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OPEN SOURCE COMMUNICATIONS, ANALYTICS RESEARCH

Survey of UK Public's Exposure to and Sharing of Coronavirus Disinformation and Fake News

Summary Findings

■ 722 UK citizens were surveyed about disinformation and fake news related to coronavirus between 21st March – 5th April 2020 using the Qualtrics online platform (survey design details are contained in the Methodology).

■ 51% of those surveyed reported seeing disinformation / fake news about coronavirus in the last month. This confirms just how widespread the problem is.

■ These respondents were 'disinformation aware'. Of concern is that, given how widespread COVID-19 disinformation and fake news is, within the remaining 49% of citizens are likely to be large numbers of people who are not picking up that they are being exposed to false and misleading messages.

■ 12% of those questioned said they had shared disinformation / fake news about coronavirus with others (online and/or offline) in the last month.

■ People who had seen and/or shared coronavirus disinformation / fake news tended to be younger, have fewer years of formal education and were more likely to identify as a minority.

■ 42% of sharers of fake news self-identified as having central political views, while 35% held right-of-centre and 22% held left-of-centre political views.

■ Respondents who had seen coronavirus disinformation / fake news were also more likely to report having seen more disinformation about other topics.

■ People seeing and sharing coronavirus disinformation / fake news stories are more likely to engage in fact checking behaviour.

■ Individuals reporting seeing higher levels of disinformation about COVID-19 are more politically engaged and are more likely to share political stories with their social networks on social media every day.

■ While over half of the sample agreed that 'the government does what is right', more viewers of coronavirus disinformation / fake news stories disagreed with this statement, potentially indicating an impact of coronavirus disinformation and fake news content.

■ Respondents who had seen COVID-19 disinformation / fake news perceive it to be more impactful on citizens' trust in government than those who have not seen the stories.
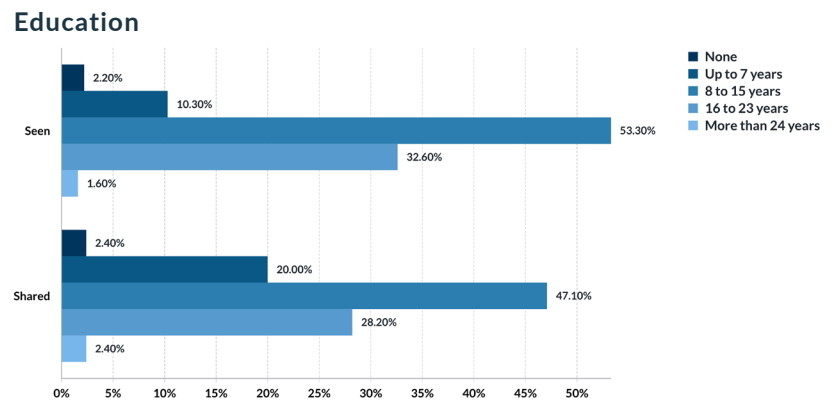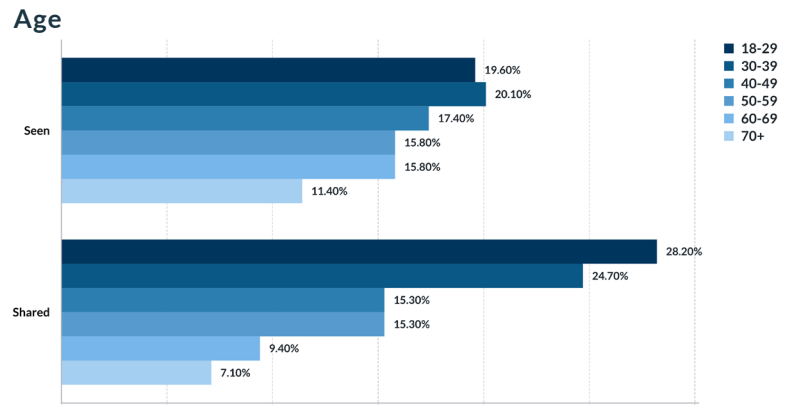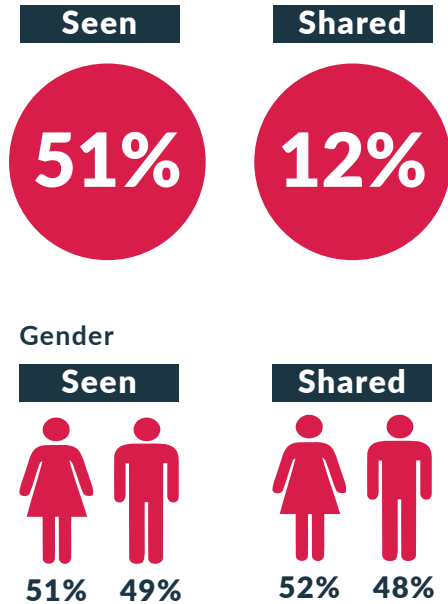
■ Seeing and sharing disinformation / fake news about coronavirus was associated with believing that disinformation had an impact "to a great extent" on trust in scientists and experts.

