

Sounds Like MLM, But OK:
Evaluating the Utility and Credibility of Information
Encountered in a Facebook Interest Group

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents	1
Introduction.....	2
Literature Review.....	3
Williamson’s Ecological Model of Information Use	4
Motivation for and Reception of Information Sharing	4
Personal & Environmental Factors	5
Evaluation of Trustworthiness	6
Methodology	6
Methods	7
Survey Structure & Procedure	8
Data Analysis	10
Validity and Reliability.....	10
Results.....	11
Participant Profile	11
Information Use Behaviours	13
Evaluating Credibility	14
Evaluation of Simulated Posts	15
Discussion	17
Effect of Personal Characteristics on Information Behaviour	18
Effect of Values on Perceptions of Credibility	18
Conclusions.....	19
Limitations	20
Future Research	21
Acknowledgements.....	22
References.....	23
Appendix A: Consent Form	25
Appendix B: Survey.....	27
Appendix C: Sample Qualitative Data Analysis.....	33

INTRODUCTION

Human information behaviour (HIB) is a broad field that considers the many ways in which people interact with information. HIB is typically considered in terms of three key phases: A person discovers that they have an information need, they seek out or search for information, and then they use the information. Phases one and two, information need and information seeking, are both well-studied phenomena within the HIB literature. Less studied is how people use information. This stems in part from how difficult it can be to measure information use, particularly when examining how individuals take information from the digital world and apply it to their real-world lives.

This project seeks to contribute to the body of work on how individuals use information that they find online in their everyday lives. More specifically, this project examines how individuals use information that they either actively seek out or serendipitously encounter while using Facebook. Facebook groups are useful to study because they are composed of a self-selected group of individuals who are not only interested in a topic but engaged enough to seek out and join a dedicated community.

The target population for this project is the membership of the Facebook interest group *Sounds like MLM but OK* (hereafter SLMLMBOK, the group's preferred acronym). SLMLMBOK is a large group of more than 163,000 members as of 8 April 2020 (Sounds like MLM but OK, n.d.). Its membership includes former distributors for multi-level marketing companies (MLMs) as well as those with friends and family who are distributors and those without personal ties to MLMs.

More colloquially known as pyramid schemes, MLMs sell products and services through person-to-person sales. The sellers for MLMs are generally known as distributors or consultants. These distributors often have to purchase product up front for later re-sale. It is commonly feasible for them to make a commission only through recruiting others, not through selling – in contrast to what MLM companies portray. Most people involved in MLMs will lose money (Federal Trade Commission, 2019).

SLMLMBOK functions as a safe, anti-MLM space. Many former distributors have joined the group and found it gratifying to share their experiences with others. Some members have never sold for an MLM but have friends or family members involved. Because involvement in an MLM

can be quite damaging for personal relationships, these members sometimes come to the group to blow off steam or to find resources to prepare them for interventions with their loved ones. Others join the group out of general interest in the subject, or simply because they have gotten one too many cold pitches from strangers asking them to try out “that crazy wrap thing.”

The information landscape of SLMLMBOK is rich and diverse. Members frequently share news articles and personal stories about their time working for MLMs. They also provide support for members who are considering leaving an MLM or who have recently left. Some post asking for advice on how to talk to their former “upline,” the person who initially recruited them to the MLM who may still be involved. More lighthearted content is also shared, including memes and videos that poke fun at MLMs and MLM leadership.

SLMLMBOK is an active group with many new posts and comments every day, meaning that there is a lot of opportunity for members to encounter, and therefore potentially use, the information they find. I have personally seen many comments from other members of the group indicating that they have used resources that they have learned of from the group as fodder for having conversations with others and changing their purchasing habits. The size, frequency of activity, and subject matter of the group made it an ideal match for a project of this scope.

In addition to information use behaviour, this study also seeks to understand what factors individuals take into consideration when they evaluate if information is credible or trustworthy. Previous research (Jin, Phua, & Lee, 2015) indicates that the popularity of the content, the identity of the content sharer, and the content of the message make the most impact in decisions about credibility. Building upon extant research, this project asks what impact the information sharer or news source plays in how people incorporate information into their real-world lives.

These two themes will be examined using the ecological method of information use (Williamson, 1998), focusing specifically on the impact that personal characteristics and values have on information use behaviour and perceptions of credibility.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on information use is comparatively less plentiful than research on information need and information search behaviours, but there does exist a body of literature that grounds this project conceptually and provides structure for its implementation.

The SLMLMBOK Facebook group has a complex information landscape. Members routinely engage in knowledge sharing behaviours like posting news articles, telling personal stories, and giving advice. They also share memes, post jokes developed within and specific to the group, and provide support to other members. Upwards of 20 posts are made by members each day, and most generate at least a few comments. Many will spark long discussions that span hundreds of comments. SLMLMBOK is not a unique group in its level of activity and the complexity of its in-group social dynamics, but it does provide an interesting grounds for study because its members are so motivated to share their experiences and knowledge with one another, and to so actively provide support to other members.

