Article

Adolescents' Vulnerability to Fake News and to Racial Hoaxes: A Qualitative Analysis on Italian Sample

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Abstract: Following the Digital Revolution, we are witnessing an increase in the number of manipulated sources of information. For this reason, virtual environments can be a breeding ground for the proliferation of prejudices and stereotypes, resulting from the spread of racial fallacious news, known as 'racial hoaxes'. Adolescents may be more susceptible due to the tense and complicated relationship between their experience with digital platforms and the development of their relatively limited critical thinking. In this landscape, in order to explore the features of disinformation in adolescence, the research involved 41 Italian adolescents between 13 and 16 years old, balanced by gender and school education. The teenagers took part in the focus group discussions on the topic of online information preferences, fake news and racial hoaxes, which were analyzed by means of content analysis. The answers given by participants show a so-called adolescents' perception of 'misinformation invulnerability' that can influence their credulity in fake news, since they are aware of fake news but they are not so able to recognize or remember it.

Keywords: online disinformation; adolescents; racial hoaxes; focus group discussion; immigrants; content analysis

1. Introduction

For today's young people the Internet and social media are the main sources of news and information [1], in which users can find both credible and fake news.

Indeed, scholars [2] have argued that the fact that their news consumption patterns differ greatly from those of previous generations does not automatically imply that youths are uninformed, but rather that they are differently informed about current events than their parents and grandparents are [3].

A subject that appears crucial within disinformation and fake news, through the various media, is that of immigration, which in recent years has become increasingly important in our society because of the continuous migratory flows. Immigrants can arouse negative emotions, as they can be seen as dangerous. Several authors have argued that immigrants are perceived as a threat mainly for realistic reasons (e.g., work) or symbolic reasons ('national identity' or 'religious') [4]. These negative communicative frames can be reinforced also by means of false or misleading information.

Fake news, in particular, the so-called 'racial hoaxes' [5], are intended to validate and encourage discriminatory and racist attitudes towards minority groups [6], in particular immigrants and refugees.

In order to explore the features of disinformation in adolescence, in particular linked to racial hoaxes, this research involved 41 adolescents between 13 and 16 years old, balanced by gender and school education. The teenagers, called through contacts with schools or after-school associations, were involved in the focus group discussions on several topics like online information preferences, fake news risks and recognition and racial hoaxes. The results of the research show the existence of gender and age differences in credulity in fake

news, but also a perception of 'misinformation invulnerability'. One of the results that confirms the scientific literature [7] is the existence of a kind of 'affective processing in news consumption that can make fake or misleading information more credible since it can be based on a non-critical or heuristic type of reasoning. As to the misleading information concerning immigrants, the results show great difficulty in recognizing and remembering manipulated content in the sample of adolescent participants.

2. Fake News in Adolescence

Disinformation is the intentional dissemination of false information and is part of the so called 'information disorders' [8]. While they are part of the same phenomenon, there are significant conceptual differences between disinformation and fake news. The first element is the ability to 'touch' the emotional and deep dimensions of the reader [9]; the second is related to technology, or the use of social media.

According to Weeks and Holbert, virality can be linked to whether the content is interesting or emotionally stimulating [10]. In this sense, Fernandez-García [11] stresses that the important thing is to stimulate a reaction, both ridiculing and expressing indignation. The author states that the reaction to fake news can be positive (if we think of a cute story) or negative (scandalous disasters), but the fundamental thing is that the article leads people to comment and react to the topic [11].

Several studies [12] have recently tried to understand what factors are associated with the selection and consumption of fake news in an online environment, for example, the growing distrust in the media, the level of user education [13], age and gender [14], political affiliation and ideological identity [15], availability and time devoted to social media [16] and cognitive capacity [17]. Too much time spent on social media increases the exposure of the user to false or illegitimate content, especially if the user has a very active identity or political orientation [18]. Exposure can also become repeated, making the content more familiar and easily accessible, and then increase the probability to believe that content [19].

One of the most vulnerable groups can be teenagers, called 'digital natives' [20], who would grow up in a multiscreen society and would consider technologies as a natural element, not feeling any discomfort in interacting with them; this condition can lead them to processing information in a more 'affective' modality, being more sensible to image features like positive or negative emotional valence [21,22].

In addition, the consumption of news by young people is characterized by selective exposure, as they select the news and information that correspond to their momentary attitudes and beliefs [23]. Moreover, young people have often been considered 'news avoiders'; in fact, about half of teenagers ignore or avoid news by not following it either through traditional channels or through digital and online spaces. Shehata has shown that these 'avoidance patterns' of news among teenagers are persistent over the years [24] and this resulting lack of familiarity with news could be a significant factor in teenagers' credulity.