■ Everyday users of niche social media platforms (such as VK, Weibo & Tumblr) have a higher relative percentage of sharers of COVID-19 disinformation than everyday users of mainstream social media platforms. This suggests that efforts to stop the spread of such stories need to extend beyond the current focus upon Twitter and Facebook.

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FIGURE 1

Who sees and shares coronavirus disinformation / fake news?

During the past month, have you seen or shared any fake news / disinformation about coronavirus?

Seen

51%

Shared

12%

Gender

Seen

51%   49%

Shared

52%   48%

Age

Legend: 18-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60-69, 70+

Seen:
- 19.60%
- 20.10%
- 17.40%
- 15.80%
- 15.80%
- 11.40%

Shared:
- 28.20%
- 24.70%
- 15.30%
- 15.30%
- 9.40%
- 7.10%

Education

Legend: None, Up to 7 years, 8 to 15 years, 16 to 23 years, More than 24 years

Seen:
- 2.20%
- 10.30%
- 53.30%
- 32.60%
- 1.60%

Shared:
- 2.40%
- 20.00%
- 47.10%
- 28.20%
- 2.40%

0% 5% 10% 15% 20% 25% 30% 35% 40% 45% 50%

ASSESSMENT

Over half (51%) of all respondents reported they have seen disinformation and/or fake news concerning coronavirus in the past month. This provides a clear indication of just how widespread this problem has become and the extent of public concern about it. 12% of the sample disclosed that they have shared disinformation (either intentionally or unintentionally) with others concerning coronavirus during the past month. These patterns were equally distributed amongst women and men.

• Younger people (aged 18-39) were slightly more likely to report having seen coronavirus related disinformation.

• Similarly, with sharing behaviour: 28% of those who shared disinformation were aged between 18-29 years of age; 25% were aged between 30-39; just 7.1% were over the age of 70.

The data revealed a slight skew regarding time spent in formal education and the reported sharing of fake or distorted coronavirus stories. 69% of those who had shared coronavirus disinformation had less than 15 years of formal education, and within this group, 20% had received only 7 years of formal education.

By contrast, of those who had not shared coronavirus disinformation, 88% of individuals had received between 8 and 23 years of formal education, thus indicating a tentative link between education and sharing behaviour. Sample members who identify as belonging to a minority group were more likely to have seen (70%) and shared (25%) disinformation on coronavirus compared with non-minorities (seen = 49%, shared = 10%).

