

A SURVEY ABOUT UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF POST-TRUTH ON SOCIAL MEDIA*

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Article History: Received: 12 October 2018 Accepted: 30 October 2018</p> <p>Keywords: Post-truth, social media, fake news</p> <p>DOI: 10.26809/joa.2018445555</p>	<p>The purpose of this paper is to survey university students' perception of post – truth on social media. The post-truth, which has been selected as the 'Word of the Year' by Oxford World Dictionaries in 2016, is a new technological era today. This new era especially effects students who have a habit of access information via social media. This survey is aimed to illustrate how university students evaluate the fake news appeared on social media and to reveal solutions about the possible negative effects of this era.</p> <p>The method involved in this survey is data collection from students, who represent the majority of social media users, with 5 Likert type scale questionnaires. Data has been collected from two-year degree, undergraduate, post graduate and doctoral university students who continue their studies in public and foundation universities in Turkey. There is not an existed scale to evaluate perception of post truth on social media. The existed scales are related to evaluate the technology addiction in psychology field. A standard scale has not been used and it is not aimed to develop a scale in this study.</p>

1. INTRODUCTION

The report We Are Social (Digital in 2018), which contains data on the use of all digital platforms in the world, was announced in January 2018 in cooperation with major organizations such as Hootsuite, Statista, Global Webindex, Smilarweb and Alexa. The report is announced in January every year, constitutes the previous year's data (Digital report,2018).

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According to the report, 4 billion of the world's 7.5 billion population are internet users and 3.1 billion of them use social media actively. Facebook ranks first on social media platforms by monthly user accounts, while YouTube, Instagram and Twitter follow it respectively. Analyzing the age groups of Facebook users, the report shows that the age groups using this social media platform are 18-24 and 25-34 years old. While there are 250 million women and 361 million male users in the 18-24 age group, there are 371 million female and 260 million male users in the 25-34 age group. 25-44 age group includes 160 million female and 201 million male users; 45-54 age group includes 99 million female and 100 million male users; 13-17 age group includes 80 million female and 96 million male users; 55-64 age group includes 59 million female and 64 million male and over 65 age group includes 39 million female and 37 million male users. When we examine the Instagram user profile by age and gender, it is also observed that the most Instagram users are at age ranges between 18-24 and 25-34 age groups.

In Turkey, which is located in the West Asia section of the report, 54 million of the 81 million population are internet users and 51 million are seen as active social media users. The average time spent on the internet is 7 hours a day and the time spent on social media platforms is approximately 3 hours on average. 84% of the users use it every day, 12% of them use at least once a week, 2% at least once a month and 2% use it monthly.

Another data presented by the report is that YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are the most frequently used social media platforms in Turkey. In Turkey, 28 million out of the 51 million user population are between 18-24 and 25-34 age ranges and the most internet usage is in the 25-34 age group with 9.3 million men and 5.6 million women users. 18-24 age group with 8.3 million males and 5.1 million females follows it. The fact that active social media users were collected especially in the 18-35 age group showed that we should work with the users in this age range especially in terms of providing more effective and reliable results.

The Post-truth selected the word of the year in by the Oxford Dictionaries in 2016 has launched a new era in the technological sense.

The aim of this study is to measure how this new era affects young people and university students who have made a habit of accessing information via social media and to reveal the post-truth perceptions of students.

2. POST TRUTH CONCEPT

Post-truth selected as the word of the year in 2016 is defined as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016).

Although the existence of the word dates back to the beginning of the 1990s, it has been observed that the usage of the word in the year 2016 increased by 2000 % (Steinmetz, 2016).

"It's not surprising that our choice reflects a year dominated by highly-charged political and social discourse," said Casper Grathwohl, president of Oxford Dictionaries. "Fueled by the rise of social media as a news source and a growing distrust of facts offered up by the establishment, post-truth as a concept has been finding its linguistic footing for some time." And, he suggests, it may become a defining word of our time.

The word that was not even in the Oxford Dictionaries until November 2016 has been the word of the year just days after Trump's election in 2016. The fact that the word post-truth has taken place in the dictionary only for the last few years does not mean that it is a very new concept. There are examples of proving it has already existed. One example for it is Nayirah al-Sabah's testimony about Iraqi forces left Kuwaiti babies to die which made public to support the United States to involve in the Gulf War. Other examples are Andrew Wakefield's article

on the connection between vaccination and autism and in the 2001 Enron's managers' false statements hiding the company's status during the company's bankruptcy that resulted with the loss of election by Governor of California, Gray Davis. These examples show that the concept of post-truth has actually existed in the last 30 years, although it is not included in the dictionary (Mejia et al.,2018).

