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## Fake News is Shared by “Them” Not “Us” On Social Media: Perceptual Gaps of Fake News Sharing and Affective Polarization

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### ABSTRACT

Drawing on a two-wave survey conducted in Taiwan, this study examines the perceptual gaps of fake news sharing between pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal communicators, including both ordinary netizens and social media influencers. The findings indicate that social media news consumption increases exposure to political disagreement, which, in turn, widens the perceptual gaps of fake news sharing. In addition, the perceptual gaps concerning social media influencers are significantly associated with affective polarization. By extending the relative hostile media perception framework, this study elucidates a key mechanism through which the politicization of the “fake news” label on social media influences political polarization and democratic challenges.

While many cherish the opportunities social media outlets have created for news consumption, these online platforms also facilitate the spread of fake news (Nelson & Taneja, 2018). As a result, fake news has become a prominent concern in contemporary political communication. The term “fake news” refers to false information or news articles that are deliberately created to mislead readers (Lazer et al., 2018). Importantly, the societal impact of fake news does not depend solely on its actual prevalence, but also on how citizens perceive and interpret it (Chang, 2021).

When evaluating fake news shared on social media, partisans often engage in motivated reasoning, the tendency to selectively process information in ways that defend their pre-existing attitudes and group identities (Li & Su, 2020; Taber & Lodge, 2006). In this case, the term “fake news” has become politicized and often weaponized in online discourse. Consequently, social media news consumption is likely to shape perceptions about who is responsible for spreading fake news, particularly whether it is attributed to in-group fellows or out-group opponents (Tong et al., 2020). Along this line, our study draws upon the hostile media perception framework to examine how partisans form biased perceptions of fake news sharing.

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The hostile media perception theory posits that individuals often view ostensibly neutral news coverage as biased against their own side (Vallone et al., 1985). Building on this foundation, the relative hostile media perception (RHMP) framework emphasizes the gaps in perceived credibility between in-group and out-group news sources (Hmielowski et al., 2022; Zheng & Lu, 2021). People generally perceive politically congenial outlets as trustworthy while viewing counter-attitudinal outlets as biased. This study extends the RHMP framework to the perceptual gaps of fake news sharing, defined as the differences in how individuals perceive the frequency of fake news sharing by pro-attitudinal versus counter-attitudinal communicators. As the term “fake news” becomes politicized, partisans tend to perceive that their political opponents share fake news more often than their in-group allies, regardless of the actual sharing behaviors (Van der Linden et al., 2020).

Heightened affective polarization, marked by distrust and hostility toward political opponents, poses serious risks for democratic governance. It can erode willingness to compromise, reduce trust in institutions, and even fuel support for political violence (Iyengar et al., 2019). Likewise, perceptual gaps of fake news sharing can intensify misinformation disputes by fostering mutual blame across partisan lines, making people less receptive to fact-checking interventions and undermining a shared understanding of basic political facts (Flynn et al., 2017). These society concerns underscore the importance of understanding how such perceptual gaps arise and how they reinforce polarization in the social media environment.

Drawing on a two-wave survey conducted in Taiwan, we examine the perceptual gap of fake news sharing between 1) pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal netizens and 2) pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal social media influencers. This study advances the existing literature in three ways. First, while most research on fake news sharing has focused on ordinary social media users (Brummette et al., 2018; Cohen et al., 2020), we broaden the scope by examining perceptions of both netizens and influencers, who play an increasingly important role in online political communication (Stocking et al., 2024). Second, extending the roles that motivated reasoning plays in fake news research (Li & Su, 2020), we investigate how social media news consumption and exposure to political disagreement shape perceptual gaps in fake news sharing. Third, given the ongoing debate over whether and how social media use affects political polarization (Chen et al., 2024; Lee et al., 2022), this study identifies a mechanism linking social media news consumption to polarization through political disagreement and fake news perceptions. Taken together, our findings reveal how the politicization of the term “fake news” on social media could affect the functioning of democracy.