FIGURE 2

Political Orientation

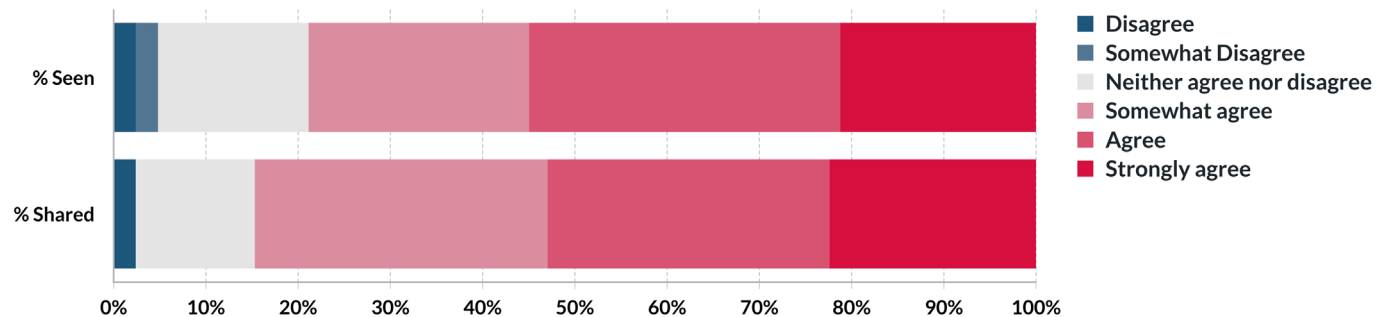Legend: Left, Centre, Right

Seen / Shared bar chart (0% to 100%)
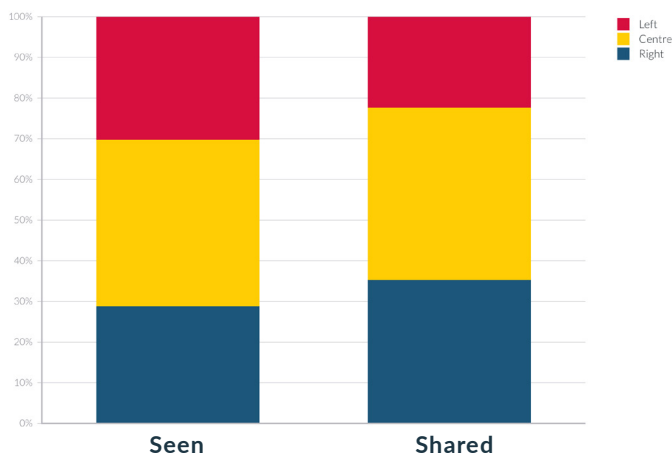
ASSESSMENT

While the data reveals no difference between the political orientation of sample members who saw disinformation and fake news on coronavirus (left-orientation = 30%, right-orientation = 29%), the greatest proportion of those who shared coronavirus disinformation and fake news identify with a centre political orientation (42%), followed by a right-of-centre political orientation (35%), with the smallest group of sharers self-identifying with a left-of-centre political orientation (22%)

FIGURE 3

Perceived Prevalence of Disinformation

During the past month, have you seen or shared any stories with other people (online or offline) about coronavirus that you thought might have been fake or distorted?

Legend:
- Disagree
- Somewhat Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat agree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

ASSESSMENT

One survey question asked respondents to consider if they encounter disinformation online more regularly now than in the past.

Considering these responses through the lens of the coronavirus questions, the data shows:

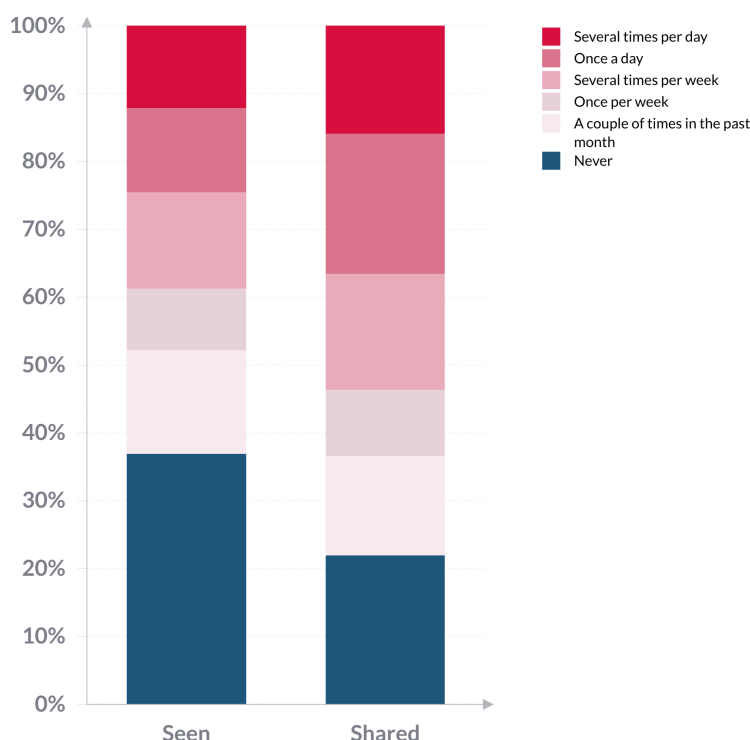• 79% of those who had seen disinformation on coronavirus agreed that they see disinformation more regularly now than in the past, compared to 38% who had not seen any coronavirus disinformation.

