



Detecting and sharing fake news on social media: the role of demographic information and emotional intelligence

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Abstract

Introduction. In today's information-driven era, the rampant dissemination of fake news on social platforms is not just a nuisance but a formidable challenge. The present study investigates the interplay between emotional intelligence (EI), demographic characteristics, and detecting and sharing fake news on social media.

Method. This observational study was designed on Iranian population through an online questionnaire, which was distributed via Porsline from August 24 to October 24, 2024.

Analysis. Data were analysed using SPSS 26.0, applying descriptive and inferential statistics. Associations between fake news detection and emotional intelligence were assessed using Spearman's correlation, with significance set at $P < 0.05$.

Results. Six hundred nine participants were enrolled with a mean age of 39.99 ± 11.18 years. Most were female (65%) and married (65%), university educated and employed. Emotional intelligence was significantly associated with the ability to detect fake news and willingness to share. However, no such association was found for demographic characteristics, except a positive link between gender, educational level, and willingness to share information. Sharing of fake news mainly occurred unintentionally.

Conclusion. Our results suggest that that educational and supportive initiatives may enhance individuals' skills in detecting and mitigating the spread of fake news.

Introduction

Today, a vast amount of information is available in cyberspace. However, we are also faced with the phenomenon of information pollution, which includes false and misleading information, posing a significant challenge in information retrieval. The rampant dissemination of fake news on social platforms is not just a nuisance but a formidable challenge that demands immediate attention and action (Muhammed & Mathew, 2022).

In this paper, *fake news* is used to indicate sources that fabricate information, disseminate deceptive content, or strongly falsify actual news reports (Zimdars, 2016, as cited in Rochlin, 2017). In other words, a piece of fake, false, or deceptive content, analysed as a complex construct that does not have clear signs and is often designed to provoke strong emotional reactions; it is easily shared unknowingly across social media platforms, causing the spread of misleading information and misinformation (Sharapkova & Merkulova, 2023; Tandoc et al., 2018; Vosoughi et al., 2018). As evidenced by recent studies, a significant portion of readers share such information for specific reasons (for example, political motives, engagement, or humour), but many do so under the belief that the misinformation is factual (Banerjee et al., 2024; Tian & Willnat, 2025).

As Floridi (2016), writing in *The Guardian*, notes:

The appetite for populism is not a new problem. In the ferocious newspaper battles of 1890s New York, the emerging sensational style of journalism in Joseph Pulitzer's New York World and William Randolph Hearst's New York Journal was dubbed "yellow journalism" by those concerned with maintaining standards, adherence to accuracy and an informed public debate. We now have the same problem with online misinformation.

This phenomenon has far-reaching consequences, influencing political opinions, societal beliefs, and even public health behaviour. Misinformation and fake news can significantly disrupt the dissemination of accurate information, distorting public opinion and posing a threat to the psychological well-being and health of nations. Moreover, they undermine the fundamental right of individuals to access truthful information freely (Vosoughi et al., 2018). As a clear example, its destructive role was particularly evident in the 2016 US presidential election and the COVID-19 pandemic (Al-Zaman, 2021; Kalsnes, 2018). Given the significant impact of social media on the dissemination and consumption of information, recognizing the factors that facilitate the detection and sharing of fake news becomes crucial. This understanding is crucial not only for mitigating its impact but also for maintaining social harmony and promoting informed decision-making (Wu, 2024).

Although the academic literature has not reached a consensus on the specific individual factors that lead to challenges in identifying fake news and the willingness to share it, the problem of fake news on social media has attracted the attention of researchers in recent years, given the dangers of the spread of fake news in society and the importance of identifying effective factors to take necessary preventive measures. Factors such as information literacy (Faragó et al., 2023; Orhan, 2023;), critical thinking (Pennycook & Rand, 2019; Shephard et al., 2023), emotional intelligence (Potenciando et al., 2024; Preston et al., 2021), and individual characteristics (Arin et al., 2023; Buchanan, 2020) have been examined for their impact on identifying and sharing fake news. In the present study, the latter two are of interest to researchers.

As mentioned, emotional intelligence (EI) has appeared as a key determinant in one's ability to recognize misleading or false information. So, recent researchers have begun unravelling the complex psychological, cognitive, and emotional factors influencing individuals' susceptibility to fake news (Horner et al., 2021; Martel et al., 2020; Potenciando et al., 2024; Preston et al., 2021; Taurino et al., 2023). Emotional intelligence emerged in the 1990s as a construct based on abilities, similar to general intelligence. In simple terms, it refers to the ability to recognize and regulate

emotions in oneself and others, encompassing self-control, enthusiasm, perseverance, and the capacity to motivate oneself (Sasikumar & Manikandan, 2017). The most formal definition of emotional intelligence refers to the ability to identify and express emotions, understand emotions, integrate emotions into thought, and regulate positive and negative emotions in oneself and others (Dhani & Sharma, 2016). There are various instruments for measuring emotional intelligence, with the most commonly used being the Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (EQ-i), the Schott Self-Report Inventory (SSRI), and the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test 2.0 (MSCEIT 2.0) (Bru-Luna et al., 2021). The significant facets common to emotional intelligence measures include perceiving emotions, regulating emotions, and utilizing emotions (O'Connor et al., 2019).