Finally, young people's news consumption is rather fragmented, as young people prefer to 'snack' with the news and are often exposed to it while monitoring one or more other screens [25]. Therefore, their attention to news articles may be minimal, and they may not be able to distinguish between false and true news due to the attention they must divide between different screens. This aspect can be seen from a recent study by Herrero-Diz and colleagues [26], which addressed online credibility in fake news among Spanish teenagers. The authors, in fact, administer the 'Questionnaire on Students' Habits in Sharing Fake News by Mobile Phone-CHECKM' to adolescents between the ages of 14 and 18. From the results of the research, it emerges that teenagers are aware of the existence of fake news and their manipulative intentions and perceive high confidence in their skills to recognize false news. However, at a time when teenagers are asked to assess the truth of the news, the authors point out that young people give little importance to verification strategies, such as the control of who is the author of the news or the control of the source of the news. In particular, these scholars pointed out the motivations linked to the sharing and credulity of false news among Spanish teenagers by highlighting that

teenagers/digital native, regardless of the veracity or falsity of the news, share it if it is in their interests. In fact, it is demonstrated that the acquisition information of young people is conditioned by a previous awareness of fake news and their own ability to detect that type of content, but also by the need to feel included in the social group [27] and to maintain a high reputation [28].

3. The Peculiarity of the False News on Immigrants: The 'Racial Hoaxes'

A particular type of fake news, to which teenagers can be exposed, is racial hoaxes that are becoming a popular discursive strategy to mask racism as well as a powerful means to unleash waves of fake news and outraged comments on social media. They can remain latent for a long time, emerge periodically by spreading negative stereotypes wide and foster a discourse of exclusion on refugees and other minorities [29].

In general, the false information targeting immigrants and refugees is not only sensational, because of its shock value, but provides stereotypical, biased and prejudicial falsehoods [30]. In particular, from a psycho-linguistic perspective, racial hoaxes can become a means of conveying stereotypes and prejudices through the manipulation of language. D'Errico, Papapicco and Taulè [31] pointed out for instance how in fake news can be seen typical linguistic forms of stereotypes and prejudices aimed at dehumanizing and attributing to them various types of threats. In this sense, the racial hoaxes can be a tool to affect anti-immigrant attitudes, as demonstrated in adults by Wright and colleagues [32]; people have schematic visions of immigrants and refugees especially in the presence of social representations mediated by false news. The cited literature so far highlights how the preferred target of recent research is adults, neglecting the adolescent range in which, paradoxically, vulnerability factors can emerge.

4. Materials and Methods

Starting from these recent studies, the aim of this research is to explore the attitude of adolescents toward fake news, paying particular attention to racial hoaxes.

Sampling took place in a reticular way with various institutions. The sample is quite varied and includes 41 Italian students, aged between 13 and 16 years, since age, to our knowledge, has not been much investigated in psychological literature—which is mainly focused on adults—especially considering the 'racial' component of fake news. Thus, the participants were divided into eight groups based on membership in a school and a cooperative. In particular, four groups of respondents attend a scientific high school, two groups are of the social co-operative Onlus 'Charisma', one group attends a classical high school and one group attends a technical institute.

The research was divided into two phases:

- The data collection phase
- The data analysis phase

The first phase of data collection took place through focus group discussion (Bohnsack, 2004) in order to focus on a topic and bring out the relationships between the participants. The focus group was carried out by two people: An animator who led the discussion and an observer who examined the relationship dynamics of the group. In our case, the focus groups were conducted online, through the Google Meet platform, in the period between March 2021 and June 2021. The mediated focus group was very helpful in putting participants at ease, as they could have chosen the setting that was most convenient for them.

The groups consisted of a minimum of three people to a maximum of six people and the focus group sessions were recorded for a total of 8 h. Registration was possible with the consent of the parents, as the sample was made up of minors. The single group was composed of teenagers (both girls and boys) from the same school or association. Each session lasted about an hour and was divided into three parts: The first one was devoted to reciprocal participants' knowledge; in the second one participants discussed the topics investigated; finally, in the third part there was the final debriefing, aimed at presenting

the topic of misinformation. During the sessions, the role of the conductor was mainly to mediate interventions and to regulate turn taking, leaving, however, the participants free to express themselves. In this regard, the questions were funnel shaped, starting with general aspects such as 'What media do you use the most?' to more specific concepts, such as 'Have you ever come across racial hoaxes?'.

