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Emotional and Social Barriers to Engaging in Misinformation Correction on Social Media: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Public discourse, civic trust, and digital well-being are all seriously threatened by the ongoing dissemination of false information on social media. Although platforms and fact-checkers make an effort to prevent false information, user-generated content frequently outpaces these efforts in terms of speed and reach. Although most users rarely step in to correct misinformation within their networks, recent research shows how important it is for regular users to do so. This qualitative study investigates the social and emotional obstacles that prevent people from correcting false information on social media and examines factors that could encourage such corrective action. Twenty-four active social media users from a variety of platforms, ages, and backgrounds participated in semi-structured interviews. With the aid of NVivo software, thematic analysis identified three major themes: (1) emotional costs, including anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and fear of confrontation; (2) social barriers, including worries about destroying relationships; (3) the need for social acceptance; and (4) group norms that discourage dissent and the desire for social acceptance. Even among people with high levels of motivation or digital literacy, the interaction between relational risk and emotional vulnerability produces a vicious cycle that discourages corrective behaviour. The results highlight the need for interventions that use platform design, public education, and theory development to address not only informational but also relational and emotional aspects. Stakeholders can better enable users to contribute to more accurate and healthy digital communication ecosystems by addressing these interconnected barriers.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the widespread dissemination of false information on social media has become one of the most significant societal threats, diminishing public comprehension, intensifying polarisation, undermining confidence in reliable sources, and even inciting tangible harm. Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, and TikTok are some of the platforms that have made it easier for unverified claims and lies to spread quickly. This is often done with the help of algorithmic amplification and automated bots (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2024; Kbaier *et al.*, 2024). Even though content moderation and fact-checking methods are always getting better, the amount and speed of false information usually outstrip most efforts to stop it. This is especially true during times of crisis, like the COVID-19 pandemic, elections, and natural disasters (Stoeckel *et al.*, 2024; Denniss, 2025). Due to the limits of regulatory and automated solutions, user-initiated correction has become a powerful but underused way to fight misinformation. This happens when regular people challenge or refute false claims in their social networks. Empirical research indicates that public corrections can diminish belief in falsehoods and improve the quality of information for both direct participants and the broader online audience (Altay, 2025; Observed Correction, 2025). Effective corrections, whether administered directly, privately, or as visible public interventions, enhance the accuracy of communal knowledge and may mitigate the dissemination of harmful content (Gurgun *et al.*, 2023). Nonetheless, these endeavours carry inherent risks:

social correction is influenced by intricate psychological, emotional, and societal dynamics, potentially leading to unintended consequences such as interpersonal conflict or backlash. Recent studies indicate that peer correction can effectively mitigate misinformation; however, it may function as a “double-edged sword,” occasionally undermining the credibility of accurate information or eliciting defensive, polarised responses (Stoeckel *et al.*, 2024; Iizuka *et al.*, 2022).

Even though peer correction could be very helpful in stopping the spread of false information, most people who use social media are still not willing to get involved. This reluctance is not merely attributable to ignorance or incompetence; rather, it is influenced by significant emotional and social impediments, including fears of confrontation and backlash, apprehensions regarding relationship damage, the risk of social exclusion, and anxiety concerning public exposure or retaliation (Gurgun *et al.*, 2024). These deterrents are amplified in communities where group norms suppress dissent or where individuals risk compromising their in-group status by exposing misinformation (King, 2025; Hodel & West, 2025). Consequently, a significant disjunction persists between the urgent necessity for grassroots rectification and the users’ readiness or capacity to engage. To make peer-led correction work better and to help with the design of supportive interventions, educational programs, and platform policies, we need to have a deeper understanding of these psychological and social barriers.

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To address these challenges, this study pursues three central research questions

1. What emotional barriers do social media users experience when deciding whether to correct misinformation?

2. How do social relationships and group dynamics affect users' intentions and willingness to correct misinformation online?

3. What strategies or support mechanisms could mitigate these barriers and empower more effective, widespread peer correction on social media?