Potenciado et al. (2024), in a study conducted among students at the University of Mindanao, Philippines, examined the relationship between emotional intelligence and the ability to detect fake news. Analysis of the results revealed a positive relationship between emotional intelligence and fake news detection, with self-awareness exhibiting the highest correlation and self-management showing the lowest correlation. Self-awareness has a positive influence on the ability to detect fake news. Overall, emotional attachment increased the likelihood of believing false information, suggesting that emotional processing may make individuals more susceptible to misinformation. The results of a study by Taurino et al. (2023), which examined cognitive, emotional, and personality factors for identifying fake news, showed that people with high levels of psychosis, impulsivity, suspiciousness, and low analytical reasoning were more likely to believe fake news. Although social media platforms contribute to the spread of fake news, individual vulnerabilities also play an important role. Horner et al. (2021) emphasized that emotions play a crucial yet often overlooked role in the dissemination of fake news. The results of a study by Preston et al. (2021), which examined the effect of emotional intelligence on identifying fake news, showed that participants who scored higher on *emotional perception* were less likely to be exposed to fake news. This finding supports the idea that individuals with high emotional intelligence are more likely to be able to see beyond the emotional content that characterizes fake news, leading to more effective critical evaluation of the content's likely veracity.

Furthermore, Martel et al. (2020) examined the relationship between an individual's emotions and mood, as well as their recognition and belief in fake news. They found that emotions play a significant role in the belief in fake news, negatively affecting individuals' ability to discern the truth. These findings highlight the importance of emotions in cognitive and decision-making processes when encountering fake news.

On the other hand, although there is still no systematic evidence on the impact of age and other individual-level characteristics such as education, gender or income on the ability to detect fake news, conducting studies in this area and obtaining such evidence may help vulnerable groups by targeting them and appropriate policy measures such as fake news warnings that remind viewers of potentially misleading or inaccurate information.

The results of the few studies that have been conducted on this topic show that demographic factors such as age, education, cultural background, and socioeconomic status also contribute to how individuals engage with and assess the credibility of information (Arin et al., 2023; Buchanan, 2020; Grinberg et al., 2019). The results of the study by Arin et al. in Germany and the United Kingdom (UK) to identify individual factors in the recognition and willingness to share fake news, indicate the importance of age, political orientation, and income in the pervasive problem of spreading fake news. However, the results regarding individual differences were not entirely consistent in both countries. For example, the results show that those with higher education in Germany are better able to detect fake news, while in the UK, this ability does not depend on education. On the other hand, right-wing respondents in the UK are worse at detecting fake news than left-wing respondents. Such an effect is not detectable in Germany. When it comes to sharing fake news, young and politically right-wing respondents are more likely to spread fake news in

both countries. In the UK, female respondents are more likely to spread fake news, while in Germany, the difference is negligible. Furthermore, while Buchanan (2020) showed that younger, male, and less educated individuals were more likely to spread misinformation on social media in the UK, Grinberg et al. (2019) who examined the sharing of fake news during the 2016 US presidential election, found that conservatives and those over 65 were more likely to share pro-Trump fake news.

Considering that the findings from the limited studies conducted so far indicate that the influence of individual characteristics differs across societies, it is essential to replicate these studies in diverse cultural settings. In this study, we conduct extensive surveys in Iran to investigate the personal factors that influence people's ability to recognize fake news and their tendency to share it, whether intentionally or unintentionally.

Iran is a country in the Middle East with a population of c.92.6 million (as at October 2025). Based on datareportal.com a total of 151 million cellular mobile connections were active in Iran in late 2025, with this figure equivalent to 163 percent of the total population, indicating that almost everyone has access to a mobile phone and is thus potentially exposed to fake news on the Internet (Kemp, 2025). Given the complexity of the mechanisms behind the spread of fake news, this study aims to explore the intricate relationships among emotional intelligence, demographic factors, and the processes of identifying and disseminating false information on social media in Iran. Specifically, the first objective is to investigate the impact of demographic characteristics and emotional intelligence on the detection of fake news. We examine the effect of demographic characteristics and emotional intelligence on sharing fake news. The second objective examines whether the sharing of fake news was deliberate or accidental, and at the end, examines the question of whether sharing in the study community is more deliberate or accidental. Understanding this distinction is important for shaping effective policies. If fake news is spread mainly by accident, then we can focus on helping people improve their ability to spot it. However, if it is shared primarily for a purpose, simply teaching people to identify it will not be enough. In that case, we may need to adopt a broader approach to tackle the underlying societal issues that contribute to the spread of misinformation (Arin et al., 2023).

