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Article

## Skeptical Inertia in the Face of Polarization: News Consumption and Misinformation in Turkey

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### Abstract

Focusing on Turkey, this article analyzes the role of polarization on news users' perception of misinformation and mistrust in the news on social media. Turkey is one of the countries where citizens complain most about misinformation on the internet. The citizens' trust in news institutions is also in continuous decline. Furthermore, both Turkish society and its media landscape are politically highly polarized. Focusing on Turkey's highly polarized environment, the article aims to analyze how political polarization influences the users' trust in the news and their perceptions about misinformation on social media. The study is based on multi-method research, including focus groups, media diaries, and interviews with people of different ages and socioeconomic backgrounds. The article firstly demonstrates different strategies that the users develop to validate information, including searching for any suspicious information on search engines, looking at the comments below the post, and looking at other news media, especially television. Secondly, we will discuss how more affective mechanisms of news assessment come into prominence while evaluating political news. Although our participants are self-aware and critical about their partisan attitudes in news consumption and evaluation, they also reveal media sources to which they feel politically closer. We propose the concept of "skeptical inertia" to refer to this self-critical yet passive position of the users in the face of the polarized news environment in Turkey.

### Keywords

misinformation; news; polarization; skeptical inertia; social media; Turkey

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

The literature notably documents the multilevel relationship between polarization, online news consumption, misinformation, and declining trust in the news (Fletcher & Park, 2017; Levy, 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2017; Serrano-Puche, 2021; Strömbäck et al., 2020). In the contexts where social and political polarization prevails, and populism is the dominant style of political rhetoric, media users access the news increasingly via online sources, such as social media, search engines, and other internet platforms. In turn, online news consumption

feeds into polarization saturated by the intensive spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories erected on the separation between them and us. The literature dominantly revolves around such cases as the USA, Russia, and Brazil (for instance, Baum & Groeling, 2008; Machado et al., 2018; Urman, 2019). However, further studies that explore the contextual elements influencing the multilevel interrelationships between polarization, online news consumption, and misinformation are in order.

Turkey is among the top countries where citizens complain about misinformation on the internet.

Longitudinal studies show that citizens' trust in news media declines every year (e.g., Aydın et al., 2021). Furthermore, Turkish society is politically highly polarized, and this polarization strongly influences the mediascape of the country. The majority of the news outlets and programs demonstrate partisan tendencies of different degrees in their news reporting. Focusing on Turkey's highly polarized environment, the article aims to answer the following research questions: How do social media users assess the accuracy of the content with which they engage in social media? How does political polarization influence the users' trust in the news and their perceptions about misinformation on social media? What actions do social media users take in the face of information they mistrust? In what ways do they seek to establish trust?

The study is based on multi-method research, including focus groups, media diaries, and interviews with people of different ages and socioeconomic backgrounds. The article firstly demonstrates the strategies that the users develop to validate information, including searching for suspicious information on search engines, looking at the number of followers of accounts that share information or the comments below the post, and looking at other news media, especially television. Secondly, we discuss the influences of polarization on news consumption, trust, and the perception of misinformation. Our analysis shows that although news literacy skills are useful for validating information about less polarized topics online, belonging, partisanship, and mistrust also play a crucial role in shaping the perception of misinformation on social media in polarized contexts. In contexts of severe polarization such as Turkey, news users are highly skeptical of political news which refers to partisan politics, President Erdoğan, his family, and the country's historical fault lines, such as ethnic and sectarian identities. However, news users simultaneously settle into a position of passivity when it comes to evaluating the accuracy of questionable content by relying on a perspective that is similar to their own existing worldview and political leanings. We refer to such a position of passivity despite doubt in the face of political news "skeptical inertia."

