

Survey of Public Attitudes to Coronavirus Disinformation and Fake News in France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK

Summary Findings

■ 3,696 citizens from France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK (n = +700 per country) were surveyed about COVID-19 disinformation / fake news between 18th March – 30th April 2020. The survey was conducted using the Qualtrics online platform (survey design details are contained in the Methodology).

■ Findings reveal distinct differences across the five countries in terms of how those who have seen and those who have shared COVID-19 disinformation and fake news understand its causes and consequences.

■ People who had seen and/or shared COVID-19 disinformation / fake news tended to be younger, have fewer years of formal education, were daily users of social media and were more likely to self-identify as a minority.

■ Spain had the highest level of concern regarding the impact of disinformation on trust in government, scientists and experts, and health policies.

■ In all 5 countries, people who have seen COVID-19 disinformation were more likely to believe that disinformation impacts trust in scientists/experts and health policies “to a great extent”.

■ Respondents who had seen COVID-19 disinformation / fake news perceived disinformation to be more impactful on citizens’ trust in government than those who had not seen the stories.

■ German sharers of disinformation / fake news were more likely to have a left-of-centre than a right-of-centre political viewpoint. Whereas for the other four countries, COVID-19 disinformation sharers were more likely to have right-of-centre political orientations. Most respondents self-defined as having centrist views.

■ In Italy and the UK, seeing coronavirus disinformation / fake news was associated with disagreeing with the statement ‘the government does what is right’, potentially indicating an impact of coronavirus disinformation content.

■ Respondents who have seen and/or shared coronavirus disinformation reported using social media to stay up to date with news and current affairs to a greater extent than

those who had not seen COVID-19 disinformation.

■ Respondents who had not seen COVID-19 disinformation / fake news were more likely to “never” engage in fact checking behaviour than those who had. This highlights the possibility that those who claim to have not seen COVID-19 disinformation may have been exposed to disinformation without realising it.

■ Italian citizens were most likely to “always” fact check; British citizens were most likely to “never” fact check news before sharing it with others.

■ People who have seen and/or shared COVID-19 fake news, reported using social media to fill spare time to a greater extent in all five countries, and were also more likely to report using social media regularly.

■ 31% of UK respondents had “unknowingly” shared “exaggerated” news stories (highest level). This compares with only 20% in Italy (lowest).

■ 31% of Spanish respondents who had shared COVID-19 disinformation had “knowingly” shared “exaggerated” news stories, 17% had “knowingly” shared “made up” content, 46% had “unknowingly” shared “made up” content”.

■ Across all countries a relatively small number of people seem to act as ‘super-sharers’, responsible for sharing a disproportionate amount of COVID-19 disinformation on social media.

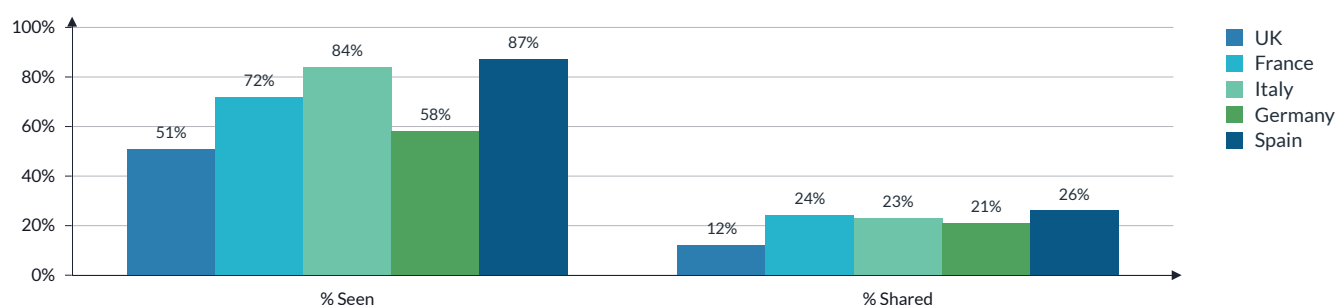
■ ‘Super-sharers’ were significantly more likely to be younger, have more strongly held religious beliefs and have fewer years of education. In Italy and the UK being a ‘super-sharer’ was statistically significantly associated with believing in conspiracy theories.

■ Everyday users of ‘niche’ social media platforms (such as VK) are more likely to have shared COVID-19 disinformation / fake news, in all five countries.

■ Everyday users of Instagram and Twitter shared coronavirus disinformation / fake news more often than everyday users of Facebook in all 5 countries. The number of sharers on WhatsApp was generally lower than other platforms.

FIGURE 1

Who Sees and Shares COVID-19 Disinformation?

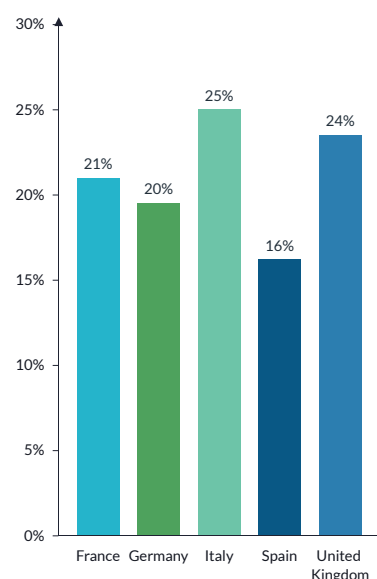
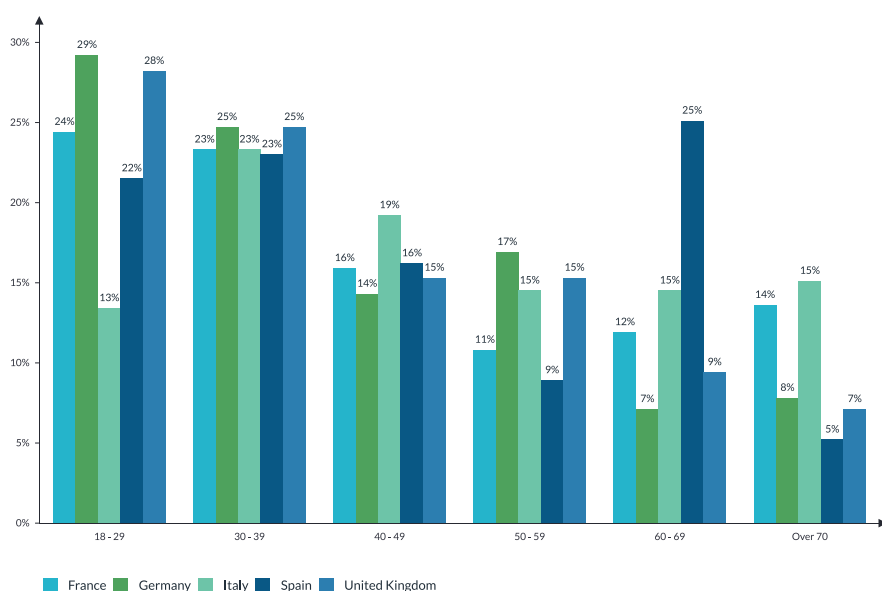


Shared

How old are you today?