Williamson's Ecological Model of Information Use

The main theoretical underpinning of this project is Williamson's (1998) ecological model of information use. Williamson (1998) posits that in the course of trying to remain informed about the world around them, individuals often encounter information that they were not seeking and did not previously know they needed. Some information is intentionally sought, while other information is serendipitously encountered. How individuals seek, acquire, and use information is impacted by several ecological factors: personal characteristics, socio-economic circumstances, values, lifestyles and physical environments (Williamson, 1998, p. 35). Personal characteristics and values are the variables that can most feasibly explored via a survey, while the others might be more effectively measured based on interview data.

Furthermore, Williamson's (1998) model shows that personal networks and mass media are avenues by which individuals seek information and incidentally acquire it. Facebook likely falls somewhere between a personal network and a mass media avenue, in the case of closed groups; members tend to communicate informally and form personal bonds, and messages are not only one-way as is usually the case for mass media sources. Facebook has also proven to be a useful ground for studying information seeking behaviours and information use intentions (Zheng, 2014; Jin, Phua, & Lee, 2015).

Motivation for and Reception of Information Sharing

In community-driven social media settings, motivation for engaging in knowledge and information sharing behaviours seems to come from members' desire to contribute what they know

for the benefit of others (Kang, Kim, Gloor, & Bock, 2011). Users that display intentional information seeking behaviours tend to value the utility of the answer and the socio-cultural aspects of the information exchange (Kim & Oh, 2009). Information sharers and recipients also co-construct meaning in the process of exchanging information (Gauducheu, 2016).

Also of note is the contribution of “lurkers” to online communities. Lurkers are group members that do not actively post or comment. They do, however, maintain membership in the group and understand its norms and typical information sharing behaviours (Edelmann, 2013). Despite not functioning as information sharers inside the group, lurkers may still use the information they find in their everyday lives (Edelmann, 2013).

Information seekers have diverse motivations for looking for information. In a study of young adults’ information acquisition behaviours on Facebook, Zheng (2014) described four classes of information seekers. Quadrant 1 users displayed high seeking and high scanning behaviours and were motivated by “knowledge fulfillment,” meaning that they were comfortable asking questions and seeking health information on Facebook and were highly motivated to do so. Quadrant 2 users preferred an “entertainment” approach, appearing less motivated to seek out information but showing a high degree of interest in scanning their news feed. These users paid particular attention to posts made by their friends. They were more likely to use this information to stay up to date about their friends’ lives or simply to gossip about it, and were less likely to reveal the same information about themselves. Quadrant 3 users were motivated by “sociability,” primarily using Facebook to keep in touch with friends. They were not motivated to seek out health information but occasionally shared their own stories to gain emotional support from friends. Quadrant 4 users were characterised by “instrumentality.” They had a high degree of interest in health information, which prompted them to use Facebook as a tool to perform health-related activities like “setting up an outdoor activity, establishing an exercise group, checking a golf class schedule, [or] selling exercise equipment” (Zheng, 2014, p. 169).

Personal & Environmental Factors

The *type* of question that a person asks plays a role in what is considered a useful answer. Kim and Oh (2009) describe the ways in which question askers on a social Q&A site evaluated the usefulness of answers they receive. Which type of response the original asker deemed the “best” depended on the type of question posed. Kim and Oh (2009) found that answers were rated

based on the following qualities: content (scope, depth, quality); cognitive (interesting ideas or perspectives); utility (whether a response is useful to the asker); information source (authority of response; identity of asker); extrinsic (evaluation based on factors like speed of answer); and socioemotional (supportiveness, sharing experiences, humour). Information outcomes can be hindered or encouraged by the types of information that users can find and synthesise with their personal experience (Sin, 2016).

Accessibility of the information source and convenience of access also play a pivotal role in the type of source that a person will consult. Networked sources, in particular, are regarded as current, as providing good access to detailed information, and as providing more varied information than a personal network alone (Savolainen, 2010).

Evaluation of Trustworthiness

Individuals judge the credibility of information differently depending upon their personal characteristics. For example, some users find more trustworthy the information sources that present multiple viewpoints or both positive and negative descriptions, while others value the authority of a source most highly (Zheng, 2014; Jin, Phua, & Lee, 2015). In some cases, the popularity of the information source can also affect users' perceptions, particularly on Facebook where posts and comments that garner more 'likes' and other reactions are sometimes seen as more credible (Jin, Phua, & Lee, 2015).

