The Psychology of Misinformation: Cognitive Biases, Emotional Responses and Susceptibility to False Information

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Abstract

The rapid proliferation of misinformation in digital environments represents a significant challenge to individual judgment, social trust, and democratic resilience. Understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying susceptibility to false information is essential for developing effective strategies to counter misinformation. This study aims to explore the relationships between cognitive biases, emotional responses, and individuals' vulnerability to misleading information, emphasizing the psychological processes that influence information evaluation, belief formation, and decision-making.

The research adopts a qualitative methodology based on a narrative literature review of relevant theoretical and empirical studies in cognitive psychology, social psychology, and communication sciences. The analysis focuses on three interconnected dimensions: cognitive mechanisms, emotional influences, and individual differences in susceptibility to misinformation. Particular attention is given to confirmation bias, motivated reasoning, the illusory truth effect, and cognitive dissonance, alongside emotional factors such as fear, anxiety, anger, and uncertainty.

The literature indicates that misinformation susceptibility emerges from complex interactions between cognitive limitations, emotional activation, and sociocultural contexts. Confirmation bias and motivated reasoning may reinforce pre-existing beliefs, while repeated exposure to misleading narratives can increase perceived credibility. Emotionally charged information, particularly content associated with fear and anger, may facilitate rapid dissemination and reduce critical evaluation. Furthermore, digital environments characterized by algorithmic personalization and selective exposure can amplify these psychological vulnerabilities.

The synthesis highlights the importance of critical thinking, media literacy, emotional regulation, and reflective information processing as potential protective factors against misinformation. It also emphasizes the need for interdisciplinary interventions integrating psychological research, educational strategies, and responsible digital communication practices.

The study contributes to a deeper understanding of the psychological foundations of misinformation and provides a conceptual framework for future empirical investigations and evidence-informed interventions aimed at strengthening cognitive resilience, informed decision-

making, and public trust in increasingly complex digital information environments.

Keywords: misinformation, cognitive biases, emotional responses, susceptibility to misinformation, motivated reasoning, qualitative literature review, digital media.