Investigating How University Students in the United States Encounter and Deal With Misinformation in Private WhatsApp Chats During COVID-19

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Overview

- Misinformation on WhatsApp is a unique sociotechnical challenge

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- Studied how US university students responded to COVID-19 related misinformation in private WhatsApp chats

Pandemic

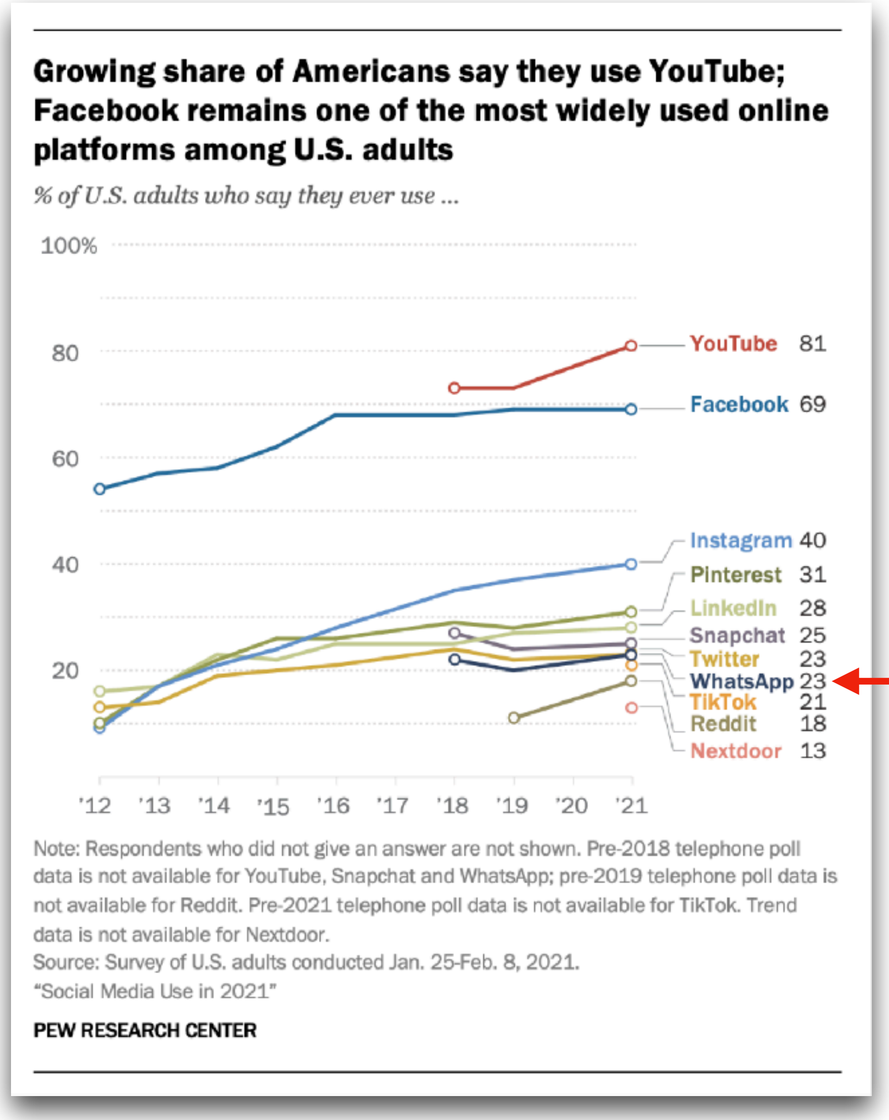
Infodemic

Infodemic

*"Overabundance of information, both online and offline. It includes **deliberate attempts to disseminate wrong information** to undermine the public health response and advance alternative agendas of groups or individuals."*

— World Health Organization (WHO)