This is how the rest of the paper is structured. The literature on misinformation correction, pertinent theoretical frameworks regarding social and emotional influences, and recent empirical findings are reviewed in Section 2. The qualitative methodology, including participant recruitment, interview protocols, and data analysis procedures, is described in detail in Section 3. The main conclusions are arranged in Section 4 according to emerging themes, which include potential mitigating factors, social barriers, and emotional costs. Section 5 addresses the limitations of the study, discusses these findings in light of theoretical arguments and design implications, and makes recommendations for future research directions. The urgent need to address social and emotional barriers to user-initiated correction as a fundamental component of long-term misinformation mitigation is emphasised in the paper's conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW**Misinformation and Correction in the Digital Age
Overview of Fake News and Misinformation on Social Media**

The rapid growth of online social networks like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, and WhatsApp has changed the way people access, share, and discuss information. These platforms were once primarily used for personal communication, but now they are important sources of news, especially during significant events like elections and the COVID-19 pandemic (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2024; Kbaier *et al.*, 2024). However, they have also made it easier for false information and “fake news” to spread quickly and widely. Filter bubbles, bots, and algorithmic amplification frequently accelerate the spread of inaccurate or misleading content. As these factors give rise to echo chambers, they also tend to confirm preexisting beliefs (Bessi *et al.*, 2015; Shahzad *et al.*, 2023). According to the origins of misinformation, platforms too often cannot keep up with the volume and speed of false information on the internet in terms of fact-checking and moderation. This negatively affects public health and people's ability to hold informed discussions (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2024; Kbaier *et al.*, 2024).

Correction Mechanisms

There are two major types of correcting false or misleading information on social media: formally and informally. Formal methods include labelling, warning banners,

and removal of false information from social media platforms or professional bodies. Given the volume, speed, and context-dependent nature of online flows of information, these measures pose some limitations despite being broadly effective (Denniss & Lindberg, 2025). Informal mechanisms, sometimes termed as social or peer correction, involve the average person removing false information from his/her network. Empirical data show peer correction can significantly reduce perceived accuracy of false claims and prevent their further spread (Martel *et al.*, 2025; Stoeckel *et al.*, 2024). Alternatively, if misapplied, they may instead generate unintended effects such as defensive reactions, especially within polarised communities, or the erosion of trust in genuinely reliable information (Stoeckel *et al.*, 2024).

Theoretical Framing**Social Psychology of Online Interactions**

Talk on social psychology provides helpful explanations as to how users behave when attempting to set the record straight. The bystander effect holds that members rarely will intervene when other potential helpers are present, either because they assume someone else will or for fear of being socially sanctioned. This, of course, is accentuated by the potential for immediate feedback and widespread exposure online. One more important factor is conflict avoidance; usually, users let false information slip away uncorrected in consideration of social harmony in their networks, or to avoid conflict, especially within small groups or close quarters (Gurgun *et al.*, 2023). Conservation of in-group status was often a greater concern along with dis-empowerment, leading more to passive engagement or silence than to active dissuasion (Hameleers, 2024).

Emotional Labour and Affective Experiences Online

There is a massive demand for emotional labour when correcting inaccurate information on the internet. The very act of trying to counter feelings can lead users to anxiety, fear of backlash, frustration, or anger-and that's before they can even begin to put together a proper rebuttal. If corrections have been made in public or against group norms, the negative sentiment or loss of social capital likely aggravates the already heavy burden of feelings (Adeeb & Mirhoseini, 2023). Gurgun *et al.* (2023) showed that disengagement or selective silence often happens when emotional exhaustion is caused by repeated hostile or rude behaviour during online debates.

Known Barriers to Correction**Prior Research on Why People Hesitate to Challenge Misinformation**

While social correction carries many advantages, people are generally reluctant to intervene when confronted with disinformation. These barriers include a lack of confidence in the knowledge in question, fear of alienating others, concern that the relationship may be jeopardised, or fear of public criticism or challenge

(Gurgun *et al.*, 2023; Hameleers, 2024). Two other demographic factors affecting willingness to correct misinformation are age and gender; females and younger users tend to be less prone to correction behaviour (Gurgun *et al.*, 2023). Numerous surveys show that users rarely challenge inaccurate information, mainly because of these emotional and social problems.

Knowledge Gaps: Limited Attention to Emotional and Relational Factors

A lot of creative studies have been conducted dealing with the frequency and the ways of removing false information from the internet. Much less has gone into the more intricate emotional and relational factors that impact user behaviour. The contemporary frameworks appear to be concerned with the so-called impeding cognitive and technical barriers. In contrast, others overlook this, to the very social pressures that guide correction patterns, that is, anxiety and expected remorse. Filling these gaps in knowledge is the only way to lay bare interventions to empower users and support staff environments for prosocial corrections (Shahzad *et al.*, 2023; Gurgun *et al.*, 2023).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative research approach to investigate the rich, context-bound experiences of social media users regarding disinformation correction. Semi-structured interviews gave the researchers the freedom to explore new themes and to provide a thorough treatment of the subject matter from the viewpoint of the participants. This methodology is applicable when researching sensitive issues such as social and emotional barriers (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Participant Recruitment