Especially in recent years, we have witnessed the rise of populism and populist leaders in politics and the reactions of these two profiles to the established politicians and the institutions supporting them. This new populism is also supported by post-truth politicians by using social media as a spokesperson for false news and alternative facts (Speed and Mannion, 2017).

It is not surprising that the post-truth concept was chosen as the word of the year, especially after the 2016 presidential election. The presidential election of 2016 was a process in which a candidate, Trump, was dominant in the news media with his speeches. Considering Trump's discourses, it is understood that post-truth concept only could explain how a racist, misogynistic, neo-nationalist member of the economic elite could win a presidential (Montgomery, 2017).

PolitiFact, that controls the reality of politicians' discourse, shows that 70% of Trump's allegations in the election campaign are not real, and that is a huge proportion (Konnikova, 2017).

Similarly, we have witnessed many unfounded claims in the UK's Brexit campaigns, similar to the US presidential election such as:

- The United Kingdom sends 350 million pound a week to the European Union,
- Immigration number to the United Kingdom exceeds 330,000
- Turkey will join to the European Union with 75 million population (Joyce, 2017).

These claims, which are used without a firm foundation, are effective in influencing and directing the belief of the public in the post-truth era. So how?

At Harvard University, psychologist Daniel Gilbert argues that people believe opinions as fast and automatically as the objects they see.

Gilbert also argues that our brains perceived the lie in two-stages. In the first stage, the brain automatically accepts what it hears or reads. To understand something, we must first accept it. In the second stage, it accepts or rejects them. This second phase requires effort. According to Gilbert, the human brain may not be able to refuse the information it accepts even though involuntarily for a short time, because of lack of energy, time and evidence.

Psychologist Maria Konnikova also states that when our brain is constantly exposed to false or potentially misleading expressions, it gives up and no longer reviews everything and accepts them how they are stated (Konnikova, 2017).

Moreover, the researches reveal that the repeated discourses are accepted correctly. Many times, we start to accept the statements we hear again and again after a while even if they are not real. Researchers argue that repeated false statements are more likely to be considered accurate. Repeating a lying statement or situation does not make it right, but it makes us think it is right (Jacobs, 2017).

A study related to the effect of imaginary reality revealed that a repetitive statement was perceived more accurately than a later expression. This study by Fazio et al. reveals that the people start to believe that the Atlantic Ocean is the largest ocean of the world even though they

know that the Pacific is the largest after the repeated statement that says the opposite (Fazio *et al.*, 2015).

While judging whether the information is right or not is one of the most important tasks of people, as Gustave Le Bon points out in 1895, there is only one strong influence affecting such right judgments, which is repetition (Unkelbach and Rom, 2017).

What happened in Trump's election campaigns or during the Brexit referendum was the semi-real or totally unrealistic discourses were constantly repeated and affected the personal beliefs and emotions, destroyed their willingness of evaluating of the truth and their beliefs replaced with the reality.

3. SOCIAL MEDIA AND MEDIA LITERACY

The human civilization, which has existed for 5500 years in the geographic area, is now moving towards the postmodern civilization especially with the Big Data Age. Virtual reality is one of the most important outcomes of this era. Although the history of virtual reality extends for less than a human generation, such as 20 years, the growth of social media networks is unpredictable. Considering the fact that economies, business world and terrorism consider social media as the largest information transporter and warehouse provider, this growth rate in an unrestricted area causes social media to be considered as a social, national and even global threat. Social thinkers and experts are trying to motivate individuals to use the social media with the STOP-THINK- GET CONNECTED steps to protect them from the harmful effects of social media networks. While organizations are developing strategies from the negative impacts of social media networks, countries are also trying to take measures such as closing social media networks completely or for a certain period or educating individuals to use the positive aspects of social media networks. Many popular social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn can be opened as an anonymous account with an anonymous email address. Although making activation of these accounts with phone numbers many of them seems confidential as these phone numbers are registered, most e-mail services do not implement this activation process. There are very few mail services that make phone activation mandatory, and as a result, anonymous accounts are becoming quite widespread (Rahman and Adnan, 2016).

In this age, which is defined as the beyond-reality age and where the facts and evidence are replaced by personal beliefs and emotions, things that people accept as news have begun to be replaced by faith and emotion-centered marketing (Rochlin, 2017).

The social media accounts, which have been opened anonymously, have an important and effective role in the rapid dissemination of the news, which are unrealistic and not based on evidence, and are only created by manipulating the beliefs and feelings of the people.