This study aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the psychological and social dynamics involved in combating online fake news. Understanding how these demographic differences intersect with emotional intelligence (EI) can provide valuable insights into the mechanisms behind the spread of fake news.

Contribution

Our research offers a novel contribution to the expanding body of literature on fake news in five significant ways:

First, the results of this study are important for increasing awareness and sensitivity about the impact of individual characteristics on the detection and sharing of fake news through social media, providing empirical evidence to improve the understanding of the dissemination of fake news. Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on users' interactions with fake news. Planners and practitioners can use its results to tailor educational and prevention programmes for the dissemination of fake news, as identifying the factors influencing and associated with the distribution of fake news is essential and helpful in tailoring appropriate educational and prevention programmes for specific populations.

Second to the best of our knowledge, the majority of prior research has been concentrated in Western contexts (the United States and Europe). The present study is among the few to examine

fake news detection and sharing within an Asian context, specifically Iran. This addresses the recent encouragement for researchers to investigate diverse cultural contexts.

Third, we simultaneously study the detection of fake news, as well as its accidental and deliberate sharing, in an experimental setting. Few studies examining the sharing of fake news have examined whether the sharing of fake news is deliberate or accidental. The importance of these findings lies in the fact that if sharing is accidental, then enhancing citizens' ability to detect fake news could hinder its spread. However, if sharing fake news is deliberate, improving citizens' ability to detect fake news will not be practical, and a different approach may be necessary to overcome the social gap.

Fourth, the current study employs a user-centred approach to investigate personality traits that may help identify individuals who are more likely to click on, accept, or share fake news than others. In short, the question is, "Who is interested in fake news and who is sharing it?" If a profile of personality traits can be identified, this provides an opportunity to develop interventions that reduce this likelihood in such individuals.

Five, by examining the impact of emotional intelligence, the results of this study help people from all walks of life think about the relationship between emotional intelligence and the prevalence of fake news. This helps them better assess whether their emotions are affecting their ability to absorb information. Furthermore, this will also benefit society as a whole, because when people understand that recognizing fake news is related to their ability to manage emotions, they will be better able to evaluate and gauge the information they are going to absorb.

Method and materials

Study design

This observational study was conducted among the Iranian population aged 18 years and older who used social networks, using a self-designed online questionnaire from August 24 to October 24, 2024. We created a primary questionnaire in the Porsline format (survey.porsline.ir), a tool for producing and publishing online questionnaires in Persian. The link was made available to all people on social networks (including popular and trending social networks in Iran, such as Instagram, Telegram, and WhatsApp) for two months. A time constraint was imposed to prevent participants from verifying the validity of the news items online while they were doing the survey. The time limit was determined based on a pilot study conducted with twenty participants, which helped estimate the average time required to complete the questionnaire. Participants were informed of the time constraint and provided their informed consent prior to beginning the survey. This was obtained through an introductory section on the Porsline platform, where participants were informed about the study and asked to confirm their willingness to participate before proceeding. Further, sampling was done randomly using the snowball method. In this way, respondents were asked to share the questionnaire link with their friends. This was done to expand the questionnaire's distribution range and increase the diversity of respondents' demographics. The study was approved by local ethics committee of Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences (Code of Ethics: IR.SBMU.RETECH.REC.1403.137).

Study population

All individuals living in Iran and over 18 years old (the legal age in Iran) who used social networks and completed the Porsline questionnaire were eligible. The recommended sample size, based on Cochran's formula, was 600 participants ($P = 0.50$, $\alpha = 0.05$, $d = 0.04$). However, 700 participants were considered to ensure adequate statistical power. Participants who did not answer all the questions completely were excluded. Finally, 609 participants met the eligibility criteria.

Demographic information

The demographic information we collected included several important details about the participants. We examined their gender, age, marital status, educational level, employment status, income, and place of residence. These factors help us better understand the diverse backgrounds of the people involved in our study.

