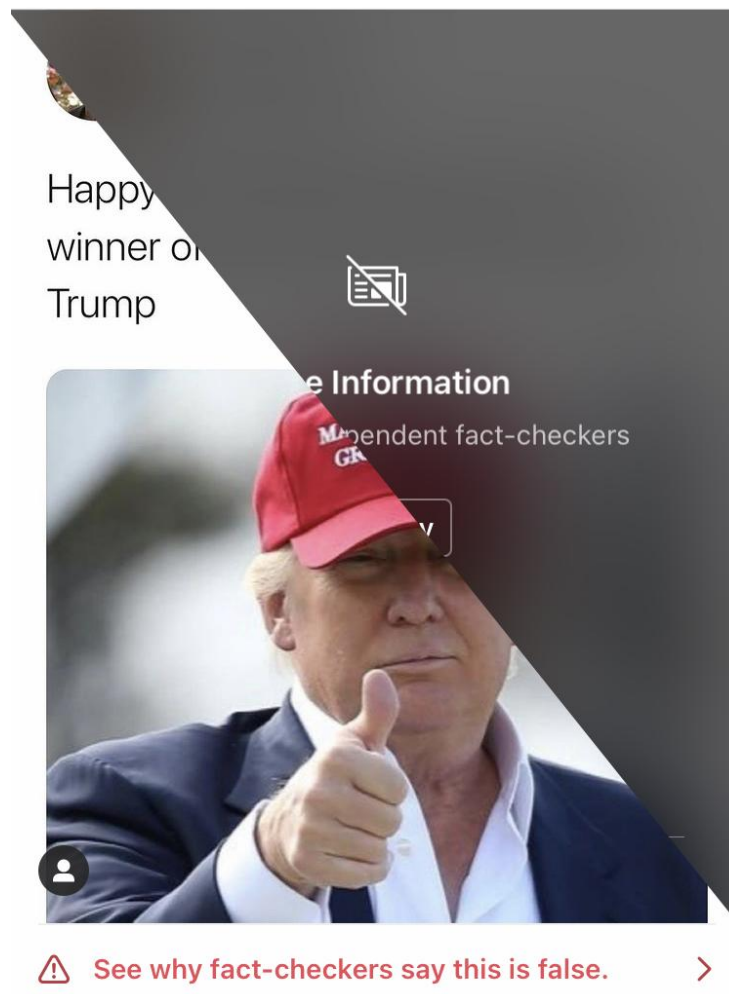# The thin line between information and misinformation on Instagram: reflecting on hyperreality

A study on users' responses to Instagram implementation of fact-checkers

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ABSTRACT

This thesis draws on the theory formulated by Jean Baudrillard to explore the meaning generated on Instagram independent fact-checkers in public comment sections. To understand users' responses, this research undertook a thematic analysis of 100 comments on Instagram posts claimed false by third-party fact-checkers. The analysis focuses on users' comments under two different categories of content: serious (political propaganda) and fun (entertainment/memes) informative posts. Through Baudrillard's lens of the hyperreal, Instagram appears as a successful medium for misinformation, since every content on the platform can be seen as simulation, hence unverifiable truth. The findings of this study highlight the importance of context when interpreting information shared on social media. Fact-checkers fighting misinformation on Instagram merge with the medium as any other content and become part of the hyperreal. Therefore, I argue that Instagram can be a sound example that reflects the hyperreal characteristic of present-day Western capitalistic societies.

Keywords: fake news, hyperreality, fact-checking, public comments, simulation, Baudrillard, Instagram, misinformation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

A few months ago, while researching Instagram content for a paper I was writing at the time, I noticed a post blurred out and labelled with "false information". The warning banner was asking whether I still wanted to see the post. At that moment I was interacting with my first Instagram fact-checked post.

I clicked on the banner "see why" and a text appeared stating: "False: Independent fact-checkers say this information has no basis in fact" (Instagram, 2021). Reading into the comment section of the post, users were expressing a wide array of opinions on the fact-checkers. Quickly, my attention was directed to how Instagram was offering content on the platform that consisted of articles denying information shared on the social network; and the whole dynamic was highly engaging and entertaining for many users.

Reading into this new component of Instagram, fact-checking struck a chord with me. Right away, this new phenomenon evoked in me the concept of hyperreality described by the French sociologist Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007). The author claimed that our current world is 'pure simulation' where truth and fiction collapse in one hyperreal world. There it was in my Instagram feed, fact-checkers being taken for fake news.

Following this experience, I became curious to look further into the latest developments of fact-checking and the current academic debate on the topic. In 2019 the social media platform Instagram, owned by Facebook, started an active fight against the spread of fake news. To declare war on misinformation, Instagram started to use an army of external independent fact-checkers (Harrison, 2019). This new system consists of a collaboration between Instagram and third-party companies that are responsible for researching and fact-checking information shared on the platform. Posts reputed to contain fake news are obscured and Instagram warns the users of the falsity of the content (Lux, 2019; Bell, 2019).

Instagram's collaboration with third-party fact-checkers became the subject of contrasting views. Chung and Kim (2020) studied theoretical mechanisms that have an impact on fact-checkers credibility. They focused on the possible factors and contextual cues that may nudge users into sharing fake news. Throughout their article, they claim that fake news with fact-checking information yields negative evaluations of the content, thus decreasing users' shares of fake news (Chung and Kim, 2020).

Contrarily, Ardèvol-Abreu et al. (2020) carried out a qualitative and quantitative analysis of online surveys to understand the dynamics of users' interaction with social media content flagged false by fact-checkers. Their findings suggest that fact-checkers warning banners on false information do not necessarily play a role in users' evaluation of the content and their decision to share it. They conclude that the majority of users expressed distrust and lack of knowledge on the fact-checking process.

Since there is little knowledge on social media users' evaluation of fact-checked content flagged false, Ardèvol-Abreu et al. (2020) and Chung and Kim (2020) have called for further research on this topic. Moreover, they have claimed that users' public opinions on this process are understudied (Chung and Kim, 2020). I follow up on their request, however, I will approach this matter through the specific lens of hyperreality.

To answer the call for action made by Ardèvol-Abreu et al. (2020) and Chung and Kim (2020), I investigate Instagram public comment sections through the theoretical lens of Baudrillard's writings, to understand the meaning generated by users on the topic of fact-checking. Therefore, this thesis consists of a thematic analysis of comments on Instagram posts flagged false to reflect on its links to hyperreality. The analysis will focus on exploring whether there is the presence of a thematic difference among comments with a serious tone (political propaganda posts) and a fun tone (entertainment/meme posts).

The importance of using this framework stems from the fact that Baudrillard's theories have been successfully adopted by Prisk (2017) and Richardson (2019) as the foundation for exploring the dynamics of communication in today's capitalist society. Prisk used the framework of hyperreality to analyse how memes online can manipulate users. His article revealed that, through memes' creation of hyperreality, far-right movements can spread their ideology and flourish until their preferred simulation becomes reality (Prisk, 2017). Similarly, Richardson used the Baudrillarian framework of hyperreality to analyse the concept of sovereignty and its use in political propaganda. His article concludes that populist politicians create imaginaries of sovereign societies that, through the hyperreal, become the basis of important societal changes (Richardson, 2019).

I argue that looking at users' comments on fact-checked information on Instagram using Baudrillard's vocabulary is novel research that can yield useful

observations on the dynamics of misinformation on social media. Furthermore, this study can provide valuable insight into the hyperreal characteristics of our society.

1.1 Research questions

Social media comment sections are rich resources of information to understand public opinion and they have been under looked in social and communication studies. I aim to use Baudrillard's theory to analyse online discussions on the controversial topic of third-party fact-checkers on Instagram. This paper aims to answer the main research question:

RQ: In what manner can Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality contribute to understanding the thematic analysis on Instagram users' public comments on fact-checkers?

To explore this inquiry, this research will answer the sub-question:

> SQ: What thematic differences appear between comments on "serious" and "fun" false information posts?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This thesis aims at interpreting themes that emerge from Instagram comments on fact-checkers through a Baudrillarian lens. As follows, it is necessary to define the framework of fact-checking as well as hyperreality. Before talking about the motives and risks of using the French sociologist's theories as a framework for this research, I will explain what has been claimed on the development of misinformation on the social network Instagram. The following sections will touch on the elements that correlate to the spreading of fake news, the consequences of misinformation on social media and the new affordances developed by Instagram in response to the information crisis.

2.1 Why is fake news successful on Instagram?

There are a series of factors that determine users' tendency to endorse fake news (Mena et al. 2020). Braun and Loftus (1998) explained that visual information has a greater ability to mislead than verbal information. Instagram has a strong visual aspect, consequently, it is an excellent medium for misinformation. Additionally, the specific design of Instagram interface contributes to limiting the information exposed to the viewer. The user must take extra actions to find the source, making it more challenging to assess authenticity (Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Peters, 2018).

Furthermore, it has been argued that the credibility of content on social media derives mostly from its aesthetic appearance and characteristics rather than its source and the facts that support it (Cunningham & Bright, 2012; Hwang, 2013; Mena et al. 2020). One of the fundamental aspects of credibility on Instagram is social validation (Mena et al., 2020). Research on online environments claimed that when sources are unknown or doubtful, users rely more on others' endorsement, successfully overcoming their initial scepticism (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013; Messing & Westwood, 2014; Mena et al. 2020). Even more so if misinformation is endorsed by popular digital personas such as celebrities. Fake news shared by popular Instagram accounts can spring into a snowball effect and be shared by many of the account's followers (Mena et al. 2020).

Besides trustworthy personalities, bandwagon heuristics (large numbers of likes, comments and shares) are among the main signals of strong social validation. Relying on heuristics to evaluate posts credibility is a way for users to decrease cognitive effort (Metzger & Flanagin, 2013). Araújo et al. (2014) introduced the 'rich get richer' phenomenon, explaining that Instagram content with high engagement levels is predestined to be appreciated more, thus further increasing its popularity (Araújo et al. 2014). This phenomenon is more powerful when news posts have large amounts of feedback. Comment sections hold incredible power on social media. It is one of the most efficient and quick tools to assess credibility. Comments can have different results when negative, positive, or mixed (Del Giudice, 2010).

The 'rich get richer' phenomenon is a prime example of how reality is lost on social media. All the aforementioned elements contributing to the fast spread of misinformation, illustrate how the current society relies on appealing/convincing news rather than the true state of affairs. This dynamic already gives insight into how Instagram users unconsciously discard the truth in favour of sensational fake news that is simply more interesting.

2.2 What are the consequences of misinformation?

Misinformation has become a serious issue in the past decade (Mihailidis and Viotty, 2017; Lewandowsky et al., 2017). In moments of crisis or instability, users' content on social media and unverified sources of information such as conspiracy theories and fake news receive millions of interactions (Mian, 2020).