Situated within this body of research, my project is of relevance because it explores how users both seek out and encounter information serendipitously in a social media setting. This project will focus on interaction and usability as key classes of measurement, asking users to provide tangible examples or at least indications of what they have done with information from SLMLMBOK.

METHODOLOGY

Based on the above review of the literature, I developed three research questions to guide this project.

RQ1: How do members of the closed Facebook group *Sounds like MLM but OK* use information they encounter in the group to modify their behaviour?

RQ2. How do members evaluate the credibility of the information and/or the information sharer?

RQ3. What role does this evaluation of credibility play in information use behaviours?

Terms like *information*, *behaviour*, and *modify* can be context-dependent and vary considerably in their definitions between researchers and frameworks. I have therefore defined them here for clarity and specificity. These definitions were made clear to participants during the survey process through the use of descriptive instructions before each relevant set of questions.

Information refers to anything that group members would typically come across in the course of browsing posts in the group. Examples of information include stories shared by members, news articles, questions, photos and videos, and discussions in the comments sections.

Behaviour means any action that is intended to have a tangible impact on the everyday lives of the member or those around them. Deciding to talk to a friend or family member about the information the member has read, making purchasing decisions, or deciding to leave or join an MLM are examples of information use behaviours that members might exhibit. *Behaviour* here refers to actions taken both online (e.g., re-sharing a news article) and offline (e.g., having a conversation with someone).

Modification should be understood in this context to mean how people respond to the information they receive. Within the scope of this project, it is not possible to empirically compare participants' behaviour before and after they encounter a piece of information.

Methods

A mixed methods approach to data collection was deemed most appropriate for a course-based research project of this size. When recruitment began in mid-February 2020, SLMLMBOK membership was approximately 158,000 people. To effectively gather data from such a large group within the timeframe allotted to this project, I determined that a survey was the best suited instrument. The survey contained both quantitative and qualitative questions.

Prior to the initiation of the project, I contacted the group's administrative team to gain approval to recruit from the group. I contacted the admins again after receiving ethics approval to confirm that the text of the recruitment letter was acceptable. After getting their sign-off, I made a post directly in the group with a link to the survey. The post advised group members that

participation was voluntary and that the data collected were anonymous. Members were also advised that they could request a copy of the final report should they want to read the findings.

Members were eligible to participate if they were aged 18 or older and were either a current/former distributor for an MLM or had a close friend or family member who is/was a distributor. The rationale for targeting this demographic was that these individuals would be the most affected by MLMs and might therefore be more likely to use the information they encounter in practical, measurable ways.

Drawing on research conducted by Jin, Phua, and Lee (2015), this project used a survey and simulated Facebook posts to test how users evaluated the trustworthiness and usefulness of information. It also draws inspiration from Williamson's (1998) ecological model of information use by measuring how personal characteristics and values impact information behaviour. The relevant personal characteristics to be measured were *level of activity* in the group and *distributor status*. To measure participants' values, I designed closed-ended and free text questions with the goal of comparing respondents' self-reported ways of evaluating trustworthiness with their criteria for judging the credibility of two simulated Facebook posts.

Survey Structure & Procedure

After providing informed consent, participants were to complete a survey (Appendix B) with several distinct sections.

Demographic information.

Participants were asked to provide their age range, gender identity, and country of residence. These data were collected to determine if there were significant trends in information use behaviours or methods of determining trustworthiness among these demographic categories. If no trends existed, this would serve to provide a clearer picture of who participated in the survey.

MLM involvement.

Participants were asked if they are current or former distributors for multi-level marketing companies, and when they left the MLM(s), if applicable. They were also asked if they have close friends or family members involved in MLMs and how recently their friends or family members left, if applicable. I also collected data on which MLMs participants sold for or have connections to through their friends/family. My reason for collecting data on which MLMs participants have been affiliated was that some MLMs are more heavily discussed than others. Lularoe, for example,

was sued last year by the Washington State Attorney General (Office of the Attorney General, 2019), and there have been numerous posts with updates from news sources as well as personal reflections on experiences with the company. Color Street, for example, is a much less frequently discussed MLM with no current lawsuits at the time of writing.

Use of the SLMLMBOK Facebook group.

Participants were asked about their length of membership, post and comment behaviour, and reasons for using the group. These questions were intended to reveal if long-time group members are more likely to have used information from the group than newer members, and what kinds of information sharing behaviours lurkers may engage in. Participants were also asked for specific examples of when they may have used information from the group. A set of examples clarifying what constitutes “information” and “everyday decisions” was provided in this section’s instructions.

General information use behaviours on Facebook.

To gauge how participants use information they find on Facebook at large compared with the SLMLMBOK group, participants were asked about how they perceive information they find on Facebook. They were also asked if they intentionally visit Facebook as a source of information, and if they use what they find to make decisions about purchasing, companies to support, or other similar choices. These questions were developed based on Zheng’s (2014) findings that Facebook users have different motivations for using the site, and that these motivations inform the kinds of information that users pay attention to and ultimately use.