Taiwan offers a suitable context for examining perceptual gaps in fake news sharing and affective polarization, given its high social media penetration and citizens’ reliance on these platforms for political discussion and information exchange (Guo, 2023). Its vibrant yet polarized democratic environment also facilitates the spread of fake news, particularly during elections (Rauchfleisch et al., 2023). As fake news remains a salient topic in social media discourse (Chang, 2021), Taiwan provides a valuable case for understanding how social media use shapes polarization and attributions of misinformation across political lines.

## ***Hostile Media Perception and Perceptual Gaps of Fake News Sharing***

The hostile media perception describes individuals' tendency to perceive neutral media coverage as biased against their own views (Gunther, 1992). This framework helps explain how political identity influences the perceptions of media trustworthiness (Barnidge et al., 2020; Gunther et al., 2012). People on opposing sides often believe that media coverage favors their adversaries, a process rooted in the salience of social identities (Vallone et al., 1985). According to the social identity theory, individuals structure social differences and maintain favorable intergroup comparisons through categorization (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). By categorizing themselves as members of social groups, individuals fulfill the need to maintain a positive social identity (Hogg & Turner, 1987). Media coverage can activate these social identities, prompting audiences to interpret coverage through an identity-based lens and perceive hostile bias toward out-groups (Cooks & Bolland, 2021). To defend their in-group's status against potential threats, individuals rely on group identity as a heuristic for evaluating information, which heightens their tendency to perceive media as biased or hostile (Lin et al., 2016; Reid, 2012).

Scholars have extended the hostile media perception framework by introducing the concept of relative hostile media perception (RHMP), which captures the discrepancy in perceived credibility between pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal sources (Gunther et al., 2009; Zheng & Lu, 2021). Hostility toward incongruent news sources has become an emerging trend in contemporary democracies (Waisbord, 2018). Indeed, some studies have found that individuals perceive counter-attitudinal news sources as less trustworthy and more biased than pro-attitudinal sources (Arceneaux et al., 2012). The RHMP framework also encompasses situations in which individuals' evaluations vary according to the political stance of the media or content, even when those evaluations do not fall strictly within the "hostile" category (Gunther et al., 2009). For example, a conservative may perceive a liberal-leaning outlet as relatively neutral yet regard a conservative-leaning outlet as highly trustworthy and credible. The RHMP framework, therefore, provides a more comprehensive conceptual foundation for capturing identity-based differences in media perceptions (Stroud et al., 2014). It also serves as a flexible theoretical lens for linking such perceptions to broader identity-driven dynamics such as political polarization (Zheng et al., 2025).

Although the RHMP framework was originally developed to explain perceptual discrepancies regarding media sources, its core logic concerns identity-based evaluations of communicators and information sources more broadly (Stroud et al., 2014). In social media environments, the boundary between media sources and individual communicators has become increasingly blurred, as ordinary users and influencers both function as salient sources of political information (Stocking et al., 2024). Therefore, the RHMP framework can be extended to explain how political identities shape evaluations not only of institutional media outlets, but also of individual actors who disseminate political content on social media. In other words, people are likely to attribute lower credibility and greater blame to counter-attitudinal sources, regardless of whether these sources are media organizations or individual communicators on social media (Hameleers & Brosius, 2022).

In this study, we extend the RHMP framework by applying the identity-based differences in media perceptions to the perceptions of fake news sharing. We argue that there exists a perceptual gap of fake news sharing between pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal

communicators on social media. This is because “fake news” has become a politicized label used by social media news consumers to blame adversarial contents and sources (Tong et al., 2020). The frequent mentions of “fake news” by politicians have brought hostile perceptions to the forefront of public discourse and heightened the partisan nature of news source evaluations (Mourão et al., 2018). Previous studies have found that social media users are more likely to blame opponents for sharing inaccurate and fake news than their likeminded fellows (Hameleers & Brosius, 2022; Van der Linden et al., 2020).