This study's contribution to the field of online news use, trust, and misinformation is threefold. Firstly, our findings demonstrate that, especially in the contexts of severe polarization, news consumption goes beyond the rational processes of an informed citizenry and news literacy and is rather closely linked to the affective domain. Our findings align with the emergent literature on news consumption as affect-bound practice (Papacharissi, 2015; Serrano-Puche, 2021), with our study providing evidence from an understudied context. Secondly, our findings illustrate that trust is not always simply the opposite of mistrust but is, in fact, a distinct construct on its own (cf. Rice & Taylor, 2020). Unbinding the trust vs. mistrust dichotomy opens up a space for context-bound, operational definitions of trust and mistrust. Our participants often deploy intuitive and affec-

tive tactics for establishing trust in the news they consume. These tactics are profoundly shaped by the Turkish context marked by the political divisions between "us" and "them." Finally, our study shows that high levels of self-awareness about the polarized social environment and constant self-reflection on one's news consumption do not directly entail literate news consumption but might cause people to give up seeking alternative news sources for verification. Such a state of inertia (stemming from active self-reflection and skepticism) differs from the conventional understandings of filter bubbles based on availability bias and selective exposure, which assume that news users are in a passive position, to begin with (cf. Spohr, 2017). On the other hand, our findings show that users end up in a position of inertia by which they endorse news narratives that align with their political views after a laborious verification process.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Misinformation and News

Research on misinformation and false news has developed immensely since the rise of social and mobile media in 2008 (Ha et al., 2019). Such scholarly interest has grown in parallel with the increasing relevancy of discussions around fake news over the last decade, especially since the controversial American election and the UK Brexit referendum of 2016 (Ha et al., 2019). Many scholars have paid close attention to this issue, looking in-depth at misinformation, and particularly to false news as a category of misinformation (Bennett & Livingston, 2020; Spohr, 2017; Waisbord, 2018; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

The interdisciplinary academic work focuses primarily on the internet and social media as the principal arenas in which misinformation and false news are shared. Without a doubt, social media has entailed deep structural transformations in the actualization of the public sphere, which has facilitated the spread of false information (Turcilo & Obrenovic, 2020; van Dijck & Poell, 2015). However, the problem of false news is limited neither to the internet space nor to the social media era. Instances of serious misinformation expose the degeneration of legacy news media that has occurred against the backdrop of neoliberal capitalism, in which basic journalistic principles, such as accuracy, independence, and objectivity, have gradually been eroded at the hands of media moguls and corporations (Baybars-Hawks & Akser, 2012; Hallin, 2008). Such erosion stems from the demand for high-speed, tabloidized internet news, highlighted by the platform architectures and the contingent business models of internet media. The outcome is the inexpugnable global problem of misinformation and false news that drag down public trust in media and democratic institutions (van Zoonen, 2012).

The interdisciplinary academic work on misinformation relies mostly on quantitative methods. Ha et al.

(2019) scrutinize 142 articles dealing with misinformation and false news published between 2008 and 2017 to map out the analysis trends and disciplinary tendencies in misinformation studies. According to their findings, most articles (43.45%) rely on quantitative research techniques. One-third of the pieces analyzed are theoretical papers without concrete data, and 7.59% derive from mixed methods. Ha et al. (2019, p. 300) note that “only 5.17% of the articles used a qualitative approach.” In their review of the news-sharing literature, Kümpel et al. (2015) examined 461 articles published between 2004 and 2014 and noted three foci in this corpus. Among the 461 articles the research team studied, only 4% relied on qualitative methodologies. In much of this USA-based literature, scholars tend to discount factors such as the political and historical context (Kümpel et al., 2015). This finding also reveals the scarcity of qualitative and mixed-method designs in news sharing research (Kümpel et al., 2015).

The problem of false news and misinformation is of global concern. Nevertheless, the agents of misinformation who produce, circulate, and consume false news are situated people in specific cultural, historical, and political settings. Thus, scholars of misinformation must open their minds towards diverse national media systems, different cultural settings, and the social functions of news use (cf. Kümpel et al., 2015) to develop robust mechanisms for the fight against false online information. Especially in settings where media worlds are unstable, the news media is under political pressure, and the social media is by default a platform of propaganda, news use is simply a politicized practice. Turkey is a case in point, with increasingly authoritarian tendencies encompassing online and conventional media worlds (cf. Kaygusuz, 2018; Somer, 2016). The literature notes that the ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party) has utilized media as “the main instruments of authoritarianism” (Somer, 2016, p. 495) to manipulate public opinion in Turkey since the 2000s. The news users’ diminishing trust in media results from this media environment. Longitudinal research studies show that the media ranks bottom of the list of trustworthy institutions in Turkey (Aydın et al., 2021). The Reuters Institute’s 2018 *Digital News Report* indicates that Turkey ranks among the top countries for mistrust in the news media (Yanatma, 2018). The prevalent authoritarian tendencies and the subsequent mistrust in the media have made Turkish news users susceptible to misinformation spread via social media and conventional media, especially during crises such as elections and the pandemic.