Trustworthiness and credibility of information.

Participants were asked how they evaluate the credibility of information based on the person who shared it and/or their knowledge of the website it came from. The section concluded with an open-ended question for participants to share what factors play into their evaluation of the trustworthiness of information they find on Facebook.

Simulated Facebook posts.

At the end of the survey, participants were shown two simulated Facebook posts like what they might find when browsing SLMLMBOK. Both were similar in content – a user has shared a link to a news article about an MLM that has been sued – but the number of likes and the URLs differed. This is intended to mirror, on a much more simplistic level, the Jin, Phua, and Lee (2015) study that asked participants to rank their impressions of the credibility of posts on a simulated

Facebook page. Two of the key variables that the research team manipulated were: 1) how many likes and comments a post got, and 2) how authoritative the content seemed to be, e.g., did it come from an expert or was it a testimonial from a peer? I have tried to emulate this to a small degree. After reading the simulated posts, participants were asked if they had seen similar posts in SLMLMBOK, which of the screenshots seemed trustworthy to them, and how they made their decision. Asking participants to review these posts directly within the survey was intended to make it fresher in their minds what factors they use to determine if information can be trusted. The goal was to reveal additional considerations that may not have been captured in the responses to previous questions.

Data Analysis

Much of the data gathered were quantitative, so I used basic descriptive statistical analysis to derive insights. Beyond basic description, I also tracked how the *personal characteristics* and *values* variables related with participants' responses. This is in accordance with Williamson's (1998) ecological model of information use. The ecological model holds that how individuals seek, acquire, and use information is impacted by several ecological factors, the most pertinent of which to my study are *personal characteristics* and *values*.

To provide a richer analysis, I also used thematic analysis of the qualitative data to understand why participants made their choices. I took into account the respondents' level of activity in the group and their distributor status when comparing qualitative responses. There are many more relationships between variables and responses that could be evaluated, but with time constraints and the size of the study in mind, these were the most feasible. Appendix C contains a sample of the qualitative coding.

Validity and Reliability

Participants were asked to self-report and may not have been able to fully access all of their memories about how they use information from Facebook generally or SLMLMBOK in specific. It is possible that participants might misremember where they encountered information that they have used. Larger and more comprehensive studies may prefer to use diaries or interviews to actively engage with participants (Williamson, 1998). For a mixed-methods project of this size,

using a survey is more appropriate because it allows for larger scale data collection over a shorter span of time.

RESULTS

In total, the survey received 639 responses, 500 of which were completed and deemed usable (i.e., the respondent confirmed they were over the age of 18; 2 participants were disqualified for marking that they were under 18). Most of the data collected were quantitative data coming from closed-ended questions, with a minority of questions allowing respondents to share personal anecdotes or provide additional comments.

Participant Profile

Participants were relatively homogenous, at least within the data points collected for this survey. Most respondents were female ($n = 478$). Almost all respondents were from primarily anglophone Commonwealth or former Commonwealth countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States ($n = 490$). 389 respondents were residents of the United States. Most of the respondents fell within the 25 – 40 age range.

