformation might emphasize that people hold more overarching (dis)trust perceptions regarding their entire information climate. Those with low levels of trust might be generally more cynical and therefore are more challenged to stay accurately informed. Thus, these high misinformation perceptions sound alarming but might primarily be a call for further studying how news audiences themselves understand the phenomenon of misinformation.

Given that misinformation perceptions can determine how audiences navigate and evaluate their news environment (van der Meer, Hameleers, et al., 2023), it is essential to factor in such perceptions in designing future studies. To a certain extent, the threat of misinformation can be considered a social construct, where the increased perceptual risks manifest in society, leading to real consequences for how people deal with a news landscape that is perceived to be undermined by misinformation. Here an important role for elite discourse and the weaponized use of misinformation can be identified. When audiences are warned by

alarming language regarding the prevalence and impact of misinformation, they may be more likely to overestimate the amount of misinformation in their own media environment. Hence, audiences' standards for evaluating real news are found to be malleable by elite discourse (Van Duyn & Collier, 2019). Exposure to elite discussions about fake news was found to lead to decreased trust in media and less accurate identification of real news. Elite discourse on misinformation primes deception in the public's mind, therefore efforts to warn for misinformation may inadvertently blur the distinction between false and accurate information. Caution in elite discourse is therefore advised: against the backdrop of overly high misinformation perceptions, it becomes crucial to provide context to relativize the extent to which misinformation is present when discussing its influence in public debates.

For future research, it is important to study how interventions, such as media-literacy interventions and policy initiatives, can effectively stimulate accurate risk assessments of misinformation across low- versus high-risk settings. Rather than interventions warning for high rates of misinformation, it is suggested to relativize the risks of misinformation and direct audiences to credible information (Acerbi et al., 2022). Since the successfulness of such interventions is often found to be complex at best (Vraga et al., 2022), more research is needed to help people navigate today's media environment and avoid undermining journalism overall. Finally, future research could focus on demographic factors to understand risk perceptions related to misinformation since our findings showed some associations with some of these factors in certain countries.

This study has some noteworthy limitations. First of all, although we expect that people's estimates of misinformation across all countries are disproportionately high, we lack empirical research to contextualize and verify risk perceptions. Future research may pair media exposure measures to a content analysis of the media people are exposed to in order to arrive at a more comprehensive analysis of (dis)proportionate concerns across settings. Secondly, although we use a comparative endeavor that extends beyond the usually included countries (i.e., Western Europe and the USA), we did not include a comprehensive selection of Global South countries that would allow for even more regional variations to be explored. Thirdly, we rely on rather crude measures of estimated misinformation exposure. Media users may have different interpretations of what false and inaccurate information entails, and our analyses do not allow us to assess which topics, media sources, communicators, or other contexts they associate with misinformation.

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Appendix 1

Table A1. Mean and standard deviation per country for political distrust and media distrust

	Political distrust		Media distrust	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
France	4.99	1.41	4.10	1.55
Germany	4.81	1.58	3.29	1.92
India	4.76	1.59	4.80	1.48
Netherlands	4.73	1.34	3.34	1.70
Poland	5.29	1.33	4.36	1.38
United Kingdom	5.30	1.18	4.03	1.50
United States	4.92	1.55	4.48	1.65
Total	4.97	1.45	4.08	1.69

Appendix 2. Wording of statements of survey items

Media distrust

Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements:

- The established news media and politics conspire to manipulate peoples' opinions.
- The established news media systematically tell lies to the people.

- The established news media are merely the mouthpiece of those in power.
- The established news media prescribe the people what to think.

Political skepticism

Could you indicate to what extent you agree with these items about politics?

- Politicians are primarily self-interested
- To become president, it is more important to have the right friends than the right abilities
- Politicians are only interested in my vote, not my opinion
- Politicians do not understand what really matters to society

Misinformation salience per country

Next, could you make an estimation of how much—in terms of percentages—the news (both online and offline) consists of misinformation for the following countries? Misinformation is here defined as false or deceptive information, also known as fake news.

- The Netherlands
- United States
- United Kingdom
- Germany
- India
- Poland
- France

Age

What is your age in years?

Gender

To which gender identify do you most identify?

- Female
- Male
- Other
- Prefer not to say

Education

Which is the highest degree you have finished (so far)?

- Did not finish high school; or high school diploma or equivalent, no further schooling; or technical or vocational school after high school
- Some college, no degree; or Associate's or two-year college degree; or four-year college degree
- Graduate or professional school after college, no degree; or Graduate or professional degree; or PhD or equivalent

Political ideology

In political matters people talk of 'the left' and 'the right'. What is your position?