A total of six hundred and nine participants took part in this study. As shown in Table 1, the mean age of the participants was 39.99 ± 11.18 (range: 18-73) years, and their ages ranged from 18 to 73 years. Notably, the majority of the participants were under the age of 54. In terms of gender distribution, women made up a significant portion of the study group, accounting for 65% of the participants. Additionally, a similar percentage, also 65%, reported being married. Most of the respondents had completed a university degree, and 65.8% of them were currently employed. While 20.7% of the participants reported having no income, 59.1%, indicated that they earned an average income. Furthermore, a substantial 78% of the participants lived in metropolitan areas,

Variables		Participants (n = 609) M $\pm$ ds (min-max)
Age	39.99 $\pm$ 11.18 (18-73) N(%)	
Sex	Female	397 (65.2%)
	Male	210 (34.5%)
	indeterminate	2 (0.3%)
Marital status	Single	213 (35%)
	Married	396 (65%)
Education level	Academic education	478 (78.5%)
	No academic education	131 (21.5%)
Work status	Employed	401 (65.8%)
	Jobless	208 (34.2%)
Income (annual)*	No income	123 (20.7%)
	Low income	70 (11.5%)
	Middle income	360 (59.1%)
	High income	53 (8.7%)
Place of residence	Metropolitan/City	475 (78%)
	Small town	107 (17.6%)
	Village	27 (4.4%)

Table 1. Sociodemographic variables description of the participants

*. Low income = < USD2,200, Middle income = USD2,200 – 4,300 and High Income = > USD4,300 (at time of writing)

Study measures

The questionnaire had three sections: demographic information; emotional intelligence assessment; and assessing, detecting, and sharing fake news

Emotional intelligence (EI)

There are various instruments for measuring emotional intelligence. A systematic review study (Bru-Luna et al., 2021) identified forty different instruments, each with advantages and disadvantages inherent to its type of tool. Based on its findings, Schutte's self-report Emotional Intelligence Scale (SEIS) ranks as the second most commonly reported instrument in the highest number of studies. So, we used the forty-one-item self-report Emotional Intelligence Scale of Schutte (SEIS), which is actually the modified version of the emotional intelligence scale of Schutte

et al. (Schutte et al., 1998) and has subsequently been investigated in several studies (Austin et al., 2004; Bakhshipour et al., 2009; Bester et al., 2013).

In the present study, the assessment of emotional intelligence was conducted in accordance with the study by Bakhshipour et al. (2009), which investigated the structure of the forty-one-item version of the Schutte Emotional Intelligence Scale within an Iranian sample; its overall reliability coefficient was 0.84. The four-factor structure of the Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Scale (SEIS) includes: *social awareness*, which evaluates emotions in oneself and others; *self-management*, which regulates emotions; *self-awareness*, which involves recognizing and utilizing emotions in problem-solving; and *relationship management*, which refers to the perception and understanding of emotions.

We also employed Cronbach's alpha coefficient to assess the internal consistency reliability of the 41-item Schutte Emotional Intelligence Scale (SEIS). The overall reliability coefficient reached $\alpha = 0.76$ (95% CI [0.72, 0.79]), exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70 for exploratory research. Subscale reliabilities ranged from $\alpha = 0.65$ to 0.72, demonstrating acceptable consistency across all domains (Table 2).

Scale	α	CI 95%	No. of question
Total	0.76	[0.72, 0.79]	41
Social awareness	0.69	[0.65, 0.72]	10
Self-management	0.72	[0.68, 0.75]	13
Self-awareness	0.68	[0.64, 0.71]	9
Relationship management	0.65	[0.63, 0.70]	9

Table 2. Reliability table of the emotional intelligence questionnaire

News items and fake news detection task

To evaluate the participants' ability to recognize fake news, ten news items (five fake news and five real news) were selected. The respondents were asked to ascertain whether an item is likely to be real or fake. We asked the respondents: "Based on what you know, how likely is it that each claim in the news item is accurate?" They had five response options: (a) extremely unlikely, (b) somewhat unlikely, (c) neither likely nor unlikely, (d) somewhat likely, and (e) extremely likely. We defined fake news detection as a scale from 0 to 40, where a higher score indicates better detection ability. For fake news items, we assigned a score of 4 for 'extremely unlikely', 3 for 'somewhat unlikely', 2 for 'neither likely nor unlikely', 1 for 'somewhat likely', and 0 for 'extremely likely'. Accurate news items were scored in reverse. So, for actual news items, a score of 4 for 'extremely likely', 3 for 'somewhat likely', 2 for 'neither likely nor unlikely', 1 for 'somewhat unlikely', and 0 for 'extremely unlikely'.

Most studies conducted in this area have pertained to political news, while fake news encompasses more than just political news. Many forms of fake news, for instance, avoid overly partisan or provocative content (such as vaccines containing microchips for tracking people), making them more pervasive and undetectable. In other words, non-political fake news may be more difficult to detect because it lacks prominent partisan markers that might prompt politically aware individuals to verify its accuracy. Furthermore, such content maybe more pervasive, as it is often unrelated to specific sociopolitical events, and instead concerns everyday issues such as crime, health, and education. Therefore, this study adopts a user-centred approach to examine the sharing intentions and ability to detect *everyday* non-partisan fake news.