Dramatic headlines successfully attract attention; however, the most exciting and engaging content consists of unproven speculations (Zannettou et al., 2019; Mian, 2020). Through this process, social media became exponentially efficient in the spreading of misinformation. Popular fake news directly discredits reliable, evidence-based media sources, undermining scientific data's credibility and increasing confusion (Mian, 2020; Hartley & Khuong Vu, 2020).

The current historical period, in which the spread of information is decentralised and, at times, not driven by facts, has been defined as post-fact, post-truth and post-hyperreality (Mihailidis and Viotty, 2017; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Bailey, 2014). This shift in information dynamics became a profitable ground for political

propaganda and conspiracy theorists. It has been claimed that fake news on social media had an important role in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections as well as Brexit (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017; Richardson, 2019). Moreover, far-right movements and populist ideas flourished thanks to the information crisis (Prisk, 2017). Additionally, during the Covid-19 pandemic, conspiracy theorists received an incredible amount of attention, creating confusion and pushing part of the Western population to underestimate the health crisis (Mian, 2020).

2.3 How did Instagram react? New affordances

The term affordance is used to define the action potential of technologies (Bower, 2008; Gibson, 2014; Hutchby, 2001). Instagram's affordances are all the options offered by the interface that limit the actions of the user and shape her/his experience of the digital environment such as the like button and the possibility to publish a post. Instagram deployed new affordances as a response to the increasing issue of misinformation. The social media interface started by undergoing a series of changes, among which, the removal of the number of likes attached to posts (Leskin, 2019).

Following the recent developments during the Corona crisis and the 2020 U.S. elections, Instagram is further revising its interface affordances, now including warning banners directing to reliable sources and limiting access to misleading posts. This response, aiming to create awareness of fake news, is based on a system of independent third-party fact-checkers. This system was already used on Facebook since 2016 and consists of a collaboration with 25 fact-checking international organizations (Harrison, 2019). On its website, Facebook claims that fact-checkers are certified through the non-partisan International Fact-Checking Network (Lyons, 2018).

When a post is fact-checked and reputed to contain false information, the platform obscures the content, warning the user with the text "false information" (fig.1). Users are enabled to click on the affordance "see post" or on the button "see why" to read the fact-checker conclusion as well as access further information on the post (Lux, 2019; Bell, 2019).

The implementation of external fact-checkers is Instagram's response to the misleading characteristics that information acquires when located within the

platform's interface (visual appearance, bandwagon heuristics, social validation and comment sections). These features, along with the social dynamics of Instagram users, shape the role of fact-checkers. They all play a role in predetermining the necessity for an external party that acts as the gatekeeper to reality.

The use of fact-checkers to debunk fake news on social networks created a clash of opinions. Chung and Kim (2020) have claimed that fact-checking had a successful impact in discrediting unreliable information on social media. Moreover, they decreased the sharing of fake news (ibid). Contrarily, Ardèvol-Abreu et al. (2020) claimed that the issue of misinformation persisted after social media fact-checking. Users showed a lack of knowledge regarding the fact-checking process. In addition, fake news after fact-checkers corrections has the risk of backfiring (ibid). Overall, studies of fact-checking on Facebook demonstrated that warning labels do not have a strong impact on users (Oeldorf-Hirsch et al., 2020). Nonetheless, several articles on this topic argue that users' interpretation and evaluation of fact-checked content remains understudied (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020; Chung and Kim, 2020).

2.4 Hyperreality: fake news as simulation

The hypothesis of this thesis contends that the French sociologist Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality strongly relates to fake news on social media. Hyperreality is a term that appears often in Baudrillard's works but is mainly explained in his book *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994 [1981]). In the latter, the French author examines the relationship between meaning, culture and media to understand the construction of human society as a shared reality.

To explain the complex significance of hyperreality, Baudrillard elucidates four successive stages on the relation between sign and reality. The first stage consists of the faithful copy, where the image is a direct simple representation of reality. In the second stage, representation is unfaithful, the copy masks and perverts reality. In the third stage, reality is lost and the signs mask its absence. Signs and images pretend to be a representation of reality but they are copies without any original. In the fourth stage, Baudrillard introduces the pure simulacrum. At this point, signs have lost any relationship with reality. Images refer to each other, any reality is artificial: in the simulated world everything is hyperreal (Baudrillard, 1994).

Alongside the four stages of sign-order, Baudrillard links three types of simulacra with different historical periods. The first order consists of the premodern period, where simulacra were representations of 'real' elements, directly recalling physical reality. The second degree arrives with the Industrial Revolution and is the breaking point between representation and reality. Due to mass reproduction, copy and original are not distinguishable anymore. Fiction appears as true as the real thing. The third degree is associated with late capitalism. At this stage, the simulacrum goes beyond representation and becomes a new reality, the hyperreal. The distinction between reality and representation is lost in the play of simulation. Simulacra successfully simulate a reality that has never existed, it therefore precedes and shapes reality (Baudrillard, 1983). At this point of the French sociologist's theories, reality is lost in the play of simulation. This last stage of simulacra brings us to the subject of this thesis: fake news.

Fake news was defined by Hartley and Khuong Vu (2020) as "false information masquerading as verifiable truth". Consequently, fake news is a simulation of evidence-based news. The problem of misinformation online consists of fake news (simulation of reality) being consumed and believed more than reality itself. Their description recalls Baudrillard's definition of simulacra: "a copy of a copy which has been so repeatedly acknowledged, referred to and disseminated, that it has come to be accepted as more real than the original" (Baudrillard, 1994, 2).

The difference between truth and falsehood used to rely on facts. In contemporary society, there is more information than necessary, accordingly, there is an increased need for selection. However, given the dynamics of new media, information that reaches the highest level of attention is the most appealing, regardless of its verifiability (Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017).

As explained in the previous paragraphs, social media have been a hostile environment for facts. Knowledge is now dictated by the attention economy while being increasingly distant from real events. Several authors have proposed media literacies to produce more critical media consumers, directly fighting partisanship and distrust (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017; Lewandowsky et al., 2017). It has also been claimed that digital corporations should invest more in programming algorithmic fact-checkers. Moreover, platforms should apply strict comments moderation to limit comment sections' power to nudge users. (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). On these claims, new media corporations are working to create safer digital environments as

well as critical consumers. The new feature of independent fact-checkers is an attempt to solve the irrelevance of facts on social media (Lewandowsky et al., 2017).

The increasing success of fake news as a simulation of verifiable truth evokes Baudrillard's words on the current loss of reality through the play of simulation. If everything is hyperreal, fake news and fact-checked news have more in common than what we think. Accordingly, the vocabulary of the French author can be helpful to better understand the current information crisis.

2.5 Accepting Hyperreality to reframe misinformation

Baudrillard's theories have become a useful lens to look at new developments in communication studies. Prisk (2017) used a Baudrillarian approach to analyse how memes can manipulate users. He claimed that political memes use different layers of irony and connotations that support a simulation of reality. His article revealed that, through memes' creation of hyperreality, far-right movements can spread their ideology and flourish until their preferred simulation becomes reality (Prisk, 2017).

He focuses on the communication strategy of the spokesperson of the "Alt-Right" movement Richard Spencer. Prisk claims that Spencer uses strong symbols such as the swastika in memes to destabilise their meaning. He continues that simulating a nazi is a tactic to confuse the reader and send the implicit message that he is not one (Prisk, 2017). Prisk then connects this defence mechanism to Baudrillard description of the hyperreal: "Is the simulator [nazi] or not, given that he produces 'true' symptoms?" (Baudrillard, 1994, 4, cited in; Prisk, 2017, 6). Prisk explains that using confusing signs to make oneself hard to interpret is a successful strategy that relies on hyperreality. Far-right memes spread their ideology while hiding it behind an illusion of openness to multiple meanings (Prisk, 2017).

Similarly, Richardson (2019) used the Baudrillarian framework of hyperreality to analyse the concept of sovereignty. He investigates the case studies of Brexit and Trump's slogan "America First" to explore how sovereignty belongs to the realm of the hyperreal. His article concludes that populist politicians create imaginaries of unrealisable sovereign societies. Nevertheless, this illusion of sovereignty became reality because it has been the basis of important societal changes such as Brexit (Richardson, 2019).

Richardson argues that the concept of sovereignty is an abstract model that has never existed. Yet, quoting Baudrillard, he writes: "a copy of a copy which has been so repeatedly acknowledged, referred to and disseminated, that it has come to be accepted as more real than the original" (Baudrillard, 1994, 2, cited in; Richardson, 2019, 7). Through this process, Richardson's paper suggests that the imaginary of sovereignty is increasingly taken for real because citizens have lost the ability to distinguish between the model and the real since the distinction between truth and untruth is annihilated (Richardson, 2019).

Current politicians exploit this dynamic and make the false promise "to restore the truth beneath the simulacrum" (ibid, 182, cited in; Richardson, 2019, 8). Nonetheless, the distinction between hyperreal and real collapses; hyperreality is no longer illusion and reality is no longer true (Debrix, 1999, cited in; Richardson, 2019). With his study cases, Richardson argues that the statements released by populist politicians support a nostalgia of a true past sovereignty that can be achieved again. These claims illustrate the hyperreal aspect of sovereignty in which the "logic of simulation has nothing to do with a logic of facts" (Baudrillard 1994, 175, cited in; Richardson, 2019, 10). Sovereignty becomes successful because the simulation of the real indefinitely supplants the real.

Prisk (2017) and Richardson's (2019) Baudrillarian approach arrives at the same conclusion: "all the possible interpretations, even the most contradictory – all are true" (Baudrillard, 1994, 175). The framework of their articles enables them to explain how signs and language can now achieve anything. Especially in political propaganda, the collapse of simulation and truth is advantageous to nudge citizens in certain directions. This new understanding of information dynamics would have been impossible to illustrate outside the concept of hyperreality. Hence, I aim at using a similar approach for my case. I believe that Instagram's latest affordances should be looked at from Baudrillard's framework because, as Prisk (2017) and Richardson (2019) have confirmed, Baudrillard's theories are relevant to bring new insight on social media information crisis, impossible to expose otherwise.

I hold that a thematic analysis of comments following Baudrillard's vocabulary of hyperreality can generate a new understanding of the underlying socio-economic dynamics that shape misinformation online. Through the lens of hyperreality, I will argue a different framing of the issue of false information, thus generating useful insight on how to approach misinformation. Furthermore, I aim to explore how the

meaning attached to Instagram's fact-checkers clarify how social media are in the realm of hyperreality.

It is important to state that applying the Badrillarian framework to the case study of this research comes with risks. Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality goes as far as to claim that every component of our current capitalistic society is a simulation. Baudrillard draws multiple examples, among which he claims that the American city Los Angeles is a simulation of a modern city. Similarly, the Cold War and the Gulf War can be interpreted as hyperreal wars since they were fought through media rather than in the fields. Baudrillard claims that the whole of America is no longer real, but just a simulation of society (Baudrillard, 1983).

However, the concept of hyperreality is a product generated within the hyperreal characteristic of postmodern society. Following the approach of hyperreality, Baudrillard's theories are a simulation of critical philosophical theories. Therefore, this study will not simply rely on Baudrillard's thoughts, but it will question their interpretation.

