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1. Introduction

Fake news has emerged as a significant social issue, particularly during the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the Brexit. Public concern is on the rise as fake news is being disseminated through social media on a daily basis. Google Trends Analysis ([trend.google.com](https://trends.google.com)) indicates that public interest in fake news escalated from October 2016, reaching its peak in early January 2017 (Yum and Jeong 2019: 10). In South Korea, the spread of fake news became a pressing matter following the impeachment of former President Park Geun-hye and the subsequent early presidential election. Information regarding the political situation was widely shared across media platforms without proper fact-checking (Jeong and Jung 2019: 11). A more concerning issue arose when, despite being debunked, such information continued to be believed by many, based on personal convenience.

The issue of fake news intensifies as it intertwines with the societal changes brought about by the post-truth era. The Oxford Dictionary describes post-truth as "relating to circumstances in which people respond more to feelings and beliefs than to facts." This signifies a shift where falsehoods often eclipse the truth, as reliance on objective facts diminishes. In this post-truth era, social instability and risk escalate, fueled by a relativism that prioritizes the public's interest in defining reality (Kim 2020: 232). Truth not only loses its traditional acceptance but also its relevance and significance. Farkas and Schou (2018) interpret the dilemma of fake news using Laclau (2005)'s notion of the "floating signifier." This refers to dominant narratives shaping worldviews and establishing a new "truth" (Kim 2020). In a world where "alternative facts" are the norm, the opposing factions exploit fake news to assert dominance and create a narrative conducive to their interests.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution has triggered profound and widespread changes, unlike anything experienced in the past. These changes permeate not just the societal modes of production and operation but also the very thoughts and actions of individuals. The very foundations of our understanding of the world and the values that guide our lives are becoming increasingly unstable. As the world undergoes rapid transformations, people find themselves in a transitional period marked by instability and uncertain direction. It is within this context of uncertainty and unpredictability that

fake news thrives, exploiting the difficulties in distinguishing truth from falsehood. Such ambiguity often makes it challenging or time-consuming to verify information. In this context, fake news has emerged as a strategic tool in the battle for dominance and influence.

In short, the issue of fake news is a consequence of the transformative period driven by the Fourth Industrial Revolution, which has led to shifts in social structures, systems, and operating paradigms, as well as alterations in individual perceptions and values. This study examines the causes and explores strategies to counteract the proliferation of fake news in South Korean society, adopting both structural and agent perspectives. Every phenomenon arises from the interplay between structure and agent, where structures limit actions, but actions also shape structures. Structuralists contend that it is societal structures that shape society, rather than individual actions. Thus, individual behavior is framed by the societal and operational systems, beyond the control of personal will or ability. Consequently, individuals' judgments and choices concerning fake news are influenced by the political-social structure and the media landscape and are not entirely free or voluntary. This research delves into the modifications in political communication structures triggered by increased political polarization and digital technological advancements. From the agent perspective, it examines the causes and processes of fake news production and distribution, focusing on how shifts in the characteristics and behaviors of citizens contribute to this issue.

2. Literature Review

While numerous definitions of fake news exist, recent research suggests adopting the terms "disinformation" or "misinformation" instead of "fake news" (Min 2022: 156). Fake news is often deliberately disseminated, mimicking legitimate news to hide its deceptive motives and gain trust (Hwang and Kwon 2017; Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). Individuals often turn to fake news as an alternative to the established truth, especially when it aligns with their preferred beliefs (Strong 2017). The susceptibility to disinformation is linked to confirmation bias—the tendency to favor information that reinforces one's existing beliefs—that leads to a selective gathering of evidence without objectively evaluating its truthfulness (Hart et al. 2009). This bias becomes apparent when media reports contradict personal beliefs, driving people to seek information that supports their viewpoint. Consequently, they are more likely to accept fake news that aligns with their beliefs without verifying its authenticity (Yum and Jong 2019: 12). Thus, the perceived utility or relevance of information often outweighs its accuracy in the decision-making process regarding its acceptance.

So far, research on disinformation has primarily concentrated on the cognitive processes at the individual level, examining the impact of false information on political perceptions, voting decisions, or attitudes towards fake news consumption (Howard, Bradshaw, Kollanyi, and Bolsover 2017; Silverman 2016; Weeks and Garrett 2014).