Shared

Do you consider yourself to belong to a minority group?



ASSESSMENT

Over half of people surveyed in each country had seen COVID-19 disinformation / fake news. A smaller but substantial portion reported sharing COVID-19 disinformation with others either intentionally or unintentionally.

• Spain had the highest percentage of those who had seen (87%) and shared (26%) coronavirus related disinformation.

• The UK had the lowest percentage who had seen (51%) and shared (12%) COVID-19 disinformation.

Males and females were equally likely to see and share COVID-19 disinformation / fake news in all countries. Younger people were more likely to see and share COVID-19 disinformation. The association between seeing COVID-19 disinformation and age was statistically significant in France, Germany, Italy and the UK. Whilst the association between age and sharing COVID-19 disinformation / fake news was statistically significant in France, Germany, Spain and the UK.

• Approximately half of sharers were under the age of 40 in France (48%), Germany (54%), Spain (45%) and the UK (53%).

• Of those who had shared COVID-19 disinformation in Italy, 37% were

under the age of 40.

• Sharers of COVID-19 disinformation / fake news were more likely to have less than 8 years of formal education than those who had not shared COVID-19 disinformation.

Self-identifying as a minority (according to ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, religion and/or disability) and sharing COVID-19 disinformation / fake news was a statistically significant association in all five countries. For example, in Italy a quarter (25%) of those who had shared COVID-19 disinformation self-identified as a minority, while 7% of non-sharers self-identified as a minority. In Germany and the UK, self-identifying as a minority was also positively associated with seeing COVID-19 disinformation. These findings may reflect the racial and social element of coronavirus statistics and that certain aspects of COVID-19 disinformation may target minority groups.

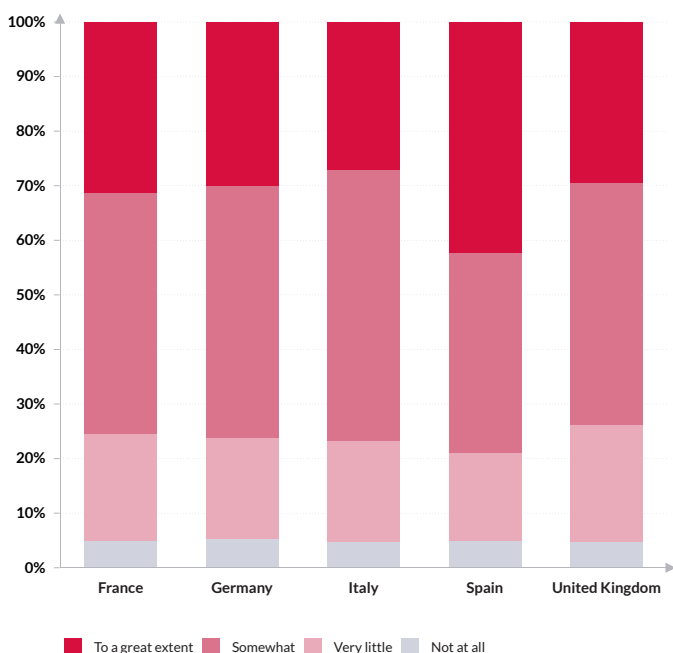
Across all countries there was a significant relationship between seeing COVID-19 disinformation and having a positive attitude toward homosexual rights. For example, in Italy 77% of those who had seen COVID-19 fake news support homosexual rights compared to 65% of those who had not seen COVID-19 disinformation.

FIGURE 2

Perceived Impact of Disinformation on Trust in Scientists and Experts

Seen

To what extent do you think that disinformation affects each of the following areas in your country? - **Trust in Scientists and Experts**



ASSESSMENT

- In France, Germany and the UK, those who have seen COVID-19 disinformation were statistically more likely to believe disinformation impacts trust in scientists and experts to a “great extent”.

This may indicate that the content of COVID-19 disinformation is particularly centred around scientists and experts in these countries. Spain had the highest percentage of all countries of those who believe that disinformation has a significant impact on trust in scientists and experts. However, in this case, the difference between those who had seen and those who had not seen COVID-19 disinformation / fake news was marginal (seen = 42%, not seen = 39%).

- For most other countries, just under 1/3 (approx. 30%) of those who had seen COVID-19 disinformation believed that disinformation had an impact on trust in scientists and experts to a “great extent”.

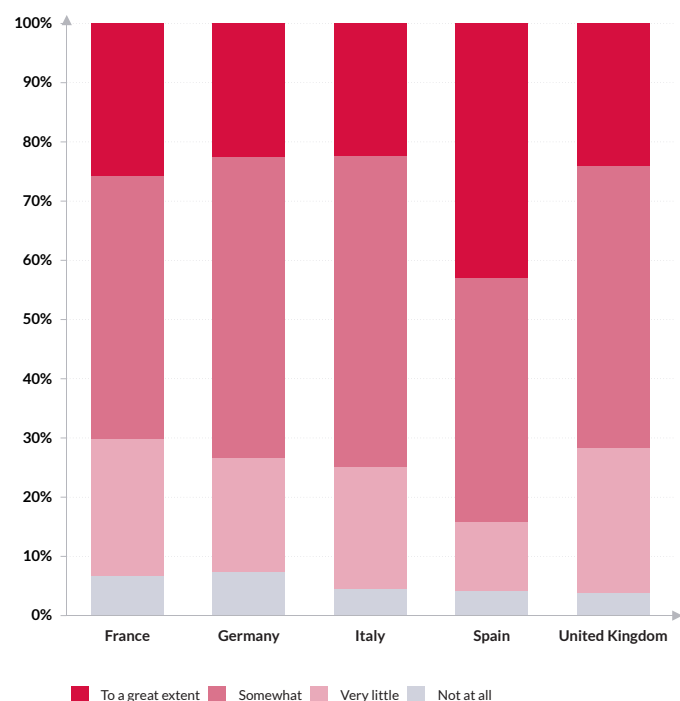
In comparison, the percentage who believed disinformation had an impact to a great extent for those who had not seen COVID-19 disinformation / fake news was much lower for France (18%), Germany (20%) and the UK (18%). In Italy, the percentage who believed that disinformation had a great impact on trust in scientists was not substantially affected by seeing coronavirus related disinformation / fake news (seen = 27%, not seen = 26%).