We can see the speed of spreading of unreal news on social media not only in the political platform, but also in many areas including health.

As Castells (2005:471) says, internet users in the new media have also become producers of the media. The fact that internet users become information producers at the same time through the social media applications raises the result of uncontrolled and unethical production of information (Castells, 2005).

Many researches reveal that very few of the users who use the Internet as a means of information are questioning whether the source of this information is reliable or not. Social media applications are becoming an environment where health-related worrying news stories or patient stories are spreading rapidly (Ünal and Taylan, 2017).

Keyes (2017) stated that the internet is a powerful tool for the rapid dissemination of a large amount of information by evaluating rumors, news, misleading advertisements as well as

a weak tool as all this information is not accurate. In this weak Internet environment, where the spread of false news and false information has become a problem, the number of information verification platforms is rapidly increasing (Keyes, 2017).

The Truth Share, the International Verification Network, and Google's verification service are some of them. According to a study done by Duke Reporters Lab 2017, journalists and researchers work intensively with 114 verification platforms in 47 countries in the fight against false news. The research indicates that these validation platforms are particularly active during the 2016 American elections, and that these platforms are particularly active in America (Stencel, 2017).

12 out of 19 claims had been analyzed as false, 3 as unknowns, 3 as mix and only 1 as true by Teyit.org verification platform in Turkey. 7 claims had been spread via only social media, 5 via internet news web pages, 4 via both social media and WhatsApp groups, 2 via internet web pages and 1 via only WhatsApp groups. The total ratio reaches to 63% of the content spread over social media and WhatsApp shows that this area has an important share in health issues (Ünal and Taylan, 2017).

Digital media literacy, responsibilities of social media users and librarians are the other important issues that must be taken into account in the context of post-truth. There are a lot of researches about the media literacy ability of students who use the social media at the most and also constitutes our research's sample and how this ability can be improved.

There is a thin line between evaluating a news story is false or evaluating all news as false just because they do not fit our own worldview and providing media literacy education to students, it would be more effective to provide a genuine journalism education, which is far from prejudice.

Media literacy, starting from the definitions made in different sources, accessing the messages in written, printed, visual, audio and electronic media; to have the necessary knowledge to understand and evaluate media messages; to be able to evaluate the accuracy of the information from different sources and to be aware of the impact of the media on the thoughts, behaviors and values of people and society.

Libraries and information and records managers who aim to serve the community by meeting the information needs of individuals and aiming to inform users in different aspects of life should also lead the way in media literacy (Önal, 2007).

As the amount of available information to students increases, the importance of the librarians for providing information to the students as well as guiding them to evaluate about the information they need is increasing (Benjes-Small, C. et al. ,2013).

The University of Indiana's librarians in Richmond have developed a library guide (LibGuide) with detailed pictures to identify false news and reports and questions to be asked when reviewing a web page. Librarians are of vital importance to guide everyone of all ages to become critical and reflective news consumers (Banks, 2017).

4. METHOD OF THE STUDY

This study has been carried on between 27th of April 2018 and 8th of July. The purpose of this study to reveal university students' perception of post – truth on social media.

The method involved in this survey is data collection from students, who represent the majority of social media users, with 5 Likert type scale questionnaires. Data has been collected from two-year degree, undergraduate, post graduate and doctoral university students who continue their studies in public and foundation universities in Turkey. There is not an existed

scale to evaluate perception of post truth on social media. The existed scales are related to evaluate the technology addiction in psychology field. A standard scale has not been used and it is not aimed to develop a scale in this study.

5. RESULTS

Data has been collected from 542 students studying at various universities of Turkey. Oldest participant is 47 and the youngest one is 17 years old. 65% of participants is female and 35% is male students

Table 1. Gender of participants

	N	%
Female	350	64,7
Male	191	35,3
Total	541	100

The type of the programs collected data are associate degree, bachelor's degree, master's degree and doctorate degree. The numbers of the participants studying on these programs are 228, 263, 38 and 8 respectively.

299 students of our participants have been studying in state universities while 238 have been in foundation universities.