The second phase of data analysis began with the transcription of the focus and finally the analysis of the content [33].

The four main thematic areas and thus questions were:

-   **social media** and their use, which social media are most used, the time they spend on social media and the content they seek most;
-   **informative preferences**, or if they inform themselves, if yes by what means;
-   **fake news**, that is, if they have ever come across or shared, the characteristics that according to them have fake news, the topics that deal with fake news, and the consequences that these may have;
-   **racial hoaxes** about immigrants, if they read about the subject and if they have ever come across fake news about immigrants.

Specifically, after the transcription of the recordings, an analysis of the manual content was carried out, focusing mainly on the detection of repeated text segments. The set of significant repeated segments of a text helped to provide a synthetic representation of the contents of the corpus and to quickly identify actors, objects and actions on which the text is structured.

5. Results

5.1. Social Media Uses

From the results of the content analysis, it emerges that the social media most used by adolescents between 13 and 16 are Instagram and TikTok. In many cases, there is an inability to distinguish social networks from search engines such as Google or instant messaging platforms such as Whatsapp or Telegram. For the 41 adolescents, in fact, Google, and also Whatsapp, Telegram and Youtube are among the most used 'social networks'. This bias would depend on the fact that this generation of digital natives would be part of the 'touch screen' generation [34], that is, capable of intuitively using all technologies with touch screens, which requires dynamic movement. The technologies belonging to the old generations, such as text and social networks, are used but do not presuppose basic knowledge.

Only in a few cases do we highlight the use of Twitter, Reddit and creative blogs, such as virtual spaces to write and share poems. In just one case was the answer concerning the use of social media negative, or linked to extrinsic reasons, such as rejection by parents, as shown in extract 1:

> Example 1: 'I used TikTok before, not so much, but I used it. Then, in relation to what happened to that girl in Palermo, my parents banned me, so now I'm not on any social media. Not that I used it for some reason, I used to watch black humor videos.'

In the case of their use, the time range goes from 'often/fairly' to 'not much', with difficulty, in both cases, of quantification. Some are, however, more precise, indicating the time slot, for example 'from two hours to five hours', or 'generally in the evening' or, again, 'when I don't do my homework'.

The use of TikTok is directly connected to the main motivations of social media use, traceable primarily in entertainment, in sharing experiences with peers, posting videos and photos or searching videos of their interest, for example, information about video games for boys or videos about singers or actors for girls. In the sample of younger boys, this difference in the content of fruition decreases; in fact, girls also admit to being interested in videos of football or motocross. This aspect confirms the so-called 'avoiding pattern' toward official news [24].

5.2. Informational Needs

As far as information preferences, almost all participating teenagers state a low interest in actively searching news ('the news arrives anyway'). In other words, the participants are aware of the information bombardment to which the social media exposes them and, for this reason, give more importance to those moments in which they 'want' to inform themselves. This is possible precisely in the transition from traditional and social media, as shown in the following example.

Example 2: 'I'm of the opinion that anyway, the news arrives either one way or the other, maybe, watching the news at lunchtime, they arrive then. Then it's up to us to choose what we like.'

In fact, this passage between duty and informative pleasure is made explicit by the adolescents when they affirm: In the first case, that of duty, the moments in which they watch the news, in the moments of meals when parents re-enter; instead the 'free' information is generally autonomous with the use of social media and Google. In some cases, pleasant information is also automated, through the algorithms of preferences or filtering systems, but also based on the choice to follow Instagram pages such as 'Fanpage'. Synthesizing, therefore, pleasant information is free and easily and quickly accessible. This is deduced from many excerpts.

Example 3: 'Yes, I inquire, but only on topics that interest me.'

Example 4: 'Not everything, I just like to know about things that interest me.'

Example 5: 'Yes, I inquire through the Instagram fanpage.'

Only one participant out of the whole sample claims to get superficial information through Google and then to deepen it through TV programs of information ('Propaganda live'). Another participant still claims to inquire through national paper magazines, ('Il Corriere della Sera'). As for the topics that attract the most, most of the news covers topics that the participants repeatedly define as 'frivolous', 'superficial', 'funny', such as sports news, gossip, TV series and video game news. A particular trend linked to the current pandemic period is to learn about the news related to health and legislative measures, especially with regard to the closure and opening of schools. In particular, news on COVID-19 is considered alarming news by the adolescents, in the sense that it provides a state of alert and is more easily spread as false news. This confirms the study of Matfei, Cojocariu and Dumitriu [35], which might suggest the significant impact of the pandemic in several aspects of adolescents' lives. In one case, a participant identified as alarming news the episode of a trans man beaten in the subway in Milan. This news is reported by the boys as 'alarming' because it tells of an episode that can really happen and, therefore, by which they were alarmed thinking that it could be true.