Source: University of Washington magazine


Growing share of Americans say they use YouTube; Facebook remains one of the most widely used online platforms among U.S. adults
% of U.S. adults who say they ever use ...
100%
80
60
40
20
'12
'13
'14
'15
'16
'17
'18
'19
'20
'21
YouTube 81
Facebook 69
Instagram 40
Pinterest 31
LinkedIn 28
Snapchat 25
Twitter 23
WhatsApp 23
TikTok 21
Reddit 18
Nextdoor 13
Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown. Pre-2018 telephone poll data is not available for YouTube, Snapchat and WhatsApp; pre-2019 telephone poll data is not available for Reddit. Pre-2021 telephone poll data is not available for TikTok. Trend data is not available for Nextdoor.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 25-Feb. 8, 2021.
"Social Media Use in 2021"
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

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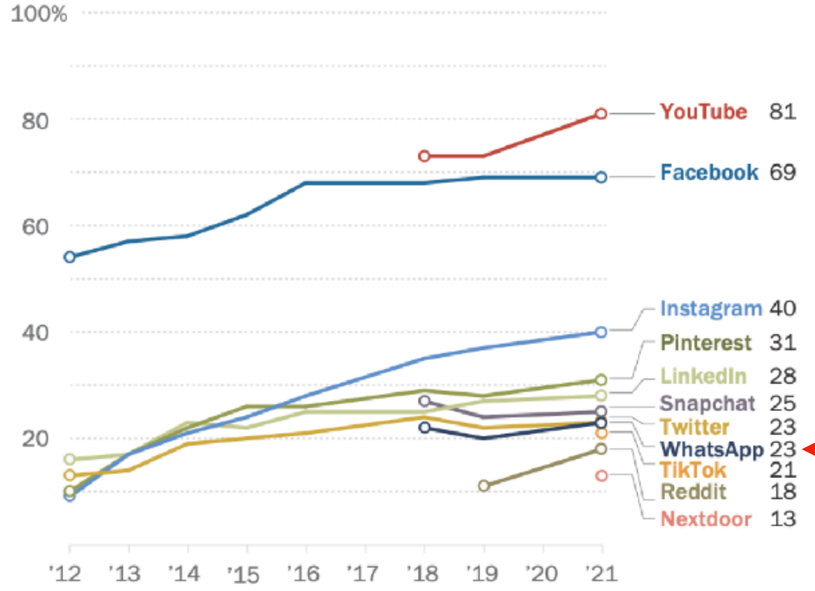