• This pattern is also replicated for the data regarding those who shared disinformation on coronavirus, where 85% of sharers agree that they see disinformation more regularly, compared to 56% who had not shared any coronavirus stories.

FIGURE 4

Fact-Checking and Political Activity on Social Media

Some people like to share news about politics on social media. During the last month, how often did you share news on social media?

Legend:
- Several times per day
- Once a day
- Several times per week
- Once per week
- A couple of times in the past month
- Never

ASSESSMENT

Respondents who said they had seen and shared disinformation and fake news about coronavirus were more likely to engage in frequent fact checking behaviour (viewed = 32%, shared = 32%), compared with those who had not seen or shared any coronavirus stories (not viewed = 14%, not shared = 22%). These findings imply that a proportion (at most about 1/3) of those sharing disinformation may have been doing so to help de-bunk the material. However, the majority of sharing may serve to propagate the distorting and deceptive information.

Of those respondents who use social media and had shared fake coronavirus news:

• 37% reported that they share news about politics on social media accounts every day;

• This compares with 16% high political news sharers who had not seen any dubious stories on coronavirus.

Overall, those who had seen and shared coronavirus disinformation, shared more content generally than those who had not seen or shared coronavirus disinformation.

FIGURE 5

Trust in Government

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**
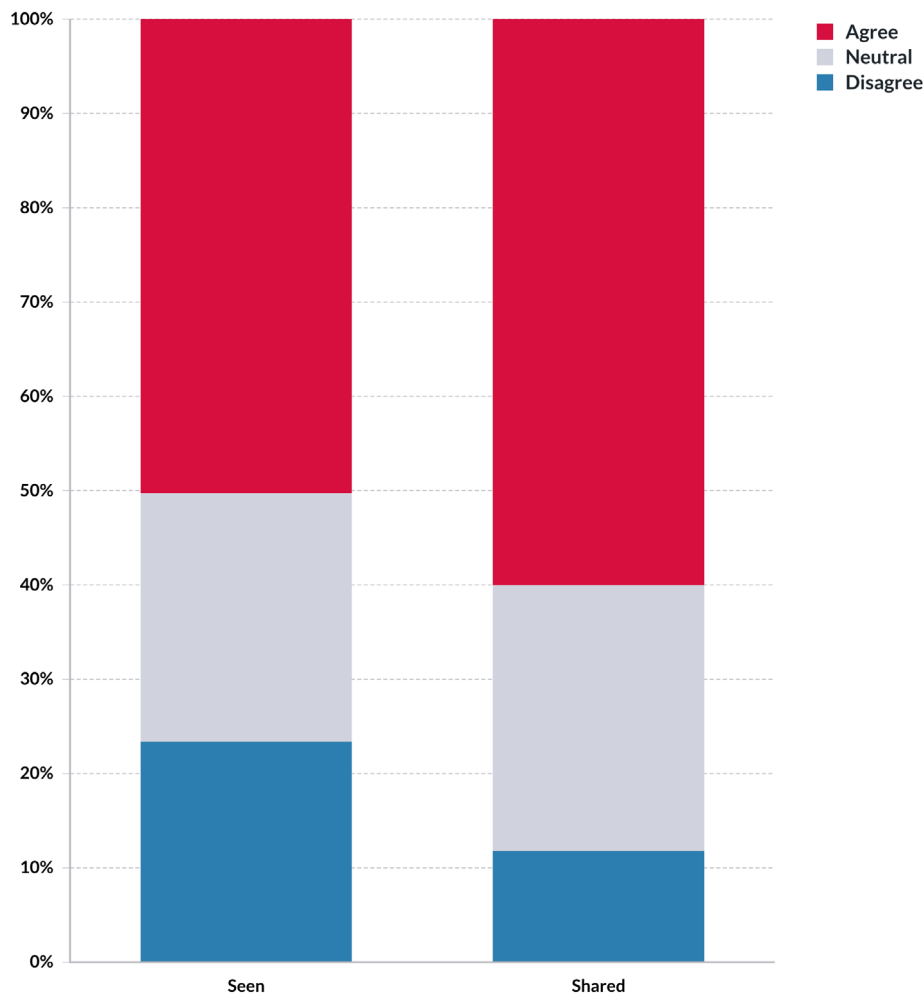
ASSESSMENT