Please indicate your views using any number on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means 'left' and 10 means 'right'.

Appendix 3. Regression models with unstandardized coefficients, predicting misinformation salience in own country and other countries

Country	Dependent variable													
	NL		US		UK		GER		INDIA		POL		FR	
	Own	Other	Own	Other	Own	Other	Own	Other	Own	Other	Own	Other	Own	Other
Misinfo salience	6.32***	3.82***	6.34***	5.05***	5.02***	2.17***	6.27***	3.37***	3.85***	3.02***	6.33***	4.02***	6.39***	4.11***
Media distrust	(0.71)	(0.58)	(0.84)	(0.71)	(0.78)	(0.59)	(0.66)	(0.54)	(1.07)	(0.95)	(0.90)	(0.67)	(0.74)	(0.57)
Political distrust	0.54	0.30	1.47*	-0.18	2.58***	0.16	0.68	1.64***	0.78	0.11	0.62	0.02	-1.10	-0.07
	(0.87)	(0.70)	(0.86)	(0.73)	(0.94)	(0.70)	(0.76)	(0.62)	(1.02)	(0.91)	(0.89)	(0.66)	(0.80)	(0.61)
Left right	0.22	-0.27	1.30***	0.79**	0.03	-0.14	0.19	-0.57	0.69	1.21***	-0.54	0.30	0.12	0.05
	(0.46)	(0.37)	(0.41)	(0.34)	(0.48)	(0.36)	(0.52)	(0.42)	(0.44)	(0.39)	(0.42)	(0.31)	(0.42)	(0.32)
Age	-0.11*	-0.03	-0.10*	-0.06	-0.29***	-0.09*	-0.25***	-0.14**	-0.11	-0.10	-0.11	-0.11**	-0.12*	0.002
	(0.07)	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.07)	(0.05)	(0.07)	(0.06)	(0.09)	(0.08)	(0.07)	(0.05)	(0.07)	(0.05)
Education	-1.65	1.77	-0.93	0.98	-0.79	3.00**	1.98	2.63**	-5.82***	-1.47	1.42	2.39*	2.01	1.46
	(1.56)	(1.27)	(1.18)	(0.99)	(1.67)	(1.25)	(1.34)	(1.09)	(1.70)	(1.52)	(1.67)	(1.24)	(1.31)	(1.01)
Gender	1.02	-0.02	2.53	-1.18	-0.31	0.87	4.29**	5.50***	-0.06	-3.24	-4.54**	-2.20	-1.49	2.38
	(2.11)	(1.71)	(2.01)	(1.69)	(2.25)	(1.68)	(2.02)	(1.65)	(2.42)	(2.16)	(2.25)	(1.67)	(2.03)	(1.56)
Constant	23.84***	31.91***	21.85***	22.99***	33.09***	33.17***	19.95***	21.96***	58.32***	45.99***	39.04***	32.99***	33.95***	25.70***
	(6.67)	(5.41)	(5.36)	(4.52)	(8.29)	(6.19)	(6.82)	(5.56)	(6.97)	(6.23)	(7.79)	(5.78)	(6.46)	(4.95)
R ²	0.25	0.13	0.28	0.20	0.19	0.06	0.33	0.23	0.11	0.11	0.16	0.13	0.19	0.14
Adjusted R ²	0.24	0.12	0.27	0.19	0.18	0.05	0.32	0.22	0.10	0.10	0.15	0.12	0.18	0.13
Residual Std. Error	20.79 (df = 397)	16.87 (df = 397)	22.93 (df = 481)	19.31 (df = 481)	22.08 (df = 403)	16.49 (df = 403)	20.60 (df = 405)	16.78 (df = 405)	23.74 (df = 384)	21.22 (df = 384)	21.96 (df = 384)	16.31 (df = 384)	20.75 (df = 407)	15.90 (df = 407)
F Statistic	22.62***	10.23***	30.97***	19.82***	16.10***	4.25***	32.88***	20.21***	7.99***	8.24***	12.34***	9.69***	15.72***	11.29***
	(df = 6; 397)	(df = 6; 397)	(df = 6; 481)	(df = 6; 481)	(df = 6; 403)	(df = 6; 403)	(df = 6; 405)	(df = 6; 405)	(df = 6; 384)	(df = 6; 384)	(df = 6; 384)	(df = 6; 384)	(df = 6; 407)	(df = 6; 407)

* $p < 0.1$.** $p < 0.05$.*** $p < 0.01$.