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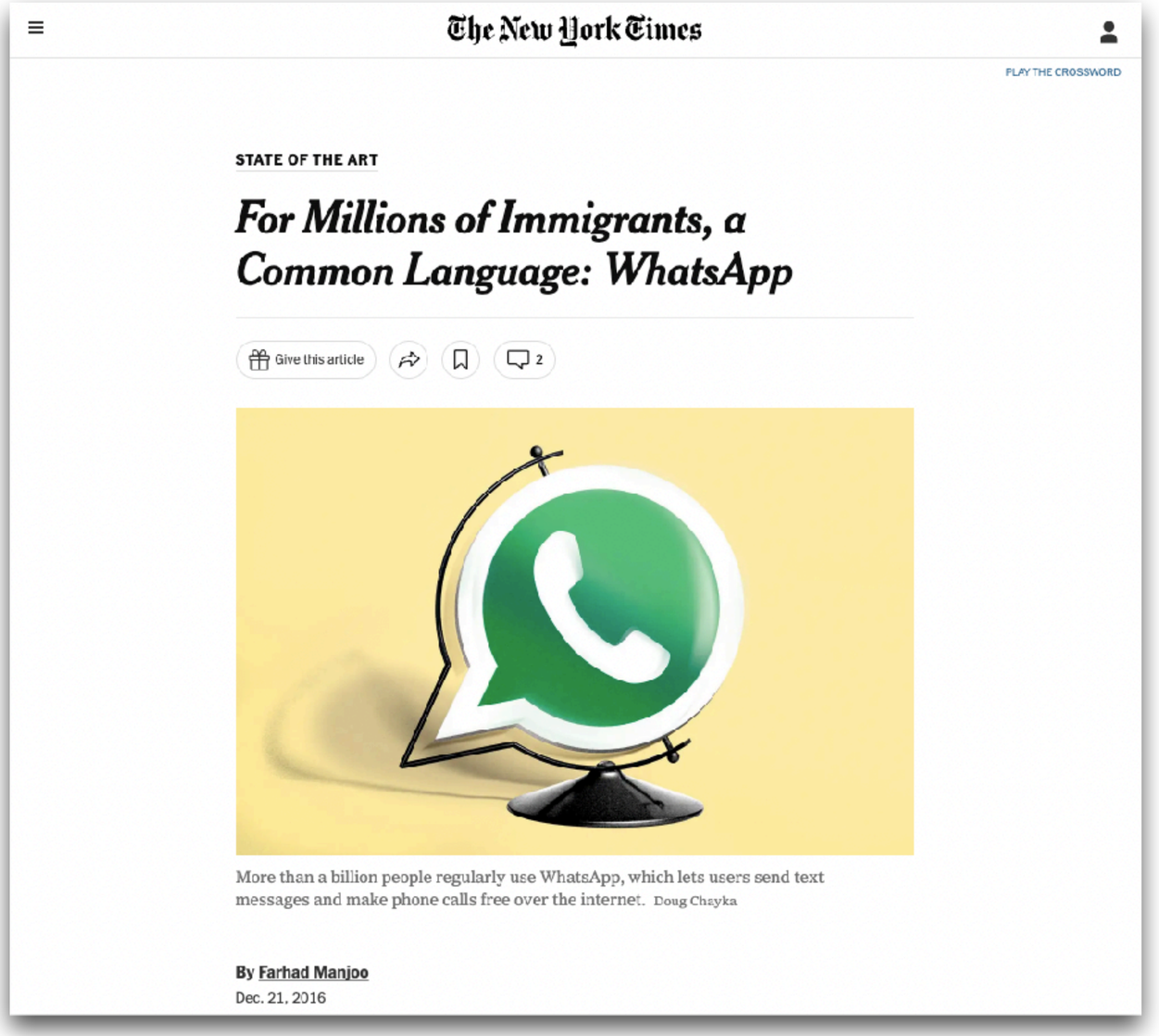

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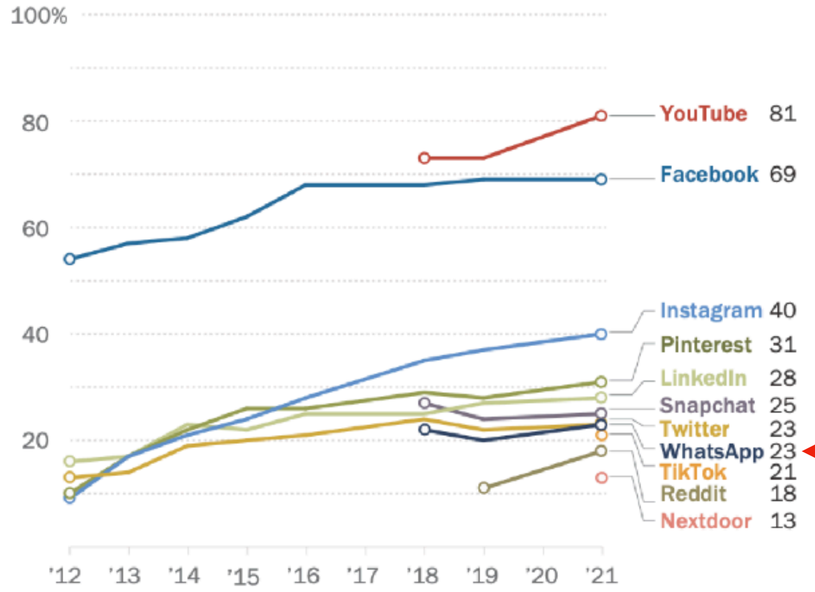