At least half of the sample agreed with the statement 'I believe the government does what is right' regardless of whether they had seen (50%), not seen (58%), had shared (60%), or not shared (53%) coronavirus disinformation and fake news. Interestingly, those who had shared COVID-19 disinformation exhibited a comparably high level of agreement with the statement in comparison to those who had not seen any coronavirus disinformation and fake news. This finding might tap into the motives of why people share disinformation - to propagate or debunk. Additionally, the data revealed a notable difference between persons who disagreed with the statement.

• 23% of those who have seen COVID-19 disinformation exhibited a greater level of disagreement with the statement 'I believe that the government does what is right', compared to 13% of those who had not viewed coronavirus disinformation and fake news.
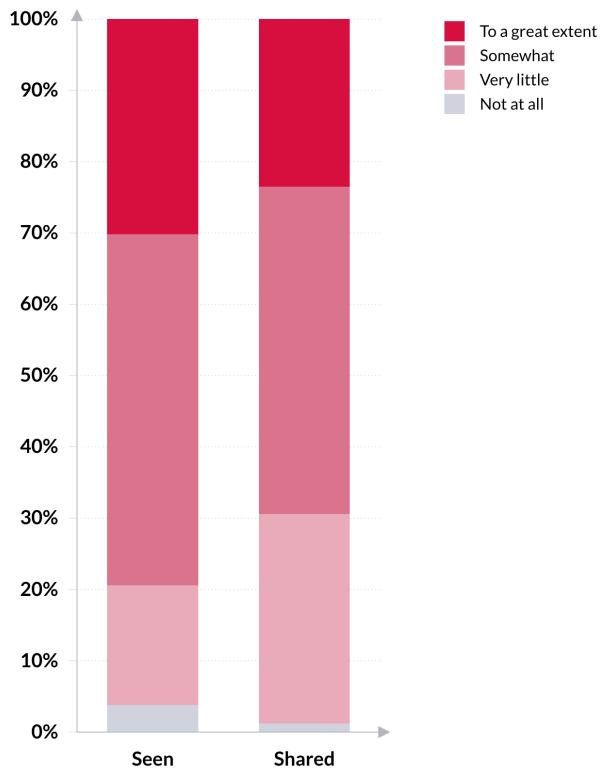
This finding suggests that the content of coronavirus related disinformation and fake news may impact a segment of UK citizens' trust in the government.

Perception of the Effect of General Disinformation

FIGURE 6

Effect of Disinformation on Trust in Government

To what extent do you think disinformation affects trust in government in your country?

ASSESSMENT

The survey asked, "to what extent do you think disinformation affects trust in government in your country". Of those who had seen coronavirus disinformation and fake news:

• 30% believed it had an impact to a great extent. In comparison to those who had not seen COVID-19 disinformation, only 16% believed that disinformation impacts trust in government to a great extent.

Thus, those who have seen COVID-19 disinformation and fake news perceive it to be more impactful than those who have not seen the stories, suggesting that the content of the seen and shared disinformation has some influence upon individuals' perceptions of the effect of disinformation on trust in government.
While the data showed an almost equal percentage of sharers (24%) and non-sharers (23%) of coronavirus disinformation and fake news who believe that disinformation affects trust in government to a 'great extent', differences can be seen in those who disagree with this statement:

• 29% of sharers of coronavirus disinformation believe that disinformation has 'very little' impact on citizens' trust in their government, compared to 17.1% of non-sharers.

This group of sharing respondents is interesting because they do not believe that sharing has any real impact.