In Iran, in addition to political misinformation, numerous fake news stories circulate on social networks every day in domains such as health and technology. Therefore, news from these fields is likely to reach a wide audience, and the headlines used in this study were selected from these

fields. We relied on Factnameh (@factnameh), a Persian-language fact-checking page on Instagram that verifies widely circulated popular news in Iran. Verified news stories from the last six months in the technology and health categories were reviewed, and then ten headlines (five real and five fake) were selected based on the highest levels of user engagement, measured by the number of likes. In selecting both real and fake items, efforts were made to select headlines whose perceived accuracy would be less likely to depend on participants' political or religious orientations. To prevent influencing the respondents' responses, the news articles were presented exclusively in textual format, devoid of any visual elements or references to the primary news source.

News items and sharing task

To assess whether participants were generally willing to share news, each item was asked separately, "Are you likely to share this news item?" and they were asked to answer "yes", "maybe", or "no" for each. We then created three metrics for willingness to share. The first metric, general news sharing, was developed as a scale from 0 to 20, where a higher score indicates a greater likelihood of sharing. To formulate this scale, we evaluated all news headlines, assigning a value of 2 for a 'Yes' response, 1 for 'Maybe,' and 0 for 'No'.

We then sought to differentiate between the deliberate and accidental sharing of fake news by developing two additional scales. The first scale measured deliberate sharing, indicating that the respondent acknowledged the headlines were fake but still chose to share them. Respondents identified a headline as fake if they selected "extremely unlikely" or "somewhat unlikely" in response to the question, "Based on what you know, how likely is it that each claim in the news item is accurate?" We considered respondents to have the intention to share if they answered "yes" or "maybe" to the question, "Are you likely to share this news item?" We then tallied the number of headlines that respondents were willing to share intentionally, creating a scale ranging from 0 to 5.

The second scale measured accidental sharing, where respondents did not recognize the headlines as fake and wanted to share them. Similar questions were posed for this scale, with the lack of recognition defined as answering "neither likely nor unlikely," "somewhat likely," or "extremely likely" regarding the detection of fake news. This scale was also constructed by counting the number of headlines respondents were willing to share unintentionally, ranging from 0 to 5.

Statistical analysis

The normality assumption was rigorously examined using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test complemented by Q-Q plot analysis. Both analytical and graphical assessments consistently indicated significant deviations from the normal distribution [K-S D = 0.09–0.24, $p < 0.001$]. Consequently, nonparametric analogues (Mann-Whitney U test) were employed to ensure the validity of statistical inferences.

Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS 26.0 software. Data were expressed as mean $\pm$ SD for quantitative variables and counts (%) for categorical variables. For data analysis, one-sample t-test, Kolmogorov-Smirnov, Chi-Square, and Whitney-Mann statistical tests were used. The association between the capacity to identify fake news and emotional intelligence was examined using Spearman's correlation test. The significant difference was considered P-value < 0.05 .

Results

Scores of fake news detection and sharing and EQ assessments

As demonstrated in Table 3, the participants in this study generally had a moderate to high level of ability when it came to detecting news (20.11 ± 3.8 (min=0, max=33)). Despite this ability, there is still a significant occurrence of sharing fake news, especially in random situations. The rate of deliberate sharing of fake news was particularly low (0.25 ± 0.6 (min=0, max=4)), This low level of intentional sharing may suggest that participants are becoming more aware of the implications of

sharing false information and feel a greater sense of responsibility in their sharing behaviour. Additionally, the assessment of emotional intelligence revealed that participants generally exhibited relatively high levels of emotional intelligence (129.110 ± 9.06 (min=67, max=160)). The various sub-components of emotional intelligence, including social awareness, self-management, self-awareness, and relationship management, highlighted a range of emotional skills present among the individuals in the study.

	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Fake news detection	609	20.110	3.807	0	33
Willingness to share news	609	6.100	4.512	0	20
Deliberate fake news sharing	609	0.250	0.608	0	4
Accidental fake news sharing	609	1.630	1.658	0	5
Emotional intelligence (EI)	609	129.110	9.060	67	160
Social awareness	609	18.300	3.710	7	33
Self-management	609	33.960	3.005	17	44
Self-awareness	609	5.030	1.581	2	10
Relationship management	609	8.000	1.323	2	10

Table 3. Summary scores for the *Fake news detection task*, *Sharing task*, *Deliberate fake news sharing*, *Accidental fake news*, and the *Emotional intelligence measure*

Demographic information and fake news detection

The data analysis revealed no significant differences in individuals' ability to detect fake news when considering various personal characteristics. Specifically, we examined factors such as gender, age, education level, employment status, and income level. The results showed that these individual traits had no meaningful impact on how effectively people could identify fake news. This finding was statistically significant, indicating that any variations observed were not substantial enough to suggest a real difference in detection abilities based on these characteristics. The significant difference was considered P-value <0.05.