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The New York Times

PLAY THE CROSSWORD

STATE OF THE ART

For Millions of Immigrants, a Common Language: WhatsApp

Give this article

For migrants who leave their homes out of desperation, WhatsApp offers another advantage that many other networks lack: It's secure. The app is encrypted, making it safe from government snoops. The company has also long been adamant about its

More than a billion people regularly use WhatsApp, which lets users send text messages and make phone calls free over the internet. Doug Chayka

By Farhad Manjoo
Dec. 21, 2016

WhatsApp Monitor: A Fact-Checking System for WhatsApp

Philipe Melo[1], **Johnnatan Messias**[2], **Gustavo Resende**[1], **Kiran Garimella**[3], **Jussara Almeida**[1], **Fabrício Benevenuto**[1]
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Countering Misinformation Via WhatsApp: Evidence from the COVID-19 Pandemic in Zimbabwe

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WHATSAPP AND NIGERIA'S 2019 ELECTIONS: MOBILISING THE PEOPLE, PROTECTING THE VOTE

Authors:

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Idayat Hassan
(Centre for Democracy and Development),
Dr Jonathan Fisher
(University of Birmingham),
Professor Nic Cheeseman
(University of Birmingham)

A Study of Misinformation in WhatsApp groups with a focus on the Brazilian Presidential Elections.

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WhatsApp as a verification tool for fake news. The case of 'B de Bulo'

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J. Sedano [CV] [Orcid]. Doctorate student. Faculty of Communication Sciences. Universidad de Málaga (UMA), Spain. jon@uma.es

Analyzing Textual (Mis)Information Shared in WhatsApp Groups

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What can we learn from qualitative explorations of misinformation in private WhatsApp chats during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Study Overview

Tailoring Our Focus

- Different experiences can come from different user demographics
- Focus on WhatsApp users in the US
- Focus on younger users (undergrad + graduate students)
  - Unreciprocated concern directed towards older family members, especially for COVID misinformation [Tandoc Jr. and Lee 2020]

Interviews to Understand Misinformation Encounters

- Semi-structured, virtual interviews with 16 university students in the US:
  - Age 18-34
  - 9 female, 7 male
  - Regularly use WhatsApp (multiple times a week)
- 3 topic categories:
  - General WhatsApp usage
  - Misinformation encounters
  - Fact-checking strategies + design recommendations

Findings

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- Misinformation in private family/friends group chats is often spread from good intentions
- Intimacy in these group chats complicates users' willingness and ability to deal with misinformation
- Users see privacy and stringent content moderation as trade-offs on WhatsApp

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Very easy to forward messages to many people / groups

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“[Our family believed] that we should rinse our noses with saline solution to prevent COVID” — P10

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Mindset differences in senders & receivers

“She was more of the mindset that we should do whatever we can even if it’s not true [...] but she also didn’t consider it misinformation.” — P3

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Social Relationships in Groups Hinders Correction

Intimacy is attached to misinformation

Users tend to trust those close to them, but also receive misinformation from the same people

"I know [many] have their families in WhatsApp, and people tend to trust things that come from people close to you. So, I feel like it adds almost a level of genuineness to this misinformation, and then it causes people to panic, which I think is the biggest con [of using WhatsApp]." — P6"

Social Relationships in Groups Hinders Correction

Correcting older relatives is often seen as disrespectful

Older relatives are also ones who typically send misinformation

"Just because they are not as able to filter out fake news from real news. I mean, obviously it's presented in a more and more realistic way every single day and they just lap it up and believe in it, and also, they are not as tech savvy to be able to go and Google immediately and do a quick check on what's actually happening" — P2

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Misinformation is typically ignored rather than disputed

Active disputes sometimes happened with those of a similar age range (e.g. siblings), or parents