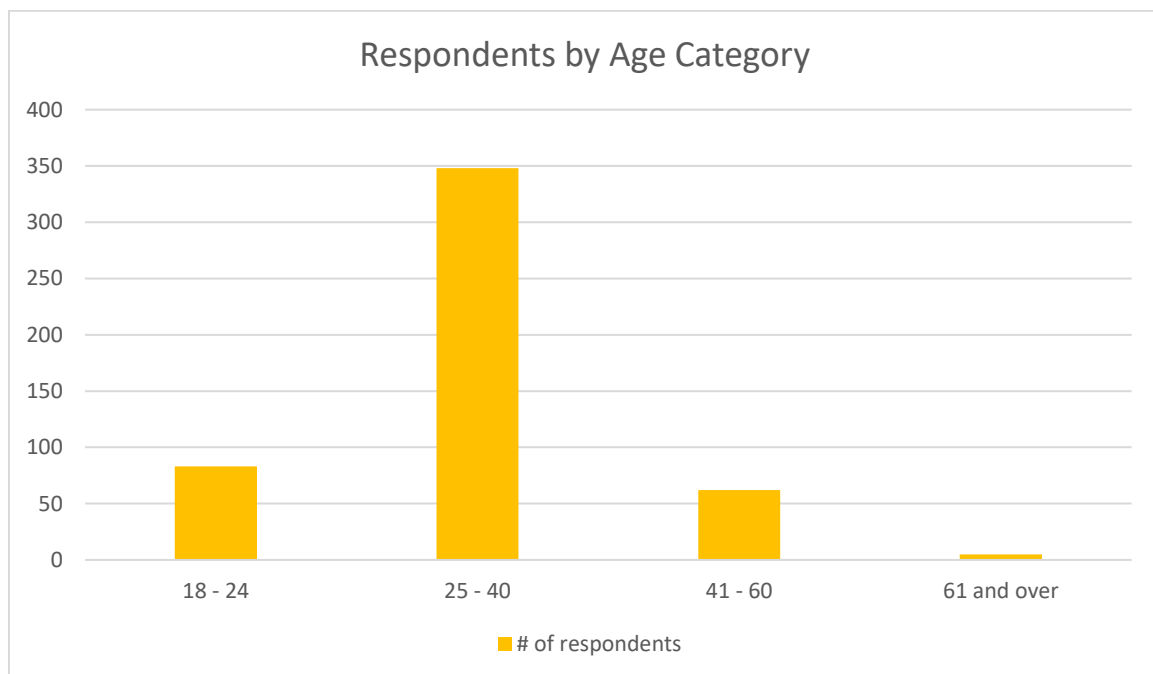


Figure 1: Respondents by Age Category

The vast majority of participants – 92% – have had or currently have at least one family member or close friend involved with an MLM. Of those participants, 76% still have a friend or family member involved. 30% of respondents are former distributors themselves. Most left their MLM(s) between 1 and 5 years ago (44%) or more than 5 years ago (44%).

Most respondents (78%) have been in the SLMLMBOK group for less than one year. It should be acknowledged that this version of the SLMLMBOK group was founded in late 2017, meaning that its history is fairly short and it is therefore understandable that most members are newer. Most respondents could be classified as low-activity members, with 74% reporting that they have never posted in the group and 25% posting fewer than 5 times a month. Respondents were more likely to comment on posts than to make their own post. 17% rated themselves as frequent commenters, commenting 5-10 times per month. 54% comment occasionally (fewer than 5 times per month).

One quarter of participants never posted or never commented and are thus considered lurkers.

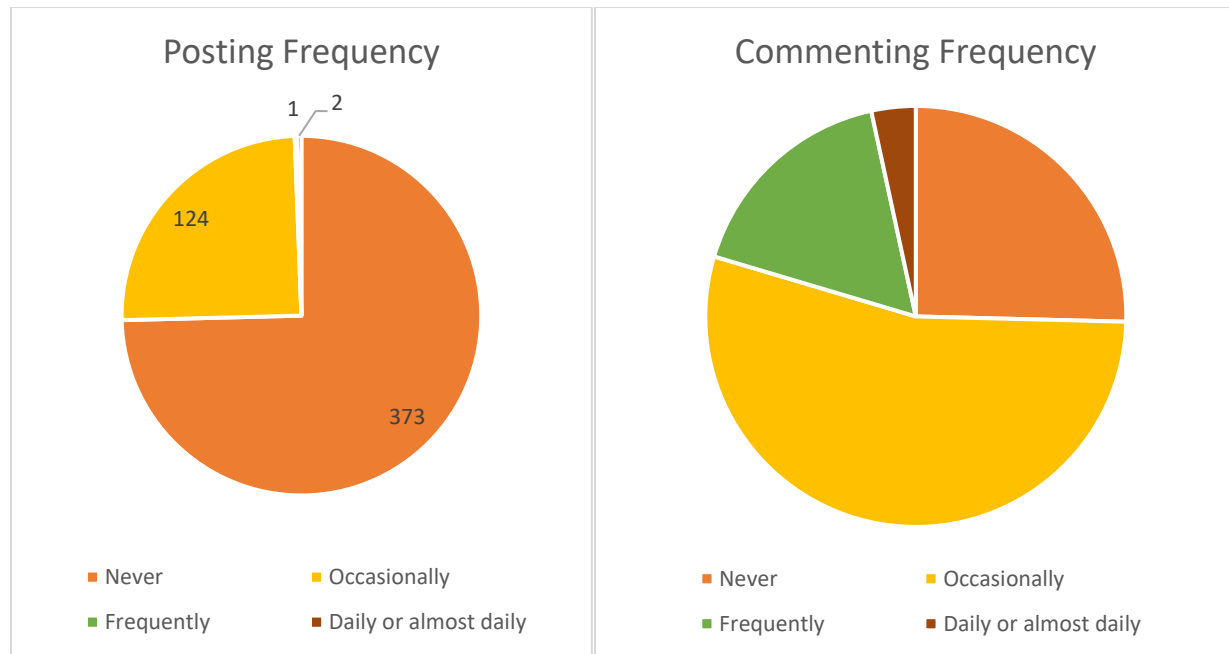


Figure 2: Post and comment frequency. Occasionally: Fewer than 5x per month; Frequently: Between 5-10x per month

The most popular reasons selected for browsing SLMLMBOK were entertainment (88%), to get information about new MLMs (65%), as a safe space to share frustrations (49%), and as a place to connect with others harmed by MLMs (36%). Several participants responded that they

browse the group for other reasons, such as those noted in the participant quotes in Table 1. Most respondents agreed or strongly agreed that SLMLMBOK is a trusted source of information about MLMs (89%).