Two predominant theories elucidate the motives behind disseminating disinformation: ignorance theory and polarization theory. The former emphasizes the role of accuracy, analyzing the extent of an individual's propensity to spread fake news through factors such as age, cognitive reflection, political knowledge, and digital literacy. Brandt et al. (2014) discuss the proliferation of fake news in relation to its origins, noting that individuals may turn to fake news when they are unable to find adequate legitimate news that aligns with their beliefs.

On the other hand, polarization theory highlights partisanship as a crucial driver in the spread of fake news. Guess et al. (2019) observed that conservatives and Republicans were more prone to sharing fake news on Facebook than Democrats during the 2016 presidential election. The surge in both creating and consuming disinformation at this time was largely aimed at supporting Trump, reflecting a purpose-driven approach to information acceptance that values political utility over factual accuracy.

Osmundsen et al. (2021) contend that the case of the U.S. demonstrates a profound connection between the dissemination of disinformation and a polarized political climate. Thus, addressing the issue of fake news effectively requires tackling political polarization initially. Similarly, Amira et al. (2019) identify political polarization as the primary factor in the sharing of fake news, positing that hostility towards the opposing party serves as the key motivator. Their research suggests that individuals are more likely to share fake news when they perceive a threat to their group, aiming to undermine and discredit their opponents. Brady et al. (2017) further elaborate that individuals tend to share articles damaging to the opposing party rather than those supportive of their own, indicating a preference for content that discredits adversaries over content that bolsters their own side. Conversely, Nelkes and Westwood (2017) argue that those with strong party loyalty are more inclined to share information that benefits their party, rather than that which harms the opposition.

3. Public Perceptions of Disinformation

A significant portion of the respondents viewed the impact of fake news as serious. A substantial 81.3% acknowledged disinformation as a severe issue in South Korean society, whereas a mere 4.5% did not view it as a problem. 60.8% agreed that they themselves are susceptible to fake news, and only 13.4% said they are not. Given the widespread concern for the severity of the issue and personal susceptibility, 58.7% supported the idea that disinformation should be regulated. In contrast, 18.2% opposed regulation, fearing it might infringe on media freedom.

<Table 1> Public Perception of Fake News

[Unit: # of Respondents (%)]

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Gravity of Problem	11(.9)	45(3.6)	178(14.3)	541(43.4)	472(37.9)
Likely to be deceived	32(2.6)	135(10.8)	322(25.8)	566(45.4)	192(15.4)
Should not be regulated	305(24.5)	426(34.2)	289(23.2)	179(14.4)	48(3.8)

Regarding personal encounters with fake news, 44.7% of participants reported experiencing what they considered fake news in the past six months. A majority, 68.4%, identified the internet (including portals, Facebook, KakaoTalk) as the primary source, whereas traditional media such as newspapers and television accounted for just 13.5%. YouTube was frequently cited as responsible for the production and distribution of disinformation, but politicians and traditional media were also deemed significantly accountable.

<Table 2> Responsibility by Actor for Producing and Distributing Fake News:

4 Points (Likely) + 5 Points (Very Likely)

Conservative YouTube	Progressive YouTube	Ruling Party Politician	Opposition Party Politician	Conservative Media	Progressive Media
841 (67.5%)	807 (64.7%)	657 (52.7%)	681 (54.6%)	700 (56.1%)	689 (55.3%)

Echoing findings from both domestic and international studies, 63.8% of respondents agreed that social media platforms like KakaoTalk and Facebook, as well as portals like Naver and Google, have aggravated the disinformation issue, with only 7.7% disagreeing. Moreover, 74.3% believed that false information circulates more rapidly than truth on social media, underscoring the critical role of social media in the proliferation of fake news.

<Table 3> Perception about the Spread of Fake News

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
SNS exacerbates problem	17 (1.4)	78 (6.3)	356 (28.5)	642 (51.5)	154 (12.3)
Lies spread more rapidly	7 (.6)	50 (4.0)	264 (21.2)	530 (42.5)	396 (31.8)
Truth & Lies are distinguishable	75 (6.0)	394 (31.6)	501 (40.2)	227 (18.2)	50 (4.0)

4. Key Factors in Disinformation Receptivity

Human action is influenced not just by individual agents such as personal values or objectives, but also by structural factors including societal norms, rules, and the framework of social relationships. In the discourse on social phenomena, agent theory emphasizes the voluntary and autonomous judgment of individuals, whereas structuralists highlight the influence of social relationship frameworks and operational rules that govern individual behavior (Bang 2008). This research seeks to examine the causes of susceptibility to fake news by dividing the influential variables into agent and structural factors.

