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So Emotional? The Role of Emotions for Young Adults' Resilience to Disinformation

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Abstract

The chaotic information environment during (poly)crises, marked by urgency and heightened emotions, complicates truth assessments and provides fertile ground for the proliferation of disinformation. While the role of emotions in shaping disinformation beliefs and sharing is widely acknowledged, there is little empirical evidence on how and under what circumstances emotions impact responses to disinformation. To provide an in-depth understanding, we applied a qualitative study design, conducting 29 semi-structured interviews between November 2022 and April 2023 with young adults in Germany and the Netherlands. Our study outlines the context in which specific emotions arise when individuals encounter potential disinformation, connected behaviors, and the consequences for resilience to disinformation. We find that emotions of positive valence, such as feeling calm and confident, are linked to verification behaviors and can indicate and reinforce resilience to disinformation. Contrary to existing research, we find that emotions of negative valence, such as anger or discontent, can also be signifiers of resilience when accompanied by critical information evaluations. However, the intensity of emotions matters, as strong negative emotions are linked to resignation, distrust in democratic institutions, and disinformation beliefs. Illustrating the interaction between emotions and behaviors when navigating disinformation, our study offers more contextual and nuanced insights into how emotions influence, express, and may strengthen or weaken resilience to disinformation.

Keywords

disinformation; emotion; resilience; young adults

1. Introduction

The potency of disinformation lies in its ability to tap into the power of emotion, triggering affective responses that increase engagement with an issue. Disinformation agents leverage this perfectly, appealing to emotions to spread their often politically motivated messages. Emotional bonds may also explain why (dis-)information is believed along political and ideological lines (Anthony & Moulding, 2019; Lawson & Kakkar, 2022) or how political leaders stay in power despite having been (repeatedly) exposed for lying to their constituents (Marwick, 2018). This places emotions at the heart of not only issues related to disinformation but also polarization and populism. Despite the widely acknowledged role of emotions in shaping disinformation beliefs and sharing, there is a lack of empirical evidence on the underlying mechanisms. Existing research on the influence of emotions, such as anxiety and anger, presents conflicting findings (Oh & Lee, 2019; Weeks, 2015), underscoring the need for a more comprehensive understanding of how and under what circumstances emotions impact responses to disinformation. To address this gap, we apply the concept of resilience. Investigating the role of emotions for resilience enables us to broaden the analytical scope, examining not only the outcome—whether people believe disinformation—but also the process involved, including protective mechanisms.

Resilience processes in humans contain cognitive, behavioral, and emotional components (Shafi et al., 2020). In disinformation research, cognitive and behavioral elements have thus far received the most attention for explaining and preventing disinformation beliefs. Consequently, attempts at increasing resilience predominantly rely on conveying knowledge and skills to detect disinformation, for example, through media literacy or prebunking techniques (Roozenbeek et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2023). These approaches are based on a premise of rationality: Once people can differentiate "correct" from misleading information, they will endorse the former. However, research on the efficacy of and resistance to fact-checking (Bateman & Jackson, 2024; Hameleers, 2024), for example, reveals complexities that challenge this assumption. Even if the premise were accurate, emotions would still command attention, due to their influence on "rational" evaluations, belief-forming, and (re-)actions (Martel et al., 2020). Thus, to advance ongoing debates, it is imperative to understand what people feel when encountering potential disinformation and how this impacts their thoughts and actions. As emotions are highly context-dependent, prior quantitative studies have provided only limited answers.

To provide an in-depth understanding of how emotions shape resilience to disinformation, we employed a qualitative study design, conducting 29 semi-structured interviews with young adults (aged 18–32) in Germany and the Netherlands. Younger people are regarded as more susceptible to disinformation due to their high social media use and the assumption that the skills needed to discern disinformation may still be underdeveloped (Pérez-Escolar et al., 2023; Vissenberg, 2025). To counterbalance these expectations, our study focuses on the realities and daily practices of young adults. Based on day-in-the-life narrations and in situ social media walkthroughs, we investigate participants' expressed emotions when navigating their daily information environments and map connected behaviors and consequences for their resilience to disinformation. Our study illustrates the relationship between emotions of positive and negative valence and resilience, outlines the underlying dynamics, and provides alternative explanations for well-documented phenomena, such as news avoidance.

2. Emotions and Disinformation

The scarce and inconclusive empirical evidence on the influence of emotions on resilience to disinformation could be due to methodological difficulties posed by emotions' fleeting and partly latent nature, being "hard to define, hard to operationalize, hard to measure" (Mercer, 1996, p. 1; see also Bleiker & Hutchison, 2018). Indeed, terminologies and definitions relating to emotions vary significantly, partly due to their conceptual openness and having been operationalized in vastly different contexts within the humanities, behavioral, medical, and computational sciences (Lünenborg & Maier, 2018; van Lange, 2023). Most referred to are affect, feeling, and emotions, which are often used synonymously. However, clarifying distinctions between these concepts is crucial for methodological rigor and the comparability of research results.