FIGURE 3

Perceived Impact of Disinformation on Health Policies

Seen

To what extent do you think that disinformation affects each of the following areas in your country? - **Health Policies**



ASSESSMENT

When asked whether they believe that disinformation impacts health policies, participants who had seen COVID-19 disinformation were more likely to agree that disinformation had an impact to a “great extent”, than those who had not seen in France, Germany, Italy and the UK.

- In France, 26% of those who had seen COVID-19 fake news felt that disinformation had an impact to a “great extent” on health policies compared to just 15% of those who had not seen coronavirus related disinformation / fake news. This correlation was significant for all countries excluding Spain.

Asking respondents if they believe that disinformation impacts health policy, attempts to discern whether people believe that disinformation / fake news can influence concrete policies. This finding is interesting because in the current climate, if citizens believe health policies are driven or tarnished by disinformation and fake news, they may be less inclined to comply with them.

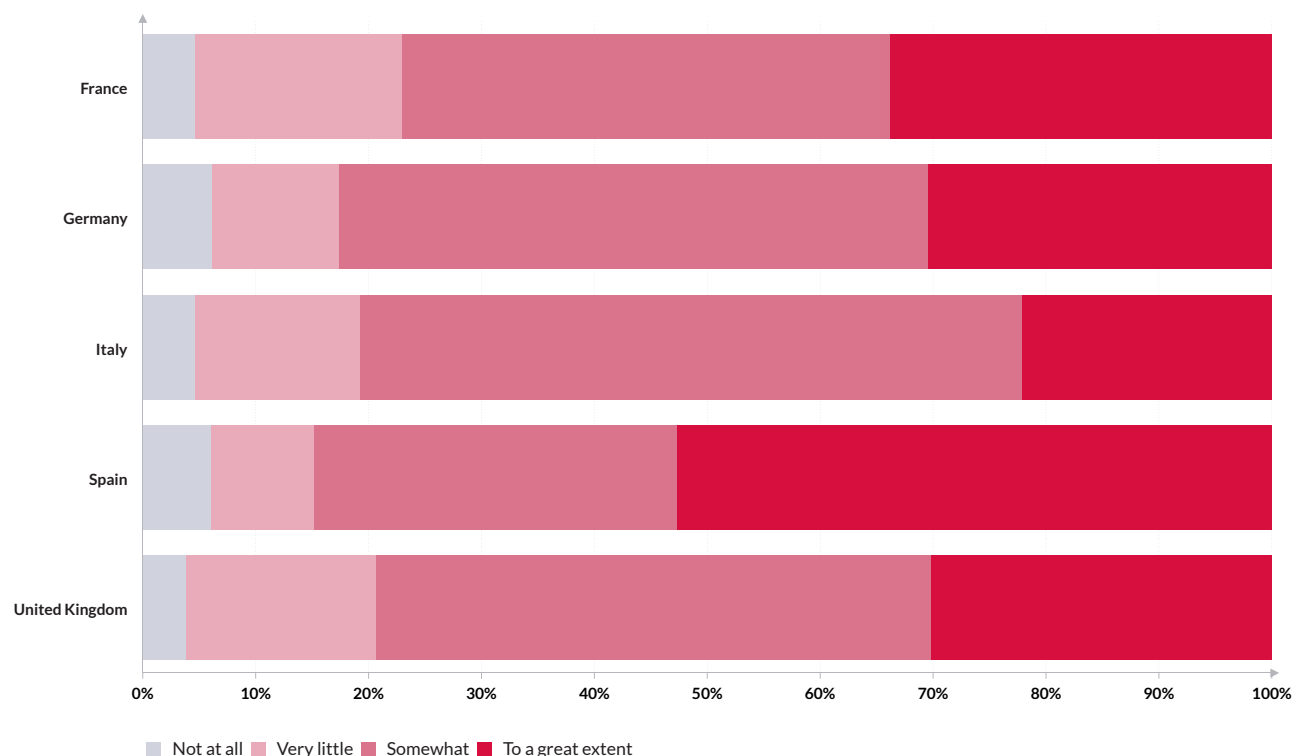
- Spain had the highest percentage of those who believed that disinformation / fake news impacts health policies to a “great extent” (43% of those who had seen COVID-19 disinformation / fake news belonged to this group).

FIGURE 4

Perceived Impact of Disinformation on Trust in Government

Seen

To what extent do you think that disinformation affects each of the following areas in your country? - **Trust in governments**



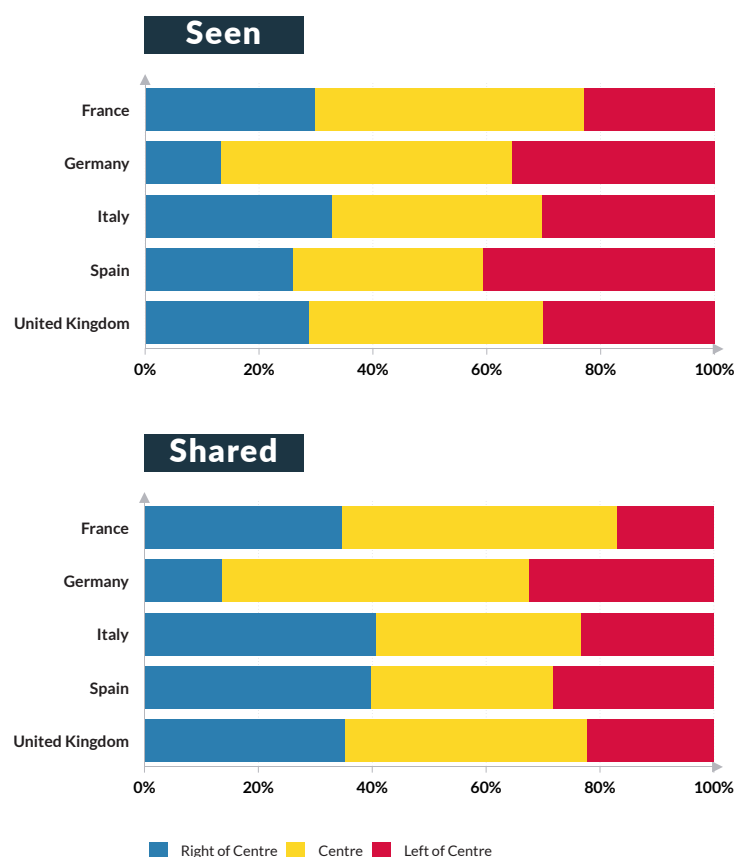
ASSESSMENT

For all countries, seeing COVID-19 disinformation was significantly associated with believing disinformation had an impact to a “great extent” on trust in government. This may signal the content of COVID-19 disinformation / fake news as being detrimental to belief in the benevolence and competence of governments.