For the agent factor, this study incorporates variables emphasized by ignorance theory, such as gender, age, education level, social status, ideology, and political knowledge. The structural factor includes variables highlighted by polarization theory, which help assess the impact of partisanship and the structure of social conflict.

4.1 Agent Factor

48.4% of males reported encountering fake news, compared to 40.9% of females. The difference in experiences across age groups was not significant, marking a deviation from findings in the U.S. Osmundsen et al. (2019), in their analysis of content on X (formerly Twitter) during the 2016 presidential election, noted that older individuals were more likely to share disinformation than their younger counterparts. Similarly, Guess et al. (2019) observed that individuals aged 65 and older were six times more likely to share fake news than those in their 20s, attributing this trend to the older generation's lower level of digital literacy compared to the younger generation.

<Table 4> Differences in Experiences with Fake News by Gender

Group	Cases	Mean	SD	F	df	Significance Probability	η -squared
Male	628	.48	.500	7.191	1, 1245	.007	.006
Female	617	.41	.492				

There was a significant correlation between political interest and fake news experience. While the mean of the group not interested in politics was 0.18 (0 – no experience, 1 – have experienced), the mean rose up to 0.62 for those who had high level of interest in politics.

<Table 5> Differences in Experiences with Fake News by Level of Political Interest (No experience 0, Experience 1)

	None at all	Very Little	Somewhat	Quite a lot	To a great extent	Total
Mean	.18	.30	.42	.53	.62	.45
SD	.387	.458	.494	.500	.487	.497
N	34	199	551	302	161	1247

Sum of Squares	Degree of Freedom	Mean square	False	p-value	Partial η -squared
14,107	4	3.527	14.894	.000	.046

Political knowledge was also correlated with the likelihood of encountering fake news. The average was 0.33 for individuals who answered none of the four political knowledge questions correctly, but it rose to 0.63 for those who answered all four correctly. Meanwhile, variables such as social status, education level, and political efficacy showed no correlation with fake news encounters.

[Table 6] Differences in Experiences with Fake News by Political Knowledge (No experience 0, Experience 1)

	0 Correct	1 Correct	2 Correct	3 Correct	4 Correct
Mean	.33	.38	.44	.42	.63
SD	.474	.486	.497	.495	.483
N	49	254	399	357	188

Sum of Squares	Degree of Freedom	Mean square	False	p-value	Partial η -squared
8,659	4	2.165	8.976	.000	.028

Further analysis focused on variables influencing the acceptance of fake news. Of the eight fake news articles analyzed, four were likely to appeal to conservative-leaning individuals, while the remaining four targeted those with progressive leanings.

※ Conservative-Leaning Fake News

- 1a. The substantial deficit incurred by the Korea Electric Power Corporation (KEPCO) is due to the former administration's nuclear phase-out policy.
- 1b. There was election fraud, including vote rigging, during the 2020 National Assembly Elections.
- 1c. Evidence that North Korean hackers infiltrated the National Election Commission (NEC)'s election system has been discovered.
- 1d. Police patrol units are experiencing workforce shortage, due to the heightened investigative demands caused by the "complete deprivation of the prosecutorial investigative right (*geom-su-wan-bak*: 검수완박), a policy advocated by the Democratic Party.

※ Progressive-Leaning Fake News

- 2a. The relocation of the Office of the President to Yongsan has led to an increased traffic congestion in the area.
- 2b. Yoon administration is allegedly not being transparent about the Fukushima Daiichi treated water discharge issue.
- 2c. Han Dong-hoon (former Justice Minister) engaged in a late-night drinking party with President Yoon and 30 lawyers from Kim & Chang LLC at an upscale bar in Cheongdam-dong.
- 2d. The Daejang-dong land development scandal is said to have its roots in President Yoon's tenure as a prosecutor, where he allegedly overlooked illegal loans by Busan Savings Bank, a matter connected to Yoon's close aides.

The receptivity to fake news was found to be notably high, with a higher inclination towards progressive-leaning fake news compared to conservative-leaning ones. A significant 68.1% of respondents believed that the relocation of the President's office led to increased traffic congestion, and 59.6% doubted the government's transparency regarding the Fukushima treated water discharge issue. In contrast, only 33.9% believed in election fraud during the 2020 election, and skepticism was more pronounced regarding the claim of North Korean infiltration into the NEC's system.