5.3. Fake News and Biased Information

Within this framework, the adolescents passed to talk about fake news. In fact, when asked if they have ever come across fake news or if they have ever shared it, most of the participants say they came across it, but they did not share it. Specifically, in relation to credulity [36], the adolescents specify that they have never been fooled into fake news. In the description of the experiential plan, however, about what they did when they came across fake news, differences emerge in terms of age and type of school. For example, the older adolescents (15 and 16 years old) admit they did not believe it because they claim to have skills to unmask it, including skills acquired by the study of computer science for the boys of a technical high school and civic education and the language study for the boys of the high school with a classical and scientific orientation.

Example 6: 'I read them but I never believed them, I mean I realized they were fake. This is because I have computer skills, that is, I know when they make the graphics false, the images . . . '

Example 7: 'I think literature has helped me in my linguistic knowledge.'

Others, instead, are even strongly convinced that they have never come across fake news, as if they were totally 'immune' [37], as shown in the following extracts:

Example 8: 'No, not at all.'

Example 9: 'sincerely, I don't think so, but I still know what fake news are.'

On the contrary, the youngest boys (13 and 14 years old), despite claiming to have never fallen for fake news, admitted they have come across fake profiles, especially on Instagram, as shown in the following excerpt:

Example 10: 'There was a fake profile on Instagram that asked me for friendship [on the social network]. At first, I fell for it because it told me things that made me think that it was a real person, for example, <<Who do you follow on Instagram? >>, then, however, he started to ask me photos and photos and photos...there I thought it was fake and I never replied.'

Furthermore, when the researchers asked for one or more examples of fake news they believed, the young people had difficulty remembering a specific example. Some of them manage to recover the context; in fact, there is a difficulty in remembering the detail, but there is ease of generalization, as shown in the following excerpts:

Example 11: 'I don't remember the news exactly. I remember the theme. One of the themes was gossip.'

Example 12: 'The news? No, I don't remember...now I just don't get [in mind]. I just remember it was about gossip.'

Twenty-two adolescents, however, report the example. From their words, in fact, it is clear that the topics that it is easier to believe are gossip, a macro area that also includes false news involving actors of the cinema or TV series, but also football news and sport in general, as shown in the following examples:

Example 13: 'Choosing of a tronista [a man being courted on the TV show] in Uomini e Donne [an italian Tv format].'

Example 14: 'A love story between the characters of Riverdale.'

Example 15: 'Cristiano Ronaldo has paid a large share of money for health services.'

Example 16: 'It was said that a football player was dead, but he wasn't really dead.'

The males note a recurrence of news about the death of public figures, in particular footballers, singers and actors, but they turn out to be false. In the field of football are also recurrent references to 'players changing teams', or 'news in which it announces another season of a TV series' or 'scoop on the privacy of characters acting on the media scene'. Of this category of news, teenagers immediately recognize the click-baiting function but admit that they have fallen for it. This is an interesting fact because it shows the presence of peripheral information processing [36], noting, however, that this processing is activated in relation to a strong emotionality, or, specifically, 'a love for an idol'. As to the reasons for this credulity, different motivations have been gathered, as demonstrated in the following examples:

Example 17: 'I had believed it mainly because I like to think that such an important person did a good deed.'

This reason refers to the example of Cristiano Ronaldo previously reported. Linked to motivation, in fact, is the theme of solidarity ('a good deed'), on which the false news was built, but also the reference to the public figure ('such an important person') that is used as a model to relate to. Along with these elements, the news attracted them because it aroused a positive emotion ('I like to think' that this is possible). In addition, therefore, to the affection for the idol, what emerges is also a positive emotion, linked to the pleasantness of supportive action.

> Example 18: 'I fell for the scoop because we, as girls, are pleased to see that the protagonists of a TV series who are in love in the plot, also have a relationship in life.'

The motivation given in relation to gossip, however, refers to an expectation between the world of television and that of private life. In this extract, it is hypothesized that there is a gender difference in the reasons linked to credulity in adolescence.

In fact, boys are moved by the image of their idol as a 'hero', girls, instead, by 'relationality'.