- Spain had the highest percentage of people who believed that disinformation had a severe impact on trust in government (53% of those who have seen COVID-19 disinformation). In comparison, 40% of those who had not seen COVID-19 disinformation believed that disinformation had a large impact on trust in government. This may indicate that the content of Spanish disinformation is more focused on undermining the government than disinformation in other countries.
- Italy on average tended to have a less impactful view of disinformation on trust in government (22% who of those saw COVID-19 disinformation / fake news believed that disinformation impacted trust in government to a “great extent”).
- Across all three indicators, respondents in Spain were the most likely to believe that disinformation had a substantial impact on trust in government, scientists and experts, and health policies.

FIGURE 5

Political Orientation



ASSESSMENT

Across all the countries, people generally tended to identify with the centre politically.

- People who reported seeing COVID-19 disinformation / fake news were less likely to identify with the centre than those who had not seen COVID-19 disinformation in Germany, Spain and the UK.

- In these countries, those who had seen COVID-19 disinformation tended to be more likely to hold left-of-centre political views than those who had not seen COVID-19 disinformation / fake news.

- Focusing on those who shared COVID-19 disinformation / fake news, as with the above section, respondents in all countries tended to identify as having centrist political views and values.

- In France, Italy and Spain, sharing COVID-19 disinformation / fake news was significantly associated with holding right-of-centre political beliefs.

- In Germany, there was a greater presence of those with left-of-centre political views compared to those with right-of-centre political beliefs for sharers of COVID-19 disinformation / fake news.

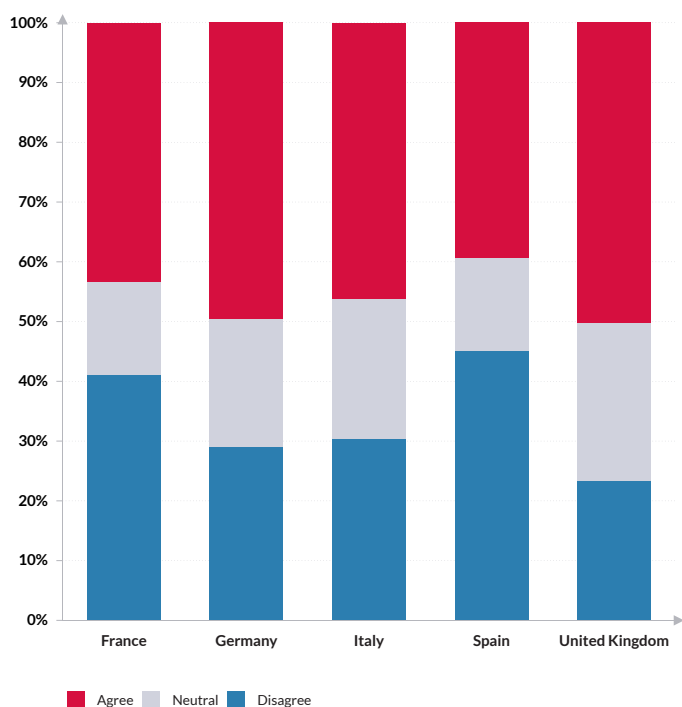
- In the UK, sharers of COVID-19 disinformation tended to be more likely to identify as right-of-centre than hold left-of-centre political views.

FIGURE 6

Trust in Government

Seen

Thinking about the government who runs the country in which you are currently living, please rate your level of agreement with the following statements: - **I believe that the government does what is right**



ASSESSMENT

Most respondents are trusting, to some extent, of their government.

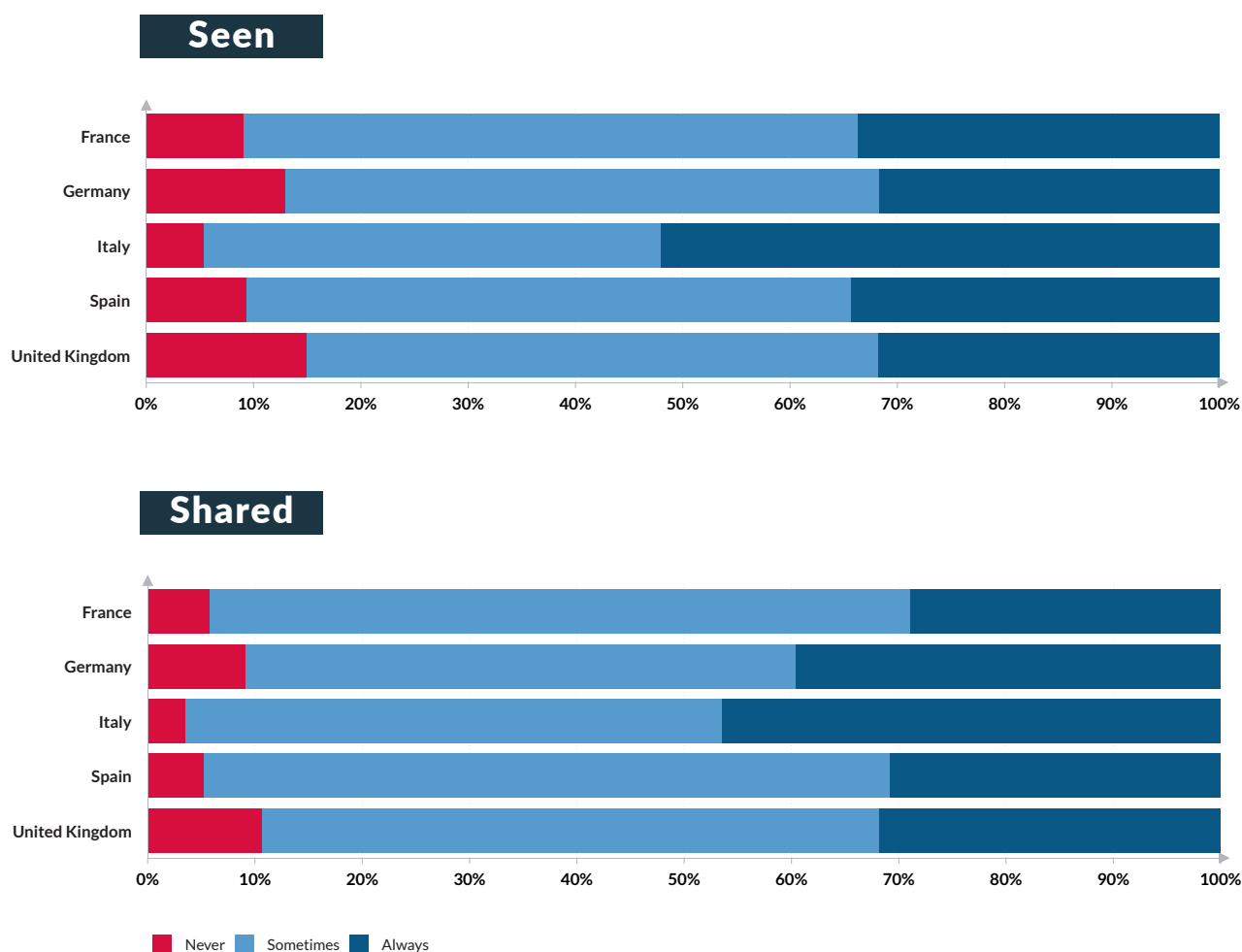
- Italy and the UK showed a significant correlation between seeing COVID-19 disinformation / fake news and disagreeing with the statement "the government does what is right".