Table 2. Type of University

	N	%
State	299	55,17
Foundation	238	43,91
Unanswered	5	0,92
Total	542	100

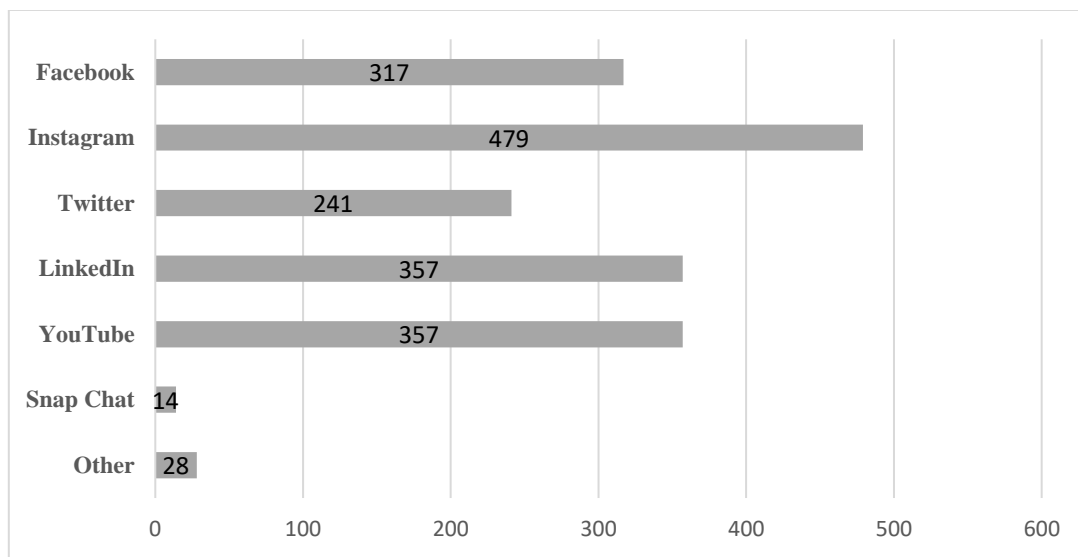
94% of participants have a social media account. The data related to post-truth on social media has been collected from this 94% participants.

Table 3. Survey Question: 'Do you have an account on social media sites?'

	N	%
Yes	512	94,46
No	30	5,54
Total	542	100

The study shows that the most popular social media accounts are Instagram, YouTube, Facebook and Twitter respectively among university students.

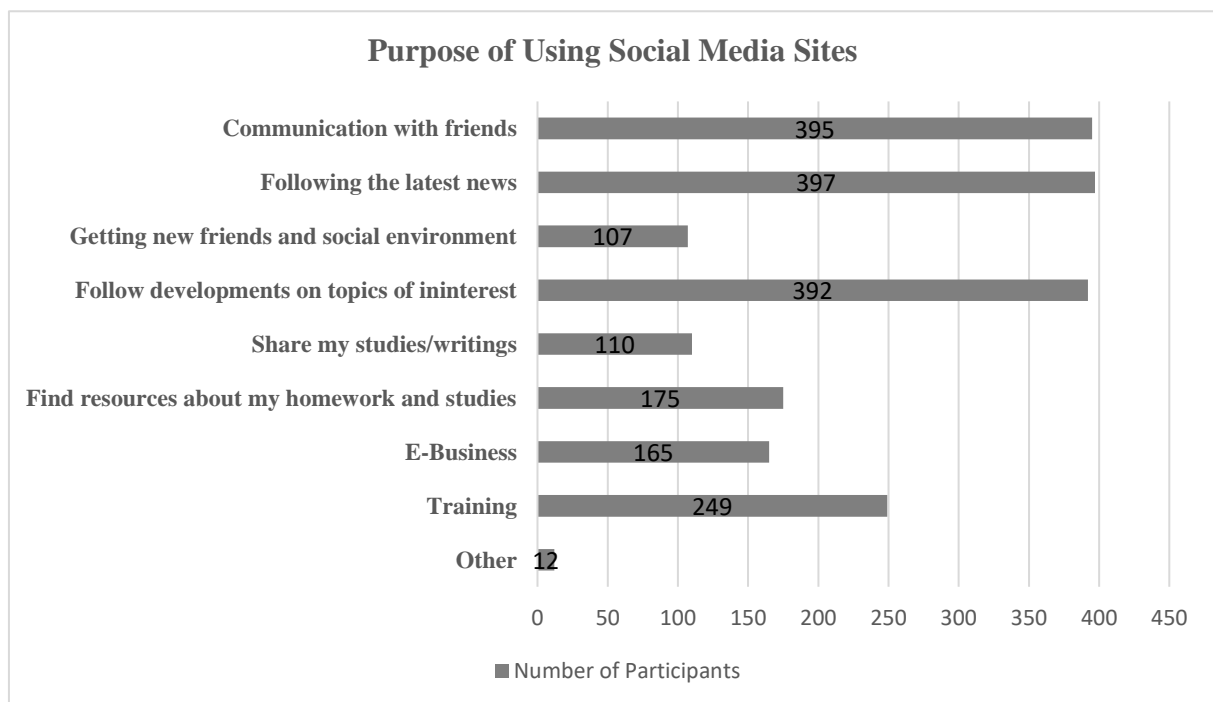
Chart 1. Survey Question: Which Social Media Site/Sites Do You Use?