Communication and psychological studies predominantly regard affect as pre-cognitive or subconscious underlying moods and energies, which precede feelings and emotions and can direct attention, behavior, and thoughts (Papacharissi, 2014). Through identifying and labeling sensations, affect can transform into feeling. Emotions are a "display of feeling" and are attributed to a more conscious experience and expression, for example, through (body) language (Shouse, 2005). According to this distinction between the three concepts, research methodologies relying on verbalization and non-verbal cues, such as qualitative interviews, can capture emotions and, if articulated, feelings, but not affect (Lehaff, 2022). We, therefore, refer to emotions and feelings in this study.

Emotions and their regulation are recognized as an inextricable part of resilience (Rothstein et al., 2016). We define resilience to disinformation as a process of harnessing resources when encountering disinformation, which supports mitigating potential adverse effects, such as deception or impacts on (mental) health (Bastick, 2021; Kont et al., 2024). We conceptualize disinformation as a hypernym, encompassing a variety of formats, including clickbait, decontextualized or fabricated content, flawed reporting, conspiracy theories, and professionally executed disinformation campaigns, including bots (Kapantai et al., 2021; Marwick, 2018).

In essence, resilience encompasses protective mechanisms that help prevent or reduce harm when faced with adversity (Bracke, 2016; Masten, 2001). As the process of dealing with adversity commonly triggers emotions of negative valence, such as anxiety or anger, emotion regulation is central to resilience (Kay, 2016). Positive emotions, such as optimism, have been shown to promote resilience (Paquette et al., 2023) but have received little attention in the context of resilience to disinformation so far.

Any investigation into the role of emotions for resilience to disinformation ultimately raises questions regarding the relationship between emotions and behaviors. To document young adults' behavior, we apply the concept of tactics, defined as calculated actions in response to challenges (de Certeau, 2005). As resilience manifests and evolves in reactions to challenges, tactics are the most outwardly observable element of the process. Kont et al. (2025) distinguish seven tactics people use to navigate disinformation in their daily lives, as shown in Figure 1.

| Avoiding news |
| Avoiding risky outlets |
| Self-reflective thinking |
| Distinguishing deceptive strategies |
| Seeking nuanced representation |
| Verifying |
| Engaging in conversation |

Figure 1. Taxonomy of tactics to navigate disinformation in order of perceived effort. Source: Kont et al. (2025).

Avoiding news, a well-documented phenomenon (Edgerly, 2022; Tandoc & Kim, 2023), is a comparably low-effort tactic to minimize exposure to disinformation. Avoiding risky outlets entails a certain alertness to the quality of news and is aimed at evading low-quality sources rather than all (hard) news (Wagner & Boczkowski, 2019). Self-reflective thinking refers to critically examining one's limitations, biases, and potential judgment errors when evaluating information. It requires conscious effort and serves as an internal radar for potentially false beliefs. Another tactic is distinguishing deceptive strategies in encountered information, for example, by checking for manipulation in imagery, decontextualized, or omitted information (Swart, 2023). Seeking nuanced representation entails considering various viewpoints, either through conversations or comparing information from different outlets and countries (Cucinelli & Farhan, 2022). Verifying, which includes evaluating the trustworthiness of the information at hand through cross-referencing and checking sources, is more time-consuming (Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022). Engaging in conversation requires the most effort and is applied only when directly confronted with people who share (suspected) disinformation. It is used to understand the logic or motivation behind the counterpart's beliefs, exchange viewpoints, or counter-argue. By connecting tactics with emotions, we aim to understand how people's feelings while navigating potential disinformation influence their actions, and vice versa. Examining these processual dimensions calls for qualitative methods capable of capturing how these dynamics unfold in context.

Existing studies are more outcome-oriented, primarily focusing on the influence of "negative" emotions, such as anxiety or anger, on disinformation beliefs. The topic is mainly explored quantitatively, relying on experiments to measure and manipulate emotions and beliefs in (false) news items or conspiracy theories. Drawing definitive conclusions is challenging as study findings differ significantly. For example, worry and anxiety have been argued to benefit resilience, as they may trigger more in-depth information processing and critical thinking (Kim et al., 2021; Weeks, 2015). However, higher social media use mediated by worry has also been associated with misinformed beliefs (Su, 2021). Anger has been found to increase belief in political misinformation that aligns with one's political identity (Weeks, 2015). Other studies connect all heightened emotions, except for anger (Bago et al., 2022), to increased vulnerability to disinformation (Martel et al., 2020). The results of conspiracy theory belief are less ambiguous, linking it to feelings of threat or exclusion (Jolley et al., 2018). Reducing these feelings of exclusion, for example, through self-affirmation,

has been shown to weaken conspiracy theory endorsement (Poon et al., 2020). This highlights the potential of emotional regulation techniques for interventions, while simultaneously raising questions about the role of "positive" versus "negative" emotions in resilience to disinformation.