<Table 7> Degree of Receptivity to Fake News (%)

Fake News	1a	1b	1c	1d	2a	2b	2c	2d
False	42.7	66.1	54.0	38.1	31.9	40.3	47.5	44.9
True	57.3	33.9	46.0	61.9	68.1	59.6	52.5	55.1

Linear regression analysis was employed to determine the effects of nine agent factors, including gender, age, education level, and political knowledge, on fake news receptivity. For conservative-leaning fake news, factors such as social status, education level, ideology, political knowledge, and political efficacy were statistically significant. Lower social status and education level were associated with a higher likelihood of believing conservative-leaning fake news. Not surprisingly, conservatives were more predisposed to accept conservative-leaning disinformation. Although political interest did not show statistical significance, it exhibited a negative correlation, indicating that lower political knowledge increased susceptibility to conservative-leaning fake news. Furthermore, among the political efficacy variables, the stronger the belief that public officials ignore the populace, the higher the probability of believing conservative-leaning fake news.

The idea that increased political knowledge reduces susceptibility to fake news is supported by international case studies as well. Ignorance theory posits that although individuals may intend to share accurate information, they often disseminate false information due to a lack of motivation or the cognitive ability to distinguish between truth and falsehood. A case study in the U.S. by Pennycook and Rand (2019) demonstrated that individuals who scored higher on cognitive reflection tests were more adept at identifying the veracity of news headlines. Meanwhile, Guess et al. (2019) found that older people tend to share fake news on Facebook more frequently, likely due to their lesser digital literacy compared to younger individuals.

<Table 8> Agent Factors Influencing Receptivity to Conservative-Leaning Fake News

Independent Variable	B	β	t	p
Gender	.251	.049	1.787	.074
Age	-.018	-.012	-.398	.691
Social Status	-.228	-.096	-3.425	.001
Education Level	-.141	-.064	-2.227	.026
Ideology	.377	.293	10.694	.000
Political Interest	.138	.053	1.828	.068
Political Knowledge	-.163	-.069	10.694	.000
Political Efficacy 1	-.095	-.043	-1.379	.168
Political Efficacy 2	.215	.082	2.680	.007
Modified $R^2 = .115$, $F(9, 1237) = 19.065$				

Political Efficacy 1: "People like me speaking out about the government's actions is pointless."

Political Efficacy 2: "Public officials ignore the voices of the populace."

Conversely, for progressive-leaning fake news receptivity, only age, political ideology, and a measure of political efficacy were statistically significant factors. The younger and more progressive an individual was, the more susceptible they were to believing in progressive-leaning fake news.

Similarly, concerning the efficacy variable, as with conservative-leaning fake news, individuals who felt that public officers were not attentive to the people were more inclined to believe in progressive-leaning fake news. However, education level and political knowledge did not emerge as statistically significant factors in this context.

<Table 9> Agent Factors Influencing Receptivity to Progressive-Leaning Fake News

Independent Variable	B	β	t	p
Gender	.306	.046	1.887	.059
Age	-.525	-.261	-10.101	.000
Social Status	-.017	-.006	-.225	.822
Education Level	.063	.022	.865	.387
Ideology	-.626	-.374	-15.424	.000
Political Interest	.055	.016	.631	.528
Political Knowledge	-.110	-.036	-1.364	.173
Political Efficacy 1	-.134	-.046	-1.784	.092
Political Efficacy 2	-.653	-.191	-7.074	.000
Modified $R^2 = .305$, $F(9, 1237) = 61.751$				

4.2 Structural Factor

Linear regression analysis was performed to understand the impact of certain variables that intensify societal polarization on fake news receptivity. These variables include favorable or unfavorable opinions towards President Yoon Suk Yeol or Democratic Party leader Lee Jae-Myung, regional conflicts between the Yeungnam and Honam areas, ideological disputes, and the tendency of online networks to connect similar viewpoints.

In an analysis of 1,247 respondents, findings showed a marked difference in the susceptibility to fake news based on political orientation: 209 individuals believed all four pieces of conservative-leaning fake news, while 448 accepted all four progressive-leaning pieces as true. When evaluating preferences for Yoon Suk Yeol and Lee Jae-myung on a 0-10 scale, those who were misled by conservative fake news showed a preference score of 4.48 for Yoon compared to 2.80 for Lee. Conversely, for those deceived by progressive fake news, the preference for Yoon plummeted to 1.67, while Lee's score rose to 5.27. This disparity extended to evaluations of government performance under Yoon, highlighting the significant influence of political polarization on the acceptance of fake news.