414 students stated that they have been a member of any social media account for more than 3 years. 45% of the participants spend between 1-3 hours and 29% of them spend between 3-6 hours on social media.

The top three reason for using social media as follow ‘following the latest news; communication with friends; follow developments on topics of interest respectively.

Chart 2. Survey Question: For what purposes do you use social media sites?



A Likert-type questionnaire has been used for the following statements and participants have been selected the nearest option for each statement.

First question as stated on Table 4 below shows that 34% of students disagree and 16% of them strongly disagree with the statement of ‘people express themselves better on social media’ while 22% of students neither agree or disagree with the statement and 21.6% of them agree with it.

Table 4. Question 1: 'People express themselves better in social media'

	N	%	x	SD
1. Strongly disagree	80	15,9		
2. Disagree	172	34,1		
3. Neutral/Neither agree nor disagree	112	22,2	2,68	1,15
4. Agree	109	21,6		
5. Strongly agree	31	6,2		
Total	504	100		

%44 of students disagree and 19% strongly disagree with the statement of 'the information people write about themselves on social media is correct.' 28% of the students neither agree nor disagree with the statement whereas only 5% of them agree and %1,6 strongly disagree.

43% of students disagree and 34% of them strongly disagree with the statement of 'People are not different on social media to how they are in real life' 15% of them are neutral while only 4,3% agree and 1,2% strongly disagree with this statement.

Research question 4 stated on Table 5 below that 'The reality in social media is different from the reality in which we live.' 36% of students agree and 27% of them strongly agree with this statement whereas 10% disagree, 12% strongly disagree and %14 of them are neutral.

Table 5. Question 4: The reality in social media is different from the reality in which we live

	N	%	x	SD
1. Strongly disagree	62	12,3		
2. Disagree	51	10,1		
3. Neutral/Neither agree nor disagree	73	14,5	3,55	1,31
4. Agree	181	36		
5. Strongly agree	136	27		
Total	503	100		

To answer Research question 5 students indicated that 'The spread of information on social media is faster'. 50% of students strongly agree and nearly 28% of them agree with this statement while only 5% of students disagree and 13% of them strongly disagree.

Research question 6 stated on Table 6 below shows that 40% of students strongly agree and %32 of students agree to the statement of being hesitant to use the knowledge without being sure of the truth of the information received from social media.

Table 6. Question 6: 'I am hesitant to use that knowledge without being sure of the truth of the information I receive from social media.'

	N	%	x	SD
1. Strongly disagree	51	10,2		
2. Disagree	27	5,4		
3. Neutral/Neither agree nor disagree	59	11,8	3,86	1,28
4. Agree	161	32,3		
5. Strongly agree	200	40,2		
Total	498	100		

Research question 7 asked whether they verify from another source before making a decision about the information they have from social media. 37% of students strongly agree and 34% of them agree with this statement while 11% of students strongly disagree and 4,5% disagree with it.

22% of students strongly agrees and 40% of them agree with the statement of consulting someone they trust before they decide about the information they get from social media

In the research question 9, 28% of students strongly agree and 38% of students agree with the statement of 'I can distinguish the difference between 'information' and 'rumor' on social media whereas 10% of them strongly disagree and 7% disagree with this statement.

For the last question 14% of students strongly agree and 28% agree with the statement that 'I believe in the trustworthiness of the information shared by people I know very well on social media' whereas nearly 17% of them disagree and 12% of them strongly disagree with this statement.

6. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that major number of the students do not trust the information online and they are aware of the post-truth information and how fast it can spread online. They believe that people do not give correct information about themselves on social media.

The rate of belief on the difference between the reality on social media and the reality that we live is reasonably high according to the research findings. Students also believe that the spread of information online is faster.

According to our research, we can conclude that students' perception about post-truth is high as the awareness of fake and incorrect information online is high.

The research shows that the students tend to confirm the information they receive online. They intend to consult with someone they trust in their knowledge before deciding on information they receive online.

As we can see from the survey students are aware of the fake information and post-truth online and they verify this information with people they trust. However, to meet the needs of students to control the accuracy of online information, impartial practices and institutions that control the accuracy of online information should be reproduced. Verification platforms such as Teyit.org could be increased on specific areas such as health, politics and academic.

Additionally, as we have seen in the example of The University of Indiana library, applications like Lib Guide can be reproduced in libraries.

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