Differences in the study context, definitions, and operationalization of concepts may account for some of the conflicting findings observed in the literature. This is symptomatic of a research field in its infancy, lacking theoretical underpinnings and conceptual development. From an epistemological standpoint, the field exhibits dualistic tendencies, positioning emotion in opposition to rational thought. In this rationale, the latter is presumed to be more beneficial for resilience to disinformation. This valorization of rationality is common in the social sciences. While it might explain the lack of research into emotions, it comes with limitations. Firstly, rather than one appearing at the expense of the other, emotion and reason most likely complement each other in evaluations, such as truth assessments (Calhoun, 2001; Mercer, 2010). Secondly, emotion "is not innately irrational but in fact plays an important role in rational behavior and rational thought" (Lehaff, 2022, p. 44). By closely examining people's emotional experiences with (dis-)information and connecting them to specific behaviors and the contexts in which they arise, our study contributes to a more nuanced perspective on emotions and disinformation. To address the research gaps on the role of emotions for resilience to disinformation, this study investigates the following questions:

> RQ1: Which emotions do young adults express when discussing disinformation? RQ2: How do emotions relate to different tactics that users adopt to navigate disinformation?

> RQ3: How does the interplay between emotions and tactics shape young adults' resilience to disinformation?

3. Method

Accuracy in depicting emotions requires methods that reflect complexity and context (Paasonen, 2021). To capture the richness of emotional experiences, we employed a qualitative study design, involving 29 semi-structured interviews. This provided insight into emerging emotions and participants' lived experiences. To compare processes across contexts and identify potential transnational mechanisms, interviews were conducted with young adults (18–32) in Germany ($n = 15$) and the Netherlands ($n = 14$). The two neighboring countries share similar political systems and media landscapes, but differ in their levels of digitalization, citizens' digital skills, and trust in institutions (Edelman, 2025; European Commission, 2025). Particularly the latter two may condition how people respond to disinformation.

Participant recruitment began with snowball sampling at vocational schools and universities and was subsequently complemented by quota sampling to ensure a balanced distribution across age, gender, and educational background (Table 1). Our sample includes young adults from various regions within Germany

Table 1. Sample demographics.

	Age group		Gender		Education		Total
	18–24	25–32	Female	Male	Vocational	Higher	
German	4	11	9	6	10	5	15
Dutch	7	7	7	7	5	9	14

and the Netherlands, and participants' occupations range from students to part-time or full-time employees, freelancers, entrepreneurs, and primary caregivers.

The data were collected by two researchers, one native speaker of German and one native speaker of Dutch, between November 2022 and April 2023. All interviews lasted an average of 60 minutes and were conducted face-to-face, either in person ($n = 8$) or via participants' preferred video conferencing software ($n = 21$). To ensure reliability, we compared the length, content, and depth of online and in-person interviews and found no significant differences. The setting was designed to make participants feel safe sharing experiences, opinions, and emotions openly. Therefore, we used a conversational, informal interview style, emphasizing that participants weren't judged or tested. This proved crucial and, at times, was explicitly addressed by participants: "Um, as you said, you're not judging, so [...]," followed by information that might otherwise have been omitted.

All interviews began with a "day-in-the-life" narration, in which participants shared how they used social and news media on a typical day. Easy to recap, this helped ease participants into the conversation, offering insight into their daily lives, information routines, and (informational) environments. The following section involved an in-situ exploration of media practices, relying on think-aloud and walkthrough methods (Charters, 2003; Ritter, 2022). Participants were prompted to open their social media and news feeds and move through them naturally, describing the encountered content, related thoughts, and actions. This invited participants to describe and reflect on how they access information and their main (trusted) sources in the next step. The last part of the interview focused on participants' interpretations of the term disinformation, their experiences, and their opinions.