- Spain was the only country for which; of those who had seen COVID-19 disinformation / fake news, more people disagreed than agreed with the statement that "the government does what is right" (45% = disagreed vs. 39% = agreed).

FIGURE 7

Fact Checking

Do you ever 'fact check' news stories before sharing them with others online or offline (i.e. investigate if the story is true, check sources etc)?



ASSESSMENT

People who had seen or shared COVID-19 disinformation / fake news were more likely to “always” fact check before they share news with others (either online or offline), than those who had not. There was a significant relationship in all countries between not seeing COVID-19 disinformation and “never” fact checking. This signals that those who claim to not have seen any COVID-19 disinformation may be exposed to disinformation without realising it.

- The data shows that the percentage of people who “always” fact check is highest in Italy (47% of the general population). Over half (52%) of Italians who have seen COVID-19 disinformation “always” fact check their news before sharing it.
- The UK had the highest percentage of people who “never” fact check their news before sharing it with others (28% of the general population), increasing to 41% when looking only at those who have not seen COVID-19 disinformation. This highlights that although the UK has one of the lowest percentages of those who have seen COVID-19 disinformation, this may be due to a failure to recognise news as false.
- In France, Germany and the UK, sharers of COVID-19 disinformation were significantly associated with more frequent fact checking.
- In Germany only 9% of those who shared COVID-19 disinformation claimed to “never” fact check news before sharing it with others, whilst 23% of those who had not shared coronavirus fake news admitted to “never” fact checking news before sharing.

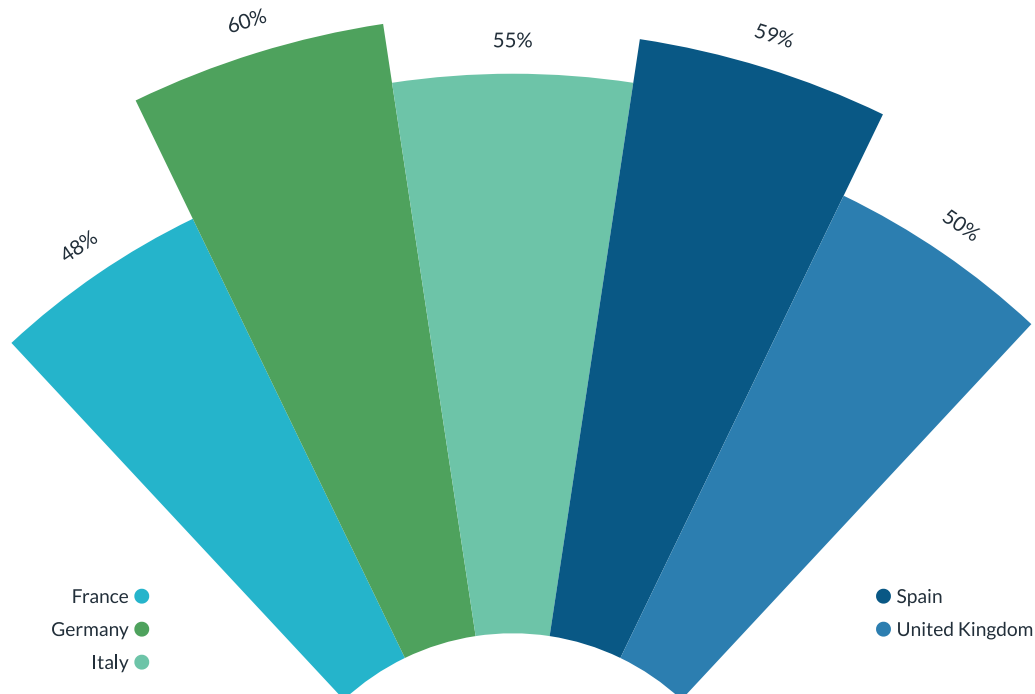
This suggests some of the more disinformation aware COVID-19 sharers could have been attempting to debunk the information they had shared. Indeed, approximately a third of all COVID-19 disinformation / fake news sharers always engaged in fact checking behaviour. In Italy and Spain, there was no significant association between sharing COVID-19 disinformation and fact checking. However, as previously mentioned, Italian citizens tended to have better fact checking practices than the other countries in this report.

FIGURE 8

Social Media Account Activity and Purpose of Usage

Why do you use social media? - To stay up-to-date with news and current affairs

Seen & Use Social Media



ASSESSMENT

All countries had a high proportion of social media users. However, there was an increase in the numbers who use social media for those who had seen and shared COVID-19 disinformation / fake news.

- Except for the UK, people who share COVID-19 disinformation check their social media accounts more regularly than those who did not share.

Therefore, for France, Germany, Italy and Spain, sharers of coronavirus disinformation / fake news spent more time per day checking their social media accounts than non-sharers of COVID-19 disinformation. For example, in France 74% of those who had shared COVID-19 disinformation / fake news checked their social media accounts regularly throughout the day, in comparison only 60% of non-sharers checked their accounts this frequently.