## 2.2. Polarization, News Consumption, and Trust in the News

In simplest terms, polarization is the increasing distance between competing political orientations (Kearney, 2019). Whereas most countries are marked by some level of polarization, in the case of a highly polarized

context, we can speak of “severe polarization,” which refers to a process whereby the usual diversity in a society increasingly aligns along a single dimension. People increasingly perceive and describe politics and society in terms of “us” versus “them” (McCoy et al., 2018). Polarization also has an affective dimension. Especially in the case of severe polarization, the political distance between the political groups is increasingly based on social identities and not on ideological differences (Iyengar et al., 2012; McCoy et al., 2018).

Studies note the relationship between trust, news, and polarization and draw varying conclusions about the nature of this relationship (Suiter & Fletcher, 2020). There is a growing body of literature on how media consumption generally and social media use more specifically influence polarization and vice versa (Barberá, 2015; Beaufort, 2018; Bozdog, 2020; Himelboim et al., 2013; Kearney, 2019; Sunstein, 2002). Such research focuses on the effects of filter bubbles on political opinions, the role of algorithms on cross-cutting exposure on social media, and the influence of polarization on network diversity. Based on a large field experiment that randomly offered participants subscriptions to conservative or liberal news outlets on Facebook, Levy (2021) affirms that social media algorithms increase polarization by limiting exposure to counter-attitudinal news. Based on datasets collected from Twitter in the context of the USA, Ribeiro et al. (2017) investigate how polarization creates distinct narratives on misinformation and reveal that even the debate around fake news on Twitter is highly polarized. This finding indicates that the role of the context influences the semantics of misinformation, potentially shifting from one given setting to the other. Indeed, the various studies in the field provide inconsistent results concerning the polarizing role of social media. As Lee (2016) argues, polarization is not a straightforward and unified process and must be considered in specific contexts. Certain contexts strengthen the polarizing potential of social media; others might mitigate it. Though limited, the comparative and longitudinal studies of trust in the news (Fletcher & Park, 2017) shed light on the contextual elements that influence the complexity of the relationship between news trust and polarization. A further focus on specific sociopolitical and cultural contexts would illuminate the multilayered relationship between polarization, the shifting nature of news use, and mistrust in the news.

Turkey has been among the most severely polarized countries in recent years (McCoy et al., 2018) and presents a fascinating case for studying how polarization influences news consumption. The divisions in the population in Turkey emerge along historical fault lines in the country: ethnic (Kurds and Turks), sectarian (Alevi and Sunnis), and ideological (AKP supporters and AKP opponents; Çelik et al., 2017). In recent years, the ruling AKP party’s polarizing discourses have strengthened these societal divisions and led to even greater polarization among its supporters and opponents (McCoy et al.,

2018). This political polarization also increases the social distance between the supporters of different political parties (Erdoğan, 2016; Erdoğan & Uyan-Semerci, 2018). Strong parallelism between media and political parties and severe polarization marks the Turkish mass media landscape (Çarkoğlu et al., 2014; Panayırıcı et al., 2016). The news outlets' framing strategies in Turkey align with their affiliated political actors (Panayırıcı et al., 2016). People often prefer media outlets that align with their political preferences (Erdoğan & Uyan-Semerci, 2018). Polarization also determines the nature of public discourse in social media. For example, only 25% of the users indicate that they would discuss critical issues on social media (Erdoğan & Uyan-Semerci, 2018). In this highly polarized environment, how do social media users assess the accuracy of the content on social media? How does political polarization influence the users' trust in the news and their perceptions about misinformation on social media? What actions do social media users take when faced with news they mistrust? Based on the combination of qualitative data collection techniques, our findings reveal complex interrelationships between news consumption and news trust from the users' perspective against a backdrop of severe political polarization.

### 3. Research Methods

This study relies on qualitative methodology with multiple research techniques, including focus groups, solicited media diaries, and semi-structured interviews with the diary subjects. The methodological toolkit sought to expose the multilayered influence of social and political contexts on how individuals evaluate the accuracy of news and information they get on social media. We collected the data during the two weeks leading up to the local elections held in Turkey on March 31st, 2019. The pre-election period was especially fruitful for answering research questions because there was heightened tension between the incumbent AKP party's supporters and those of the opposition coalition (secularist/social democrat CHP, the center-right İYİ Party, and the pro-Kurdish HDP).