We deliberately decided against discussing emotions in a separate section of the interview. Research indicates that normative expectations around news and social media use can distort (young) adults' reflections on their emotions, making them more dismissive or reluctant to discuss those feelings (Lehaff, 2022). Therefore, we opted for a design that also allowed emotions to surface naturally, for example, during the in-situ think-aloud and walkthrough section, when discussing encountered content, (dis-)trusted outlets, and navigating disinformation. Emphasizing, at times repeatedly, the validity of and explicit interest in participants' subjective experiences facilitated sharing how certain situations or encounters made them feel. When responses were ambiguous or required further elaboration, we used follow-up prompts such as "How do/did you feel about...?" or "Does/did that make you feel...?" As studying emotions requires capturing subtleties (Ayata et al., 2019; Gupta, 2023), all interviews were audio-recorded, and, in the case of online interviews, video-recorded with participants' consent. Each interview was transcribed verbatim, noting pauses, laughter, irony, or sarcasm, and accompanied by detailed field notes documenting participant behavior and atmosphere during the interview.

We analyzed the data based on grounded theory with multiple rounds of inductive coding in ATLAS.ti, analyzing the transcripts alongside interview recordings to ensure validity in emotion coding (Saldaña, 2021). Initial coding began with clustering positive, negative, and neutral emotions, which were progressively developed into more detailed codes, such as "angry," "disappointed," or "amused." The codes were refined in an iterative process, moving from exploratory to axial coding. Then, the emergent codes were compared with the categories in the Geneva Affect Label Coder, which is widely used in emotion research (Scherer, 2005). This comparison did not replace our inductive categories, but rather strengthened the analytic rigor

and theoretical sensitivity of our findings by sharpening distinctions between emotions and identifying gaps between theory and data. Inductive codes that do not fit Geneva Affect Label Coder categories, such as feeling "depressed" or "overwhelmed," reveal how participants conceptualize their emotions in ways that challenge or extend existing taxonomies.

As emotions are subjective experiences, complete emotional detachment during data collection and analysis is not only impossible, but potentially counterproductive. Providing space for participants to express their experiences and feelings openly and correctly labeling them requires a certain degree of empathy (Saldaña, 2021; Sauerborn, 2019). To ensure a systematic and reliable approach in our methods and reasoning, we relied on analytical reflexivity and calibration among the research team. Reflective memos on decisions, difficulties, and learnings throughout the research cycle were used to minimize bias and critically examine the interpretative process. To safeguard the participants' anonymity, we use pseudonyms for quotes.

4. Results

The cross-national comparison did not reveal substantial differences regarding expressed emotions, connected behaviors, and consequences for resilience to disinformation between German and Dutch participants. Positive emotions are most often expressed during the social media walkthrough of the interviews, contrary to research tying social media use to negative emotions (Borah et al., 2022; Wu & Pei, 2022). Swiping through their feeds, the young adults find valuable content to learn from, feel inspired and enthusiastic about, making statements such as "really fun to see," "really motivating," and "really valuable." Their reactions suggest that their social media feeds and algorithms are aligned with their preferences and interests, providing a positive experience. When speaking of disinformation and news, negative emotions prevail, as reflected in the following sections, where we differentiate between emotions of neutral or positive and negative valence. Some emotions appeared in clusters, with frequently co-occurring codes, and are consequently presented together.

4.1. Emotions of Positive Valence and Resilience to Disinformation

4.1.1. Calm, Amused, Confident

Whether participants feel a sense of control is decisive for how they (emotionally) experience and deal with encountered (dis-)information. Positive emotions are expressed mainly when describing domains over which they have perceived control. For some, dealing with disinformation belongs to one of those domains. As a result, while being regarded as an issue by all participants, the topic does not necessarily spark negative or intense emotions for everyone. We also find expressions of calm, amusement, and confidence. Accounts of encounters with (potential) disinformation delivered casually or confidently are almost always accompanied by mentions of tactics such as verifying, distinguishing deceptive strategies, and seeking nuanced representation. Especially those with a broad range of tactics and knowledge of evaluating (dis-)information and news do not feel particularly challenged or concerned about themselves.

Emma (27, Netherlands), for example, believes that she encounters disinformation "almost every day, but I just don't let myself be influenced by it." Her steady, confident tone remains as she adds, "Even my dad sometimes sends me a news article or something. And I'm like: How did you even get this? This is a totally

unreliable source." Lisa (20, Netherlands) casually comments on her encounter with disinformation on TikTok with "Yeah, well, I'd rather just look it up myself," followed by an outline of the steps she takes to verify information. Being asked how she decides what to believe, a question many participants struggle to answer, Anna (22, Netherlands) responds calmly, without hesitation, that she is "quite a fact checker," wanting "to know background a lot," "what it [a claim] is based on," and "look at both sides of things."

Knowing what to do allows these three participants to remain unfazed in the face of what causes emotional turmoil in others. While our data do not allow for causal inferences, the pattern of positive emotions and verification behaviors (and knowledge) does suggest that they are related, supporting quantitative research that links efficacy to verification behaviors (Zhu et al., 2025). Having or applying the necessary knowledge and skills to navigate disinformation gives young adults a sense of control, allowing them to approach the issue calmly and confidently.