- For all five countries, those who had seen coronavirus disinformation / fake news used social media to stay up to date with news and current affairs more so than those who had not seen COVID-19 disinformation (e.g., Germany = 60% seen vs. 39% not seen).

- In France and Germany the same pattern can be seen for the sharers of COVID-19 disinformation / fake news, where sharers of coronavirus disinformation use social media as a news source more so than non-sharers (France: shared = 53%, not shared = 41%; Germany: shared = 62% vs. not shared = 49%).

For Italy, Spain and UK, sharers and non-sharers of coronavirus disinformation / fake news made equal use of social media as a news source.

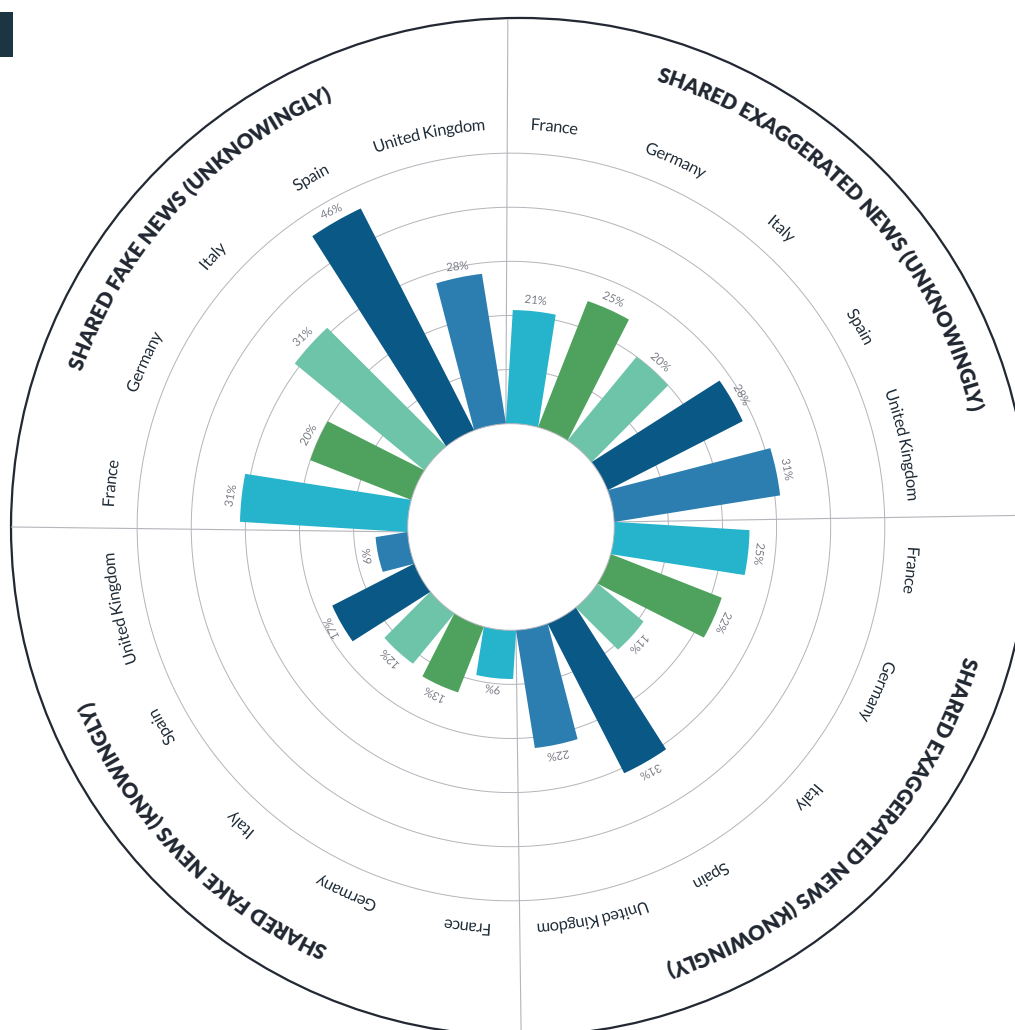
In all 5 countries, those who had seen disinformation / fake news on COVID-19, were more likely to report that they used social media to fill spare time compared to those who had not seen (Italy highest, 41% seen vs. 33% not seen). This finding implies that one unintended consequence of lockdown policies may have been to increase public exposure to disinformation / fake news about COVID-19 as people spend more time online.

For those who reported having seen and/or shared coronavirus disinformation / fake news in each country, a greater proportion reported sharing stories on social media several times per day compared to those who had not seen and/or shared COVID-19 disinformation (Spain highest, seen = 25%, not seen = 14%; shared = 41%, not shared = 18%). Those who have seen and/or shared COVID-19 disinformation and fake news are more prolific sharers of general news on social media than those who have not seen / shared COVID-19 disinformation.

FIGURE 9

Intent and Sharing Disinformation and Fake News on Social Media

Shared



ASSESSMENT

A set of survey questions examined respondents' intent and past sharing behaviours for disinformation / fake news.

- Of those who reported sharing COVID-19 disinformation and fake news, a significant proportion admitted to having previously “unknowingly” shared ‘news’ on social media that seemed accurate at the time of posting but they later discovered was “exaggerated” (UK highest, 31%; Italy lowest, 20%). Thus, a substantial number of individuals across all five countries have previously unintentionally and unknowingly shared disinformation. That is, they did not know that their post content contained disinformation at the time of sharing.

- By contrast, the largest percentage of sharers of coronavirus disinformation and fake news who had previously “knowingly” shared “exaggerated” content (i.e., they knew that their content contained disinformation at the time of sharing) was reported in Spain (31%) compared to the smallest group (11%) in Italy. The data draws attention to the unintentional and intentional nature of disinformation sharing behaviours.

- Focusing on those who have shared COVID-19 disinformation / fake news and report having previously “knowingly” shared “fake news” (i.e., they knew the content was made up at the time of sharing), Spain exhibited the highest rate (17%), followed by Germany (13%), Italy (12%), France (9%) and UK (6%). Thus, the data shows that a significant proportion of each population have previously intentionally shared fake news.

- ‘By contrast, the percentage of sharers of coronavirus disinformation who had previously “unknowingly” shared fake news was higher for all countries. In Spain, 46% of COVID-19 disinformation sharers had previously shared made up content without realising. The smallest group was in Germany (20%). This shows that although some people may intentionally share news on other occasions fake news may be shared unintentionally.