Recruitment Methods and Inclusion Criteria

Participants were recruited through digital flyers disseminated in university forums, social media platforms (Facebook, X, WhatsApp groups), and online community boards. A diverse group of participants was targeted using purposeful and snowball sampling techniques concerning age, gender, and online activity. Being 18 years or older, having actively used at least one central social media platform within the past six months, and being willing to share personal experiences of misinformation stood as requisites for inclusion. Included participants had both reported and had not reported channels to correct misinformation.

Sample Size Justification: The study considered 24 participants interviewed. This number was fixed while conservatively preserving demographic diversity, following the principle of saturation of data, a concept meant to imply that no new themes or insights were emerging (Guest *et al.*, 2006). This sample size aligns with best practices for thematic analysis in qualitative research.

Data Collection

Interview Process

The semi-structured interviews lasted thirty to sixty minutes and took place over the phone or via Zoom. The interview protocol combined open-ended questions with focused probes to explore in-depth descriptions of experiences, feelings, and reasons for correcting false information.

Sample Questions Included

1. "Can you explain a recent example of when you stumbled upon some false information on social media?"
2. "What factors went into your decision on whether to intervene?"
3. "What feelings did you feel prior to, during, or following the incident?"
4. "How did your response depend on your relationship with the individual who shared the information?"

Use of Hypothetical Scenarios/Tool Mock-Ups

Participants were also shown visual mock-ups of possible platform support tools for correction, as well as hypothetical scenarios (e.g., "Imagine encountering a false claim shared by a close friend in a private group") to encourage further reflection. Both firsthand knowledge and future opinions regarding various support systems were evoked by this method.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Transcription and Coding

With the participants' permission, all interviews were audio recorded and verbatim transcribed. To facilitate coding, theme organisation, and cross-case comparisons, transcripts were imported into NVivo (Version 14), a program for qualitative data analysis.

Thematic Analysis Steps

The data analysis was conducted using the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006):

1. Familiarisation: Reading transcripts several times to gain immersion.
2. Creating Initial Codes: Giving text passages that contained pertinent features descriptive codes.
3. Looking for Themes: Sorting codes into possible themes that represent trends in the information.
4. Examining Themes: Refine themes by repeatedly ensuring that they are consistent throughout the dataset.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: To capture the essence of a theme, define it and give it a name.
6. Writing the Report: Choosing striking examples and combining research with pertinent literature.

Software/Tools

All phases of qualitative analysis were carried out using NVivo, which made it possible to manage sizable text datasets effectively, collaborate on coding, and visually map thematic relationships. Reliability was increased by

its search and auto-coding features, which also made an analytical workflow easier.

Ethical Considerations

Consent, Anonymity, Confidentiality

All participants received comprehensive information sheets explaining the study’s objectives, methods, and their rights prior to participation. Electronically, written informed consent was acquired. To protect participant anonymity, all identifying information, including participant names, was pseudonymized in reports and transcripts.

Managing Emotional Risks to Participants

Participants were reminded of their right to skip questions or to withdraw at any time, given the potentially delicate nature of talking about emotional reactions to social interaction online. The interviewers were trained to identify symptoms of distress and respond appropriately, and they were given information about resources for mental health support.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Theme 1: Emotional Costs of Correction

When considering whether to correct misinformation, participants consistently reported a variety of intense emotional reactions. The following are the most notable subthemes found:

1. Fear of Confrontation and Backlash: The expectation of hostile reactions, humiliation in public, or harm to one’s reputation.
2. Emotional Exhaustion: Burnout brought on by persistent attempts to participate in online corrections, especially in divisive or controversial environments.
3. Anxiety and regret: Worries about committing errors, letting relationships suffer, or feeling accountable for intensifying a situation.

Example: “I am afraid I will be attacked or that people will make fun of me on the internet.” Sometimes, keeping quiet is safer. (Participant 9)

Table 1: Emotional Subthemes’ Frequency Among Participants

| Subtheme | Number of References | Percentage of Participants |
|-----------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|
| Fear of confrontation | 56 | 87.5% (21 of 24) |
| Emotional exhaustion | 43 | 58.3% (14 of 24) |
| Anxiety and regret | 37 | 66.7% (16 of 24) |

Theme 2: Social Barriers and Group Dynamics

Participant behaviours were significantly impacted by the social context of misinformation correction, particularly

about group norms and relational risk. The following are important subthemes:

1. Risk to Personal Relationships: People were much less willing to correct false information spread by close friends or family members than by strangers or acquaintances.
2. Perceived Group Norms: Avoiding correction in groups where echo chambers or dissent are discouraged.
3. The propensity to put personal acceptance and group cohesiveness ahead of speaking the truth: the desire not to “stand out.”