By merely applying this intricate framework to the Instagram case study I risk instrumentalizing Baudrillard's theories. Accepting hyperreality requires accepting the theory of hyperreality as simulation. I acknowledge the reflexivity of Baudrillard's texts, on that account, I will not merely apply his theories to my data. For this reason, along with studying how Instagram's social and information dynamics relate to the hyperreal, this thesis also investigates hyperreality possible interpretations.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Thematic analysis and Constant comparative method:

This research consists of a qualitative thematic analysis of 100 comments from four Instagram posts that have been claimed false by third-party fact-checkers. I will use the constant comparative method (CCM) to determine comment themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Speziale et al., 2011; Walker & Malson, 2020). The thematic analysis is the overall methodology of this thesis, while CCM consists of the specific approach to carry out the analysis. CCM stands for a structure of steps with which data will be coded into meaningful categories (Glaser, 1965).

The constant comparative method was first developed by the American sociologist Barney Glaser in 1965. His writing explains it to be an attempt to create a more systematic approach to generate theory from qualitative analysis. This method has been adjusted for thematic analysis in different fields, for instance, Braun and Clarke (2006) wrote a guide on thematic analysis in psychology using Glaser's theories as starting point. Walker and Malson (2020) combined Glaser's CCM with Braun and Clarke thematic analysis to delineate an appropriate methodology for their research on Facebook comments. Since Walker and Malson's research has several affinities with this analysis, I use a similar version to their methodology.

CCM consists of a theoretically flexible approach to qualitative data analysis (Glaser, 1965; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Using this approach, data is not grouped according to predefined categories. Themes are created by constantly comparing the data. Specifically, by looking at salient categories of meaning and their relationships. The constant comparison of different significant incidents will prompt me to outline the theoretical properties of the categories (Glaser, 1965). Consequently, categories are derived from the data itself through a process of inductive reasoning. Following this process, my research will be able to divide data based on a model that seeks to explain the social processes under study.

The reason for using CCM for this analysis derives from my approach to qualitative data. I became familiar with similar qualitative approaches during my academic career. In my experience as a researcher, I developed a preference for flexible methodologies, which allow complete immersion in the data. I consider them

more efficient for interpreting comments and generating relevant theory from qualitative analysis.

Moreover, as stated above, Walker and Malson's (2020) article successfully used CCM to make a thematic analysis of 107 Facebook comments studying online discussions on the controversial topic of agricultural and environmental gene editing. Their research provides new insights into the public understanding of these complex topics. Furthermore, their comment analysis revealed that users are involved in producing inaccurate meanings and terminology that fuel new users' misinterpretation of the content. Therefore, CCM is helpful to systematically divide comments into meaningful groups that reflect the different ideas expressed in the content of the comments. On these grounds, CCM can be considered as the appropriate methodology for answering the research question of this thesis.

By looking at the different general categories that emerge from users' comments on fact-checking, I will divide the data into themes. Following, I will reflect on the findings in relation to the concept of hyperreality to generate new insight into fact-checking's meaning for Instagram users.

From the thematic analysis of the comment sections, I will explore whether comments indicate trust or distrust towards fact-checkers and why. If the analysis suggests that comments consistently claim fact-checkers to be unreliable, I will argue that this thesis supports Baudrillard's claims. On that account, Instagram is a sound example of how facts and fake news have merged. Accordingly, information dynamics on social media capture the hyperreal aspect of today's society. To do so, I will not use Baudrillard theory of hyperreality as absolute truth, but I will rather use his vocabulary to reframe misinformation dynamics on social media. In the last part of this research, I will reflect on the duality of his theories to generate new meaning on the reflexive component of hyperreality.

3.2 Data collection and delineating the corpus

In order to study users' comments that directly address Instagram fact-checkers, I select four posts from four different Instagram accounts to collect a total sample of 100 comments. The collection of users' comments is done directly from the Instagram API library using the tool IGCommentExport.

The implementation of fact-checkers is a recent development that initially started on the US version of the social network and is gradually being expanded in other countries (Instagram, 2019). Consequently, news sources in English have been the main focus of fact-checkers so far. For this reason, the Instagram accounts chosen for this study were picked from several US-based accounts.

3.2.1 Instagram posts selection criteria

The selection of Instagram posts can be divided into four different criteria. Firstly, the posts have to contain news information of any context. The information of the posts cannot be exclusively made of visual cues but has to include textual elements. This criterion has been decided based on academic literature demonstrating that the combination of visual and textual elements increases fake news credibility (Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Mena et al. 2020).

Secondly, the content must have been tagged false by Instagram, ergo, they must have been fact-checked. Further, the posts need a minimum of 50 comments. The 50-comments threshold was chosen because it is reputed to show posts' notable engagement (Walker & Malson, 2020).

Lastly, Instagram comments are strongly shaped by context. Thus, comments on memes may differ from comments on a political propaganda post. To find different responses to the fact-checkers, the four accounts selected for this study have opposite contexts. Alongside their context, the four posts are chosen based on their approach to information: distinguishing posts with a "serious" tone and a "fun" tone. The first two accounts are US political figures/parties that act as news outlets for political propaganda, while the second two are entertainment-based news outlets.

Therefore, this research looks at whether there is a thematic difference in users' comments on fact-checkers among political propaganda posts (serious tone) and memes posts (fun tone). This choice is driven by the fact that misinformation and user manipulation have been exposed to come from both traditional/serious and entertainment/fun news outlets (Prisk, 2017; Richardson, 2019).

However, the boundary between what can be considered serious/political and fun/apolitical Instagram content is quite blurry. To solve this issue, the four posts analysed in this investigation are selected carefully on the basis of their content and connotations. I paid extra attention to choose ironic/entertainment posts that do not

contain any political message. Of the 100 selected comments, 50 will be taken from political sources and 50 from entertainment ones.

3.2.2 Comments selection criteria

The selection criteria to collect comments is based on the two keywords: "fact" and "false". The keywords are used to identify users' responses that directly address fact-checkers. I expected these words to be highly present in the comments sections of fact-checked posts. Hence, I tested this theory with a frequency analysis of 100 Instagram comments from one of the four fact-checked posts (@therudygiuliani). The results of the frequency analysis performed using a word frequency counter tool, complied with my expectations. The two words (fact and false) are the first two most common meaningful words present in the comments on fact-checked content (the words this, the, to and is were reputed not meaningful). Accordingly, these words have been selected as criteria to collect comments.

After gathering the desired number of comments with the keywords, I will keep the comments that relate to the content's fact-checkers and not just to the content itself. Moreover, I will discard any off-topic comment. When quoting users' comments, I will keep the texts in quotes as it was originally written on the platform, including misspellings, typos and emojis.

3.2.3 Choosing the corpus

The 100 comments are selected from four Instagram posts containing false information. The four posts selected were all judged false by third-parties fact-checkers collaborating with Instagram. They were published by the Instagram accounts @therudygiuliani (524k followers) and @republicanparty (1.2m followers) as political/serious news outlets, while @whitepeoplehumor (4.4m followers) and @trashcanpaul (2.2m followers) as entertainment/fun news outlets.

The content and context of the four posts chosen determine the frame of their comment sections. The first political post was published by the American politician Rudy Giuliani (@therudygiuliani) on February 15, 2021. The post contains a picture of the American actor Kevin Sorbo and a text in quotes that states that the state of California did not verify signatures on mail-in ballots for the US 2020 presidential

elections (fig. 2). The post has been fact-checked by the organizations PolitiFact and USA TODAY. The conclusions of the fact-checkers state: "Yes, California requires signature verification for mail-in ballots and Newsom recall petitions" and "Claim that California did not verify signatures on mail-in ballots is false".

The second political post was published by The Republican Party (@republicanparty) on the same day. The page represents one of the two main parties in the US political system along with the Democratic Party. Its Instagram content celebrates the former president of the United States Donald Trump as the "true winner" of the 2020 US presidential elections, won by his democratic rival Joe Biden (fig.3). The content was fact-checked by USA TODAY, which concluded: "Trump lost the 2020 presidential election".

The first entertainment post selected was posted by @whitepeoplehumor on the 11 of February 2021. The content proposes a picture of an ambulance with an ironic crime headline posted on Facebook followed by a joke in the form of a comment (fig. 4). The post was fact-checked by the organization Lead Stories that declared: "Woman High On Meth Did NOT Die After Pumping Gasoline Into Her Anus".

The last post was uploaded by the entertainment account @trashcanpaul on the 10 of February 2021. The post consists of a fake Twitter statement by the brand Gorilla Glue suggesting to not use glue on human hair (fig. 5). The picture was fact-checked by USA TODAY and PolitiFact. They respectively wrote: "Company never shared the fake viral tweet about "Gorilla Glue Girl" and "No, Gorilla Glue did not tweet this about the woman who used its product on her hair".

3.2.4 Limitations of the corpus

It is important to state that Instagram comments are posted only by a small fraction of users compared to the general audience that visualizes content. On average, users that comment have specific motivations to interact with the content.

Studies on participatory media have explained that users' motives to interact with content are multiple and include seeking information (judging the social value of content), giving information (expressing their own opinion), seeking self-status, seeking social interaction and entertainment (Khan, 2017).

The affordance of commenting is mostly supported by the motive of social interaction. In comment sections, users engage with each other, they build and

maintain contact with the community (Lange, 2007). Following, commenting originates from seeking entertainment, giving information, and seeking information (Khan, 2017; Lange, 2007).

The comments analysis in the following chapters will reflect on the themes that emerge from responses of users that had a motivation to comment. Therefore, comments are biased and do not represent the public opinion on fact-checkers. Nonetheless, following the hypothesis of this thesis, users' possible bias to defend the credibility of the content by attacking fact-checkers is a relevant phenomenon, which I would argue, can illustrate the hyperreal at work. Simulation does not need to convince the whole population to become hyperreality.

In this case, possible ideological biases of the chosen accounts are not relevant as long as their posts have been labelled false. However, their ideological biases are part of the context in which the users' comments are posted, thus they are a limiting factor of this study.

This thesis will not use a large dataset for generating quantitative results. Due to the high number of elements that play a role in determining users' interpretation of content on social media, the selection criteria for this analysis do not aim at generating a representative sample of Instagram users at large. For the sake of this study, I only look at a few responses to reflect on the meaning generated.

3.3 Methodological steps and data analysis

In Glaser's description, CCM is divided into four stages: (1) comparing incidents applicable to each category, (2) integrating categories and their properties, (3) delimiting the theory, and (4) writing the theory (Glaser, 1965, 439). Braun and Clarke (2006) draw on Glaser's theories and outline six steps for a successful thematic analysis: (1) read and familiarise with the data; (2) create initial codes and ideas on the data; (3) gather the data in potential themes; (4) review and refine themes; (5) name and define themes; (6) write the final analysis of the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Walker & Malson, 2020). Walker and Malson (2020) adapted CCM for their research on Facebook comments and they followed the six steps proposed by Braun and Clarke. The thematic analysis of the 100 comments of this study follows the version of the constant comparison method described by Walker and Malson (2020).

