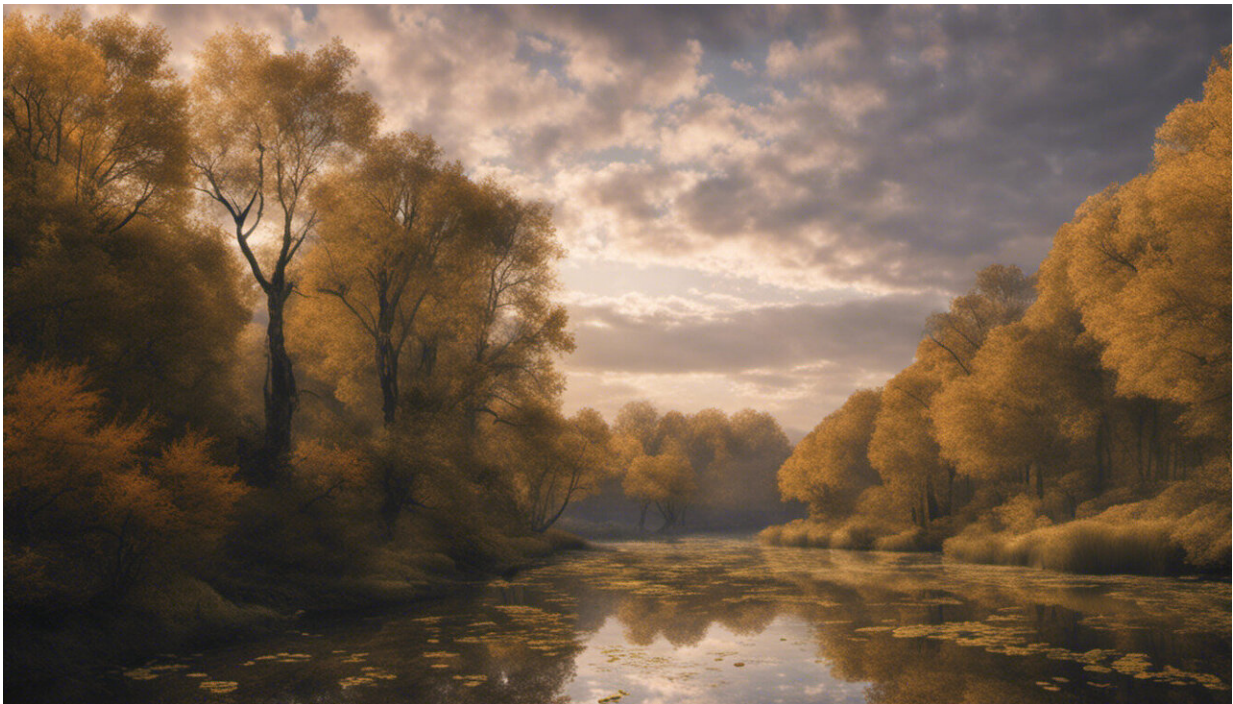


Aging and fake news: It's not the story you think it is

May 3 2022, by Brooke Adams



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Not being able to distinguish fake news from real news can have serious consequences for a person's physical, emotional and financial well-being—especially for older adults, who in general have more financial assets and must make more high-stakes health decisions.

So how good are older adults at detecting [fake news](#)?

A new study has found that older adults are no more likely to fall for fake news than younger adults, with age-related susceptibility to deceptive news evident only among those categorized as the "oldest old."

The study, conducted by researchers at the University of Florida (UF) and the University of Central Florida during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, was published May 2 by the *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied*.

The research is the first to delineate the role of analytical reasoning, affect and news consumption frequency on detection of fake news in older adults across a broad age range as well as in direct comparison to [young adults](#).

"We wanted to see if there was an age difference in determining whether news is true versus false," said Didem Pehlivanoglu, lead author and a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Psychology at UF. "We specifically wanted to look at this because we know that with aging most people show some decline in their cognitive abilities. But we also know some information processing abilities are preserved or even improved."

The research is scant regarding older adults' susceptibility to fake news and what factors might aid or impair a person's ability to judge the veracity of information. Raising concern, some previous work suggested that older adults shared [false information](#) over social media more often than did young adults during the 2016 presidential election. And the dramatic increase in misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened concern, given that the virus has been particularly deadly for older adults.

But is that warranted? "People have this perception that older adults are

going to perform worse than young adults across the board but that is not the case," said Brian Cahill, a co-author and psychology professor at UF.

While many people show [cognitive decline](#) as they age, it is also true that with age comes a broader knowledge base, more life experience and, often, more positive affect. As a group, older adults also tend to consume more news than younger adults. These factors may filter and contextualize information processing in older adults.

The researchers set out to explore age differences in the ability to identify fake news and how analytical reasoning, affect and news consumption frequency effected that ability. The study was conducted between May and October of 2020; the older adults ranged in age from 61 to 87 years and the younger adults were college students.

In the study, participants read and evaluated 12 full-length news articles about COVID and non-COVID topics, with six real and six fake stories in each category. After reading an article, participants were asked such questions as whether the article was real or fake and how confident they were in their decision.

The researchers then measured the participants' analytical reasoning skills, affect and news consumption frequency.

They found that the ability to detect fake news was comparable between young and older adults. Determining an article was fake was related to individual differences in analytical reasoning skills for both age groups. Also, both young and older adults showed a lower ability to detect fake COVID news compared to everyday fake news, which may reflect low familiarity with information related to COVID at the beginning of the pandemic.

Importantly, however, the more elderly [older adults](#)—that is those

individuals age 70 years or older—showed a reduced ability to detect fake news, whether about COVID or another topic, and that decreased ability was associated with levels of analytical reasoning, affect and news consumption frequency.

Adults in the 70+ age group who had greater positive affect and who frequently consumed news were most likely to engage in "shallow" information processing, including not looking as closely at information or paying attention to details. It may only be in very late old age, at a time in life when declines in [cognitive abilities](#) cannot be compensated for anymore by gains in life experience and world knowledge that individuals become particularly vulnerable to deception via misinformation and fake news, the researchers said in the study.

"It is a particularly high-risk population with high stakes for wrong decision making, not just for themselves but also for society at large," said Natalie Ebner, a co-author and psychology professor at UF.

The findings have the potential to influence design of decision-supportive interventions to enhance news communication and reduce misinformation across the lifespan and in aging, the team said.

More information: Didem Pehlivanoglu et al, Aging in an "infodemic": The role of analytical reasoning, affect, and news consumption frequency on news veracity detection, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied* (2022). [DOI: 10.1037/xap0000426](https://doi.org/10.1037/xap0000426)

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