### ***Antecedents of the Perceptual Gaps of Fake News Sharing***

Given that social media platforms facilitate the dissemination of fake news (Nelson & Taneja, 2018), previous research conducted in Taiwan suggests that news exposure on social media could shape perceptions of how common and severe the fake news problem is (Chang, 2021). Along this line, this study examines how social media news consumption shapes the perceptual gap in fake news sharing between pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal communicators. Social media news consumption can shape fake news perceptions because the amount of news consumption determines information availability, which is the degree to which certain types of information reach an audience (Chang, 2021; Nelson & Taneja, 2018). In this study, information availability refers to the degree to which social media users encounter news posts and discussion about the credibility and trustworthiness of news sources. Frequent news consumption may not increase exposure to actual fake news from opposing groups, but it could create more opportunities to encounter conversations about news credibility (Li & Su, 2020). Given that active news consumers often seek out pro-attitudinal sources and interact with likeminded others on social media (Shah et al., 2017), they are more likely to encounter narratives that blame opposing groups for spreading misinformation (Tong et al., 2020).

As social media allow individuals to consume news shared by both ordinary netizens and influencers, this study examines perceptual gaps regarding these two groups. The perceptual gaps concerning ordinary netizens are likely driven by selective interactions with like-minded individuals (Brummette et al., 2018). Social media encourage news-related discussions (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2016), which often involve evaluations of news credibility. Such conversations tend to amplify fake news accusations because they are emotionally charged and occur mainly among like-minded individuals (Brummette et al., 2018). Frequent social media news consumers are especially susceptible to these dynamics, as motivated reasoning leads politically attentive individuals to attribute the spread of misinformation to counter-attitudinal netizens (Hameleers & Brosius, 2022; Li & Su, 2020).

In contrast, social media influencers are typically defined as opinion leaders who have gained public recognition through social media platforms and at least occasionally discuss political topics with their followers (Harff & Schmuck, 2023). Their popularity and perceived authenticity grant them greater dissemination power and the capacity to amplify the spread of political messages, including misinformation (Cheng et al., 2024; Harff, 2025). As such, social media users are likely to attribute responsibility for fake news sharing to influencers, especially those who hold opposing opinions (Tong et al., 2020). Although the underlying mechanisms differ, social media news consumption is expected to shape perceptual gaps regarding both netizens and influencers. Given the aforementioned reasoning and empirical evidence, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H1:** Social media news consumption is positively associated with perceptual gaps of fake news sharing between pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal individuals. Specifically, frequent social media news consumption widens the perceptual gaps of fake news sharing.

Social media news consumption often exposes individuals to political disagreement on these platforms (Barnidge, 2020). Along this line, we examine how social media news consumption indirectly affects the perceptual gap in fake news sharing via political disagreement. Political disagreement can be viewed as a personal experience that shapes fake news perceptions (Chang, 2021). Frequent exposure to political disagreement leads individuals to perceive the other side as biased and may store negative impressions of counter-attitudinal sources in memory (Reid, 2012). Such impressions are activated when related constructs (e.g., fake news) are discussed (Bushman, 1998).

One mechanism underlying the hostile media perception is individuals' tendency to remember and recall unfavorable content (Gunther et al., 2012). In this case, they become more critical of counter-attitudinal sources and more likely to perceive them as hostile and fake (Tsang, 2022). According to the motivated skepticism framework (Taber & Lodge, 2006), political disagreement triggers counterarguing and thus widens the perceived hostility gap between pro- and counter-attitudinal communicators. Hmielowski et al. (2022) found that political disagreement increased the relative hostile media perception in the United States.

Frequent exposure to political disagreement on social media heightens the sense that undesirable contents are widely circulated and could potentially sway public opinion in favor of the out-group (Schulz et al., 2020). Such perceptions encourage defensive processing of disagreement and amplify perceptions of hostile bias (Gunther et al., 2012). Individuals often respond to these perceived threats by questioning the credibility of counter-attitudinal sources (Doosje et al., 2002). Accusations of sharing fake news can be used to delegitimize political opponents, so political disagreement is likely to lead individuals to attribute the "fake news" label to counter-attitudinal sources (Hameleers, 2020). We propose the following hypothesis:

**H2:** Social media news consumption is indirectly associated with perceptual gaps of fake news sharing via political disagreement. Specifically, social media news consumption is positively associated with political disagreement, which, in turn, widens the perceptual gaps of fake news sharing between pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal individuals.