Hence, the analysis consists of the six aforementioned steps explained by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Following this process, themes will reflect some level of patterned responses or meaning that appears in the comment dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through the development of general categories, I will divide the data into different themes and summarise and reflect on their meaning. Furthermore, I will look at whether the comments are pro, anti or neutral towards Instagram fact-checking features.

The following chapter focuses on the content of users' responses to see what opinions users publicly share on Instagram regarding fact-checkers. After completing the analysis, I will reflect on the results from a Baudrillarian lens to produce a better understanding of the relation between misinformation and hyperreality on social media.

3.3.3 Categorizing the selected comments into themes:

Once I gathered the 100 comments, 50 from serious/political content and 50 from fun/entertainment posts, I read the two lists multiple times to familiarise myself with the data (1). After reading the comments I quickly noticed a group of words that were consistently appearing in the comment sections. The common words from the 50 comments from political posts are: liars, who, why, idiotic, censorship and silencing (2). These six words are heavily present throughout the 50 comments selected. Additionally, some of them often appear in the same comments.

On average, the ideas expressed by users commenting on political content are quite negative. Of the 50 comments, only a few did not insult, criticize, or joke about the findings of the fact-checkers. At this stage, I gathered the data from political content in potential themes (3). Few of the words had overlapping meanings in the comments (who, why and censoring, silencing), along these lines, I included them in the same category. The first themes I developed are: liars, who/what is fact-checking, idiotic and silencing/censoring. Since idiotic was not as present and it was often overlapping with the theme liars, I redefined the themes into: liars, who/what is fact-checking and silencing/censoring (appendix).

I carried out the same process on the data gathered from entertainment posts. The initial words recurring in the 50 comments were: liars, idiotic, why fact-checking a meme, useless, ironic. The comment sections on memes were slightly more varied

than the ones on political posts. Users expressed more ideas compared to the first list of comments which was quite repetitive. The words liars and idiotic were in common with comments on serious content, yet this time they were present only in a small number of comments. Consequently, the data supporting these themes was too little compared to the other themes; for this reason, they were not representative to delineate different categories. The three themes in which I divided the 50 comments from entertainment posts are: why fact-checking a meme, useless and ironic (appendix).

The six themes generated at this stage bring useful information on the thematic difference between comments on serious and fun fact-checked content. Thus, in the following chapter, I analyse these six themes and reflect on their meaning from a Baudrillarian perspective.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Selected Themes:

To understand the thematic differences between comments on entertainment and political posts, this chapter reflects on the six themes resulting from the 100 comments selected. From the thematic analysis of 50 comments published on political/serious Instagram posts, the following themes emerged: "liars", "who/what is fact-checking" and "silencing/censoring". As opposed to this, the themes that emerged from the analysis of 50 comments from the entertainment/fun posts are: "ironic", "useless" and "why fact-checking a meme".

I made a distinction between these six themes because they represent the variety of ideas expressed in the sample of comments analysed. If I take further distance from the data, the six themes can be summarised in two overarching themes. However, approximating all the different meanings of the 100 comments in two themes would consist of a generalisation that would not profit the aim of this thesis. Because they would limit the instances in which the data gathered reflects and evokes Baudrillard's ideas. Nevertheless, following the analysis of the six themes, I will reflect on the overarching themes that group both categories of content (serious and fun).

All the comments quoted in the following sections have been published under the four posts selected for the analysis. To make the text easier to read I only make in-text citations with the author and date of the comments. I include the complete references to the comments in the appendix dividing comments on the basis of the four accounts which published the posts (appendix). Similarly, to make more accessible the references to the Instagram posts including the respective URLs, I have created a list of image sources that can be found at the end of the research.

4.2 Political/Serious Content

4.2.1 Liars

A significant part of the comments under the fact-checked posts from @therudygiuliani and @republicanparty show the recurring theme "liars". This theme was present in all the comment sections of the four posts analysed but in different

numbers. Among the comments with the keywords 'fact' and 'false' on the two political propaganda posts, this theme was heavily present.

The term "liars" best describes how comments part of this category addressed the fact-checkers. As visible in the comments: "The fact checkers here are false and liars!!!" (@itsmesani8, 2021) and "The independent fact checkers are basically full of shit!!!" (@bobeberenz, 2021). Some comments were more aggressive, often using insults. Similarly, many users claim that fact-checkers need to be fact-checked as well.

This theme shows general distrust against Instagram third-party fact-checkers. Yet, studies on the 2016 U.S. electorate have shown that social media users are not merely "ill-informed". They are, instead, determined to find information that fits their worldview. Personally relevant information is prioritized more than truth (Mihailidis and Viotty, 2017). Therefore, it is not surprising that the majority of users engaging with political content in this sample easily call fact-checkers liars.

Another element that supports this theory is that Instagram's affordances arguably sustain the filter bubble effect (Masrour et al., 2020). This phenomenon consists of social media algorithms personalising users' online experience to the extent to which individuals receive only information that conforms to and reinforces their own beliefs (Borgesius et al., 2016). This premise is consistent with users' general negative reactions present in my sample against fact-checkers disclaiming political information that supports their opinions.

4.2.2 Who/what is fact-checking

The theme "who/what is fact-checking" is not one of the most present in the comment sections analysed. Nonetheless, it emerges consistently from the users' responses on political/serious content. This theme encloses all the comments questioning the fact-checking process. Among these responses many users often ask who is the person that is actively fact-checking Instagram posts while some users ask why the content is fact-checked. Most of the comments categorised in this theme claim to not believe fact-checkers comments and conclusions. They show scepticism and distrust towards this new system, and some users seem offended on a personal level by the fact-checkers' claims.

The emergence of this theme could suggest users' lack of knowledge regarding Instagram latest developments and affordances against misinformation. The comment:

"Who is the "fact checker" and who's fact checking the fact checker? What a joke."
(@angeleekaa, 2021) indicates that some users decide to not trust the warning banners because they are not aware of how they are generated and who is responsible for this process.

As explained before, Instagram tends to generate the filter bubble. Hence, the platform has a personalised manner of content exposure. Information proposed to users is expected by the platform to fit users' interests (Borgesius et al., 2016). Personalised content exposure based on users' interests directly impacts fact-checkers credibility. Comments such as: "Nothing false about this statement. Why is Instagram lying about this?" (@bruno_bacon_lll, 2021), "False? Not false! It's true which is why it must be banned." (@shirley.perez.758399, 2021), and

> "I have to laugh at these so-called Fact Checkers...whether they like it or not the Democratic Party and their Leftist Marxist Socialists have been cheating America as regards elections. THIS IS MY PERSONAL OPINION! Fact-Check, that!" (@sanvan1937, 2021).

show that users that comment under political posts in my sample tend to be supporters of the political claims mentioned in the content. Despite the general lack of knowledge shown by this theme, users are ready to attack fact-checkers to defend their worldview and personal opinions.

Comments that are part of this category show that ignorance on the topic does not stop users from rejecting fact-checker conclusions. The comments: "Wow, fact checkers say this is false. Who are these fact checkers? We need FACT CHECKERS for the fact checkers, unbelievable!" (@1oldrooki, 2021) and the comment by @angeleekaa mentioned in the paragraph above; illustrate that users ask the questions "who/what is fact-checking?" only to claim that fact-checkers are a joke, unbelievable and generally wrong. The fact that users easily dismiss fact-checkers regardless of their lack of knowledge on the topic, suggests that they have already found the information that supports their ideas, thus, they are not interested in further research (Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017).

4.2.3 Silencing/censoring

A big part of the comments on the political posts accused fact-checkers to be a new form of censorship limiting freedom of speech. It is common among users on the selected posts to accuse Instagram and their independent fact-checkers to be leftist, liberal, or deployed by the democratic party to silence the conservative news outlets. As this comment puts it:

> "The fact checkers are so creepy. It's so transparent and so divisive and so wrong. I can't believe what is happening in the world. Censoring people because you don't like what they're saying or believe. It's disgusting. Harks back to the dark ages" (@mo2436_1, 2021).

This comment exemplifies how some users write that fact-checkers go against the principles of democracy, ergo they should be illegal. Several users also write that fact-checking is a violation of the American constitution, specifically neglecting the first amendment. This category also includes longer texts:

> "How could they take this down what happened to our first amendment to be able to speak what we feel let me go check out these other crazy sites and see if they're taking down stuff... such as false information or attacks on the conservatives are they taking those down? What did you post Rudy and where do I go to see your information this is wrong" (@danileephotogrpahy, 2021).

And
> "By censoring, you are only showing the fact that none of us have a voice. This will only hurt your party if this continues for 4 more years. I think when everyone is over Trump, you'll start to censor voices from the left, they too, will grow weary. Keep doing what you're doing, so that I don't have to" (@Kitowensby, 2021).

This theme shows how media literacies and fact-checking content can backfire. Users that have a critical approach make strong claims connecting fact-checkers to censorship. Reading users' discussions, fact-checkers are interpreted as severe oppression of freedom of speech. They are seen as impartial and one-sided, aiming to manipulate users' worldview. "Silencing/censoring" relates to the theme "liars".

Several users accuse fact-checkers to lie and promote fake news to silence information dangerous to the ruling political party.

4.3 Entertainment/Fun Content

4.3.1 Ironic

The majority of comments referred to fact-checkers on fun/entertainment posts fall within the theme "ironic". This theme refers to all the comments that claimed that fact-checkers banners on entertainment posts made the content result more entertaining. Many users claim that the fact-checkers' conclusions are funnier than the content itself. Comments that exemplify this theme state: "The fact that this got flagged as false news makes it even funnier" (@sunny.jiva, 2021) and

> "Anybody else love the irony that Instagram notifies this post as false info as per checked by independent fact checkers? 😂 Like, thank god I might have thought this really happened" (@Osh_harriott, 2021).

The theme "ironic" is by far the most present in the comment sections of entertainment posts. These comments show another aspect of fact-checkers, that is the unconscious spectacle. Fact-checkers banners become a source of entertainment when located on specific entertainment posts. They appear as an expansion of the joke made in the content that has been fact-checked. The comments on the two memes/posts analysed, tend to suggest that fact-checkers increased the spectacle of the posts. Likewise, they also increased the posts engagement levels since most users decided to comment on this unwanted ironic result of fact-checkers.

4.3.2 Useless

The theme "useless" is quite present among the comments on entertaining posts. Many users write under the meme posts containing false information that fact-checkers are not useful. Most of the comments that fall in this category are serious responses that seem to come from users that were annoyed or disappointed by this feature. Several users express that these posts had an ironic undertone, for this reason, it was not necessary to fact-check them. Besides, some comments argue that fact-checkers ruin the humorous aspect of the posts. Some examples of comments in

this category are: "Fuck you "fact checkers" your useless" (@cliffside444, 2021) and "fact checkers, obviously a joke, stupid mfers" (@mrgrumpy64, 2021).