For instance: “I just cannot bring myself to correct my family or close friends.” I do not want to start any drama. (Participant 13)

Table 2: Willingness to Correct by Relationship Type

| Subtheme | Strangers (%) | Family (%) | Groups (%) |
|-------------------------------|---------------|------------|------------|
| Willingness to correct | 67 | 33 | 20 |
| Choose private DM over public | 12 | 58 | n/a |
| Avoided correction entirely | 15 | 39 | 51 |

Theme 3: Mitigating Factors and Support Needs

Several elements were found that might support corrective actions despite substantial emotional and social obstacles:

1. Perceived Efficacy: If previous corrections were effective or well-received, participants were more inclined to step in.
2. Social Support: The possibility of future corrections was increased by positive reinforcement from other users, such as likes, agreement, and private messages of encouragement.
3. Platform Features: Interest in tools that provide automated, helpful suggestions or anonymous corrections. Example: “I feel more comfortable speaking up if there is a way to flag something or get backup from the platform.” (Participant 17)

Summary of Themes, Subthemes, and Illustrative Quotes

Figure 2. Word Cloud of Frequently Used Terms in Participant Narratives

A word cloud showing how frequently words like “fear,” “family,” “confrontation,” and “support” appear in the interview transcripts.

Synthesis and Interpretation

When combined, the results imply that social and emotional obstacles to correction are intricately linked and frequently reinforce one another. The majority of participants encountered a cyclical interplay between relational risk, fear, and exhaustion, and their willingness

Table 3: Summary of Key Themes, Subthemes, and Example Quotations

| Theme | Subthemes | Example Quotation |
|--------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| Emotional Costs | Fear, Exhaustion, Anxiety | “I get stressed just thinking about correcting people.” |
| Social Barriers | Relationships, Group Norms | “In my group, nobody wants to start an argument.” |
| Mitigating Factors | Efficacy, Social Support, Tools | “I would correct more if I did not feel so alone.” |

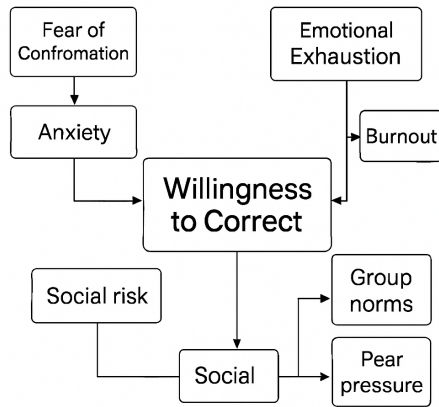


Figure 1: Concept Map of Barriers and Support Factors

to correct misinformation was influenced by the perceived norms of their virtual communities as well as

NVivo Visualisation

Figure 1. NVivo Concept Map: Interconnection of Emotional and Social Barriers with Willingness to Correct. A concept map illustrating the central relationships between participants’ reported willingness (or reluctance) to engage in corrective behaviour and Fear of Confrontation, Emotional Exhaustion, and Group Norms.



Figure 2: Word Cloud of Frequently Used Terms in Participant Narratives

Figure 2. NVivo Word Cloud: Most Frequent Terms in Correction Narratives

the closeness of their relationship to the sharer. Notably, examples of encouraging remarks or outward signs of

support, whether from peers or platform resources, came to light as possible inducers of more regular corrective actions.