### ***Perceptual Gaps of Fake News Sharing and Affective Polarization***

Accusations of fake news sharing are likely to cause polarization in a society as the other camp is not only ideologically different but is also seen as evildoers who disseminate lies and fake news on social media (Hameleers, 2020). The perceptual gap in fake news sharing and affective polarization are both thought to arise from negative attitudes toward the out-group (Iyengar et al., 2012; Reid, 2012; Tong et al., 2020). As partisans increasingly interpret fake news as a problem stemming from the other side, they may develop greater animosity toward those groups (Hameleers, 2020). Indeed, previous research suggests that the

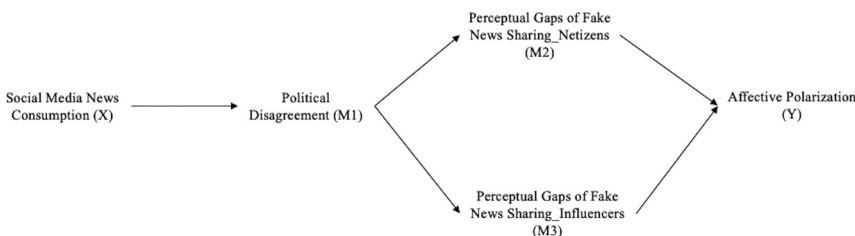
growing polarization in Taiwan is primarily driven by the negative perceptions of out-group members (Huang & Kuo, 2022).

Drawing from the social identity theory, individuals derive part of their identities from membership in social groups and seek to maintain a positive distinctiveness for their in-group (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). This motivation shapes how people evaluate information and its sources; specifically, they tend to favor in-group members and discredit out-group members more readily (Reid, 2012). A broader perceptual gap in fake news sharing therefore reflects stronger identity-driven processing of political information. Such identity salience reinforces rigid group boundaries and intensifies affective polarization by framing out-group members as both ideologically opposed and morally suspect (Hogg & Turner, 1987; Iyengar et al., 2012). When individuals perceive opposing groups as the primary sources of fake news, they are more likely to rely on pro-attitudinal sources for validation (Hameleers & Brosius, 2022; Tsang, 2022). In this case, the perceptual gap of fake news sharing is likely to reinforce polarization because repeated exposure to pro-attitudinal sources has been linked to heightened affective polarization (Garrett et al., 2014).

Additionally, the perceptual gap in fake news sharing can contribute to affective polarization via a spillover mechanism, in which the activation of one cognition increases the likelihood of engaging in related thoughts or attitudes (Lee, 2018). Individuals who believe the opposing side frequently spreads fake news on social media may feel threatened, perceiving it as harmful to their own group (Cohen et al., 2020). This hostile perception of fake news sharing can extend to associated political figures, parties, and supporters (Hart et al., 2015). As a result, politicized accusations of fake news sharing are likely to intensify affective polarization (Tong et al., 2020). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H3:** Perceptual gaps of fake news sharing between pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal individuals are positively associated with affective polarization. Specifically, wider perceptual gaps of fake news sharing are associated with higher levels of affective polarization.

Social media news consumption can increase individuals' exposure to political disagreement, as users inevitably encounter counter-attitudinal perspectives in their feeds (Barnidge, 2020). Such encounters can trigger defensive processing, reinforcing perceptions of bias and distrust toward opposing viewpoints. As a result, social media news users develop a perceptual gap in fake news sharing and attribute the spread of misinformation primarily to counter-attitudinal sources while trusting pro-attitudinal sources (Li & Su, 2020). This widening perceptual gap, in turn, intensifies affective polarization by deepening



**Figure 1.** Conceptual model. Note. This conceptual model illustrates all the hypotheses proposed in this study; H1:  $X \rightarrow M2$  and  $X \rightarrow M3$ ; H2:  $X \rightarrow M1 \rightarrow M2$  and  $X \rightarrow M1 \rightarrow M3$ ; H3:  $M2 \rightarrow Y$  and  $M3 \rightarrow Y$ ; H4:  $X \rightarrow M1 \rightarrow M2 \& M3 \rightarrow Y$ .

hostility and distrust toward political out-groups. Thus, we propose the following sequential mediation hypothesis (illustrated in Figure 1):

**H4:** Social media news consumption is indirectly associated with affective polarization via a sequential mediation of political disagreement and perceptual gaps of fake news sharing. Specifically, social media news consumption fosters political disagreement, which widens the perceptual gaps of fake news sharing, ultimately leading to increased affective polarization.