In cooperation with a professional research company based in Istanbul, we recruited 48 participants representing four major socioeconomic status groups determined by the Turkish Consumer Research Foundation (TÜAD). Our study included samples of A (upper), B (upper middle), C1 (middle), and C2 (lower middle) socioeconomic status groups. The participants, all of whom were self-reported social media users who engage with the news on the internet daily, were between 17 and 65 years old. We conducted six focus groups with eight participants over two consecutive days. In all focus groups, an equal number of men and women were present. Sessions took place in the observation rooms of the research company. We moderated the sessions, which lasted between one and a half to two hours, and all sessions were video and sound recorded. The conversa-

tions focused on news and social media in general, news access, information assessment and sharing strategies, and the participant's reasons for verifying and sharing news. We selected five out of the eight participants at the end of each session based on our immediate assessment of each individual's articulations about news use during the focus group sessions. To obtain a diverse data set, we selected individuals from different occupational backgrounds, ideological leanings, and political orientations. These 30 participants continued the study by filling out media diaries over one week.

In this study, media diaries functioned not only to generate self-reported notes about news use but especially to deepen an ongoing conversation with the research participants. We conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant based on the 30 participants' week-long diary notes about their news consumption. Between 20 to 45 minutes each, the interviews were conducted to clarify the diary entries and generate further dialogue concerning participants' news use. Moreover, the diaries opened up a critical space for the participants to reflect on their engagement with the news. While we obtained in-depth, self-reported data on the users' practices and perceptions of news, trust, and misinformation, the findings of this study only provide windows on these issues in the context of Turkey and are not generalizable.

The transcribed interviews, focus group data, and the media diaries were analyzed employing qualitative content analysis facilitated by the software package Atlas.ti's structuring, coding, and patterning of the material. For the analysis, we developed a thematic coding scheme based on this study's conceptual model and the surveyed literature. The themes included the users' reflection on the context, platforms, topics, and verification practices.

### 4. Findings

News literacy is often presented as the solution for misinformation online with the assumption that "news literate" users can easily assess and validate misinformation online. Although there are competing definitions of news literacy, Malik et al. (2013, pp. 8–9) argue that any definition of the term should include (a) "an understanding of the role news plays in society," (b) the motivation to seek out the news, (c) "the ability to find/identify/recognize news," (d) "the ability to critically evaluate news," and (e) "the ability to create news." Our participants recognize the importance of news in society and are motivated to seek out news of different sorts. Although almost none of the participants actively create news, most develop strategies to find, identify, recognize, and critically evaluate it. However, especially as they seek news and evaluate political content, they are less accuracy-oriented and more inclined to choose and believe sources closer to their political standpoints. Whereas the users adopt more rational strategies at the cognitive level to assess the accuracy of news on less



politicized topics, the evaluation of political news as the users describe it has a more affective dimension.

In this section, we first describe what makes our participants doubt the accuracy of news on social media and then discuss the strategies they adopt to verify any such news source. We draw attention to one important distinction that the participants make concerning “political news,” as they refer to it. When a particular news item is related to politics, the participants are less interested in the accuracy of the news and more goal-oriented in their news consumption. They believe in “what feels closer to them” (Ayse, female, 26, banker).

#### 4.1. *Doubting the Accuracy of News Online*

In the focus groups, several of our research participants demonstrated a keen awareness of the problem of false news on social media. This observation parallels the Reuters Institute’s *Digital News Report*, which places Turkey among the top countries where citizens complain about false news (Yanatma, 2018). Our participants, however, noted diverse reasons for doubting the accuracy of online content. These included inconsistent visuals accompanying the text or the number of followers for the root account. Ziya, a 21-year-old college student, for instance, stated that the headline of a news story would flag the news’ accuracy level:

The headline makes it obvious. Some news sites or [social media] accounts make headlines just to get clicks and get attention. When you click on them, you see stuff irrelevant to the headline. When a headline is sensational like “Shock! Shock! Shock!” [Şok, şok, şok], it is most likely false news.