FIGURE 7

Effect of Disinformation on Trust in Scientists and Experts

To what extent do you think that disinformation affects trust in scientists and experts?
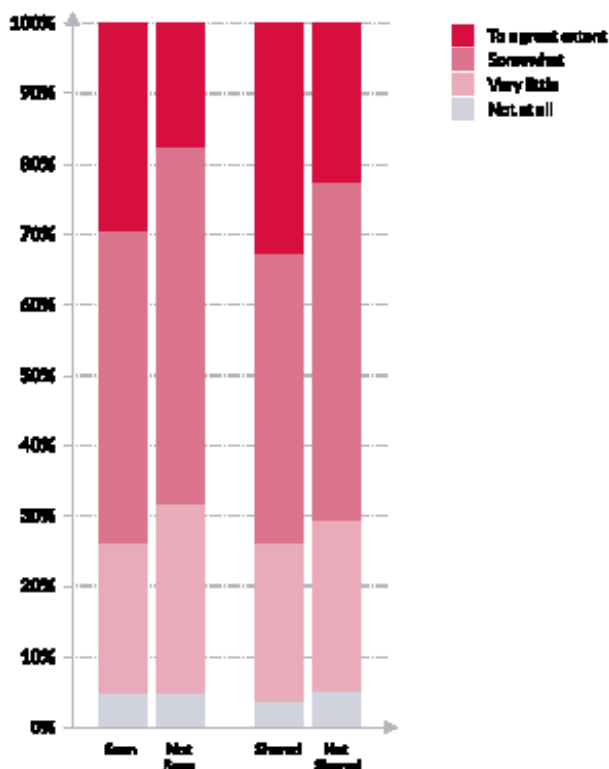
ASSESSMENT

Respondents who had seen and shared disinformation and fake news about coronavirus were more likely to believe that disinformation had an impact "to a great extent" on trust in scientists and experts:

• Seen = 30%, shared = 33%, compared with those who had not seen or shared any coronavirus stories (not seen = 18%, not shared = 23%).

This suggests that the content of the seen and shared disinformation and fake news impacts individuals' perceptions of the impact of disinformation on the trustworthiness of the scientific community.
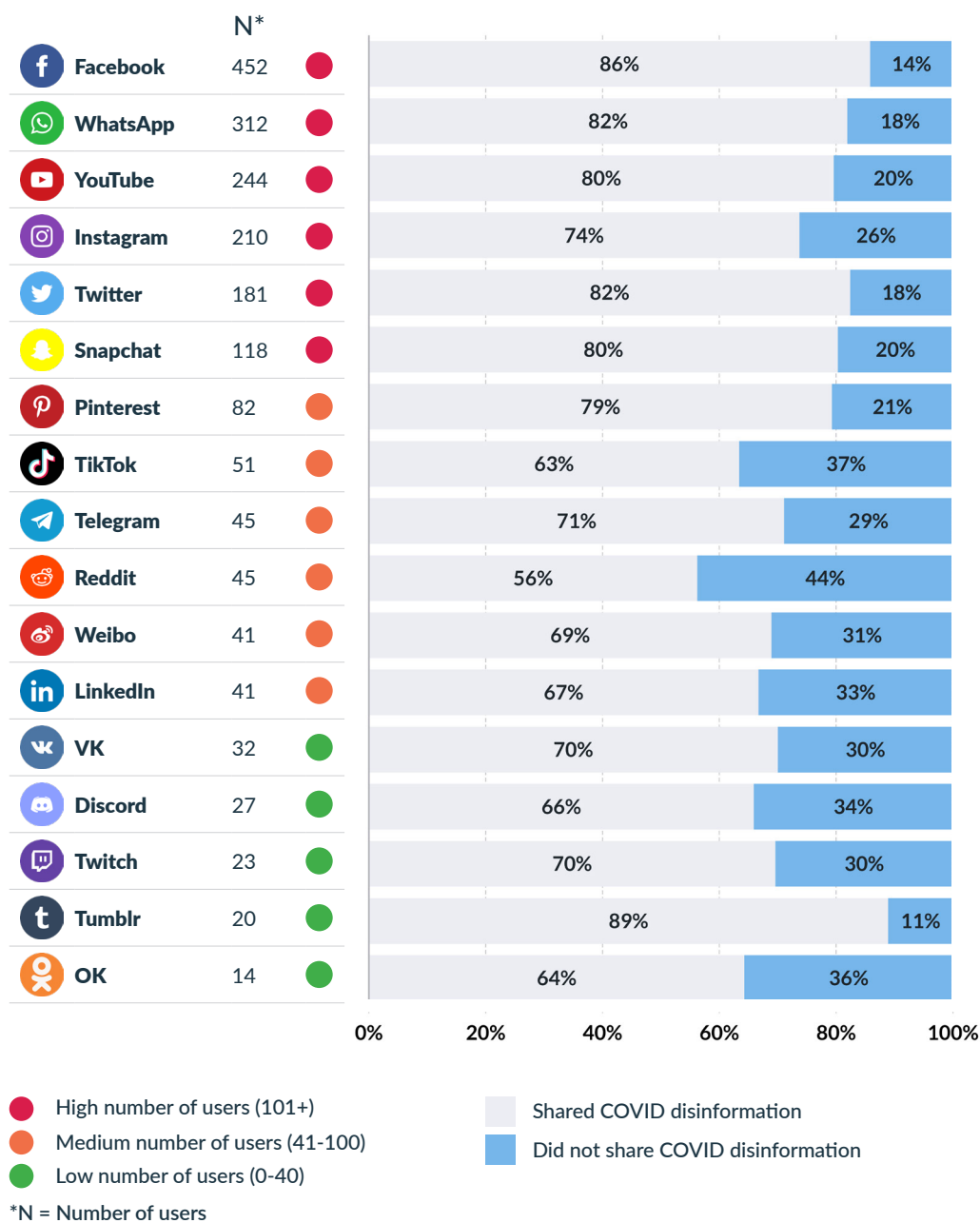
FIGURE 8
Platform usage