Where overwhelm and uncertainty drive others towards avoidance tactics, as outlined in the next section, participants who are confident in their ability to discern disinformation often feel amused instead of threatened. They cannot help but laugh recounting narratives as "Corona doesn't exist [laughs]" (Elias, 19, Germany) or the corona vaccine being used to "monitor us...yes, it's crazy [laughs]" (Luise, 21, Germany). In line with existing research (van Prooijen et al., 2022), we find that conspiracy theories specifically have an entertainment value. To such an extent that some participants consume incidentally encountered online disinformation "just shortly," because "well, [it is] a bit funny" (Daniel, 26, Netherlands):

> And a lot of people thought it was Jeff Bezos ending the world [chuckles]....That Covid was a Bill Gates project [laughs]....I don't care if it's true; sometimes, news is funnier when it's false. (Jim, 26, Netherlands)

The young adults' confidence in their truth assessments is, in most cases, well-founded. This self-efficacy, the belief in one's ability to tackle specific challenges, has been shown to promote resilience (Bandura, 1997; Zhu et al., 2025). Thus, positive emotions can indicate and reinforce resilience to disinformation. We do not find any evidence of positive emotions constraining resilience.

4.2. Emotions of Negative Valence and Resilience to Disinformation

4.2.1. Powerless, Overwhelmed, Depressed

Also in relation to negative emotions, perceived control emerges as important. Consistent with existing literature, a lack of control elicits negative emotions, such as feeling overwhelmed or depressed (Atiq & Loui, 2022). The underlying mechanism appears to be the same as the one described in the previous section, albeit operating in reverse. Participants name the negativity and sheer amount of information they have to evaluate and process daily as the leading causes. Swiping through her newsfeed, Lotta (27, Germany) labels it as "toxic," as "it's all about bad news...it's just not good for me." These participants find it difficult to actively follow the news: "All I get is a stomach ache" (Hannes, 30, Germany), it "makes me sad" (Lisa, 20, Netherlands), "the negativity....I don't want to deal with it" (Danielle, 20, Netherlands). The tactic they rely on to prevent unpleasant emotions is avoiding news.

Amelia (25, Germany) illustrates the consequences of (not) having a sense of control over subsequent emotions and actions. Regarding Covid-19 news, she says: "It didn't bother me so much because…it was still somehow something that was in my own hands." A different image emerges when discussing the news coverage of the war in Ukraine. Having Russian roots, Amelia felt not only personally affected but was confronted with conflicting news reports in German versus Russian, leaving her confused and overwhelmed:

> I couldn't sleep at all, called my mum, and cried for ages because it was all such a psychological burden. Um, then I said to myself: I'm not going to inform myself anymore, I don't want to know anything more about it….I've got enough shit to do all day. (Amelia, 25, Germany)

Feeling powerless, overwhelmed, and depressed often appear together and are connected to avoidance tactics.

Our analysis reveals two types of news avoidance, which have different consequences for young adults' resilience to disinformation. One group of participants avoids consuming news throughout their day and instead opts to actively inform themselves, firstly, in fewer selected moments when they have the energy to process information, and secondly, from trusted outlets. Frieda (25, Germany) exemplifies this approach. During the social media walkthrough, she mentions having unfollowed news channels, despite wanting to stay informed. Now, if she wants "to know more" about a topic, she actively seeks out legacy media outlets she trusts and "take[s] a look at it" in selected moments, "rather than seeing it after I've been sleeping or before I go to sleep."

In doing so, the young adults aim to elude unreliable information and minimize the impact of negative headlines, which "can really disturb your well-being" (Frieda, 25, Germany). In terms of resilience, this can be interpreted as having developed protective mechanisms to regulate negative emotions and reduce potential harm when facing a stressor.

The second type of news avoidance, which participants explicitly link to negative emotions, involves avoiding news altogether and remaining passively informed by peers, families, and algorithmically curated social media feeds. Danielle (20, Netherlands) explains it as follows:

> If there is something big, then I just will see it eventually…maybe it [not following the news] is also because if there's something bad going on that I'm sort of stressing about it in a way…with the Coronavirus, like, you see it everywhere….But I didn't really know how it came here and stuff like that.