<Table 10> Characteristics of Groups Susceptible to Fake News

	Preference for Yoon Suk Yeol	Preference for Lee Jae-myung	Yoon Suk Yeol Gov Performance	Self-perceived Ideology
Receptive to conservative fake news (209 respondents)	4.48	2.80	4.92	5.56
Receptive to progressive fake news (448 respondents)	1.67	5.27	1.60	4.28

Further, a linear regression analysis investigating six variables linked to political polarization and its effect on the receptivity to conservative-leaning disinformation found notable results. Attitudes towards Yoon and Lee, along with perceptions of conflict between the Youngnam and Honam regions and between the ruling and opposition parties, significantly influenced susceptibility to conservative fake news. A stronger preference for Yoon and a greater dislike for Lee were associated with a higher likelihood of believing conservative fake news. Additionally, an intensified perception of regional conflict heightened the susceptibility to such disinformation. A diminished perception of conflict between the ruling and opposition parties correlated with a greater likelihood of being misled by fake news. However, the presence of like-minded networks online did not significantly affect receptivity to conservative-leaning fake news.

Recent studies have raised concerns about the formation of cliques and emotional polarization in online spaces, pointing out that individuals often group with those who share similar opinions, potentially leading to confirmation bias. However, this survey indicates that the extent to which individuals' political views align with those of friends or acquaintances they interact with on social media platforms like KakaoTalk or Facebook does not significantly increase susceptibility to conservative-leaning fake news.

<Table 11> Structural Factors Influencing Receptivity to Conservative-Leaning Fake News

Independent Variable	B	β	t	p
Preference for Yoon Suk Yeol	.245	.298	10.376	.000
Preference for Lee Jae-myung	-.207	-.244	-8.500	.000
Forming cliques of like-minded people online	.055	.014	.567	.571
Youngnam vs. Honam	.330	.121	4.270	.000
Ruling vs. Opposition Party	-.374	-.124	-2.831	.005
Progressive vs. Conservative	.037	.012	.280	.780
Modified R ² = .231, F(6, 1240)=63.412				

When examining structural factors that affect the receptivity to progressive-leaning fake news, findings were parallel to those for conservative-leaning fake news in terms of the influence of personal preferences for Yoon and Lee. Yet, the perception of conflict between the Youngnam and Honam regions did not show a notable impact on susceptibility to progressive-leaning fake news. In contrast, a heightened perception of conflict between the ruling and opposition parties, as well as ideological conflict, was associated with a greater likelihood of being deceived by progressive-leaning fake news. Similar to conservative-leaning fake news, the polarized structure observed in online spaces did not have a significant statistical impact on the receptivity to progressive-leaning fake news.

<Table 12> Structural Factors Influencing Receptivity to Progressive-Leaning Fake News

Independent Variable	B	β	t	p
Preference for Yoon Suk Yeol	-.561	-.526	-24.023	.000
Preference for Lee Jae-myung	.371	.337	15.376	.000
Forming cliques of like-minded people online	-.002	.000	-.026	.980
Youngnam vs. Honam	-.016	-.004	-2.07	.836
Ruling vs. Opposition Party	-.409	-.104	-3.125	.002
Progressive vs. Conservative	.467	.119	3.559	.000
Modified R ² = .554, F(6, 1240)=258.839				

4.3 Comparative Analysis

Comparing the goodness of fit of the agent and structural variable model, the modified R² value for the agent variable model was .115, which was lower than the modified R² value of .231 for the structural variable model. Similarly, in the case of receptivity to progressive-leaning fake news, the modified R² value for the agent variable model was .305, which was lower than the modified R² value of .554 for the structural variable model. These findings indicate that structural variables, reflecting the level of societal polarization in South Korea, have a more significant impact on the receptivity to fake news compared to individual agent variables.