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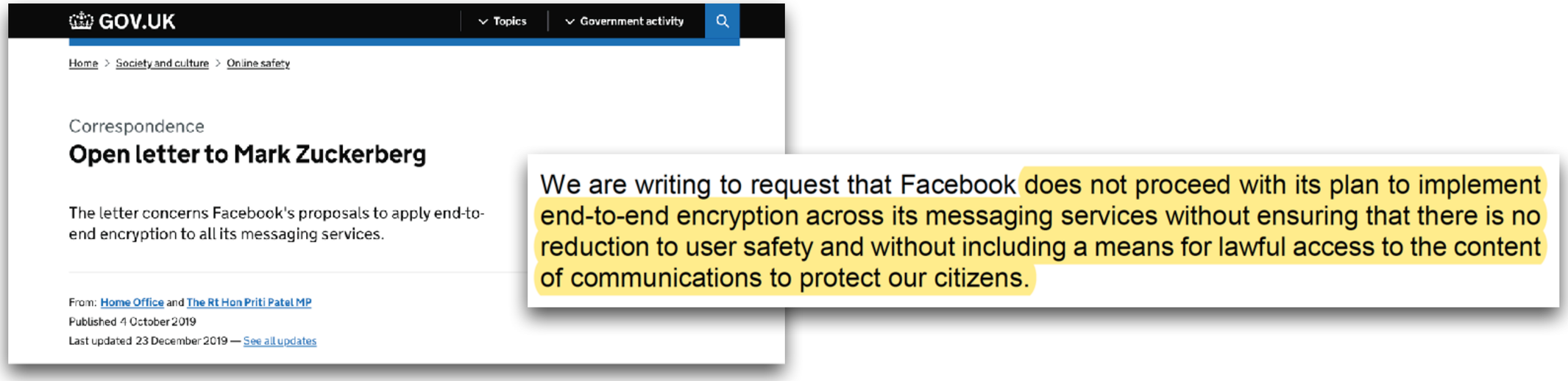

Design Implications

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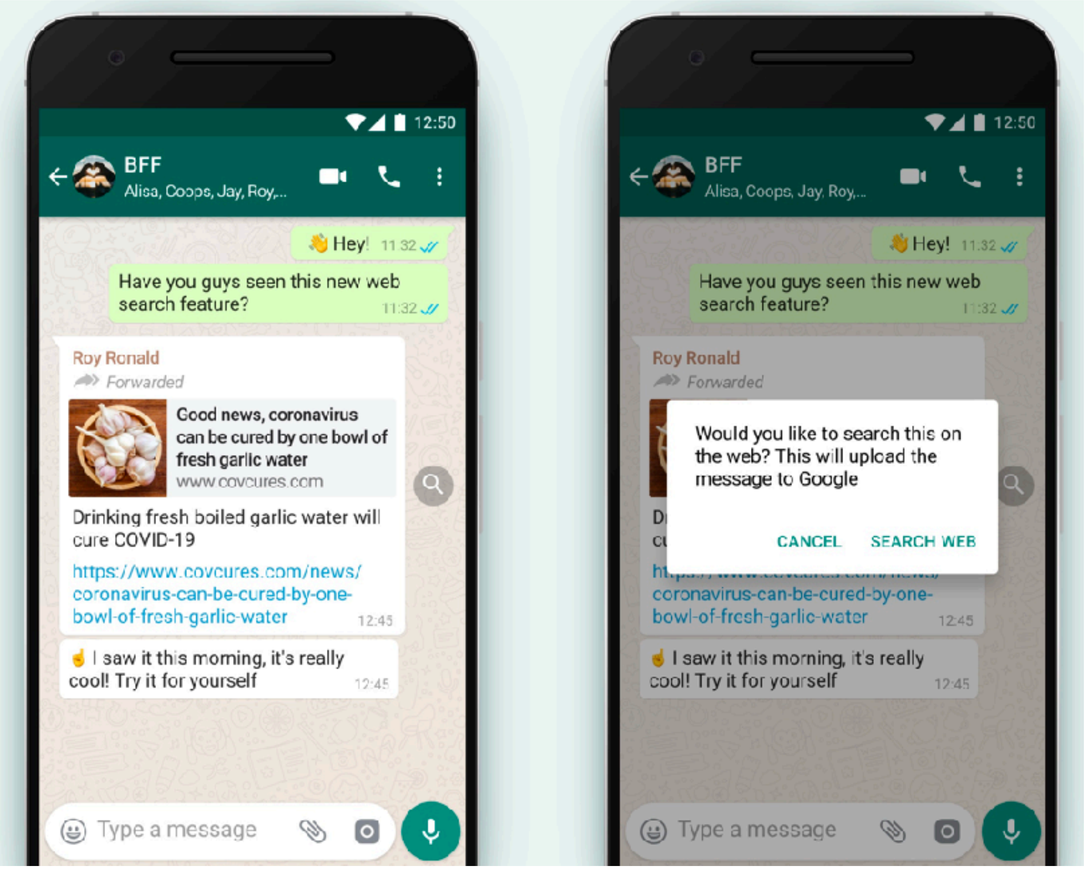
- Helping users deal with misinformation in ways that mitigate social power dynamics
- Empower the user to better fact-check or flag misinformation for themselves