Other fake news tracked refer to scams shared through Whatsapp ('the case of Whatsapp Gold', or that the instant messaging platform will change from free service to paid service) or contextual news (like the false news about COVID-19 and the presence of a black panther in Apulia, in southern Italy). These topics are, however, in the minority compared to gossip and sport.

As for the action and reaction after they discovered that it was fake news, different types of scenarios were reported. From the emotional point of view, then of the reaction, there was great disappointment or happiness in cases where the news was negative (for example, 'the change of a player's team if you are fans of the team from which the player leaves'). Instead, concerning the action, many discovered the falsity of the news by talking about it with reference figures (for example, parents, older cousins and educators). While those who alone understood the falsity of the news, different strategies, including the verification of multiple sources, concerned warning peers, lest they fall for it. Specifically, considering our participants, one of the most adopted strategies is to visit the official pages of the idols involved in the news and to wait for a statement of confirmation or denial of the facts described in the news.

A single participant, in describing his strategy to detect false news, refers to the linguistic aspect, as shown in the example:

> Example 19: 'I honestly at first I was a little bit believing it because, I say, it said words that a little bit made you believe, but then I thought, 'I don't think that so many people are killed by the vaccine."

This extract refers to a false news article about the ineffectiveness of anti COVID-19 vaccines. From the example, it is possible to notice how there is a reflexive capacity concerning the news that, however, emerges at a later time, that is after a peripheral reading of the news, full of emotion. The observation of the modality in which fake news is written ('said words that a bit made you believe'), in fact, is the result of deeper reasoning that develops as a result of the regulated emotionality, generating, in adolescents, emotions opposite to those experienced in peripheral processing. For example, as we have seen before, if the false news initially makes us happy, at the moment when it is discovered that it is false, emotion is intoned with disappointment.

The reference to the linguistic aspect of fake news made it possible to ask what the most attractive linguistic and general elements are, that is, the aspects that most induce credibility. In the survey of the linguistic characteristic of fake news, the participants present great difficulties concerning recognition. Small differences are evident in the orientation of the school, for example, the boys who attend high school with a classical address identify in the title the attractive element. At a purely linguistic level, they detect 'the presence of grammatical errors'. They also report that the titles must have 'sensationalistic' aspects, with the insertion of rhetorical figures, such as hyperbole, as shown in the following examples:

> Example 20: 'sometimes already in the title they use exaggerations, they magnify things.'

The boys of the technical–scientific high school identify, instead, as an element that increases credulity, the image, which, usually, is presented in the foreground and is larger than the title, as demonstrated in the following extract:

> Example 21: 'the images are more important than the titles, they are also found on social media and are in the foreground and larger than the titles. For example, a photomontage that looks real.'

Younger children, on the other hand, identify details as persuasive elements. The presence or absence of details, especially related to the subjectivity of the journalist, are traced as a fake element, as shown in the following examples:

Example 22: 'there are not too many details.'

Example 23: 'when there's too much detail. If you have to make a fake, there are two things you have to do: first, invent a story and then invent it around a painting that you mentally do and second, add the details.'

Since young people claim to have fallen for fake news, but never shared it, they are asked to imagine the possible risks associated with sharing fake news. Again, there are different types of age-dependent responses. Older adolescents, in fact, question the topic of 'virality'. For example, some argue that it can help to increase disinformation or create scaremongering, as shown in the following excerpt:

Example 24: 'that you talk about it even more and the risk is that everyone thinks it's true.'

In addition to virality, another rather recurrent semantic sphere of risk is that of 'espionage and persecution', which includes the risk of creating harm to the affected person (e.g., 'a fake addressed to a famous character, there is a risk that that character will remain ill') or, again, the risk of being spied on (e.g., 'can hack us'). In younger people, however, the semantic sphere of 'punishment' emerges (e.g., 'they can arrest us', 'you have to pay a fine' or 'they can block our profile, with the consequence of losing all your Instagram data'). In other cases, the logic of 'protection' against those who believe in fake news emerges. In this case, the subject of adolescents' invulnerability returns to fake news. In fact, their 'vicarious' protection is aimed at the most gullible parents or friends, as shown in the following example:

Example 25: 'I never fell for it and I never shared, but I think of my parents or friends who always fall for it.'

The last semantic sphere of fake news sharing is, instead, independent of age and refers to 'social exclusion'. Teenagers, in fact, claim not to share fake news for fear of being pointed out by peers as gullible or false news spreaders and, as a result, be excluded from the network of friends both online and offline, as shown in the following examples:

Example 26: 'you can lose credibility, I do not share.'