The wide majority of users' comments belonging to this theme allude to the fact that entertainment posts are admittedly false. Commentators interpret memes as fiction for entertainment purposes, similarly to a movie or tv series. As a result, the work of fact-checkers on memes turns out to be useless, since they overemphasize the falsehood of the content, while most users that commented already considered it fiction in the first place.

This theme illustrates the lack of distinction between ironic misinformation and dangerous misinformation. Users' comments in this sample state that ironic misinformation is not dangerous, while fact-checkers have to make sure that every single user is aware of the possible danger.

4.3.3 Why fact-checking a meme

Many users' responses on memes question the reasons behind fact-checking ironic posts. Most of the comments of this group hint that it is not necessary to fact-check entertainment posts. A few add that it may be a mistake of the system while others make the connection to censorship, claiming that Instagram is now censoring memes. Some of the comments in this category state: "Bro why did somebody fact check a meme" (@loganator136668, 2021) and "Did instagram really fuckin try to fact check and filter this? Man I'm getting really sick of big tech and their BS. Can't even let us enjoy our memes" (@nerd_gainz, 2021).

Within the category "why fact-checking a meme" some people wonder if fact-checkers claimed that the posts were false because they lacked a sense of humour. Some other comments make the contrast between entertainment accounts and news sites: "Fact checkers this is an altered photo. Wtf man I thought this was a news site" (@Marcel.vogel, 2021). This response is jokingly criticising fact-checkers, alluding to the fact that users do not consider meme pages as news sites.

4.4 Defining overarching themes

Before reflecting further on the six themes, it is worthwhile to draw attention to the overlap in the meaning of the comments analysed. The analysis revealed a clear thematic difference between comments on serious/political posts and entertainment/fun posts. However, the six themes analysed in the previous paragraphs indicate that many comments in my sample contain strong negative opinions on fact-checking. Therefore, before zooming in the six initial themes I take further distance from the data to define two overarching themes.

The three themes from political posts suggest that user's comments generally consider fact-checkers to be liars and cheaters trying to censor uncomfortable information. Conversely, themes that emerged from comments on entertainment posts show the general opinion that fact-checking entertainment posts is not necessary. Hence, the six themes can be further categorised into two groups. The themes resulting from political posts fall within the overarching theme "liars/cheaters", while the themes from entertainment posts fall into the theme "unnecessary".

This further coding of meaning reflects how the themes "liars", "who/what is fact-checking" and "silencing/censoring" illustrate that users are more aggressive towards fact-checkers on political posts that have a serious tone. This theory is visible in several comments posted on the political posts: "Well I see you have been censored under the guise of "fact checking"" (@smiley.whipple, 2021), "Fact check AssHat liberals" (@peasebobby, 2021), "I want to know who is the lying fact checkers? They are so far left they don't know what the truth is." (@kelloff63, 2021) and "F the "fact" checkers" (@robert.adcox.9, 2021).

On the other hand, the themes "ironic", "useless" and "why fact-checking a meme" mostly consist of comments such as: "I love how this was flagged by fact checkers. 😂" (@deloreanman14, 2021), "Bro why did somebody fact check a meme" (@loganator136668, 2021) and "They literally fact checked this post. Good God where does the irony end" (@theresbrando, 2021).

These results are consistent with the findings of previous research. Mihailidis and Viotty (2017) have claimed that users tend to prioritize information that fits their worldview, while easily dismissing the truth if it poses a threat to their beliefs. Entertainment posts do not contain information that supports users' opinions thus fact-checkers in this context are treated differently.

The thematic difference represented by the two overarching themes supports the claims made previously regarding users' motivation to comment. Users have different motives to comment on fun/entertainment posts compared to political propaganda posts. This difference is based on the content of the posts and confirms users' biases when commenting. As a consequence, users' comments cannot be considered reliable information to determine fact-checkers success in discrediting fake news.

4.5 Linking themes to hyperreality

4.5.1 Political/Serious Content

The thematic analysis on comments on political content flagged false by fact-checkers shows the validity and topicality of Baudrillard's vocabulary. Due to the potential difference in motivation to comment and the limited sample of data, comments do not provide insight on how many users believe fact-checkers. Yet, about three-quarters of comments out of the 50 selected fall in the theme "liars". Consequently, several users appear convinced that fact-checkers are spreading fake news.

The theme "liars" evokes Baudrillard's description of the hyperreal: "He who strikes with meaning is killed by meaning" (Baudrillard, 1994, 103). Fact-checking consists of linking facts to show which information is false and which is real. Fact-checkers' job is to strike with facts, knowledge and meaning. The comments in my sample indicate that several users reverse their meaning and understand them as liars and fake news promoters. Hence, fact-checkers attack misinformation with knowledge but they are killed by their own meaning. Their knowledge is misinterpreted and their meaning is lost.

The theme "who\what is fact-checking" confirms that some users on Instagram choose to believe information that fits their worldview rather than spending time understanding other possible interpretations of the current state of affairs (Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017). This phenomenon is another instance that recalls Baudrillard's hyperreal: "logic of simulation which has nothing to do with a logic of facts and an order of reasons" (Baudrillard, 1994, 175). In a hyperreal world, users can decide to believe or not certain information based on their opinions, regardless of the facts.

The results of the thematic analysis on political information posts uncover how, in the small sample of comments analysed, users express themselves in terms of seeing fact-checkers as false proponents of justice. In the theme "silencing/censoring", users

commenting believe them to be supporters of lies who make false claims to nudge public opinion towards the beliefs of the majority and/or the ruling party. Users' interpretation of fact-checking as a simulation suggests that users do not "distinguish between the model and the real" (Der Derian, 1990, 299). Indeed, through the successive phases of the sign, Baudrillard argues: "the model takes the place of the 'real'" (Baudrillard, 1976, 100, cited in; Gane, 2003, 97). This dynamic indicates that fact-checkers are interpreted as just another opinion or narrative. For Instagram users, fact-checkers bring meaning, not facts. Whether their meanings can be considered factual is up to each reader/viewer to decide.

The facts linked to the posts by the fact-checkers to prove the falsity of the content are quickly disregarded. Users' comments show fact-checkers partial failure at discrediting fake news. Indeed, they seem to achieve the opposite effect, by appearing as "liars" trying to censor certain ideas and knowledge. Consequently, they may even reinforce the content of the fake posts. This theory is exemplified by the large number of comments writing: "When the fact checker comments you know it's true" (@Wrensvold, 2021).

4.5.2 Entertainment/Fun Content

The three themes emerging from comments on entertainment posts bring consistent insights. The theme "ironic" relates to "liars" since it shows how the meaning generated by the fact-checkers can be interpreted differently based on the original context of the post. The affordance meant to increase awareness of fake news becomes something completely different when applied to posts that have an entertaining approach to information. As a consequence, this theme also captures the hyperreal aspect of Instagram in which "all the possible interpretations, even the most contradictory – all are true" (Baudrillard, 1988, 175).

For instance, in the case of the post by @trashcanpoul, representing a fictional ironic tweet by the brand Gorilla Glue (fig. 5); fact-checkers' conclusions state that the content is a construction: the glue brand never shared this tweet, the content has been manipulated. However, once linked in this specific Instagram context, their meaning is suddenly transformed into a meme and becomes a source of enjoyment for part of the users. This dynamic is another instance that illustrates how "He who strikes with meaning is killed by meaning" (Baudrillard, 1994, 103).

In *Simulacra and Simulation,* Baudrillard quotes McLuhan's phrase "the medium is the message" (1994, 30). The multiple meanings given to the content indicate that on Instagram, as stated by Baudrillard, reality is no longer identifiable as such. As a result, in the present capitalistic society, the medium and the message merge. Instagram and its content have never been distinguishable from each other; there has always been a constant mixture of the two. The medium is dissipated in its content and vice versa (Baudrillard, 1994, 30). Due to the confusion between medium and message, Baudrillard wrote: "it is practically impossible to isolate the process of simulation [... and ...] it is now impossible to isolate the process of the real, or to prove the real" (Baudrillard, 1994, 21-30).

Fact-checkers are trying to differentiate the reality from the medium, stating that the content is altered and fictitious. Nevertheless, it has never been possible to prove the "real" on social media. Once located within the medium of Instagram, fact-checkers acquire new meaning because they become part of the medium itself. Fact-checkers blend in like any other content and become part of the hyperreal.

In the theme "useless" users write that certain content, although fake/manipulated, does not need to be fact-checked and declared false. Reflecting on this theme, the question arises: what are the criteria for dangerous misinformation? As argued by Baudrillard, nowadays the medium and the message collide, there is no longer a 'real' message. Every content on Instagram is altered by the medium, thus it is open to debate. From unproven statements used as political propaganda to ironic memes with fake headlines or to users' selfies with coloured filters: they are not truthful representations of reality.

From the reflection on the theme "useless", it appears clear that Instagram fact-checkers promise "to restore the truth beneath the simulacrum" (Baudrillard, 1994, 182). They are trying to state what information is fake and what is true. In this case, the two memes analysed contain false claims, as follows they are fake news. Nonetheless, if every Instagram content is partially altered and any misinformation is potentially dangerous; it is not a matter of what is true, but rather of what to fact-check. Hence, fact-checkers become a false promise because it is not possible to restore the truth beneath the simulacrum.

The theme "why fact-checking a meme" brings further insight that reinforces the claims made in the reflection of the previous themes. Users who commented emphasize that the content was just a fun joke made to make users laugh. They take

for granted that there is a clear distinction between entertainment content and news sites. Yet this is not the case anymore, because misinformation can have a powerful impact even if not from traditional news sites (Prisk, 2017).

For the same reasons for which it is now impossible to draw a boundary between entertainment pages and news sites on Instagram, the same phenomenon applies to everything on the social platform. There is no longer a boundary that separates fact-checkers from the rest of the content. Therefore, fact-checkers can be easily confused with memes or fake news. As Richardson stated: "the distinction between the real and the imaginary -- between truth and untruth -- is annihilated" (2019, 9).

5. CONCLUSION

This chapter focuses on formulating an answer to the main question of this research: *In what manner can Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality contribute to understanding the thematic analysis on Instagram users' public comments on fact-checkers?* Instagram and social media at large provide powerful space for public discussion and expression of opinions. Baudrillard's vocabulary of hyperreality contributes in multiple ways to interpret the thematic analysis of users' public comments on fact-checkers.

The three themes that emerged from political/serious posts (liars, who/what is fact-checking and silencing/censoring) suggest that due to Instagram dynamics, to the attention economy and the filter bubble effect, users can believe any information and interpret it as facts. Moreover, some users look for information that supports their ideas. Once they find it, they are not interested in further research. Lastly, critical consumers of information can question every single aspect of Instagram content and affordances. Through the use of comment sections, they can portray a preferred reality (such as the idea of fact-checkers as censorship) and share it with like-minded people.