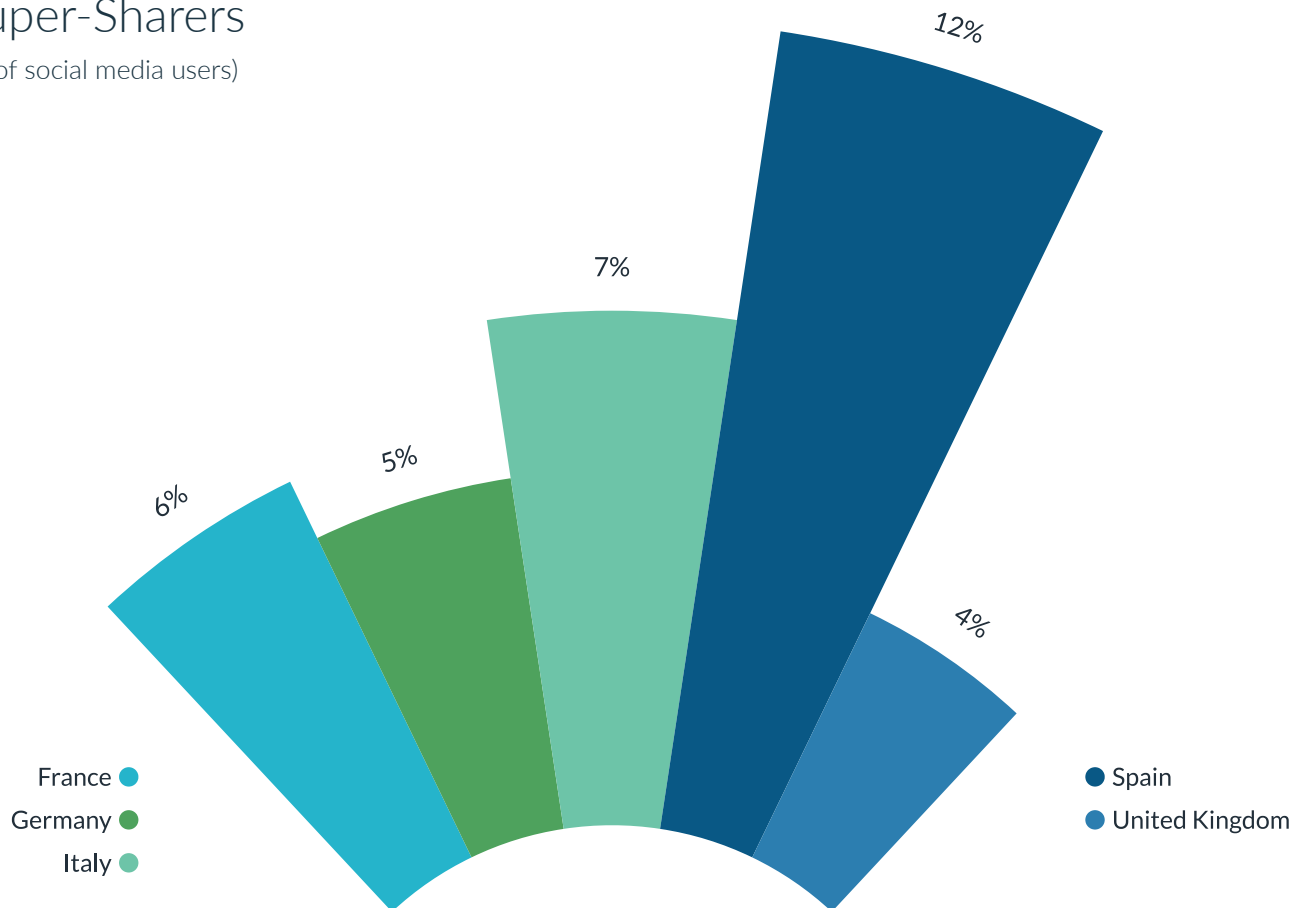
- Interestingly, for all five countries, sharers of COVID-19 disinformation and fake news reported having previously shared more disinformation and fake news compared to non-sharers. That is, regardless of their intent, people who had previously shared disinformation / fake news, were more likely to share COVID-19 disinformation / fake news compared to non-sharers. Thus, the data revealed the existence of groups of super-spreaders of disinformation within each country.

For example, in the UK, 31% of COVID-19 sharers had previously “unknowingly” shared “exaggerated” content compared to 9% of non-sharers, while in France, 25% of COVID-19 sharers had previously “knowingly” shared “exaggerated” content compared with 13% of non-sharers. Additionally, in Spain, 17% of COVID-19 sharers had previously “knowingly” shared “fake news”, compared to 4% of non-sharers. Furthermore, in Germany 20% of sharers had “unknowingly” shared “fake news” compared to just 4% of non-sharers. Thus, COVID-19 sharers share more disinformation and fake news generally than non-sharers, indicating that these behaviours are regularly performed by a segment of social media users.

FIGURE 10

Super-Sharers

(% of social media users)



ASSESSMENT

A small number of social media users appear to be responsible for amplifying and boosting a disproportionate amount of COVID-19 disinformation / fake news messages. We label this group 'super-sharers'. To estimate the proportion of people acting as 'super-sharers' we analysed those respondents who fit all the following criteria, and compared their responses to other groups of respondents;

- Have shared content on social media which turned out to be not completely accurate (either knowingly or unknowingly);
- Share news on social media at least once a day;
- Check their social media accounts everyday across 3 or more platforms;
- Use social media to stay up to date with the news.

We identified 6% of respondents are 'super-sharers' across all 5 countries, with the number varying between different countries. Spain had the highest concentration of 'super-sharers' (12% of social media users), whilst the UK had the lowest (4%). Being a 'super-sharer' was statistically significantly correlated with:

- **Sharing COVID-19 disinformation.** For example, in France (74%) of 'super-sharers' had shared COVID-19 disinformation.
- **Seeing coronavirus related fake news** in France, Germany, Italy and the UK. For example, in Italy 98% of 'super-sharers' had seen COVID-19 disinformation.

- 'Super-sharers' were significantly more likely to be younger, have more strongly held religious beliefs and have fewer years of education.