Sensational titles are received with suspicion by the participants, as Ziya indicates above, and are interpreted as signs of false news. This is especially the case if there is a mismatch between the title and the content. The type of visuals accompanying news stories raised suspicion for a number of our research participants. Even though the presence of photographs often flagged articles as potentially accurate for the majority of the focus group participants, some (especially the younger social media users) questioned the images’ authenticity and whether the photographs were directly related to the news narrative. Ziya explained this as follows: “When news by a journalist comes with a high-resolution photograph taken with a journalist’s professional camera, you get that it is not fake. [But] when the photo is taken with a 3-megapixel camera like a toaster, it’s not credible.”

The low resolution of a visual element in the news is seen as a sign of lack of journalistic professionalism by the participant above and is interpreted as a sign of false news. Another element noted for causing doubt was the number of followers for accounts sharing a piece of news. Although the presence of large numbers of followers for the account sharing questionable content

soothed the immediate doubt for most of our participants, the younger participants, in particular, were more likely to be suspicious of social media personas with large numbers of followers than older social media users. For instance, Beste, a 20-year-old college student from the high socioeconomic status group, noted that she did not trust social media personas with many followers by claiming that these might simply have bought followers for their accounts.

Regardless of the demographic characteristics such as age, socioeconomic status, and educational background, our research participants stated that they often doubted the accuracy of the information in social media if it was a piece of political news. Based on the participants’ assertions, we define “political news” as news stories identifiably related to party politics, President Erdoğan and his family, and the historical fault lines of identity politics in Turkey such as Islamism, secularism, and the Kurdish identity movement (Koçer & Bozdağ, 2020). Social media in Turkey has increasingly become the domain of political news due to political polarization and the state clamping down on traditional news media and the related official (and unofficial) censorship that journalism has faced for the last two decades. Rising polarization has also deepened users’ mistrust in the news, especially when it comes to political news. This mistrust has risen regardless of one’s ideological orientation or political tendencies. In the focus groups, we frequently heard statements such as “we tend not to believe in anything anymore” (female, 34, housewife) and “I don’t believe in news. I just believe in my own view” (male, 35, accountant). The relationship between polarization and the lack of trust in news has been well documented in a number of settings (for instance, Levy, 2021; Ribeiro et al., 2017), including Turkey. Kirdemir (2020) documents that Turkish social media users tend to trust and access news from resources according to their political leanings. Reuters Institute’s *Digital News Report* demonstrates that while 38% of the news users in Turkey trust the media, 40% do not (Yanatma, 2018). The closeness of these values is an indicator of polarization and its effect on media trust.

On the other hand, our findings indicate that mistrust in political news goes beyond partisan sources. The narratives of the focus groups participants delineated their mistrust as the lack of trust in the news genre overall. For instance, Tuba (female, 26, unemployed) noted that she voted for the AKP but did not trust A Haber and ATV, the party’s unofficial media mouthpieces. Nilhan’s (female, 45, store manager) assertion illustrates the loss of trust in the news genre and the position of skeptical inertia distinctly:

In the past, we used to watch the news...and we didn’t use to feel the necessity to question everything....But now we immediately start questioning, trying to read what is behind a given news story....There is no truth or lies. What is correct for

you might be incorrect for me and vice versa. I believe this now....In the end, I stick with it with whomever I trust. If she said this or that, I say ok that is true.

Nilhan is skeptical of the news overall, no matter what the source is, but she remains inert by endorsing the version of truth coming from whomever she already trusts at the end.

#### 4.2. Strategies for Dealing With Misinformation

When asked about what they do when they doubt the accuracy of any news on social media, our participants mentioned various strategies they employ in different situations. These strategies include checking the sources (primarily links), searching for more information on search engines, comparing different sources (news websites), checking presumably reliable sources, looking at established news outlets, looking at social media comments, and asking trusted people to check their accounts.

“Searching for information on Google” was the most common response by the focus group participants, asked about what they do in the face of suspicious content. Searching Google means comparing different sources for many users:

For example, recently, it [referring to the timeline] shows a political leader on Facebook. He is supposed to be a mason. He is supposed not to be Kurdish, but Armenian, like that....You cannot know who is looking into this. I don't find it convincing, of course....In that case, if I am curious, then I try to find that person or a book, or I search on Google. I check if it is on any news channels, if it is true, and so on. Or I consult someone who knows it well. (Tahsin, male, 34, medical sales representative)

Like Tahsin, users sometimes actively engage with certain news or information online by searching for more sources on search engines. One essential reference here is to the established news channels. Many participants trust established news channels and programs (CNN Turk, TRT News, or NTV) as a point of reference to verify the information.