Similarly, the three themes from entertainment/fun posts (ironic, useless, and why fact-checking a meme) illustrate that information on Instagram becomes part of the medium and its meaning can change based on the context and the social dynamics of the platform. Secondly, they suggest that every content shared on Instagram is partially altered or manipulated. Thirdly, they confirm that concepts such as fake news, facts, misinformation, memes, and news sites on Instagram are constantly merging. Their boundaries are increasingly blurred, making it impossible to distinguish one from another.

Multiple interpretations of fact-checkers' message reflect how they are quickly killed by the meaning with which they try to strike (Baudrillard, 1994). Fact-checkers are Instagram's attempt to reanimate the social platform with realness and relevance abound. Nevertheless, every distinction between the imaginary and the real on Instagram is annihilated. The attempt to use fact-checkers as gatekeepers to truth is a partial failure as the truth on Instagram is impossible to prove, since it is fragmented and intrinsically mixed with the medium. As a result, all the different possible

interpretations of fact-checkers' conclusions, even the most contradictory, are all true to the same extent (Baudrillard, 1994).

The constant shift of interpretations underlines how it is not a matter of what is 'real' anymore. What is 'real' lies in the context produced by the institutions that design social media and/or information. As it follows, truth is lost and everything is simulation: hyperreality is real. The consistent interpretation of fact-checkers as simulation does not directly show Instagram's failure in its attempt to fight misinformation. Nonetheless, it suggests that on Instagram fact-checkers fail at restoring the truth behind fake news (simulacrum), making the hyperreal characteristic of Instagram ever more evident.

To conclude, I argue that these observations underline the topicality of Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality. The insights generated by the analysis of comments fall beyond developing knowledge on misinformation online. I claimed that fake news on Instagram relates to hyperreality. Hence, they are intrinsically determined by the socioeconomic dynamics of our current society.

This thesis suggests that the problem of the current increase of misinformation appears to reside in two main elements. First of all, it is necessary to acknowledge the bigger picture of our current society. Specifically, the role of western capitalistic societies predetermining a constant overabundance of data with decreasing demand. At the same time, new mass social media indirectly solve the problem of lack of demand by increasing appeal.

Social networks' digital environments push users and producers to create ever more exciting and engaging content that will be more successful thanks to the affordances of the platform interface (visual appearance, interactive affordances, bandwagon heuristics and social validation). Dramatic headlines attract attention and spread successfully but they consist of unproven speculations (Zannettou et al., 2019; Mian, 2020). Therefore, misinformation is directly correlated to the new dynamics of social media that developed to increase content demand. However, this phenomenon originates in the capitalistic system that creates an overabundance of information.

5.1 Limitations and further research

The flexibility of the constant comparative method was remarkably helpful for the analysis of this thesis. Thanks to the constant comparison between different ideas generated from the data, the themes that emerged from the two categories of comments (serious vs fun) were strictly inherent to the content of the different users' responses. This approach enabled me to find meaningful themes on which to reflect through Baudrillard's theories. Accordingly, this approach could provide a useful methodological framework for future qualitative research in new media studies.

Similarly, the different themes that emerged from the comments analysed could provide a framework for future content analysis. For instance, the findings of the present study suggest that the knowledge proposed by fact-checkers on Instagram can acquire several roles, with some users using it to promote their ideas by claiming violations of constitutional amendments and others interpreting fact-checkers' knowledge with a humorous lens. This insight may help delineate different categories on the function of fact-checkers' conclusions on online discussions on social media. In contrast to using a generalised category to classify users' comments in a binary division such as positive/negative towards fact-checkers, for example.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that the thematic analysis following CCM requires the researcher to reach high levels of familiarisation with the data. This aspect determines a strong methodological limitation since it requires an expanded time frame. As follows, compared to quantitative methodologies, this study was not able to use a large dataset. Along these lines, CCM will not be useful for future research that needs larger quantities of data/meaning for generating relevant findings.

Finally, this thesis consisted of a conceptual analysis using the case study of Instagram's comments on fact-checkers to explore the topicality of the theory of hyperreality. Accordingly, the present analysis did not aim at investigating whether the use of fact-checkers on social media is a successful strategy to fight partisanship and misinformation. Considering that fact-checkers influence on users' interpretation of content on social media is an understudied phenomenon; future research should explore this inquiry to create more knowledge on this topic.

6. DISCUSSION

Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality gives a new frame to misinformation. Following the ideas of the French sociologist, on social media, information and misinformation are increasingly merged. The strong framing capacities of the platform make it hopeless to differentiate the message from the medium. Content is partially true and partially false at the same time. In this context it is impossible to distinguish simulation from reality, hence it is not plausible to prove the truth.

The findings of this thesis suggest that the frame through which we currently seek solutions to misinformation is wrong. Fact-checkers may be mildly successful in decreasing the sharing of dangerous fake news, however, they may be the wrong solution to the current information crisis. Indeed, fact-checkers blend in like any other content and their meaning becomes open to a wide range of possible interpretations, along with high risks of back-firing. Consequently, I argue that trying to bring 'true' facts (meaning) in the current artificial (hyperreal) reality is simply not relevant. Since users on Instagram can't understand which meaning is truer than the other.

The constant increase of information determined by the current capitalist society means that our knowledge is ever more partial. Thus, there is not a simple solution to misinformation, but there is the possibility to cope with its consequences while we slowly move towards a change of our socio-economic system.

6.1 Hyperreality as hyperreal

As argued by Baudrillard and supported by this thesis, in a capitalistic system, meaning is up to interpretation. Since Baudrillard's texts were written within the hyperreal characteristic of the present-day post-modern capitalistic society; this section will explore different interpretations of hyperreality.

The confusion between medium and message explained by Baudrillard (1994) and linked to Instagram in the previous paragraph determines the reflexivity of hyperreality. Following Baudrillard's reasoning, everything produced within the context of capitalism (including meaning) is just a simulation. Accordingly, Baudrillard's theories written in his multiple books and publications are a simulation.

I now arrive at the limits of hyperreality. At the end of Baudrillard's writings, I find myself lost in the duality of his thoughts. How can hyperreality be hyperreal? In the last chapter of *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), he writes: "One must be conscious that, no matter how the analysis proceeds, it proceeds toward the freezing over meaning, it assists in the precession of simulacra and of indifferent forms" (1994, 161). Theory is described as a photograph that freezes one split second and keeps it still. However, it is just an illusion of meaning because, similarly to a photograph that keeps its subject immortal, it is pure simulation. If theory, like everything in today's society, is hyperreal; the question that Baudrillard leaves open is whether his works should be read under the sign of truth or fiction. Perhaps, he leaves us in this ambiguity to offer the possibility to choose and form our own opinion.

He concludes his book writing: "There is no more hope for meaning. And without a doubt this is a good thing: meaning is mortal" (Baudrillard, 1994, 164). Claiming the mortality of meaning points out how the author himself buys into the duality of existence. Everything dies and disappears, truth is fragmented. Nevertheless, accepting the mortality of things does not disregard their existence. After all, we all disappear, but while we exist, we can experience our subjective reality. Still, I believe that Baudrillard consciously leaves to the reader the possibility to choose whether his words and symbols reflect profound realities or just an interesting narrative. One thing appears clear, Baudrillard is a successful provocateur.

This thesis, like Baudrillard's thoughts, is written with a system of signs and connotations part of our shared imaginary. So, although I believe my argument, I will not claim it as true and possible readers should not take it too seriously. It is the reader that can choose to interpret these words for the approximated meaning (partial realities) that they are trying to reflect. Yet if it is the reader to decide, perhaps this thesis has a lot in common with fake news on Instagram; it is as true as it is convincing.

6.2 Final thoughts and future directions

The methodology of this thesis did not allow for an analysis of a large number of comments. For this reason, none of the conclusions made in this paper concern the entire Instagram community. Similar research addressing the same research questions following a quantitative approach may yield different results. Nonetheless, if capitalism provides always more data to analyse, larger datasets would still be extremely partial, thus completely unnecessary.

The findings of this exploration cannot simply be acknowledged in the classical academic field. Conceptually speaking, in the present time, truth is simulation. Academic research is limited by the hyperreal. It is simple to acknowledge the theories useful for our goals and disregard all the other facts that may question our claims. But then, how can an author avoid falling into the trap of making "true claims"? The answer depends on the meaning of truth. Is truth an idea? An approximation? An illusion of reality, and therefore purely simulation?

This thesis is open to interpretation; such an approach can seem to undermine the academic system. Yet, it implies clear consequences for the field of new media studies. The problem of classical academic research is that it has taken for granted that knowledge is based on truth. At the same time, postmodern thinkers and scientists alike have been claiming the relativity of knowledge for decades now. This current of thought diminishes any academic research into just a compelling opinion. In this regard I like to quote the American philosopher Richard Rorty: "The world does not speak"; to remind us that truth is intrinsically human (Rorty, 1998, 138). Truth only exists within a language/vocabulary. A theory, for Rorty, is true if it is the best theory at helping us to achieve our goals (Rorty, 1998).

I like to think that truth has been a useful convention (approximation) that is now being redefined. Whether something is true is simply based on what we decide to believe. Because that is what humans do, believe stories. Nevertheless, it is of pivotal importance to keep doing research. To solve this paradox there is one suggestion I can make for future research: every academic author, as well as every human being, should take reality less seriously.

7. APPENDIX

This appendix lists the 100 comments used for the thematic analysis of this research. Comments are divided based on the two categories of content on which they were posted (political/serious and entertainment/fun content). Moreover, they are listed under the four Instagram accounts which posted the content (@therudygiuliani, @republicanparty, @trashcanpaul and @whitepeoplehumor). I divided the comments into different colours following the six themes used for the comment analysis in the third chapter: "liars", "who/what is fact-checking", "silencing/censoring" for political content, and "ironic", "useless" and "why fact-checking a meme" for entertainment/fun content. All the comments selected included one of the two keywords "fact" and "false". To make the text easier to read I decided to include the references of each comment in footnotes at the end of the pages rather than in the text.

7.1 Political/Serious Content

Themes analysed:
Lying
Who/what is fact-checking
silencing/censoring

Extra Themes:
Positive towards fact-checkers
Idiotic

7.1.2 @therudygiuliani

1. "The fact checkers say this is false, I say the fact checkers are lying."[1]

2. "Who is the "fact checker" and who's fact checking the fact checker? What a joke."[2]

3. "Got fact checked huh? 😂😂😂😂😂😂"[3]

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[1] Grumanpilot, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 17/02/2021, 16:00:26.
[2] Angeleekaa, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 17/02/2021, 18:05:17.
[3] d3ath187sin, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 17/02/2021, 20:31:47.