Why do the same negative emotions result in total news avoidance for some and not others? What appears to differentiate participants like Danielle is difficulty evaluating information. Asked how she decides what information to trust, her response is characterized by frequent longer pauses, self-interruptions, and incomplete utterances. She then admits that "those are really hard questions," that "if you search something on the internet, there are so many pages" with at times contradicting information, making it "very difficult" to know "okay, this is the truth." These difficulties are often accompanied by resignation: "There's no point, so I might as well leave it be" (Sophia, 26, Germany). Confronted with a lack of other coping mechanisms or resources, avoiding news becomes the primary tactic. Whether these participants end up disinformed or not depends heavily on their social and online environments. Socio-cultural resources have been shown to influence the outcomes of tactics such as news avoidance for resilience to disinformation (Kont et al., 2025).

4.2.2. Angry, Discontent, Disappointed

When participants demonstrate anger, discontent, and disappointment in relation to disinformation, it is often directed at mainstream media, which is perceived as biased, one-sided, or profit-driven, and at politics, for not serving the public good. This confirms existing research regarding "wider discontent with the information landscape" (Nielsen & Graves, 2017, p. 1) and youth's dissatisfaction with political institutions (Abdelzadeh et al., 2015). Interestingly, these emotions appear both with critical information evaluation and news avoidance.

It is tempting to adopt a unidirectional view in which people experience a certain emotion and consequently apply tactics to cope with it. Our analysis shows how the process may also work in reverse. Participants' expressions of discontent with the media often appear with arguments based on tactics such as distinguishing deceptive strategies or seeking nuanced representation. Their discontent and anger stem from detecting bias, framing, and profit-driven sensationalism in the news. Referring to a Dutch news outlet, Lisa (20, Netherlands) says that she doesn't "like how they share news," because "it's really clickbait." Reading their articles leaves her wondering, "What was all this fuss about?" pointing towards a disappointing experience. Hannes (30, Germany) finds that "news coverage could be more neutral. It always feels like: This must be your opinion." Scoffing angrily, he adds, "This just makes me want to vomit."

These participants have the knowledge and skills to evaluate media reporting, concluding that it is dissatisfactory. Consequently, their trust in the information or source at hand decreases. This skepticism, in turn, sparks two distinct reactions among the young adults. For most, this serves as motivation to rely more on tactics such as avoiding risky outlets and seeking nuanced representation, which is a constructive mechanism. As being able to identify misleading elements in encountered content helps in discerning disinformation, we interpret these reactions as signifiers of resilience.

The opposite is the case for participants with the strongest expressions of anger and discontent. They all share a comparatively high distrust in politics and media, and either avoid mainstream news altogether or divert to alternative media such as YouTube and closed social media channels. Asked whether she trusts her country's government and media, Klara (30, Germany) replies "not at all," naming Covid-19 news reporting as an example:

> During Covid, where were the other things? Where were the starving children? [raises voice, speaks more rapidly] Where were the tsunamis? Where were the shootings? Where was all that? Was that gone during that time? No, don't bullshit me, it was there. Did anyone inform us about anything? No, they didn't!

To her, the Covid-19-centric political and news agenda during the pandemic shows that neither can be trusted to give a complete picture of reality. Therefore, she would "go to people who are conspiracy theorists" and "ask: Where do you get your information?" or turn to YouTube for people who "really talk about it, give real figures" (Klara, 30, Germany).

Another example that illustrates the origins of heightened negative emotions and the resulting behavior is Finn (29, Germany). Like Klara, he is discontent and angry about news reporting:

> When a foreigner does something, it gets blown out of proportion to such an extent that people form their opinions about such people based on what they see on television....But that shouldn't be the case! And then [speaking more agitated] they're surprised when... (Finn, 29, Germany)

He then concludes: "That's why I'm not interested in it," meaning mainstream media. Sophie (32, Netherlands) notes that the government "should be there to help the people out"; instead, "this is the government [puts her hand up], and lower are the people...mhm [shakes her head] I don't trust it anymore." Therefore, she turns to her friends and "the sites," meaning closed Facebook groups with titles such as "questions about the vaccines." Of the three participants who express the most anger, all believe theories that are conventionally labeled conspiracies. Our data do not indicate a lack of critical thinking skills that impede their ability to discern information, challenging conventional explanations of conspiracy theory beliefs. Instead, we observe a cycle wherein negative emotions, distrust, and disengagement reinforce one another. Existing strong feelings of discontent, anger, and disappointment with the government and media lead to a severe erosion of trust, which in turn results in disengagement and/or a shift to alternative media, thereby further amplifying existing negative emotions and mistrust.

4.2.3. Worried, Confused, Uncertain

Uncertainty is typically defined as an appraisal rather than an emotion. However, in our participants' narratives, it emerged as an important theme and is experienced as emotionally charged. To avoid reducing lived expressions of emotion, we report it alongside accompanying emotions, such as worry and confusion.