Purpose	Participant Statements
Self-educate	Become more educated on the dangers of MLM
	Learn the scams and financial risks behind MLMs
	To become more aware of MLM practices
Stay up to date	To keep up with information about mlms
	To have a place to read on the latest predatory tactics so I can best protect myself from people close to me who may be participating in an mlm
Gather information	To check in on whether certain companies are MLMs
	To gather language from others to help me respond to people selling MLM
Help others	Advocate for victims of MLM
	How to hopefully help friends out of the MLM scheme!
	To learn how deeply harmful MLMs are so I can explain to my friends who get roped in

Table 1: Qualitative responses to question, "What do you use the group for?"

Information Use Behaviours

Many respondents reported that they do not use the information from SLMLMBOK to make everyday decisions in their own lives (46%). However, 35% of respondents shared that they have used information they discovered in the group to help their friends or family members. They shared many anecdotes about times they had done so. Several individuals specifically mentioned referring others to listen to the podcast *The Dream*, an ongoing investigative show that dedicated its first season to explaining why MLMs are so harmful yet so appealing (Palus, 2018). Others related times they have shared income disclosures and statistics that they learned from the group, predatory and sometimes deceptive sales tactics, and articles and personal stories. Many members used information from the group to dissuade friends or family members from joining an MLM or to persuade them to leave, with varying levels of success.

When looking at lurkers specifically – respondents who never posted or commented – only 26% reported using information in their interactions with others. There were no significant

differences in the types of information behaviours that lurkers displayed. Most related times when they used statistics and income disclosures to try to help friends and family members, or to draw attention to the negative outcomes that distributors often experience as a result of their MLM involvement.

Former distributors were asked if they have used information from the group to make decisions about an action they have taken or plan to take. Of the respondents to this question, 83% answered that they had not. The remaining 17% were asked to provide examples of a time they had used information from the group. The two most common themes were ceasing to support MLMs, financially or otherwise, based on information obtained from the group, and using tips and stories from the group as encouragement to talk with their former uplines and others in their lives about MLM involvement.

Generally, most participants (82%) reported that they get a lot of information from Facebook and other social media sites. A slightly lower percentage of lurkers (77%) and a slightly higher percentage of former distributors (90%) saw this as characteristics of themselves.

60% intentionally look to Facebook as an information source for some topics. Participants were equally likely to share news articles and personal stories from Facebook with the people in their lives. Most participants use information from Facebook to make decisions about purchases or companies and products to support, with 67% doing so sometimes and 25% doing so often. Participants were also asked if they use information on Facebook to make other types of choices. Most said that they sometimes do (64%). Qualitative responses revealed common themes centred around parenting, politics, looking for recommendations, checking reviews, researching charities, food and cooking, networking, vacations, events, and checking out products based on Facebook ads.

Evaluating Credibility

Participants were asked to rate their ability to determine if information is credible based on their knowledge of the information sharer and of a website's reputation. Participants expressed a much greater degree of confidence in assessing information based on the website's reputation rather than a person's. 48% reported that they were often able to tell if information was credible based on a website's reputation, with 23% saying they can always tell. Only 17% of respondents

felt that they were often able to tell based on a person's reputation, and less than 1% were always confident judging based on this criterion.

In responses to free-form questions, participants provided other examples of ways they evaluate how credible information is. Common themes were checking for corroboration with additional sources, judging based on the source's reputation or the website domain (e.g., .com or .org), evaluating the quality of the evidence the source presents, using fact-checking websites like Snopes, evaluating the tone and language the source uses, and even confirming with experts they know or trusted people in their lives.

Evaluation of Simulated Posts

Two simulated Facebook posts, which can be seen in Figures 3 and 4 below, were shown to participants. The content was intended to mirror a typical post that might be seen in the group; this seemed to resonate with participants, of whom 80% confirmed seeing similar content. Participants were asked to evaluate which of the posts seemed more credible to them.



Figure 3: Post 1 - low engagement, popular news source, shallow comment depth



Figure 4: Post 2 - higher engagement, obscure news source, detailed comment

Opinions were divided about which post seemed more trustworthy. Former distributors and those who had never sold for an MLM had differing perspectives. Former distributors found Post 2 to be much more credible than Post 1, while non-distributors were almost evenly split in their preference for Post 1, Post 2, or neither post. Fewer non-distributors found both posts to be credible.