Several users claim that news channels cannot disseminate false news because of the internal institutional filtering mechanisms and due especially to the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK), the regulatory body with sanctioning power for television broadcasts in Turkey. Asking trusted people or checking their social media accounts is another strategy mentioned by the user above and adopted by other participants. These trusted people can be those from the immediate social networks of the news users, or they can be prominent individuals such as journalists, politicians, or influencers that the person trusts. The social media accounts of these trusted people can generally also be sources of news and information, as Yildiz explains:

For example, a news anchor that I follow more on Instagram, you follow their accounts, and there are some explanations below the visuals there. But I also sometimes use the applications of the newspapers. I follow the news from there. But like I said, sometimes I might also go there [to the newspapers] after seeing something on Instagram. And sometimes, something I see on Instagram is enough, but of course, nobody can write long news there. (female, 31, purchasing expert)

Some users go beyond searching for information on search engines and use more advanced tools such as image search engines. It is rather the tech-savvy and younger users who adopted these more advanced strategies of verification of information. In line with existing research that points out age differences concerning assessment and sharing of misinformation (e.g., Osmundsen et al., 2021), our findings suggest that younger people adopt more advanced strategies for verifying information online. One example is Ziya (male, 21, college student), who uses visual search engines when he suspects the accuracy of news by checking the images' authenticity. Another example is by Fatma (female, 36, director in a dental hospital), for whom the visual elements are significant flags of accuracy in news evaluation. Fatma notes that even assessing the authenticity of the images can be tricky. She explains her skepticism by emphasizing general distrust in the news genre:

Because we do not believe in anyone, no matter whether or not it is someone we follow, like, or agree with, we still need to compare or look at the other side because we cannot believe in anything, we cannot believe in anything we hear or see. Yes, there can be tricks in the videos, but something that I read and see is more reliable for me; therefore, I prefer the internet.

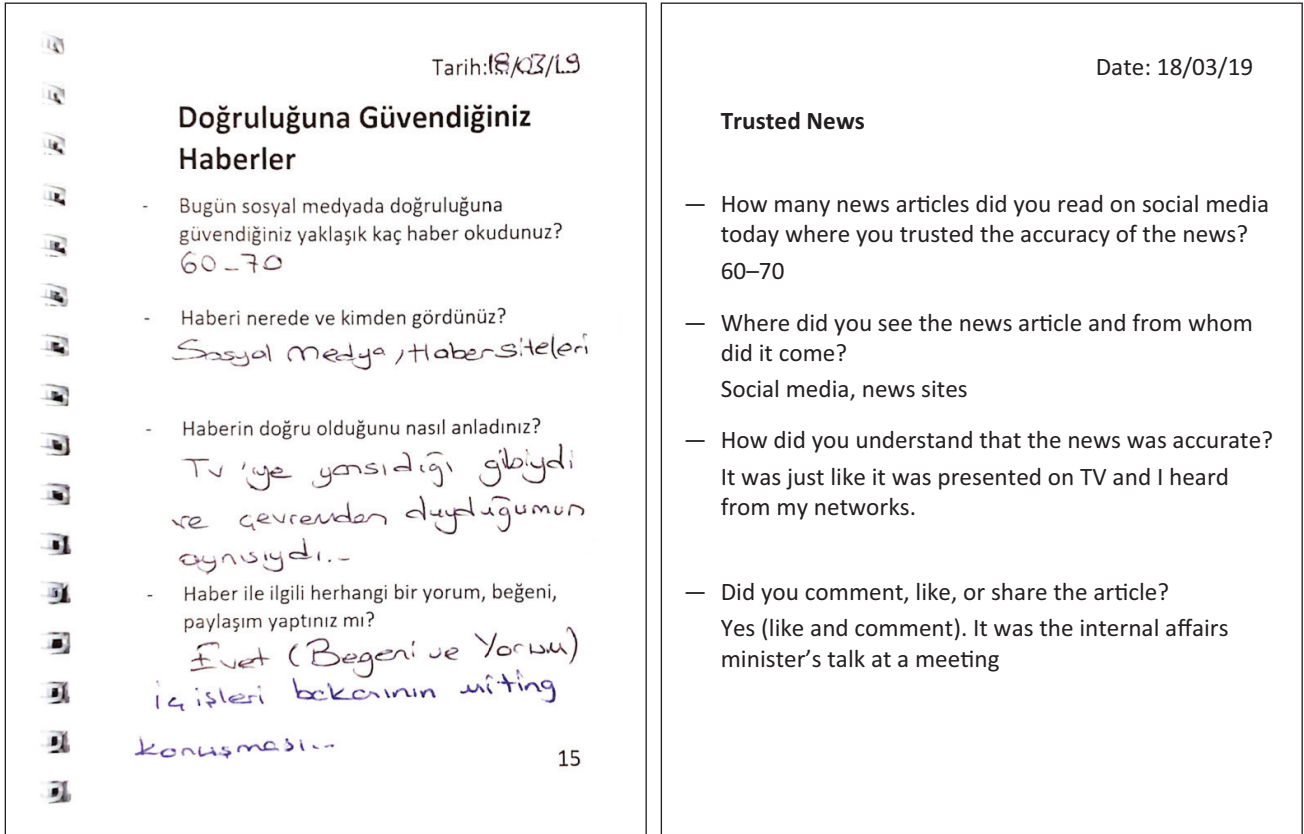
One last strategy that the participants mentioned was checking the comments below a particular social media post to see if there are any conflicting views, as Engin (male, 20, student) states below:

Engin: When I open the news, I look at the comments below it right away. Is there anyone who says the opposite? Is it fake news? You can see it there right away.

Interviewer: How can you see it there?

Engin: If a news article is fake, let's say, then a comment that claims the opposite gets a lot of likes. If it gets a lot of likes, you see it in front of you [in your timeline].

Engin checks the comments to verify the accuracy of news in a particular social media post. He argues that the



**Figure 1.** Orhan's (male, 37, salesperson) notes in his media diary (left) and respective English translation (right).

opposite claim will get many likes and become visible in the timeline if there is a disputable point in the original post. Similarly, Orhan (male, 37, salesperson) notes in his media diary that he verifies the news by reading the comments underneath (Figure 1).

The quote and the diary entry above show that the participants develop an intuitive understanding of the functioning of social media platforms and their algorithms. Comments and the number of likes, followers, and retweets are used iteratively to verify social media information.

#### 4.3. Skepticism and Inertia in News Consumption

Although the participants adopted rational strategies to verify information online as discussed in the previous section, some of them were generally mistrustful of news and news sources, like Fatma, who was quoted above saying, "we do not believe in anyone." This skepticism goes hand in hand with a decrease in trust in institutions besides the media. Beyza (female, 34, housewife), for example, explains that she does not even trust institutions like The Forensic Institute anymore because they have also provided falsified evidence before as she explains:

It was when they arrested the military officers. They had tried to obfuscate the evidence. It leaves an

impression that deeply damages even that institution. Could they do this in a hospital, or did they go to a private hospital? Now we check everything.

Several participants with different political positions raised the issue of mistrust in institutions. However, the opponents of the government, who believe that the government manipulates these institutions, declared mistrust more often. The level of mistrust in news sources seems to increase in line with the political content of the news. For example, Samet (male, 38, teller) says that "about news, especially concerning politics, nothing is reliable." The emphasis here lies on the news related to politics for many participants, and this mistrust in political news is shared both by government supporters and government opponents. However, in the face of the highly politicized and polarized mainstream media environment, they differ from each other concerning the sources they trust or doubt. Participants especially doubt the accuracy of political news that "do not match with their opinions" (Caglar, male, 34, accountant assistant) or that do not "fit their mentality" (Ayse). Whereas government opponents often mention the TV channels Fox TV and Halk TV as trusted sources of news, government supporters tend to trust CNN Türk, NTV, and A Haber, outlets owned by companies that are politically and economically linked to the government and the public broadcasting channel TRT. Despite the skepticism that the users



note about political news, they also show inertia when it comes to taking action and prefer to believe what they want to believe, as Fatma explains below:

In any particular news that we watch or read, we believe in what we want to believe in the last instance....It is related to what you want to see, your opinions, what you imagine, settled or want to believe, I think. Because the news is partial, very different, very biased. Because of that, we all continue believing whom we support, what we think, what we want to believe because you can say so many things about the same news. Before, we used to watch the news, and let's say I said this is mandarin. I would not question it; I would just go on. But now when someone says mandarin, (we ask) is it a real mandarin? They said mandarin, but why did they say it? We start seeing the opposite views. We try to scrutinize it. As a result, there is no such thing as truth or lie. All in all, something that is true for you might be wrong for me. I am now convinced of this. Finally, as I said, I eventually put an end to it with the person I trust. So, if Fulya [another focus group participant] said this, then it is ok, and we leave it there.