In line with existing research (Borah et al., 2022), many young adults in our sample experience uncertainty when determining what information or outlets are trustworthy. Navigating conflicting information, a multitude of sources, and disinformation-prone topics such as Covid-19 and the war in Ukraine leaves them feeling worried and confused. Bram (24, Netherlands) and Mia (26, Germany) verbalize their emotions, saying: "The scary thing is I'm not even sure what I'm disinformed about" and "this uncertainty—how do I know what's right." Others express their confusion and uncertainty more implicitly, for instance, through utterances such as "What is the truth even?" (Emma, 27, Netherlands), or "What can I actually believe?" (Noah, 29, Germany).

Our analysis reveals that these emotions often accompany tactics such as verifying and self-reflective thinking. Here, uncertainty, worry, and doubt arise due to nuanced thinking and awareness of their vulnerability, such as potentially lacking information, being biased, and not wanting to spread disinformation themselves. Just like anger, discontent, and disappointment, this cluster of emotions can spark (the need for) deeper inquiry. At a minimum, it causes participants to postpone their evaluation until they receive more information on the subject. Therefore, worry, confusion, and uncertainty can indicate and benefit resilience to disinformation.

Only intense experiences of worry and uncertainty, often accompanied by feelings of overwhelm or powerlessness, are associated with resignation and disengagement in our sample. Luise (21, Germany), for example, feels "helpless" when navigating disinformation and does not "really know how to deal with it," or how to "even recognize it, because it's quite difficult." She concludes: "I don't feel that I can even develop the expertise for that." These struggles are a recurring theme in her interview, and her case exemplifies how intense feelings of overwhelm and uncertainty lead to resignation. Luise has given up even trying to develop

her skills and knowledge. Sophia (26, Germany) also finds it "really difficult to assess anything at all," in this case regarding news reporting on Ukraine. Her uncertainty and confusion originate from the realization that for some of the legacy outlets she previously trusted, "it has now become apparent over the last few years that what they tell you isn't always true" (Sophia, 26, Germany). Having to constantly ask herself "Is it true, is it not true?" makes her wonder whether she should "even listen to it [legacy outlets] anymore" (Sophia, 26, Germany). Thus, she disengages and directs her attention to other things than staying informed.

Resignation and disengagement can be read as expressions of resilience, a way of protecting one's well-being and enduring the unchangeable when active resistance is futile. In this case, however, the strong negative emotions appear to result from difficulties in assessing the credibility of the (dis-)information. Additionally, although these emotions do not necessarily lead young adults to believe disinformation, they seem to impact their mental well-being. As our definition of resilience encompasses the potential adverse effects of disinformation on mental health, we conclude that strong feelings of uncertainty and overwhelm can indicate lower resilience to disinformation.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study explores the role of emotions in young adults' resilience to disinformation. Our inductive, in-depth analysis carefully examines the contexts in which specific emotions arise and delineates the subtle differences not only across but also within clusters of emotions and behaviors. This enables us to identify the circumstances under which certain emotions reinforce and indicate (a lack of) resilience to disinformation. By foregrounding process, our study advances discussions beyond established emotion–reason dualisms, broadens the emotional range under consideration, and complements outcome-focused perspectives in the field.

Addressing RQ1, we find that young adults express a range of emotions when discussing disinformation, which can be divided into four clusters: calm, amused, confident; powerless, overwhelmed, depressed; angry, discontent, disappointed; worried, confused, uncertain. These clusters of emotions are associated with specific behaviors. Responding to RQ2, our findings indicate that positive emotions are accompanied by mentions of tactics such as verifying and distinguishing deceptive strategies. Feeling powerless, overwhelmed, and depressed appears with news avoidance, confirming prior research results (Tandoc & Kim, 2023; Toff & Palmer, 2019). Anger, discontent, and disappointment emerge with tactics such as distinguishing deceptive strategies and seeking nuanced representation or avoiding news and turning towards alternative media. Similarly, expressions of worry, confusion, and uncertainty are linked to self-reflective thinking and verifying, as well as disengagement.

What do these patterns reveal about the role of emotions for young adults' resilience to disinformation (RQ3)? Firstly, they show how emotions can not only impact but also indicate resilience. For example, participants who can rely on a broad range of tactics to navigate disinformation, such as verifying and distinguishing deceptive strategies, feel calm, confident, or even amused when facing (potential) disinformation. This affirms the importance of literacy initiatives and provides an alternative explanation for the entertainment value of, for example, conspiracy theories (van Prooijen et al., 2022). As these positive emotions are rooted in having the skills and knowledge to detect disinformation, we interpret them as signifiers of resilience. In scholarly discourse, emotions are often implicitly approached as factors

contributing to disinformation beliefs, best minimized not to impede rational assessments of information (Bago et al., 2022; Martel et al., 2020). Our findings offer an alternative perspective, viewing them as an integral part of resilience processes.