Example 27: 'the risk is personal, you lose all credibility. Then if they point to you as the one who believes in everything, they isolate you, both on the same social media, but also when you go out with friends.'

In addition to individual risks, there are also social risks, such as scaremongering and the massive spread of fake news, as evidenced by the following excerpts:

Example 28: 'and as they have already said a general alarmism, I do not think there is any other factor that can contribute.'

Example 29: 'Maybe spread that news much more, that we take for real and spread it as much as possible, maybe that person sends it to another person and a chain is formed. These individual risks then have an effect on social risks, which lead to a greater virality of fake news.'

Another interesting aspect that emerged from the focus is that of the invulnerability of the fake news of the teenagers involved. There is, in fact, a 'trust' in being able to recognize instances of fake news. Some think they can compare them with other sources as demonstrated by the example:

Example 30: 'I don't think I don't take it all for real so even the slightest news I try to understand if it is real or not maybe comparing with other news and so on.'

Others are convinced that they have never come across fake news:

Example 31: 'No, not at all.'

Example 32: 'sincerely, I don't think so, but I still know what I am.'

This confirms their feeling of being invulnerable, and therefore immune to fake news, although aware of the phenomenon. Moreover, in recognizing fake news, the males are attentive to some signals that characterize fake news for them. In fact, fake news is often characterized by sensationalist titles and images that are intended to attract attention and by many details that are needed to distract from the real content.

Example 33: 'I'm always on the title, but also on photos, like if you put it on the front page of the cover, put the title in bold, in black, in large, in double block letters, unlike the writing of the article text and then a photo of the news, a photo that can be fake, manipulated.'

5.4. Racial Hoaxes

With regard to the last sphere under investigation, that of racial hoaxes, all the participants are aware that media generally talk about migrants in a distorted and manipulated way, as shown in the following extracts:

Example 34: 'We speak badly on the social networks of immigrants, with bad words, insults.'

Example 35: 'In my opinion, it is not properly discussed because if you highlight the real difficulties that face these people, maybe this news would really move someone and make a decision to help them instead.'

On this theme, within the focus group, adolescents tend to take a clear position, creating an intense discussion and confrontation. This makes us understand how adolescents are sensitive to the issue of immigration, in some cases, contrasting their family's values (e.g., 'I don't share what my own family thinks of immigrants'), recognizing the strongly manipulative intent of the hoaxes. However, they have several opinions about the reasons for the manipulation, regardless of gender or age. In fact, some adolescents say that manipulation is not carried out on events (e.g., disembarkations) but on numbers and especially on the numbers of deaths at sea:

Example 36: 'This can be tricky because, in the end, you don't know how many victims there really were.'

Some of them highlight how some news specify the nationality and/or the race of the subject under consideration; this should be a further element of manipulation:

Example 37: 'It tends to emphasize Moroccan did something, a Muslim found more to denigrate the fact that certain crimes, that is, a totally wrong thing or emphasized.'

Interestingly, in this case, it is noted that adolescents have clear ideas about the motivations of the manipulations, stating that immigration is a sensitive topic, the facts of which can be modified depending on political orientation:

Example 38: 'Yes, they tell a story that is not true, but that serves the government. It is bad news because they are human beings.'

Despite their general awareness of 'media manipulation', during the focus group adolescents did not recover examples of racial hoaxes: Also, in this case, as for fake news, participants reported generalized examples, which referred to a topic. Among the most recurrent were mentioned 'the landings', 'the immigrants who disfigure the Italian roads', 'the immigrants who steal work from the Italians', 'immigrants carrying diseases' and 'the anti-immigration policy'. Others, however, reported rather that they came across more comments containing hate speech and not racial hoaxes:

> Example 39: 'on TikTok, they talk about immigrants who are dirty and bring diseases. They have done nothing wrong to us and we make fun of them. But they're mostly comments. False news about immigrants...mmmh, no.'

Surprisingly, in fact, it emerges that the majority of racial hoaxes are traceable to 'economic' reasons to 'make money' by pointing out a general mistrust in journalism.

> Example 40: 'I think so that in my opinion is just one thing to make money... and just though the journalist writes Tunisian makes 100 thousand extra sales.'

Moreover, the respondents saw a close connection between the theme of immigrants and politics, and in particular Salvini (politician of Italian rightist party) is often mentioned, especially in relation to the theme of immigrants' landings.