Selective Application of Fact Checker Icon



Source: WhatsApp blog

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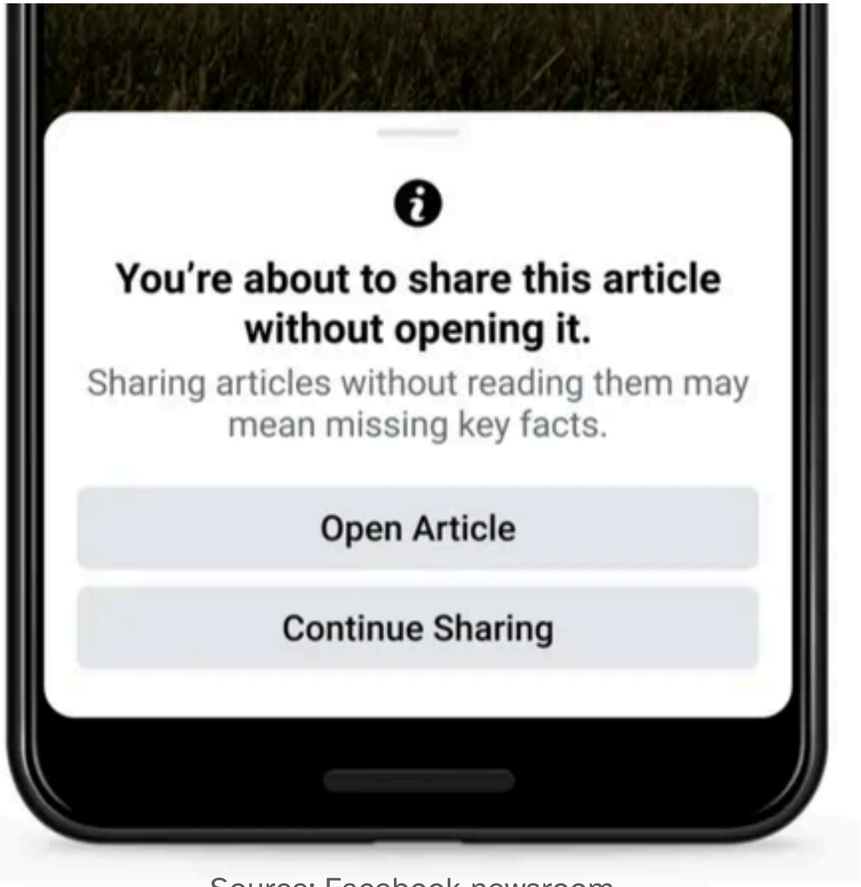
Add Friction When Sharing Unopened Links



Source: Facebook newsroom

Summary

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- Misinformation in private WhatsApp groups can look very different than open social media platforms
- Social relationships and privacy commitments brings about challenges to misinformation management
- User empowerment and mitigating social power dynamics can be future design considerations

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Thanks!

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