<Table 13> Factors Influencing Receptivity to Conservative-Leaning Fake News

Independent Variable	B	β	t	p
Gender	.213	.042	1.649	.099
Age	-.129	-.084	-2.993	.003
Social Status	-.196	-.083	-3.187	.001
Education Level	-.099	-.045	-1.698	.090
Ideology	.073	.057	1.931	.054
Political Interest	.158	.061	2.270	.023
Political Knowledge	-.182	-.077	-2.822	.005
Political Efficacy 1	-.112	.064	-1.765	.078
Political Efficacy 2	-.001	.000	-.009	.993
Preference for Yoon Suk Yeol	.248	.303	9.541	.000
Preference for Lee Jae-myung	-.194	-2.29	-7.653	.000
Forming cliques of like-minded people online	.103	.027	1.070	.285
Youngnam vs. Honam	.295	.108	3.832	.000
Ruling vs. Opposition Party	-3.22	-.107	-2.452	.014
Progressive vs. Conservative	.087	.029	.661	.509
Modified $R^2 = .257$, $F(15, 1231) = 29.766$				

Dependent Variable: Degree of susceptibility to conservative-leaning fake news

Linear regression analysis was utilized to assess the impact of both agent and structural variables on the susceptibility to fake news. For conservative-leaning fake news, the statistically significant variables at the 95% confidence level included age, social status, political engagement, political awareness, attitudes towards Yoon Suk Yeol and Lee Jae-myung, and perceptions of conflict between Youngnam and Honam, as well as between the ruling and opposition parties. The variable with the greatest influence was favorable views of Yoon ($\beta = .303$), followed by favorable views of Lee ($\beta = -2.29$), perception of Youngnam vs. Honam conflict ($\beta = .108$), and perception of ruling vs. opposition party conflict ($\beta = -.107$). This suggests that positive attitudes towards Yoon and negative attitudes towards Lee increased the likelihood of viewing conservative-leaning fake news as credible. Similarly, heightened perceptions of regional and political party conflicts were associated with an increased susceptibility to conservative-leaning fake news. Conversely, among agent variables, age ($\beta = -.084$) and

social status ($\beta=-.083$) emerged as significant, indicating that younger individuals and those with a lower perceived social status were more prone to believe in conservative-leaning fake news.

Table 14 presents a comparison of the structural and agent variables influencing receptivity to progressive-leaning fake news. Similar to the factors affecting receptivity to conservative-leaning fake news, the attitudes towards Yoon ($\beta=-.445$) and Lee ($\beta=.324$) were the most impactful, indicating that a stronger dislike for Yoon and a preference for Lee increased the probability of accepting progressive-leaning fake news as true. Following these were age ($\beta=-.158$) and the perception of ideological conflict ($\beta=.116$), suggesting younger individuals and those who viewed the ideological divide between progressives and conservatives as more pronounced were more susceptible to progressive-leaning fake news.

<Table 14> Factors Influencing Receptivity to Progressive-Leaning Fake News

Independent Variable	B	β	t	p
Gender	.379	.057	3.025	.003
Age	-.318	-.158	-7.590	.000
Social Status	-.061	-.020	-1.032	.302
Education Level	-.001	-.000	.019	.985
Ideology	-.074	-.044	-2.008	.045
Political Interest	-.008	-.002	-.121	.093
Political Knowledge	-.100	-.032	-1.590	.112
Political Efficacy 1	-.118	-.041	-1.912	.056
Political Efficacy 2	-.200	-.059	-2.676	.008
Preference for Yoon Suk Yeol	-4.75	-.445	-18.820	.000
Preference for Lee Jae-myung	.357	.324	14.526	.000
Forming cliques of like-minded people online	-.009	-.002	-.094	.925
Youngnam vs. Honam	.022	.006	.300	.764
Ruling vs. Opposition Party	-.269	-.068	-2.113	.035
Progressive vs. Conservative	.454	.116	3.571	.000
Modified $R^2 = .588$, $F(15, 1231)=119.325$				

Dependent Variable: Degree of susceptibility to progressive-leaning fake news

Among all the factors considered, those influencing receptivity to both progressive- and conservative-leaning fake news included age, sentiments towards Yoon and Lee, and perceptions of conflict between ruling and opposition parties. Notably, the most statistically significant factor was emotion towards President Yoon.

The enduring trend of "leader politics" since Korea's liberation has underscored regional, ideological, and generational conflicts centered around the presidency or party leadership. Despite significant emotional polarization between progressives and conservatives, research indicates minimal substantial differences in policy or attitudes, applicable also to generational and gender conflicts. Thus, the polarization and political discord in South Korea largely stem from political bias mobilization rather than genuine differences among groups. Similarly, the issue of disinformation follows this pattern, with political leadership preferences being the most influential factor in susceptibility to fake news and related social issues.