Demographic information and sharing news

The findings from the Mann-Whitney test indicated that there were no significant differences in people's willingness to share news when examining factors such as age, employment status, and income level. This means that these particular characteristics did not influence how likely individuals were to share information ($p < 0.05$).

Analysis revealed two significant demographic disparities in news-sharing behaviour. First, male participants demonstrated substantially greater willingness to share than their female counterparts [$Z = -4.093$, $p < .001$], exhibiting a small effect size [$r = 0.17$, 95% CI (0.12, 0.22), $N = 607$] according to Cohen's (1988) guidelines for small effect sizes ($r_s = 0.10$ – 0.30). Second, educational attainment emerged as a critical differentiator: non-university graduates showed markedly higher information-sharing propensity compared to degree holders [$Z = -4.863$, $p < .001$], similarly yielding a small effect size [$r = 0.20$, 95% CI (0.15, 0.25), $N = 609$]. The marginal sample size variation ($N = 609$ vs. $N = 607$) resulted from unspecified gender data in two cases. While statistically significant, both effect sizes fall below the threshold for practical significance in media

studies ($r \geq 0.25$). (A more straightforward overview of these results and exact effect size calculations is available in Table 4.)

Variable		N	Mean Rank	Z	P-value	r
Willingness to share news	Women	397	282.890	-4.093	$p < .001$	0.16612
	Men	210	343.910			
	Academic	478	286.91	-4.863	$p < .001$	0.19705
	No Academic	131	371.00			

Table 4. Differences in *Willingness to share* according to gender and education

Emotional intelligence (EI) and Fake news detection

Spearman's correlation analysis ($N = 609$) demonstrated a small but statistically significant positive correlation between overall emotional intelligence (EI) and fake news detection ability ($r_s = .122$, $p = 0.003$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.20]). Applying a Bonferroni correction for five comparisons ($\alpha = 0.01$), this association remained significant. The effect size corresponds to $R^2 = 0.015$, indicating that 1.5% of the variance in detection performance is attributable to EI according to Cohen's criteria (Cohen, 1988).

Further analysis of EI subcomponents revealed differential associations. Social Awareness maintained significance after correction ($r_s = 0.114$, $p = 0.005$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.20], $R^2 = 0.013$), while Self-awareness showed a stronger association ($r_s = 0.162$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.08, 0.24], $R^2 = 0.026$), suggesting that individuals with heightened social and self-awareness tend to exhibit better fake news detection skills. In contrast, no significant correlations were observed with Self-management ($r_s = 0.041$, $p = 0.311$, 95% CI [-0.04, 0.12], $R^2 = 0.002$) or Relationship management ($r_s = 0.014$, $p = 0.732$, 95% CI [-0.07, 0.10], $R^2 = 0.0002$) (Table 5).

Variable	Fake news detection				
	Correlation Coefficient (r_s)	Sig. (2-tailed)	CI 95%	R^2 %	N
Emotional intelligence (EI)	.122	0.003	0.04, 0.20	0.015	609
Social awareness	.114	0.005	0.03, 0.20	0.013	609
Self-management	0.041	0.311	-0.04, 0.12	0.002	609
Self-awareness	.162	$P < .001$	0.08, 0.24	0.026	609
Relationship management	0.014	0.732	-0.07, 0.10	0.0002	609

Table 5. Correlation between *Fake news detection* and *Emotional intelligence (EI)* and its sub-components

Emotional intelligence (EI) and Willingness to share news

Spearman's correlation analysis ($N = 609$) revealed significant associations between news-sharing behaviour and emotional intelligence (EI). The overall EI score demonstrated a small positive correlation ($r_s = 0.152$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.08, 0.22], $R^2 = 0.023$) by using Bonferroni correction for five comparisons (adjusted $\alpha = 0.01$). Three EI subcomponents showed significant effects after correction: Social Awareness ($r_s = 0.116$, $p = 0.004$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.19], $R^2 = 0.013$), Self-Management ($r_s = 0.113$, $p = 0.005$, 95% CI [0.03, 0.19], $R^2 = 0.013$), and Self-Awareness ($r_s = 0.09$,

$p = 0.007$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.17], $R^2 = 0.008$). However, it is worth noting that we did not find a significant relationship with the sub-component of Relationship Management ($r_s = 0.057$, $p = 0.164$, 95% CI [-0.02, 0.13], $R^2 = 0.003$). This suggests that being skilled at managing relationships did not significantly influence whether someone was inclined to share news (Table 6).