## Method

### Data

The data were collected through the Taiwan Communication Survey (TCS) online panel, which consists of a representative sample of adults aged 18 or older in Taiwan (Chang, 2024). On October 21, 2022, four weeks before the 2022 local election, panel members were invited to participate in the first wave of the survey (W1) in exchange for online shopping credits. By November 13, 2022, 1323 respondents completed the survey, of whom 1253 passed the attention check question and were retained in this study ( $N = 1,253$ ).

The second wave of the survey (W2) was conducted between November 28, 2022 and January 8, 2023, beginning two days after the local election. In this wave, 1042 respondents who had participated in W1 completed the questionnaire and passed the attention check, yielding a retention rate of 83.2%. Both waves of the survey were administered online, and all respondents were internet users. Because the study focuses on news exposure and perceptions of fake news sharing on social media, respondents who reported not using any social media platforms were excluded from further analyses. The final sample size is 1191 for W1 and 993 for W2. Compared with the population in Taiwan, the final sample includes more females and is younger and more educated.

### Measurement

*Social media news consumption* was measured by two items in Wave 1, with respondents indicating how often they engage in social media activities, such as following news and clicking on news links about politics and public affairs (Kim et al., 2022; Zheng et al., 2025). Each respondent's scores on these two questions were averaged to create a single scale (*Spearman-Brown coefficient* = 0.88), with higher scores reflecting a higher level of news consumption on social media ( $M = 2.57$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ,  $Range = 1$  to 4).

*Political disagreement* is operationalized as the extent to which individuals are exposed to information they disagree with on social media. It was measured by two items in Wave 1, with respondents indicating how often they encounter the following information on social media: 1) political information that they disagree with and 2) information that is critical of the political party or politician they support (Chen et al., 2024; Lu & Lee, 2022). Each respondent's scores on these two questions were combined into a single index (*Spearman-Brown coefficient* = 0.88), with higher scores reflecting a higher level of political disagreement encountered on social media ( $M = 2.36$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ,  $Range = 1$  to 4).

*Perceptual gap of fake news sharing* was measured by four items in both waves. Given the increasing prominence of social media influencers in political communication, this study measured individuals' perceptions about both ordinary netizens and influencers.<sup>1</sup> Respondents reported how often (1 = never, 4 = always) they feel the following groups of people would post fake news on social media: 1) netizens sharing similar political opinions; 2) netizens with different political opinions; 3) social media influencers with similar political opinions; and 4) social media influencers with different political opinions. To compute the perceptual gap of fake news sharing, we followed prior research (Hmielowski et al., 2022; Zheng & Lu, 2021) by subtracting the perceptions of pro-attitudinal members from the perceptions of counter-attitudinal members. Two indicators were created for subsequent analyses: 1) perceptual gap of fake news sharing between pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal netizens (wave one:  $M = .14$ ,  $SD = .66$ , Range = -2 to 3; wave two:  $M = .14$ ,  $SD = .64$ , Range = -3 to 3) and 2) perceptual gap of fake news sharing between pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal social media influencers (wave one:  $M = .13$ ,  $SD = .72$ , Range = -2 to 3; wave two:  $M = .08$ ,  $SD = .72$ , Range = -3 to 3).

*Affective polarization* was measured in both waves using two feeling thermometer questions. The two major political parties in Taiwan are the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). Respondents rated their feelings toward KMT/KMT politicians and DPP/DPP politicians on a scale ranging from 0 = very cold or unfavorable feeling to 100 = very warm or favorable feeling. Following previous literature (Iyengar et al., 2019), we computed affective polarization by taking the absolute value of the difference between these two values (wave one:  $M = 25.39$ ,  $SD = 27.13$ ; wave two:  $M = 25.63$ ,  $SD = 26.95$ ).

*Control variables* in our study included age ( $M = 41.10$ ,  $SD = 13.23$ ), gender (male: 42.70%), education ( $M = 5.68$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ , Range = 1 to 8), political interest ( $M = 1.67$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ , Range = 0 to 4), television news use ( $M = 2.81$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ , Range = 1 to 4), newspaper use ( $M = 1.57$ ,  $SD = .94$ , Range = 1 to 4), radio news use ( $M = 1.48$ ,  $SD = .91$ , Range = 1 to 4), and online news use ( $M = 2.77$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ , Range = 1 to 4).