5. Conclusion

The opinion survey highlights the acute concern regarding the fake news issue in South Korean society. A striking 81.3% of respondents viewed the problem as severe, indicating widespread alarm. Concern over susceptibility to fake news was particularly high, with 60.8% of participants acknowledging a significant risk of being misled by misinformation. Conversely, a small fraction (13.4%) felt assured in their capacity to differentiate between truth and falsehood. This concern has led to a considerable majority (58.7%) preferring the regulation of disinformation over the preservation of media freedom. Politically-affiliated YouTube channels, politicians, and media outlets were all identified as major contributors to the spread of fake news. Echoing trends observed internationally, 63.8% of respondents believe that social media amplifies the fake news issue, with 74.3% agreeing that falsehoods propagate more rapidly than truths.

The survey also revealed a significant proportion of individuals who believed in discredited fake news stories. Notably, general receptivity to progressive-leaning fake news exceeded that of conservative-leaning narratives. Among conservative-leaning fake news, a substantial portion (61.9%) believed the false claim that "Police patrol units are experiencing workforce shortage due to the heightened investigative demands caused by the 'complete deprivation of the prosecutorial investigative right.'" Conversely, among progressive-leaning fake news, 68.1% were misled by the claim that "relocation of the President's Office to Yongsan has led to increased traffic congestion in the area." However, only 33.9% fell for the 2020 election fraud allegations, and more individuals recognized the North Korean hacking into NEC as disinformation.

The variables influencing fake news receptivity were analyzed by agent model and structure model. Out of the 9 agent variables, the most significant variable raising susceptibility to

conservative-leaning fake news were ideology, social status, education level, political knowledge, and political efficacy, and out of these, ideology was the greatest ($\beta = .293$). For the progressive-leaning fake news, ideology ($\beta = -.374$), age ($\beta = -.261$), and political efficacy 2 turned out to be most statistically significant. For the structural model, favor for Yoon ($\beta = .298$), favor for Lee ($\beta = -.244$), Youngnam vs. Honam conflict, and ruling vs. opposition party were statistically significant for conservative-leaning fake news receptivity. Likewise, favor for Yoon ($\beta = -.526$), favor for Lee ($\beta = .337$) showed high explanation power, and ideological and party conflict were also significant.

In the structure model, for conservative-leaning fake news, favorable views of President Yoon ($\beta = .298$) and Lee ($\beta = -.244$), as well as the perceived conflict between Youngnam and Honam and between the ruling and opposition parties, were significant. Similarly, for progressive-leaning fake news, attitudes towards Yoon ($\beta = -.526$) and Lee ($\beta = .337$) were highly influential, alongside ideological and party conflicts.

Mirroring trends observed in countries like the United States, political polarization has been identified as a key driver of increased susceptibility to fake news in South Korea. The survey indicated that the altered political communication landscape, fueled by the rise of social media, not only facilitates but also amplifies the spread of fake news, with falsehoods disseminating more rapidly than truths. There is a public demand for stricter fake news regulations, yet the extent to which such measures can mitigate the issue remains uncertain. Osmundsen et al. (2021), in their study of the U.S. context, argued that the fake news dilemma is challenging to address without tackling the broader issue of political polarization. They posited that reducing polarization is significantly more complex than implementing fact-checking tools on social media platforms (1013).

The spread of fake news is intertwined with the transition to a post-truth era, where distinguishing between truth and falsehood becomes increasingly challenging due to uncertainty and unpredictability. However, fake news is not the sole culprit in fostering social conflict and confusion; biased but true news can be equally divisive, threatening societal stability. With the advent of digital media, patterns of information consumption are evolving. A prevalent trend is the selective exposure to information that aligns with personal interests, exacerbating the issues of clique formation and confirmation bias. Consequently, even when people access and disseminate factual news, if it is laden with criticism and animosity towards an opposing group, it can be as detrimental as fake news. Such dynamics reinforce in-group values and interests, promoting the creation of "alternative facts" that bolster attacks against out-groups, thereby deepening political polarization and societal divisions.

To tackle the issue of fake news, measures such as regulatory enforcement and public education are crucial. It is imperative to strictly monitor and penalize YouTube channels, politicians, and media outlets that disseminate fake news. Additionally, strategies to manage the role of social media in spreading fake news need to be developed. However, both this study and international research confirm that the most effective solution to the fake news problem lies in reducing political polarization.

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