In general, the adolescents involved in the research were resistant to talk about this topic, probably because social issues are less addressed in this age group or even for social desirability. In fact, most of the sample does not inform on this topic, or at most learns generic information through the news. The two aspects, fake news and racial-themed hoaxes, did not seem to be linked in the answers; none or a few of the participants in fact remembered racial hoaxes but many only Salvini's discrediting 'slogans' [16]. In this sense they highlighted the political array of the racial hoaxes, they recalled recurrent sentences, without reporting specific hints which can be linked to false news or also by opposing a counter-argument in response to typical anti-immigrant speeches.

> Example 41: 'about immigrants I don't find much news but I often think that Salvini especially in his Instagram posts, also has a TikTok profile I think, always brings a lot of misinformation about immigrants trying to paint them a bad way and then label them so that other people follow his thinking.'

As a global result of racial hoaxes, it can be seen that adolescents are very active in denouncing the unjust motivations of the spread and diffusion of anti-immigrant manipulated news, but that they have difficulty in recalling them.

The results of the content analysis of the focus groups can be seen in the following table divided by thematic areas (Figure 1):

Theme	Frequencies	Examples
1. Social use: which social use more, for how long, for what		
Social Network used more	27	"I mainly use Instagram and Tiktok, plus, I don't know if you can consider Google a social network, but I also use that"
Time spent online	36	"generally in the evening"
Social use motivation	41	"for fun or to keep in touch with friends"
2. Information needs: what medium they prefer, what topic, alarming news		
Information and Information medium	33	"Yes, I inquire, but only on topics that interest me"
	31	"Yes, I inquire through the Instagram fanpage, by means of algorithms"
Topics	10	"Sports news"
	10	"news about the show, TV series and celebrities"
Alarming news	8	"For me, the alarming news is about the covid"
3. Fake news and biased information: faced/share, examples, action done after fake discovery, the modalities of fake recognition, risks		
Faced/Shared	41	"Faced but never shared"
Examples	22	"A love story between the characters of Riverdale"/"Cristiano Ronaldo has paid a large share of money for health services"
	15	"I don't remember the news exactly. I remember the theme. One of the themes was gossip"
Action done after fake discovery	10	"I've checked the profile of actors"
	5	"My father told me that it was a fake news"
The modalities of fake recognition	5	"I usually check some informative sources"
Risks	5	"The sharing of fake news Can create scaremongering"
		"You lose credibility and you are isolated by friends"
	10	
4. Racial Hoaxes: how it is spoken of immigrants/ examples of racial hoaxes, on which medium is amplified more		
how it is spoken of immigrants/ examples of racial hoaxes	10	"about immigrants I don't find much news but I often think that Salvini especially in his Instagram posts, also has a tiktok profile I think, always brings a lot of misinformation about immigrants trying to paint them a bad way and then label them so that other people follow his thinking"
	5	"I don't remember the news exactly, but the fact that they're stealing our jobs."
on which medium is amplified more	29	"Above all on the tg"

Figure 1. Focus group results.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The aim of this study was to explore adolescents' attitudes to fake news, with particular attention to racial hoaxes. To satisfy this purpose, four thematic areas were investigated during the eight sessions of focus group discussions.

As for the first area investigated, namely the use of social media, it emerged how most of the young people claimed to spend a lot of time on these platforms. On the other hand, some of them claimed to spend little time on social media.

This result, however, can be interpreted as self-perception maybe due to the social desirability of adults present during the discussions, as the literature also states that teenagers spend a lot of time on social media and this fact is also increasing [38].

The literature states that the most used social media are Instagram, Facebook and Youtube (Moreau, 2018) and this is also confirmed in our sample of adolescents.

According to a survey conducted by Connected Generations [39], a project to promote strategies aimed at promoting positive and conscious use of the Internet for younger users, young people, between 11 and 18 years, claims to be always connected and this also confirms our results that show that young people mainly use social media for entertainment purposes.

Most of the activities they perform are related to watching videos and memes for fun or are aimed at maintaining contact with friends.