## Results

This study employed ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models to test the hypotheses with panel analyses of lagged dependent variables. Several control variables were significantly related to perceptual gaps and affective polarization. Education and political interest were positively associated with the perceptual gaps of fake news sharing among both netizens and social media influencers, and consistent with the literature (Lee et al., 2022), education was negatively related with affective polarization while individuals with higher political interest tended to be more polarized. The findings are summarized in Table 1.

H1 predicted that social media news consumption would be positively associated with perceptual gaps in fake news sharing. As shown in Table 1, controlling for the lagged values of the dependent variables, social media news consumption had a marginally significant relationship with the perceptual gaps in fake news sharing between pro-attitudinal and

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<sup>1</sup>Following previous literature (Harff & Schmuck, 2023), we defined influencers in the questionnaire as individuals who have become famous online and share information about politics and public affairs via platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram.

**Table 1.** Regression analysis of perceptual gaps in fake news sharing and affective polarization.

Predictors	Perceptual Gap between Netizens (W2)	Perceptual Gap between Influencers (W2)	Affective Polarization (W2)
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<b>Independent Variables</b>			
SM News Consumption	.06 (.03) <sup>†</sup>	.05 (.04)	.31 (.88)
Perceptual Gap between Netizens (W1)	.23 (.03) <sup>***</sup>	N/A	-.97 (.94)
Perceptual Gap between Influencers (W1)	N/A	.22 (.03) <sup>***</sup>	2.24 (.86) <sup>**</sup>
<b>Control Variables</b>			
Age	-.001 (.002)	.003 (.002)	-.01 (.05)
Gender (1 = Male; 0 = Female)	.05 (.04)	-.02 (.05)	-1.89 (1.15) <sup>†</sup>
Education	.07 (.02) <sup>**</sup>	.09 (.03) <sup>***</sup>	-1.33 (.59) <sup>*</sup>
Political Interest	.07 (.02) <sup>**</sup>	.04 (.03) <sup>†</sup>	1.28 (.61) <sup>*</sup>
Television News	.001 (.02)	.01 (.02)	-.86 (.52) <sup>†</sup>
Newspaper News	-.01 (.02)	-.02 (.03)	.56 (.63)
Radio Shows	-.03 (.02)	-.03 (.03)	.62 (.63) <sup>*</sup>
Online News	-.03 (.02) <sup>†</sup>	-.03 (.02)	.25 (.51)
Affective Polarization (W1)	N/A	N/A	.76 (.02) <sup>***</sup>
Adjusted R Square	.10	.07	.60

Listwise; <sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ ; <sup>\*</sup> $p < .05$ ; <sup>\*\*</sup> $p < .01$ ; <sup>\*\*\*</sup> $p < .001$ ; SM: Social Media; Cell entries are unstandardized coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.

counter-attitudinal netizens ( $B = .06, t = 1.73, p = .09$ ). As for the perception of influencers, the results indicate that social media news consumption was not significantly related with the perceptual gaps between pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal social media influencers ( $B = .05, t = 1.23, p = .22$ ). Therefore, H1 is not supported.

H2 predicted that social media news consumption would be indirectly associated with perceptual gaps in fake news sharing via political disagreement. To test this indirect impact, this study used the PROCESS Macro and the Model 4 template offered by Hayes (2017). With 5000 bootstrap samples, this study analyzed the 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (CIs) associated with the indirect effects on perceptual gaps of fake news sharing. As this study explored two indicators of the perceptual gaps, we examined them separately in two mediation analyses, with one for netizens and the other for social media influencers. The findings indicate that social media news consumption was indirectly associated with both indicators of the perceptual gaps via political disagreement (*Bootstrap CI* = [.0029, .0443] for netizens; *Bootstrap CI* = [.0113, .0614] for social media influencers). The confidence intervals do not include zero, suggesting significant indirect relationships. Therefore, H2 is supported.