4. "True. Fact checkers are idiotic"[4]

5. "Here we go! Instagram owned by Facebook silences conservative speech!!! Shame on you Liberal social media hack!! How about fact-checking AOC claiming to be a victim of the LEFTIST attacks on Capitol Jan. 6th!"[5]

6. "Well I see you have been censored under the guise of "fact checking". La"[6]

7. "Fact check AssHat liberals"[7]

8. "I live in California and the polling place didn't require nor want signature verification. False statement by the fact checkers"[8]

9. "Fact checkers need to be fact checked lol 😆"[9]

10. "Thats a fact"[10]

11. "Lol @ fact check nonsense. Just because they may 'require' signature verification doesn't mean that it happens or has any way of being accurate."[11]

12. "Here we go again with the fact checkers."[12]

13. "Fact checked? You mean censored!"[13]

14. "I want to know who is the lying fact checkers? They are so far left they don't know what the truth is."[14]

15. "Are you kidding! Fact-checked!!! What a joke."[15]

16. "The fact checkers are in panic mode."[16]

17. "Funny how this has been fact checked to be false as is most of what you people say"[17]

18. "Apparently the fact checkers think this is false information lol"[18]

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[4] @lbates68, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 17/02/2021, 21:54:32.

[5] @fyrelake01, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 17/02/2021, 22:12:10.

[6] @smiley.whipple, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 17/02/2021, 22:38:16.

[7] @peasebobby, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 18/02/2021, 03:21:19.

[8] @getttobeast, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 18/02/2021, 04:58:17.

[9] @jorge_albertogc, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 18/02/2021, 06:08:13.

[10] @la.taina.de.borique, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 18/02/2021, 06:46:32.

[11] @imavolvo, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 18/02/2021, 08:58:50.

[12] @bretsullivan50, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 18/02/2021, 11:29:51.

[13] @petermancharlie, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 18/02/2021, 15:14:47.

[14] @kelloff63, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 18/02/2021, 17:23:33.

[15] @sondravax, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 19/02/2021, 07:39:34.

[16] @jakeorwhatever, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 20/02/2021, 01:20:30.

[17] @sarahlachelle_1123, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 22/02/2021, 01:58:57.

[18] @abbyfarris2020, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 16/02/2021, 23:29:41.

19. "I have never seen a fact check on insta? Wow sickening"[19]

20. "100% fact Instagram. You're embarrassing yourselves."[20]

21. "Wow, fact checkers say this is false. Who are these fact checkers? We need FACT CHECKERS for the fact checkers, unbelievable!"[21]

22. "I love how the "fact checking " said this is false. Send out the information and let the people decide. We seen what happened last November. And we have a dumb ass for our commander and chief. There is your facts!"[22]

23. "I have to laugh at these so-called Fact Checkers...whether they like it or not the Democratic Party and their Leftist Marxist Socialists have been cheating America as regards elections. THIS IS MY PERSONAL OPINION! Fact-Check, that!"[23]

24. "The independent fact checkers are basically full of shit !!!"[24]

25. "Lol 😂 the fact checkers have gotten to it already"[25]

26. "F the "fact"checkers."[26]

27. ""Fact"checkers lol typical Farcebook bs. I canceled my Facebook account tonight. I have no problem canceling instacrap too. Hey FARTBOOK -Parler is up and running again. Good riddance to you a-holes! !"[27]

28. "By censoring, you are only showing the fact that none of us have a voice. This will only hurt your party if this continues for 4 more years. I think when everyone is over Trump, you'll start to censor voices from the left, they too, will grow weary. Keep doing what you're doing, so that I don't have to."[28]

29. "The fact checkers here are false and liars!!!"[29]

30. "fact checkers ....bahahahahahahahah"[30]

31. "When the fact checker comments you know it's true"[31]

[19] @allstarcarpetcleaning, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 16/02/2021, 23:36:31.
[20] @debgator0454, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 16/02/2021, 23:38:26.
[21] @1oldrookie, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 16/02/2021, 23:46:43.
[22] @carljones4474, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 16/02/2021, 23:46:51.
[23] @sanvan1937, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 16/02/2021, 23:57:45.
[24] @bobeberenz, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 17/02/2021, 01:40:43.
[25] @joyfulcarolyn, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 17/02/2021, 02:33:58.
[26] @robert.adcox.9, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 17/02/2021, 03:11:1.
[27] @robert.adcox.9, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 17/02/2021, 03:14:40.
[28] @Kitowensby, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 17/02/2021 at 04:59:45.
[29] @itsmesani8, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 17/02/2021, 05:15:33.
[30] @jomojoben, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 17/02/2021, 09:13:34.
[31] @Wrensvold, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 17/02/2021, 13:20:45.

32. "How could they take this down what happened to our first amendment to be able to speak what we feel let me go check out these other crazy sites and see if they're taking down stuff... such as false information or attacks on the conservatives are they taking those down? What did you post Rudy and where do I go to see your information this is wrong"[32]

33. "False? Not false! It's true which is why it must be banned."[33]

34. "F..k U Instagram for marking this as false information! So tired of these Liberal pussies!"[34]

35. "Nothing false about this statement. Why is Instagram lying about this? #InstagramLies #FakeNews"[35]

36. "Of course it's considered as false , Assholes."[36]

37. "It's saying this is false"[37]

38. "Please show us the facts that you have that this is false."[38]

7.1.3 @republicanparty

1. "@venna_renn Do you live in a cave? Massive election fraud is why he isn't in office. Fact."[39]

2. "Fact checkers on Instagram. This statement is true"[40]

3. "Fact checkers are liberals and liars."[41]

4. "This fact checker is getting out of hand"[42]

5. "Of course a liberal source is the "independent" fact checker"[43]

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[32] @danileephotogrpahy, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 17/02/2021, 17:21:49.
[33] @shirley.perez.758399, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 18/02/2021, 11:19:42.
[34] @amartino10, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 18/02/2021, 16:29:18.
[35] @bruno_bacon_lll, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 22/02/2021, 00:55:23.
[36] @spaniard1967, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 16/02/2021, 23:27:25.
[37] @setherhamlincoln, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 17/02/2021, 02:08:09.
[38] @khess122, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 17/02/2021, 04:47:43.
[39] @coleman_k, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 17/02/2021, 13:48:382.
[40] @kimberlydunnigan, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 17/02/2021, 20:57:14.
[41] @carolyndarp, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 18/02/2021, 16:28:09.
[42] @noleeon, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 19/02/2021, 15:20:54.
[43] @derek.scott121, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 16/02/2021, 19:02:31.

6. "Bruh , fact checkers again..."[44]

7. "Suck it fact checkers!!!"[45]

8. "FUCK YOUR FACT CHECKS CLONED FUCKERBERG."[46]

9. "The fact checkers are so creepy. It's so transparent and so divisive and so wrong. I can't believe what is happening in the world. Censoring people because you don't like what they're saying or believe. It's disgusting. Harks back to the dark ages"[47]

10. "Lord have mercy, literally says false info 🤦‍♂️"[48]

11. "LOL IT GOT DECLARED FALSE INFORMATION😂"[49]

12. "Hahaha false news 🖕 suckitberg"[50]

7.2 Entertainment/Fun Content

Themes analysed:
Why fact checking a meme
Useless
Ironic

Extra Themes:
Lying

7.2.1 @whitepeoplehumor

1. "I love how this was flagged by fact checkers. 😅"[51]

2. "LMFAOOOOO FACT CHECKED 😂😂😂😂 "did NOT die after pumping gasoline in her anus""[52]

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[44] @diamonddroplet, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 16/02/2021, 21:55:43.
[45] @nicolerapplean, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 17/02/2021, 01:15:472.
[46] @sheilajones4057, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 17/02/2021, 03:46:20.
[47] @mo2436_1, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 17/02/2021, 09:41:12.
[48] @matthew_____martinez, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 19/02/2021, 05:26:31.
[49] @justinhumphrey99, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 16/02/2021, 19:02:09.
[50] @jimleopard, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 17/02/2021, 03:42:01.
[51] @deloreanman14, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 13/02/2021, 08:25:49.
[52] @jordan.gearhart, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 13/02/2021, 17:12:10.

3. "The fact check on it is gold"[53]

4. "Fact checkers gotta tell us more lies 🙄🙄🙄"[54]

5. "Bro why did somebody fact check a meme"[55]

6. "Instagram fact checking a meme page like: Geornnulizum!"[56]

7. "The fact check is almost as funny as the caption 🤣"[57]

8. "I love how this post has been fact checked."[58]

9. "The fact that this got flagged as false news makes it even funnier"[59]

10. "Fact-checking a meme page 🙄"[60]

11. "This got fact checked wtf"[61]

12. "I think one of the best parts of this is that by the time I got to it, Instagram had someone FACT CHECK THIS 😅. I had to click and disclaimer about fake news to see the post. 💀"[62]

13. "I love that IG slapped a "fact checker" filter in this post like bitch please I don't come to Kevin for facts."[63]

14. "When they throw a fact check on a meme"[64]

15. "Fact checkers don't have a sense of humor, or anything remotely close to a fully functional brain."[65]

16. "Bruh they really fact checked a meme"[66]

17. "Bruh and apparently it's been fact checked 😂😂😂😂😂 it's a meme page....who cares if it's an actual story or not. It's still funny"[67]

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[53] @srab26192, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 13/02/2021, 21:20:54.
[54] @ovoanthony, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 14/02/2021, 15:09:47.
[55] @loganator136668, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 15/02/2021, 06:37:20.
[56] @loganator136668, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 15/02/2021, 06:37:20.
[57] @britt_red_kc, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 15/02/2021, 22:09:50.
[58] @brentfewste, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 15/02/2021, 23:59:50.
[59] @sunny.jiva, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 16/02/2021, 02:59:54.
[60] @virghoskins, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 16/02/2021, 03:17:24.
[61] @coolguyx14, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 16/02/2021, 06:06:27.
[62] @with_1_elle, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 18/02/2021, 02:50:38.
[63] @cateit, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 20/02/2021, 00:33:31.
[64] @curtis_desabre, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 21/02/2021, 21:44:23.
[65] @mentulacunnus, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 12/02/2021, 06:11:18.
[66] @they_callme_fes, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 12/02/2021, 06:18:50.
[67] @stephen_hendri, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 12/02/2021, 07:35:28.