Secondly, our data suggest a reciprocal process between emotions, cognition, and behavior, showing how these can reinforce one another. For example, uncertainty among participants arises through self-reflective thinking and the ability to verify information, which alerts them to limitations in encountered content and their own abilities. Confirming existing research, we find that this uncertainty can then spark a deeper inquiry and critical thinking, leading to the employment of more tactics, such as seeking nuanced or reliable information (Tulin et al., 2025; Weeks, 2015). Thus, in the process of developing and expressing resilience to disinformation, emotional responses shape and are shaped by behavior and knowledge. Identifying a reciprocal process advances the theorization of resilience to disinformation and has implications for existing and future empirical research, as it highlights the limitations of practical but reductionist linear approaches.

Thirdly, our findings on the role of negative emotions also warrant a more nuanced interpretation. Considering the potential of positive emotions for resilience, it may be tempting to assume the opposite holds for negative emotions. However, in our sample, expressions of anger and discontent indicate participants' critical thinking and ability to identify flaws in news reporting. Similarly, uncertainty does not necessarily indicate a lack of knowledge, but rather the opposite: Participants are knowledgeable and reflective enough to realize how much they do not know. The moderate negative emotions they experience spark proactive approaches, such as seeking more nuanced information and carefully considering what to believe, ultimately benefiting their resilience to disinformation. Building on existing research (Su, 2021), we assume that these proactive approaches, which lead to exposure to diverse opinions, further help regulate negative emotions such as worry. The findings may also offer an alternative explanation for the growing discontent among young people with the media and politics (Abdelzadeh et al., 2015; Nielsen & Graves, 2017). Our participants are mostly well aware, for example, of the monetary-driven incentives in the media and their impact on the over- and underrepresentation of specific topics. In fact, our evidence suggests that some tactics aimed at attracting readers' attention not only harm the media's reputation but also prompt discontent and disengagement among young adults.

Lastly, we find that the intensity of experienced negative emotions matters. The same feelings that can spark constructive tactics to navigate a polluted information environment can lead to disengagement when felt at an extreme. It appears that the more intense the feelings of uncertainty, discontent, or anger, the more likely participants are to disengage or turn towards alternative sources of information. This might explain why anxiety, worry, or anger have been linked to critical thinking and in-depth processing in some studies, and partisan processing and disinformed beliefs in others (Bago et al., 2022; Weeks, 2015). We find that intense negative emotions can indicate a lack of tactics and knowledge to navigate a polluted information environment, and thus lower resilience to disinformation. These results may help explain existing quantitative studies, which link heightened emotions and alternative media use to increased vulnerability to disinformation (Humprecht et al., 2023; Martel et al., 2020). They are also symptomatic of an erosion of trust in governmental and media institutions, as observed in many countries (Edelman, 2025). Overall, the resilience processes of German and Dutch participants appear consistent across contexts, suggesting similar underlying mechanisms.

Studying emotions, the "least tangible part of our activities" (Williams, 1961, p. 64), entails certain empirical challenges. Subconscious processes aside, it is safe to assume that not all the emotions at play were expressed or verbalized during the interviews. Given the subjective nature of emotions, we cannot entirely rule out a certain degree of subjectivity in interpreting and coding emotions, despite taking countermeasures. It should also be noted that the structured clusters we presented may be more fluid and diffuse in practice.

Our findings offer multiple pathways for future research. Studies in different national contexts would help determine whether the patterns and mechanisms identified here are indeed transnational, as our cross-national comparison suggests. Experiments testing the effectiveness of interventions, such as fact-checking, could benefit from incorporating emotional dimensions. These studies typically examine the impact of format, source, or text on the acceptance of corrections. However, how (strongly) participants feel about a topic might explain variations in results.

With this study, we hope to also contribute to improving educational and literacy initiatives. Considering emotional aspects, such as the potential of positive emotions for resilience, alongside the traditional focus on conveying knowledge and skills, may enhance their impact by boosting perceived control and self-efficacy. These factors have been shown to improve resilience to disinformation in previous research (Paquette et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2025). As today's information environment causes overwhelm, confusion, and powerlessness in many young adults, explicitly addressing how to approach and regulate these emotions may go a long way in increasing their resilience.

A state of (poly)crisis affects, demands, and fosters resilience. Efforts to enhance resilience depend on a nuanced understanding of the concept itself. Our research advances the theoretical understanding of the concept within the context of disinformation, highlighting the importance of emotions. By revealing the underlying dynamics at play, we show how resilience to disinformation is enacted in people's daily lives.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The interview data are not publicly available due to privacy concerns.

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