H3 predicted that perceptual gaps of fake news sharing would be positively associated with affective polarization. As shown in Table 1, controlling for the lagged values of the dependent variable, the perceptual gap of fake news sharing between pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal influencers was significantly associated with affective polarization ( $B = 2.24, t = 2.60, p < .01$ ). As individuals perceived that counter-attitudinal influencers are sharing more fake news than pro-attitudinal influencers, they tended to hold more

polarized attitudes toward political parties and politicians. However, the perceptual gap of fake news sharing between pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal netizens was not significantly associated with affective polarization ( $B = -.97$ ,  $t = -1.03$ ,  $p = .30$ ). Therefore, H3 is partially supported.

H4 predicted that social media news consumption would be indirectly associated with affective polarization via a sequential mediation of political disagreement and perceptual gaps of fake news sharing. With the perceptual gaps represented by two indicators in this study, we specified a multi-mediator path model by using the Model 81 template offered in the PROCESS Macro (Hayes, 2017).<sup>2</sup> Controlling for the lagged values of the dependent variable, social media news consumption was indirectly associated with affective polarization via political disagreement and the subsequent perceptual gap of fake news sharing between pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal influencers (*Bootstrap CI* = [.0082, .1794]). The confidence intervals do not include zero, suggesting that the sequential mediation model was significant. As for the perception of netizens, the sequential mediation model was statistically insignificant (*Bootstrap CI* = [-.1790, .0533]). This is because the perceptual gap of fake news sharing between pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal netizens was not significantly associated with affective polarization (i.e., the last path of the sequential mediation model). In sum, H4 is partially supported.

## Discussion

Employing data from a two-wave survey conducted in Taiwan, this study investigated the antecedents and the polarizing effects of the perceptual gap of fake news sharing between pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal communicators. The findings indicate that social media news consumption is not directly associated with the perceptual gaps. Accusing the other side of disseminating fake news is a more severe charge than the typical negative perceptions examined under the hostile media perception framework (e.g., bias, untrustworthiness, etc.). Social media news consumers may not adopt such severe accusations until their group identities face major challenges such as frequent encounters with political disagreement (Doosje et al., 2002).

This explanation is partly supported by the mediating role of political disagreement. The results indicate that social media news consumption indirectly widens the perceptual gap of fake news sharing via political disagreement. In other words, frequent exposure to political disagreement is an essential step for social media news users to believe that fake news is shared more often by out-group than in-group members. Specifically, social media news consumption increases encounters with political disagreement, reflecting the platforms' potential to expose users to diverse viewpoints (Barnidge, 2020). However, these disagreements often amplify partisan divides by widening the perceptual gaps of fake news sharing between pro- and counter-attitudinal communicators. As the cross-cutting interactions on social media frequently involve incivility and lack rational reasoning (Chen & Lu, 2017), individuals tend to adopt the "fake news" label as a heuristic to dismiss opposing views (Tong et al., 2020).

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<sup>2</sup>We also tested the sequential mediation model with structural equation modeling (SEM) and the results were nearly identical. As demonstrated in prior research, the PROCESS Macro and SEM typically yield similar results for observed variable models (Hayes et al., 2017).

Furthermore, this study finds that the perceptual gap of fake news sharing between pro-attitudinal and counter-attitudinal influencers also causes affective polarization in Taiwan. While previous studies have documented that the dissemination of fake news is a severe challenge for democracy, it is hard to estimate exposure to fake news (Zhang & Ghorbani, 2020). In this case, it is important to study the impact of perceptions about fake news because citizens across the globe have become increasingly concerned about it. This finding extends the literature by demonstrating that mere perceptions of fake news sharing could cause affective polarization. It is worth noting that affective polarization is triggered by perceptual gaps concerning influencers but not ordinary netizens. One possible explanation is that social media influencers are often perceived to possess greater visibility and dissemination power than ordinary users (Cheng et al., 2024; Harff, 2025). Their alleged sharing of fake news is thus regarded as more consequential for shaping public opinion and electoral outcomes. As such, counter-attitudinal influencers may be viewed as more threatening than netizens, intensifying affective polarization. Future research should further explore the mechanisms underlying the polarizing effects of influencers relative to ordinary users.