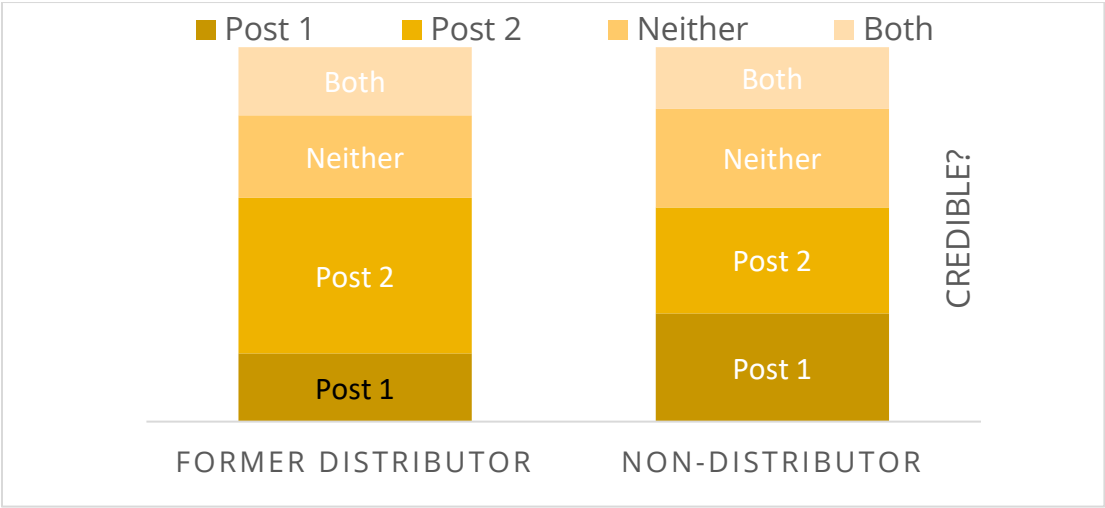


Figure 5: Comparison of responses to simulations based on distributor status

After making their selections, participants were asked to provide comments in their own words about how they made these decisions. Responses were quite mixed for respondents' reasons for choosing Post 1 or Post 2, with the majority of comments expressing that they made their choice based on the news source. BuzzFeed was particularly polarizing, with most respondents either feeling very positively or very negatively about its trustworthiness. Many also took into

account the domain name, perceiving .org as more trustworthy than .com, or seeing MLMWatch as a source that might be too biased to provide credible information.

Those who said that neither source was credible expressed greater skepticism over the information presented. Many said that they were unable to make a decision because they did not have access to the source article and were not able to do further research. BuzzFeed was also viewed very poorly by this group, and MLMWatch was viewed as a potentially biased news source. Two respondents specifically indicated that neither of the links seemed particularly credible, but that comments on the second post seemed more credible because they were well-researched and drew “on information that is happening outside of that particular MLM (linking the situation to [LuLaRoe]).”

DISCUSSION

The results of this project echo other findings about the ways in which people use information that they find online. For instance, Williamson’s ecological model asserts that information use is affected by environmental factors like lifestyle, socio-economic circumstances, and physical surroundings in addition to internal factors such as personal characteristics and values. In measuring personal characteristics like distributor status and level of in-group activity, along with values about determining credibility, this study confirms that personal traits do have an impact on how information is used and evaluated.

Participants reported different motivations for their membership in the group and their information use. Zheng’s (2014) study categorises users into quadrants by measuring their motivation to actively seek out information against their receptiveness to information they encounter passively. SLMLMBOK users also appear to have different motivations and levels of interest in the group. As the results show, the majority of participants use the group for entertainment purposes, but many also use it to intentionally seek out new information about MLMs and to garner support from others. In a larger study, it would be beneficial to examine not only how group members use information they find, but also what types of information they themselves share, and for what reasons. This idea of an active, back-and-forth dynamic in which information users are also information providers is presented by many other researchers (e.g., Gauduchau, 2016; Kang, Kim, Gloor, & Bock, 2011; Kim & Oh, 2009).

Effect of Personal Characteristics on Information Behaviour

One of the personal characteristics measured for this study was a person's level of activity in the group (i.e., if they are a lurker or a visible participant). Edelmann (2013) notes that lurking behaviour does not preclude active participation in other ways. Lurkers may not post or comment, but they are keenly aware of group norms and dynamics and still likely to use information from the group. The results of this study are in alignment with Edelmann's assertions. SLMLMBOK lurkers were less likely to use information from the group to help others in their lives (25%, compared to 35% for all participants). However, there were no significant differences between how lurkers and other participants used information and what type of information was the most useful to them. Income disclosures, statistics, and understanding of sales tactics and predatory recruitment behaviours were ranked highly across the board.