Variable	Willingness to Share news				
	Correlation Coefficient (r_s)	Sig (2-tailed)	CI 95%	R ² %	N
Emotional intelligence (EI)	.152	$P < .001$	0.08, 0.22	0.023	609
Social awareness	.116	0.004	0.04, 0.19	0.013	609
Self-management	.113	0.005	0.03, 0.19	0.013	609
Self-awareness	.109	0.007	0.01, 0.17	0.008	609
Relationship management	0.057	0.164	-0.02, 0.13	0.003	609

Table 6. Correlation between *Sharing news* and *Emotional intelligence (EI)* and its sub-components

Fake news sharing: deliberate or accidental?

We carried out an analysis to examine how people behave when it comes to sharing five specific instances of fake news. Our focus was on how individuals responded to questions about whether they could identify these pieces of news as fake. If a person recognized the news as false and expressed a willingness to share it by answering "yes" or "maybe," we classified this action as deliberate sharing. On the other hand, if someone failed to recognize the news as fake but still indicated a willingness to share by responding with "yes" or "maybe," we categorized this as accidental sharing. The results, illustrated in Figure 1, revealed that only a small percentage of the instances of fake news sharing were intentional. This low level of deliberate sharing can be primarily attributed to a general lack of awareness, as well as insufficient knowledge and information about the nature of the news being shared.

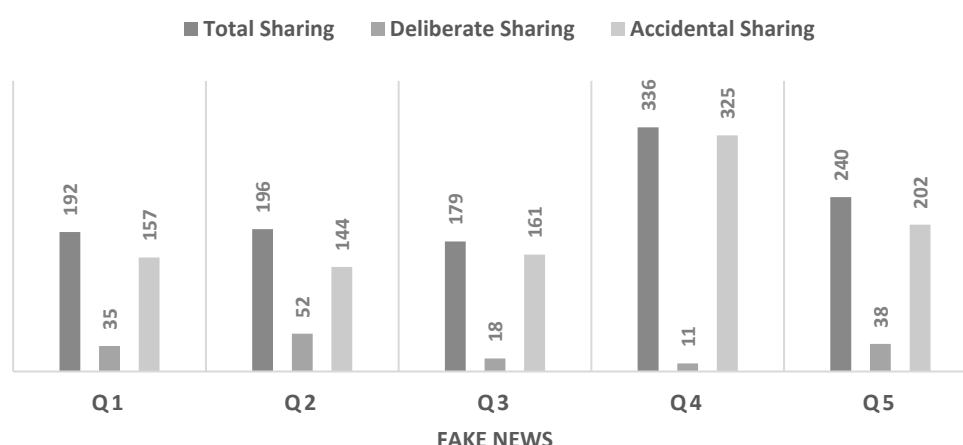


Figure 1. Number sharing fake news: deliberate and accidental

Discussion

This study explored the impact of personal traits, including demographic characteristics and Emotional Intelligence (EI), on the ability to identify and share fake news among 609 Iranian participants aged over 18 years.

Our results indicated no significant association between demographic characteristics and the ability to detect fake news ($P > 0.05$). In contrast, Arian et al. (2023) examined individual factors influencing the detection and willingness to share fake news and found that while higher education levels enhanced a greater ability to detect fake news among German participants, this correlation was absent in their UK sample. Furthermore, we found a positive association of gender ($P < 0.001$) and education level ($P < 0.001$) with the willingness to share news. Specifically, men in our study were more likely to share news than women. This differs from Arian et al. (2023), who found that British women were more likely to share news, while observing no gender correlation in their German cohort. Similarly, Ahmed et al. (2023), analysed and compared self-regulation in the sharing of deepfakes across seven South Asian countries and the United States, noting a lack of association between gender and sharing behaviour exclusively in Vietnam, while a relationship was observed in the other countries (US, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand).

Consequently, there is significant debate regarding the influence of demographic characteristics on the identification and sharing of fake news. It appears that cultural and social differences across various societies might influence how demographic factors affect the recognition and dissemination of false information.

In terms of emotional intelligence, we found that individuals exhibiting higher emotional intelligence demonstrated a markedly enhanced capacity to discern false information, corroborating findings from existing literature (Llamas et al., 2022; Potenciando et al., 2024; Preston et al., 2021; Walsh, 2023). It should be noted that, although people with higher emotional intelligence (EI) performed better in identifying fake news, the absence of a critical thinking criterion in the present study leaves it ambiguous whether those with high emotional intelligence were inherently more proficient critical thinkers. Among the four sub-components of emotional intelligence, two dimensions (self-awareness and social awareness) were found to have a small but statistically positive and significant relationship with identifying fake news. Our results align with a study by Potenciando et al. (2024), which revealed a positive and beneficial role of self-awareness in recognizing fake news.