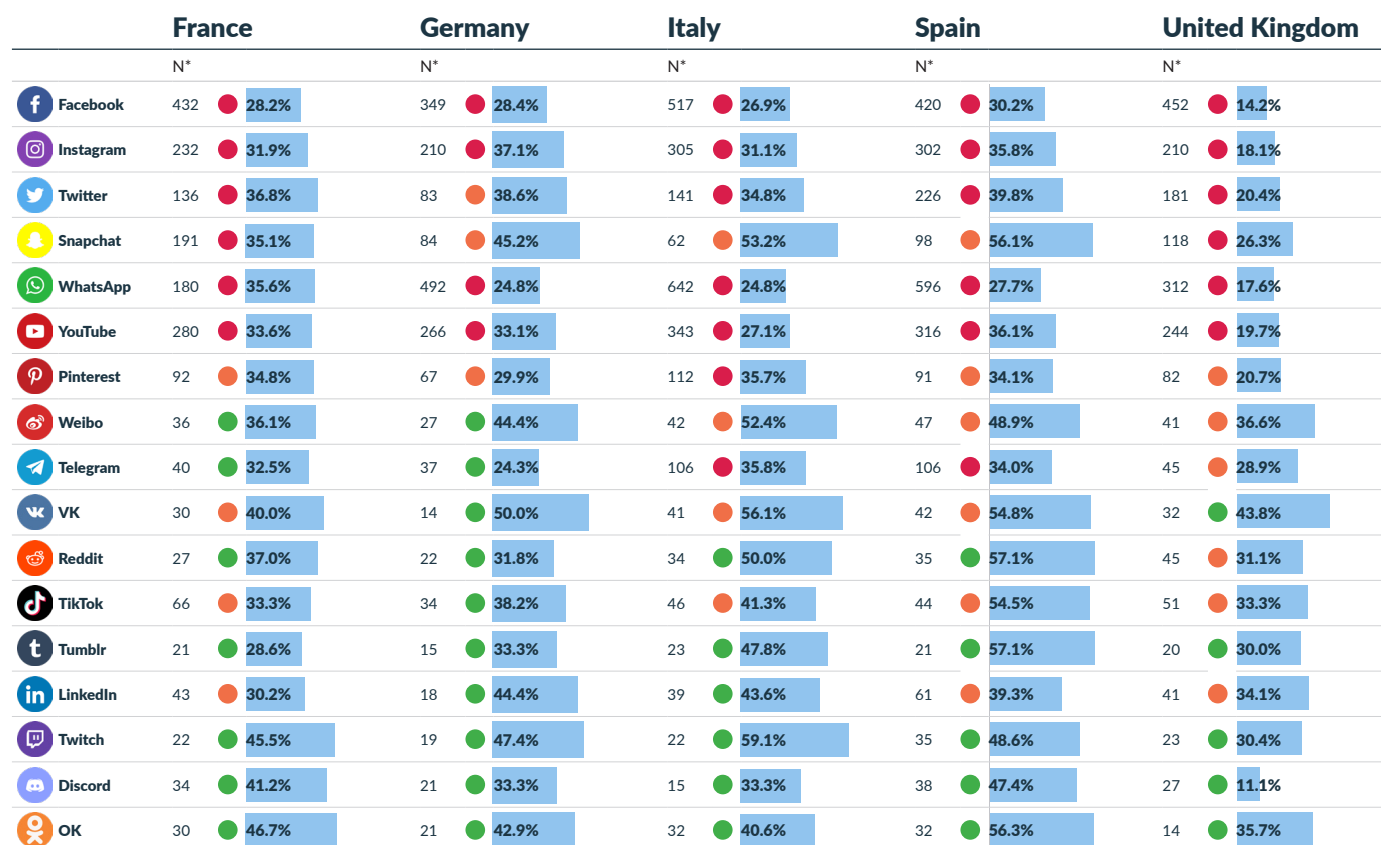
- In Italy and the UK being a 'super-sharer' was significantly associated with holding conspiracy-based views. For example, in the UK 35% of those who were classed as 'super-sharers' strongly believed that 'Government Agencies closely monitor all citizens' compared to just 8% of those who did not meet the 'super-sharer' criteria.

- Furthermore, in France, Italy and the UK 'super-sharers' were significantly more likely to believe that disinformation had a great impact on either health policies (in France), trust in government (Italy), or trust in scientists (UK).

- Spanish 'super-sharers' were more likely to believe that disinformation has little impact on trust in government.

'Super-sharers' tended to be users of more niche social media platforms. For example, in France the highest concentration of 'super-sharers' was on OK (15%). In Germany, Tumblr had the highest concentration of 'super-sharers' (13%). Weibo had the largest percentage of 'super-sharers' in Italy (14%). In both Spain (21%) and the UK (11%) 'super-sharers' were in the highest concentration on the Twitch platform.

FIGURE 11
Platform Usage



High number of users (101+)
 Medium number of users (41-100)
 Low number of users (0-40)
 *N = Number of users

ASSESSMENT

'Niche' (i.e., not Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp) social media users were more likely to share COVID-19 disinformation / fake news compared to everyday users of mainstream platforms. For example, the highest percentage of everyday Facebook users to share COVID-19 disinformation was in Spain (30%), while the highest proportion of overall COVID-19 sharers occurred on Twitch (59%) in Italy.

In all five countries, a greater percentage of everyday users of Instagram and Twitter shared disinformation on COVID-19 compared to everyday users of Facebook. WhatsApp had the

lowest presence of those who had shared COVID-19 fake news of the high use platforms in Spain, Italy and Germany.

- VKontakte consistently scored above 40% across all countries. That is, of those who use VK everyday more than 40% had shared COVID-19 disinformation, with the largest percentage of sharers in Italy (56%). The data also revealed a significant association between VK use and the sharing of COVID-19 disinformation/ fake news. Additionally, in France, Italy and Spain VK users were more likely to believe that disinformation does not influence how people think.

METHODOLOGY

The data reported are derived from a large-scale 12 country survey designed by Cardiff University. The survey uses 53 questions to assess citizens' perceptions, vulnerabilities and resilience to disinformation and fake news. The questions cover a wide range of topics including awareness of and attitudes towards disinformation in the media; domestic and world views; values, attitudes and opinions towards 'wedge' issues; personality traits; social media usage; demographic information. The survey was administered via the Qualtrics online platform from 18th March to the 30th of April 2020.

Approximately 700 people were sampled per country for:

- Bulgaria
- Estonia
- France (n = 721)
- Germany (n = 733)
- Italy (n = 739)
- Latvia
- Lithuania
- Poland
- Serbia
- Spain (n = 724)
- UK (n = 722)
- Ukraine

Sampling quotas were implemented to ensure the representation of age, gender and location (rural vs. urban) for each country. The current report focuses on analysing citizens' responses from five European countries to two dichotomous questions concerning disinformation / fake news and Coronavirus:

- Q1 asks **'During the past month, have you seen any fake news / disinformation about coronavirus?'**
- Q2 poses **'During the past month, have you shared any stories with other people (online or offline) about coronavirus that you thought might have been fake or distorted?'**