As for the news, confirming the results of our sample, our adolescents are informed through both traditional channels, such as the Tg news, and via social media. This result is partially confirmed by a study [1] on young Flemings that reveals that more than three-quarters (78%) of young people consume mainly news through their social media feeds, followed by more traditional sources such as television (74%). In addition, young people prefer 'soft' news about culture, sport and celebrities and are less interested in 'hard' news about politics, legal or social issues [1]. Our sample also showed a strong tendency to search for news and information on Google, and also to use this search engine to check the veracity of the information. This happens through the search for a news article and comparison with other sources, to refute or confirm the news itself. In particular, in our sample emerges the use of Google algorithms and social media to carry out inquiries. This happens because algorithms set information according to user preferences. In our sample, therefore, it is possible to speak of 'automatic' and 'sectoral' information. As regards, therefore, the information 'sectors', the distinction between hard news and soft news is strongly confirmed [40]. Teenagers, in fact, prefer soft ('frivolous') news, such as news on football, TV series and entertainment, always in the perspective of entertainment. In contrast, they find hard news, such as news (e.g., news on COVID-19), alarming.

Regarding the central theme of the focus, an interesting fact has emerged about the credibility and sharing of fake news. Adolescents show that it has happened that they believed in fake news, but they never shared the news. In fact, there is a difference between credulity and sharing. In imagining the motivations linked to a possible sharing, teenagers say that they would do so to inform their social network that this is false news. In other words, this happens because teenagers often share news online for the purpose of informing friends, perhaps not being aware that it is fake news. This result contrasts with what emerges in the sample of Spanish teenagers [26], where, instead, the awareness of the manipulative intent of fake news is specified. This would fall as a 'need to transmit information', understood as a need to provide the other with a network of information through their social wall.

In fact, studies show that social relationships and the status or reputation of the user are relevant indicators for sharing news [27]. The teenager feels that through his social network his reputation is strengthened, showing his center of interaction (friends, private and public groups) that he is 'informed' about new and relevant 'information'. The transmission of a novelty can make the user more easily accepted, especially if it is exaggerated information and the main feature of fake news [19].

According to the participants, there are negative effects of sharing, and these can be both individual and social. In fact, some authors have shown that sharing fake news can have negative effects on interpersonal relationships [27]. Our sample showed that individual risks may be related to profile reporting, which may also result in 'image damage'.

An interesting result emerges in relation to the emotionality linked to the credibility of teenagers concerning fake news. While the teenagers of our sample feel 'immune' to fake news, after having thought better, they claim to have fallen into certain instances of fake news that had as their topic the gossip of sports or the gossip of showbiz; it is possible, in fact, to define a kind of 'gossip vulnerability' that is based on emotional reactions triggered in adolescents for romantic reasons (e.g., sense of hope or joy referring to a romantic relationship between two actors). This aspect, instead, confirms the results of the study on the motivations of credulity and sharing of false news in Spanish teenagers [26], which

confirms that teenagers believe in the news about topics that are in their interests. These scholars [26] argue, in fact, for the need to help adolescents develop critical thinking, and to educate them already from the first years of schooling.

This need is most important for some types of manipulated news, known as racial hoaxes. In this case, the involved teenagers are aware of the phenomenon, demonstrating a certain sensitivity to the immigration phenomenon. Often, however, they hold beliefs that follow from the fake news, or they fail to accurately recall the racial hoaxes encountered or read. On this basis, the study, not having the claim of representativeness and generalizability, is the starting point for future studies. In fact, the results concerning the sample, consisting of 41 Italian adolescents, can be reinforced by enlarging a future sample also with a structured survey promoting a larger generalizability of this study.

Moreover with the literature being mainly focused on adults, the results can be seen as a starting point for further empirical studies to deepen the adolescents' vulnerability to misleading information in general and in relation to the racial component that can lead them to reinforce anti-immigrant attitudes as demonstrated in adult samples. In this perspective, future studies can use also an experimental paradigm to verify what we have seen in our participants' words. Furthermore, this study includes several limitations, like the cultural component, that can be enlarged in future studies in order to see for instance difference in adolescents who have in their educational programs media literacy courses. In fact, as shown in our results, adolescents have a high awareness of the causes of manipulation, but low awareness of how linguistic biases can be spread. In addition, to avoid social desirability, at the end of the focus a small survey was provided on how to verify information, that will be analyzed in future works.

Regarding future studies, understanding informative needs and use, psychological causes on the basis of adolescents' vulnerability to fake news and racial hoaxes can be a way to intervene as a pre-bunking strategy [41] in educational strategies aimed at reinforcing 'psychological resistance' against disinformation and anti-immigrant attitudes. In particular, concerning the results for adolescents' awareness of racial hoaxes, if they, on the one hand, show their knowledge of the political language manipulation, on the other hand, they showed how the involved adolescents do not use narrative tools such as counter-argumentation or counter-narratives which could be a particular type of 'imagined contact' [42], promoting factors that protect against the monolithic and prejudicial racial hoaxes framing [31].

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