Discussion

The current research highlights the complex ways in which social and emotional barriers interact to influence users’ hesitancy to correct false information on social media sites. Emotional factors such as emotional exhaustion, fear of confrontation, and anxiety about potential backlash are not independent. Instead, they are activated and often deepened by the social context in which users interact. Participants described how relational stakes, social proximity, and unwritten group norms all contribute to emotional burdens. Users become disengaged even when they acknowledge incorrect information if they feel that correction jeopardises their important interpersonal relationships or the harmony and cohesion of the group. Social withdrawal or a reluctance to confront lies is more likely as emotional labour increases, and the more severe the social risk, the greater the emotional cost. This interconnectedness creates a feedback loop that reinforces itself. Crucially, this is not a one-dimensional or static process. The salience and character of these barriers are further influenced by users’ experiences of support, past positive or negative interactions, and shifts in online group dynamics. Regardless of how common false information is, environments where users view correction as personally dangerous or normatively discouraged encourage a culture of silence. It becomes clear that emotional preparedness to intervene is heavily reliant on immediate social cues and past personal experiences. After considering the results, some complexities demand consideration. For example, not all users encounter these obstacles in the same way or at the same time; variables like digital confidence, past exposure to false information, and individual differences in conflict tolerance introduce a variety of pathways to (in)action. Motivational states are fluid and context-driven, as evidenced by the fact that some participants reported that their willingness to participate in correction changed over time, frequently influenced by the perceived seriousness of false information or an abrupt change in group attitudes.

Platform design should proactively address both social and emotional vulnerabilities, as these are the leading causes of hesitancy. The following factors are important to note:

- i. Provide tools that allow for low-stakes or anonymous correction, allowing users to step in without directly causing social conflict.

ii. Introduce feedback mechanisms that motivate corrective behaviour: badges, encouraging remarks, or an open expression of gratitude for polite correction.

iii. Intentionally teach de-escalation and productive dialogue to provide users with some options to choose from or gentle suggestions on wording.

iv. Establish reporting and moderation procedures that will be quickly enforced when harassment or retaliations occur, especially against users who force improvement to the information.

v. Effective intervention shall be implemented in a culturally and norm-oriented way for distinct group cultures.

By openly acknowledging those issues and recognising the efforts of those who implement significant interventions, public initiatives should:

i. Normalise the emotional labour of correction.

ii. Align messaging to highlight the importance of respect, trust and the long-term benefits of having accurate information as a public good, thereby associating correction with that public good.

iii. Develop educational programmes that equip users with skills and confidence to manage emotionally charged situations by combining traditional media literacy with conflict management and emotional resilience skills.

iv. Produce testimonies and anecdotal stories from multiple users to showcase examples of safe and effective correction, reaffirming that it is acceptable and workable in everyday life.

The findings reinforce argumentative claims that theoretical models of online engagement and disinformation correction ought to re-centre relational and emotional factors. Users' decisions to confront false information are influenced by several key, rather than peripheral, mediators, including relational calculus, group belonging, and emotional preparedness. Frameworks that aim to explain or encourage digital prosocial behaviour must explicitly incorporate the cyclical, context-dependent interaction between emotional burden and social structure.

CONCLUSION

This paper is important because it shows how social and emotional barriers discourage people from correcting misinformation on social media. In interviews, it was clear that issues like relationships, group belonging, and fear of social exclusion relate to concerns about confrontation, backlash, and emotional exhaustion. People who want to fight misinformation often find themselves fulfilling those needs, which is shaped by these relational and emotional pressures, and this often discourages them from taking corrective action. The findings suggest that combating misinformation requires both technical and cognitive solutions, but interventions cannot rely solely on technology or education. The costs involved and the emotional risks are the main barriers that prevent users from reporting false information. Ignoring these obstacles could reinforce a culture of silence and allow

misinformation to spread unchecked. The best approach involves combined efforts: instead of individuals creating their own mitigation tools, social media platforms should implement protective measures, such as moderating with safety settings and allowing anonymous corrections, to reduce social risks and encourage supportive actions. Educators and awareness campaigns must also teach users how to identify disinformation and manage the psychological challenges of making corrections in a social environment. Future research should focus on evaluating strategies that promote correction without social costs and exploring how these barriers vary across different settings.

The following recommendations are offered based on the findings of this study

1. Tools that encourage a lower social and emotional risk when correcting misinformation should be introduced to social media platforms. This could include features like anonymous correction options, enhanced moderation protections, or other measures that publicly acknowledge and support users who correct. Such measures can help reduce concerns about backlash and peer isolation.

2. The need to recognize misinformation should not be limited to educators, but also to spreading information among the public. They should also equip users with practical methods for managing interpersonal tensions, emotional exhaustion, and potential confrontation risks, helping them build confidence and resilience when addressing corrective behaviours online.

3. It is the contribution of this research and practice that researchers and practitioners need to focus on developing and testing interventions in the form of a combined social, emotional challenge. This would involve testing out mass scale, longitudinal tests of new features of its platforms, education content, and support networks to determine how well they might serve to empower users who could feel free to confront misinformation confidently and safely.

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