ASSESSMENT

Survey participants classified 17 mainstream and niche social media platforms according to their usage of these (5 groups ranging from every day, to never/no longer use). Akin to individuals' natural usage of platforms, respondents were able to classify multiple platforms under a single usage condition (i.e. used every day). Figure 8 shows the breakdown of everyday users per platform by whether they had shared coronavirus disinformation or fake news. Interestingly, individuals who use niche social media platforms every day (e.g., Weibo, Tumblr), proportionally shared more COVID-19 disinformation compared to everyday users of mainstream social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Whatsapp, Instagram).

- 44% of everyday VK users;
- 37% of everyday Weibo users;
- 36% of everyday OK users;
- 34% of everyday Linked-In users;
- and 33% of everyday TikTok users.

These percentages are proportionally greater than those of major platforms wherein 14% of everyday Facebook users, 18% of everyday Instagram users and 20% of everyday Twitter users, reported that they had shared some form of disinformation regarding coronavirus. This pattern is potentially important because, whilst the sample sizes for these individual groups are small, the survey results suggest a lot of sharing of coronavirus disinformation may be occurring on non-mainstream or embryonic platforms. This behaviour might be underpinned by perceived audience receptiveness and perceived lower levels of site policing. Either way, it suggests that the current political and public focus almost exclusively upon Twitter and Facebook, may be overly simplistic.

Platform	N*	User level	Shared COVID disinformation	Did not share COVID disinformation
Facebook	452	High	86%	14%
WhatsApp	312	High	82%	18%
YouTube	244	High	80%	20%
Instagram	210	High	74%	26%
Twitter	181	High	82%	18%
Snapchat	118	High	80%	20%
Pinterest	82	Medium	79%	21%
TikTok	51	Medium	63%	37%
Telegram	45	Medium	71%	29%
Reddit	45	Medium	56%	44%
Weibo	41	Medium	69%	31%
LinkedIn	41	Medium	67%	33%
VK	32	Low	70%	30%
Discord	27	Low	66%	34%
Twitch	23	Low	70%	30%
Tumblr	20	Low	89%	11%
OK	14	Low	64%	36%

- ● High number of users (101+)
- ● Medium number of users (41-100)
- ● Low number of users (0-40)

- ▢ Shared COVID disinformation
- ▢ Did not share COVID disinformation

*N = Number of users

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 a wide range of cover 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 21st March to the 5th of April 2020.

Approximately 700 people were sampled per country for:

- Bulgaria
- Estonia
- France
- Germany
- Italy
- Latvia
- Lithuania
- Poland
- Serbia
- Spain
- 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 responses from UK sample members 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?'**