18. "Fucking fact checkers ruining everything"[68]

19. "Why was the fact checked for me!!!"[69]

20. "The fact checkt thing telling you she explicitly did NOT pump gas into her anus is better than the post 😂😂"[70]

21. "Anybody else love the irony they Instagram notifies this post as false info as per checked by independent fact checkers? 😂 Like, thank god I might have thought this really happened"[71]

22. "I'm so glad IG fact checked this..... 😒"[72]

23. "Love how this got flagged as fake news but fake insta fact checkers"[73]

24. "Wow. They're actually fact checking a MEME page now. Fuck outta here"[74]

25. "Omg those fucking fact checkers stfu"[75]

26. "Fuck you "fact checkers" your useless"[76]

27. "I love how we are fact checking satirical meme pages. Thanks for keeping me safe zucc"[77]

28. "They actually fucking "fact checked" this post.... How fucking retarded do they think we are"[78]

29. "I love that this came under a false info warning. Made me want to check it more"[79]

30. "Bruh why is meme page put on false news"[80]

31. "This was fact-checked and I'm dying 😂😂😂"[81]

[68] @jonah.t.hamm, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 12/02/2021, 17:20:40.
[69] @aj.87.aj, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 12/02/2021, 10:01:53.
[70] @iam_dmz, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 12/02/2021, 11:56:03.
[71] @Osh_harriott, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 12/02/2021, 12:10:24.
[72] @iwasreturningsomevideotapes, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 12/02/2021, 13:03:54.
[73] @blozofattraction, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 12/02/2021, 14:38:35.
[74] @kaneisbetter_, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 12/02/2021, 14:53:28.
[75] @jonah.t.hamm8, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 12/02/2021, 17:20:40.
[76] @cliffside444, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 12/02/2021, 17:52:24.
[77] @banasmike, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 12/02/2021, 23:04:19.
[78] @queless._, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 13/02/2021, 00:20:38.
[79] @shatteredsnow, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 13/02/2021, 07:24:05.
[80] @pi32003, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 15/02/2021, 03:44:02.
[81] @_miss_geri_, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 13/02/2021, 00:45:43.

7.2.2 @trashcanpaul

1. "THANK GOD FACT CHECKERS ARE HERE TO TELL ME tHIs iS fALsE"[82]

2. ""See why fact checkers say this is an altered photo" 🙄🙄🙄"[83]

3. "Did instagram really fuckin try to fact check and filter this? Man I'm getting really sick of big tech and their BS. Can't even let us enjoy our memes"[84]

4. "I like how there's "fact checker" on this fucking meme as if it's misleading in any harmful way"[85]

5. "But why is there a fact checker in this? @instagram"[86]

6. "Fact-checkers are here for all the retars"[87]

7. "Lol they fact checked this. Fuck off ig"[88]

8. "Fact checkers censoring this wtf"[89]

9. "I find it funnier that it was a covered photo more than anything. It's saying to fact check it. 🤦‍♂️"[90]

10. "Fact Checker used to never be a thing until the truth started coming out so f*** you're stupid fact checker"[91]

11. "Fact checkers this is an altered photo. Wtf man I thought this was a news site"[92]

12. "Holy fuck. How did this get fact checked??? Are senses-of-humor i that short of supply these days??? 🤕"[93]

13. "Fact check 😂😂😂😂😂😂"[94]

14. "why did fact checkers say this is false 🙄"[95]

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[82] @logan.broccoli, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 11/02/2021, 10:21:32.
[83] @willanswer2willa, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 12/02/2021, 04:43:14.
[84] @nerd_gainz, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 12/02/2021, 04:45:51.
[85] @saint_vincent9l, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 12/02/2021, 11:59:33.
[86] @david.corwin70, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 12/02/2021, 14:35:37.
[87] @brettinskii, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 12/02/2021, 18:22:08.
[88] @nate182004, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 13/02/2021, 00:50:50.
[89] @meatball_gang69, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 13/02/2021, 03:43:48.
[90] @samuelgallowayart, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 13/02/2021, 19:45:08.
[91] @northside_hits, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 17/02/2021, 20:25:29.
[92] @Marcel.vogel, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 22/02/2021 at 07:45:31.
[93] @vanillagorilla97, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 10/02/2021, 23:23:23.
[94] @withnail_and_si, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 10/02/2021, 23:38:53.
[95] @thomas_damson, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 11/02/2021, 00:15:45.

15. "👆 fact checkers, obviously a joke, stupid mfers"[96]

16. "I love how these idiot people thought this needed to be fact checked. Here's a fact: the company 1,000% SHOULD have tweeted the same thing word for word. Take notes from @wendys"[97]

17. "THERE'S A FACT CHECK ON THIS 😂😂😂 I'M FUCKING DYING, THEY REALLY FACT CHECKED THIS 🤣🤣🤣"[98]

18. "They literally fact checked this post. Good God where does the irony end"[99]

19. "I like how not using gorilla glue on your hair was marked false"[100]

[96] @mrgrumpy64, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 11/02/2021, 00:45:18.
[97] @duncr6, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 11/02/2021, 01:07:05.
[98] @evanepic, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 11/02/2021, 01:56:00.
[99] @theresbrando, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 11/02/2021, 02:05:48.
[100] @duddygrams, accessed 2 March 2021, posted on 11/02/2021, 02:35:54.
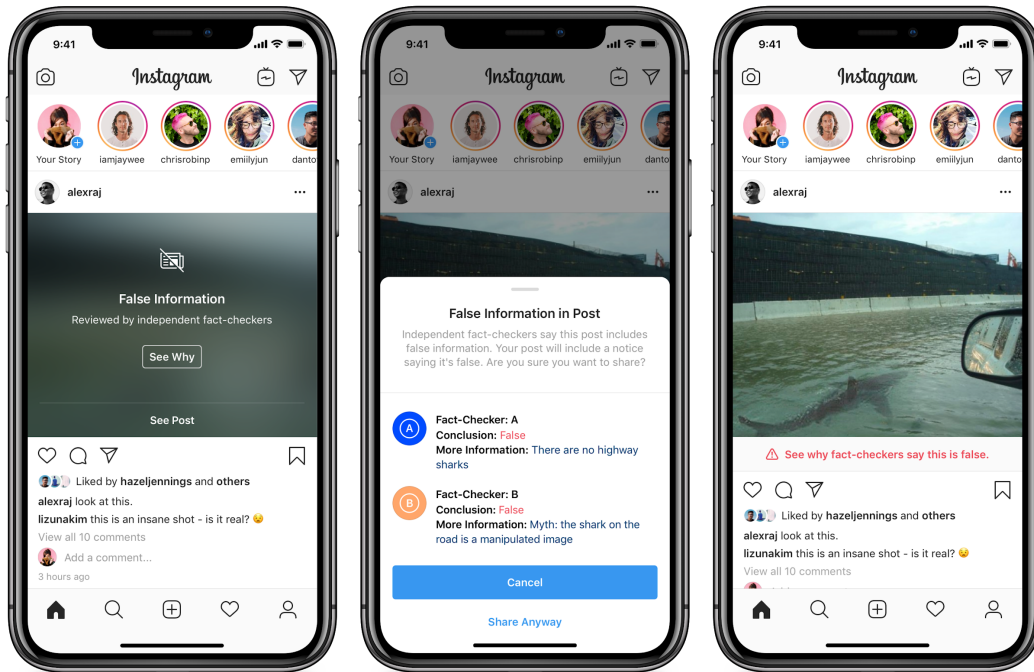
8. IMAGES

Fig. 1: pictures showing the new fact-checking features on Instagram, posted on Instagram website (about.Instagram.com) and Instagram' Twitter account on December 16, 2019.

Fig. 2: The image shows the Instagram post by @therudygiuliani, claimed false by third-party fact-checkers. The post was uploaded on February 15, 2021. It contains a picture and a text in quotes that criticises the mail in ballots of the US 2020 presidential elections.
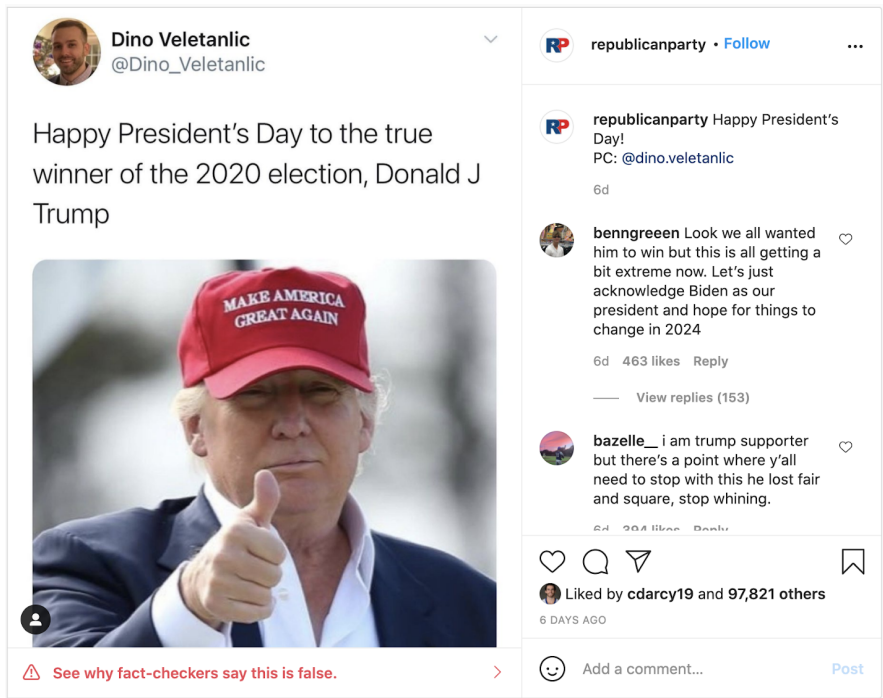
Fig. 3 and cover picture: The image shows the Instagram post uploaded by @republicanparty, claimed false by third-party fact-checkers. The post was uploaded on February 15, 2021. The content celebrates the former president of the United States Donald Trump as the "true winner" of the 2020 US presidential elections won by Joe Biden.

Fig. 4: The image shows the Instagram post published by @whitepeoplehumor, claimed false by third-party fact-checkers. The post was uploaded on February 11, 2021. The content proposes an ironic fake crime headline followed by a joke in the form of a Facebook comment.

Fig. 5: The image shows the Instagram post shared by @trashcanpoul, claimed false by third-party fact-checkers. The post was uploaded on February 10, 2021. The post consists of a fake Twitter statement of the brand Gorilla Glue suggesting to not use glue on human hair.

9. IMAGE SOURCES

Fig. 1: Instagram (2019 December 15). [Screens showing Instagram fact-checking feature]. retrieved February 20, 2021. https://about.instagram.com/blog/announcements/combatting-misinformation-on-instagram

Fig. 2: Giuliani, R. [@therudygiuliani]. (2021 February 16). Astonishing! It appears the Democrat party could up and down be called the party of Hypocrites [Instagram photograph]. Accessed February 20, 2021, from https://www.instagram.com/p/CLU9qCdgZ4O/

Fig. 3: Republican Party [@republicanparty]. (2021 February 15). Happy President's Day! PC: @dino.veletanlic [Instagram photograph]. Accessed February 20, 2021, from https://www.instagram.com/p/CLUTF1PHYRO/

Fig. 4: Flynn, K. [@whitepeoplehumor]. (2021 February 11). EVERYONE ENTER THE $2,000 GIVEAWAY ON THE LAST POST [Instagram photograph]. Accessed February 20, 2021, from https://www.instagram.com/p/CLIrKLhBBRC/

Fig. 5: Trashcan Paul [@trashcanpoul]. (2021 February 10). Why not? [Instagram photograph]. Accessed February 20, 2021, from https://www.instagram.com/p/CLHdrfThg3p/

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