The sequential mediation model examined in this study contributes to the literature by pointing out an important mechanism underlying the polarizing effect of social media news consumption and online political disagreement. When frequent encounters with political disagreement lead social media news users to perceive counter-attitudinal influencers as evildoers sharing fake news, it is no surprise that they will hold hostile and unfavorable attitudes toward the other side. As affective polarization can reduce political tolerance and willingness to compromise (Iyengar et al., 2019), it is detrimental to an emerging democracy such as Taiwan. Future research could also replicate this study across different countries to test the generalizability of these findings. Nevertheless, the Taiwanese case offers meaningful implications for understanding how political disagreement and the perceptual gaps of fake news sharing can exacerbate affective polarization because many digitally connected democracies with high social media penetration and strong partisan divides are facing similar challenges.

Theoretically, this study extends the relative hostile media perception (RHMP) framework by moving beyond evaluations of media outlets (Gunther et al., 2009) to examine perceptual gaps of fake news sharing between pro- and counter-attitudinal communicators. By linking RHMP to the politicization of fake news, we show that identity-based credibility judgments shape not only trust in media but also how citizens assign blame for misinformation. The findings also extend and support the revised communication mediation model (Shah et al., 2017), which explicates the process linking Stimulus (i.e., social media news consumption) to Response (i.e., affective polarization). In this process, exposure to political disagreement creates opportunities for the Reasoning component as it allows individuals to reflect on counter-attitudinal information (Price et al., 2002). The perceptual gap in fake news sharing (a perception driven by political orientations) serves as the Orientation component. Notably, the outcome (i.e., affective polarization) moves beyond the focus on participatory behaviors to attitudinal consequences, which is a highlight in the revised communication mediation model.

The findings of this study have important social and practical implications. Interventions aimed at mitigating polarization should address not only the circulation of false information

but also the perceptions of who is responsible for its dissemination. Media literacy initiatives may help citizens recognize the politicized use of the “fake news” label and encourage more rational evaluation of political disagreement. In addition, social media platforms could foster constructive cross-cutting discourse by emphasizing verifiable factual content and moderating inflammatory accusations. These measures may reduce the likelihood that political disagreement escalates into mutual delegitimization. Finally, political elites should be more cautious about employing the term “fake news” as a rhetorical device, as such discourse risks deepening hostility toward political out-groups.

Some limitations should be noted in this study. First, the two-wave survey was conducted during the local election in Taiwan with a relatively short interval between the two waves. During the election, the competition between parties was fierce and social media was filled with political attacks and misinformation. Therefore, the timing of the survey may inflate the negative perception and attitude toward the other side. In addition, the relatively short interval may not provide clear causal patterns. Future research could examine the relationships proposed in this study during a non-election time with a longer interval to reduce potential panel conditioning effects and provide stronger evidence for temporal ordering among the variables.

Second, the perceptual gaps in fake news sharing were calculated by subtracting respondents’ ratings of in-group communicators from their ratings of out-group communicators. While this approach provides a reasonable estimate of the relative gap, it cannot differentiate individuals who rate both groups low from those who rate both groups high. Future research could develop a typology to classify individuals based on their ratings of both in-group and out-group communicators.

Third, in the measurement related to social media influencers, the questionnaire did not specify a threshold for the number of followers. As a result, respondents may have different interpretations of who qualifies as an influencer, particularly in the case of micro-influencers. Future research should include explicit criteria, such as follower count, to ensure consistency in how respondents interpret the term. It is also worth noting that political disagreement can be measured not only as exposure to disagreeing information but also as the interaction or exchange of differing opinions. Future studies should consider capturing these different forms of disagreement to better understand their effects on polarization.

## Conclusion

This study demonstrated that social media news consumption indirectly widens the perceptual gap in fake news sharing through increased exposure to political disagreement, and that this perceptual gap fosters affective polarization. These findings underscore that polarization arises not only from misinformation itself but also from perceptions about who spreads it. As the term “fake news” is increasingly weaponized by political elites, this study suggests that people’s biased perceptions of fake news sharing can be as detrimental to democracy as exposure to misinformation itself. Future research should further examine how these dynamics unfold across different social media platforms with distinct affordances, how they evolve during nonelection periods, and whether similar patterns hold in more established democracies. Exploring these questions will deepen our understanding of the roles that fake news plays in the evolving media environment.

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