In addition, there is convincing evidence indicating that emotional states, along with psychological and personality disorders, significantly influence individuals' capacity to identify fake news. In this respect, individuals exhibiting elevated traits of psychopathy, impulsivity, and suspicion, as well as those possessing limited analytical reasoning skills, demonstrate a greater propensity to accept false information as accurate (Blanchette & Richards, 2010; Escolà-Gascón et al., 2023; Farhoudinia, 2023; Martel et al., 2020; Nimbi et al., 2023; Taurino et al., 2023). In addition, there exists a paucity of empirical research examining the influence of emotional intelligence on the sharing of news. The sole pertinent investigation pertains to a study conducted in Indonesia (Prastiyo et al., 2023) involving 200 university students, which demonstrated a robust and positive correlation between emotional intelligence and self-control: the higher the emotional intelligence, the greater the self-control in spreading false news.

In the current study, we have elucidated that the sub-dimensions of social awareness, self-management, and self-awareness within the framework of emotional intelligence were significantly correlated yet small with the inclination to share news. Our findings can be interpreted in several ways. Firstly, individuals with high emotional intelligence demonstrate greater sensitivity to the emotions and needs of others (Mikolajczak et al., 2012), which may

facilitate their comprehension of news on societal dynamics. Consequently, they may deduce that disseminating credible news can enhance public cognizance and mitigate the proliferation of misinformation. Secondly, individuals with high emotional intelligence typically exhibit superior analytical capabilities (Li et al., 2021), which enables them to differentiate between authentic news and misinformation.

Finally, we indicated a low average for the sharing of news headlines (6.1 ± 4.5 , Min=0, Max=20). The analysis of deliberate and accidental sharing of fake news also revealed that the average deliberate sharing of fake news was merely 0.2. Our findings suggest that individuals within a studied population, characterized by a relatively high emotional intelligence (EI) score of 129.11 ± 9.06 (ranging from 67 to 160), tend to exhibit thoughtful and responsible practices when disseminating news.

Considering all factors, emotional intelligence enhances individuals' effectiveness in social interactions (Lopes et al., 2004). Sharing news can be seen as a way to create dialogue and exchange ideas with others. Individuals with high emotional intelligence may use this opportunity to express their opinions and engage in discussions with others on various topics. On the other hand, cultural and social factors can significantly impact people's behaviour. In some cultures, sharing news is considered a positive and social behaviour (Marshall et al., 2023). Therefore, people with high emotional intelligence may be influenced by this social environment and view sharing news as a means to strengthen social connections and foster a sense of belonging within society.

Besides these factors, the type of news can also significantly influence this relationship. For example, people with high emotional intelligence may be more inclined to share positive or educational news. Thus, considering these points, examining the different dimensions of emotional intelligence and its effect on news-related behaviour more thoroughly in future research seems necessary.

Future research should focus more on how emotions, and perhaps mood states in a broader sense, affect how people deal with news, especially fake news. In general, research in this field is necessary and helpful in establishing effective educational and preventive programs and measures for specific populations.

To the best of our knowledge, few studies (Arin et al., 2023) on this issue have investigated whether the sharing of fake news is done intentionally or unintentionally. The importance of this finding lies in the fact that the sharing of fake news is often unintentional, as people share it believing the news to be accurate. Therefore, enhancing citizens' ability to recognize fake news can be a significant obstacle to the spread of such misinformation. However, if the sharing of fake news is intentional, improving citizens' ability to detect fake news will not help, and different approaches may be needed to overcome the social divide. The present study found that sharing fake news is mostly accidental, with a smaller portion being deliberate. Consequently, it can be concluded that in the examined community, implementing methods and programmes to enhance the emotional intelligence of its members can lead to more accurate detection and identification of fake news, thereby helping to prevent its dissemination.

Limitations

First, the typical limitations associated with survey research are also relevant to our study. Respondents might misinterpret the questions and provide untruthful responses, and a survey may fail to reflect their emotional reactions to the questions posed. Therefore, we do not assert that the findings indicate causation. However, our results offer valuable insights into fake news detection and sharing behaviour, providing policymakers with timely information to reduce the spread of misinformation.

The second limitation pertains to the generalizability of the results and the sample used. Although the sample size was adequate for this type of research, the majority of participants were women, academics, and residents of metropolitan areas. These factors may influence the results and moderate the relationship between fake news detection and the attributes examined.

Conclusions

This small-scale exploratory study examined the connections among fake news detection, news sharing behaviour, demographic characteristics, and emotional intelligence (EI). The findings revealed that emotional intelligence plays a significant role in enhancing the capacity to identify fake news and share news articles. Additionally, the unintentional nature of sharing fake news was noted, suggesting that the introduction of supportive and educational programs could help individuals improve their ability to recognize and mitigate the dissemination of false information.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors reported no potential conflict of interest.

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