Fatma's statement exemplifies several other participants who also demonstrated an increasing mistrust in news institutions and the news genre. Fatma concludes that there is no such thing as the truth, but the truth is relative depending on what one believes in. Similarly, Hasan (male, 32, salesman) refers to Fox TV and says that "their fallacies are true for them, and the truth is false for them," pointing out the relativity of truth in his eyes. Many users like Fatma and Hasan refer to "us and them" as they speak of different versions of the truth, demonstrating how people's perception of truth and misinformation links to their identification with certain social and political groups. The feeling of uncertainty and relativity of truth and the highly biased nature of news outlets in Turkey steers people to confide in the people and news sources to which they feel close. As with Fatma, Ayse says after listening to different people about a particular topic and reading different sources, she believes "in the news that feels right, that feels like a plausible scenario for (her) mentality." Orhan also indicates that he checks sources "that he feels close to yandaş [presumably pro-government media outlets]. If it fits you, if it feels plausible, then you accept it." Feeling hopeless about being able to assess what is true and what is not and being skeptical about the political bias of news outlets in Turkey, the users find comfort in believing the sources that they (politically) support and trust.

## 5. Conclusion

Studies show that Turkey is among the top countries where citizens frequently complain about false news (Aydın et al., 2021; Yanatma, 2018). Furthermore, Turkey

is one of the most severely polarized countries where we can observe increasing mechanisms of affective polarization as the citizens become socially more and more distant from other political views (Erdoğan & Uyan-Semerçi, 2018). Focusing on the case of Turkey, we studied how polarization influences the perception of news and misinformation. Our study shows that rational strategies to assess the accuracy of information online such as checking a variety of sources, relying on established news media, and searching for more information, are adopted by news users in particular situations. Users also develop an intuitive understanding of how social media platforms and their algorithms function. They further develop strategies for assessing the accuracy of information (such as checking the number of likes or popular comments) accordingly. However, these strategies, which can be seen as signs of news literacy and operate at the cognitive level, are laid aside for "political news," as the participants refer to it. As one of the participants put it: "About politics, nothing is reliable" (Samet).

Our study confirms the findings of the other studies cited above on news consumption in Turkey, showing a general lack of trust in the news media, especially concerning political news (cf. Aydın et al., 2021; Yanatma, 2018). This mistrust in the news media goes hand in hand with the declining trust in institutions (van Zoonen, 2012). In the case of Turkey, the decline in trust in institutions parallels acute clientelism and severe polarization (Erdoğan & Uyan-Semerçi, 2018). In both the focus groups and the semi-structured interviews, many participants in our study demonstrated a keen awareness and self-reflection about how the polarized and politicized media environment brings the accuracy of news into question. Despite the nature of the media environment and the users' constant suspicion of the news genre, news users choose to use sources that align with their political positions. We refer to this state of being simultaneously suspicious and indifferent as "skeptical inertia." A sense of helplessness contributes to this inertia as people face an information overload within the polarized media environment in Turkey.

In line with recent studies on news consumption, which undermine the ideal of the informed citizen who acts rationally in choosing and evaluating news, our study shows that news consumption is not only a rational process but is also closely linked to the affective domain (Papacharissi, 2015; Serrano-Puche, 2021). Users adopt intuitive and affective tactics rooted in tacit knowledge to evaluate the trustworthiness of news (Swart & Broersma, 2021). Our findings show that the affective assessment of news based on users' social and political identities is strengthened by severe polarization and the fact that society and institutions are increasingly perceived through the lenses of "us" and "them." Interestingly, our study participants demonstrated a high level of self-awareness about this polarized social environment in Turkey, and they were self-reflective and critical about their positions within this environment.

The participants were also very much aware of their partisan choices indicating that they believe in the news sources they feel closer to and want to believe in the end. However, many did not actively take steps to change their perception of the news, choosing instead to confide in partisan sources. However, this self-critical position can also be interpreted as an implicit desire for change in this polarized environment. If and how such a change can occur remains an open question for future research.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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