Distributor status was another tracked variable. Distributors rated themselves as more likely to get information from Facebook and other social media sites (90%, compared to 82% for all participants). The survey data do not provide any insights into why this might be the case, and there are no other noteworthy differences between how distributors and non-distributors use information. Interestingly, the one metric in which distributors differed significantly from non-distributors was in their evaluation of the simulated SLMLMBOK posts (see Figure 5). Former distributors strongly favoured Post 2 in comparison with Post 1. By contrast, non-distributors did not show a preference for either of the posts, with responses being almost evenly split between Neither being credible, Post 1 being credible, and Post 2 being credible. Qualitative responses from distributors and non-distributors reveal that similar factors played into both groups' evaluations: the reputation of the source website, the domain name, the perceived biases or lack thereof, and the quality of the post and comment text.

Effect of Values on Perceptions of Credibility

Participants expressed several key values that they took into account when measuring information credibility. For example, many participants mentioned evaluating the trustworthiness of information based on corroboration with other sources. Some explicitly mentioned that they prefer to check information against peer-reviewed sources or scientific consensus. Others preferred to check multiple news sites or to perform Google searches to see if other sources reported similar information. Only a handful of participants noted that they check validity by talking with someone

they know with expertise or whose opinion they already trust. These results are consistent with Savolainen's (2010) findings that online sources tend to be the preferred, expedient method of finding information.

It can be surmised that manipulating several variables in the simulated posts also impacted how trustworthy participants perceived the posts to be. For example, many participants reported that they use a website's reputation as an initial gauge of credibility. This was borne out in the qualitative responses about how respondents determined if the posts were credible.

Overwhelmingly, the reputation of BuzzFeed was cited as a key factor in how trustworthy the posts seemed. Others commented on the relative obscurity of MLMWatch.org. When choosing BuzzFeed as the source for Post 1, I was unaware of just how polarizing this choice would be. A significant number of participants viewed BuzzFeed as having poor quality journalism or not being a serious news source. Others were concerned that MLMWatch is a source with a biased title, which might mean that news it reports carry a similar bias.

Jin, Phua, and Lee (2015) reported similar findings in their study of attitudes toward breastfeeding. The researchers used sophisticated simulated posts to a Facebook page. Several variables that they found impacted their participants' attitudes were the quality and content of the comments on the posts, the tone and style of writing, the reputation of the source, and the popularity (i.e., likes and reactions) of the post and its comments.

In my project, Post 2 was intentionally crafted to show evidence of higher audience engagement (i.e., more likes), a comment with greater substance, and a news source that was fairly obscure. Post 1 had lower engagement, less substantial comments, and used a well-known news source. Results seem to indicate that popularity, substance, tone, and source reputation may have impacted how participants in this study evaluated the posts' credibility.

CONCLUSIONS

HIB is an ever-evolving field. Research centring on information use behaviours is currently under-represented, and there is plenty of work to be done to help advance theoretical and practical knowledge. In this study, I evaluated how members of the Facebook group *Sounds like MLM but OK* used information from the group to inform their real-world actions, and how they judged if the information they encountered was credible. Using simulated posts, I gathered direct feedback from participants about which factors most influenced their credibility assessments.

This study was successful in its main aim of exploring how members of SLMLMBOK use and evaluate information. RQs 1 and 2 were clearly answered by the data.

Research Question	Results
RQ1: How do members of the closed Facebook group SLMLMBOK use information they encounter in the group to modify their behaviour?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To help friends and family members • To educate others about predatory sales tactics • To dissuade a loved one from joining an MLM • To encourage a loved one to leave an MLM • To provide others with information about wage and income disclosures
RQ2: How do members evaluate the credibility of the information and/or the information sharer?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on information sharer's reputation • More commonly, based on a website's reputation • Users also evaluate credibility based on their independent searching, the number of corroborating sources, the number of sources that an article cites, their evaluation of the article's biases or hidden agenda
RQ3: What role does this evaluation of credibility play in information use behaviours	<i>Results inconclusive</i>

Table 2: Findings for research questions 1, 2, & 3.

Clear relationships between how participants evaluated credibility and how they used information were not present in the data, meaning results for RQ3 are inconclusive. However, this should be interpreted as a flaw in study design rather than an admission that these factors are unrelated. Additional data could have been collected asking respondents if they would use either of the two posts to either make decisions for themselves or to help a friend or family member, or if they would use it for another purpose entirely.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this project is its lack of generalizability. Because it is a small-scale study, I was not able to test all the variables that Williamson's (1998) ecological model of information use puts forward. It is likely that more complex relationships and interactions might be missed because I only explored two variables. Additionally, the population that I am studying is not representative of larger society. Many members of SLMLMBOK are women and a higher-than-average percentage are or have been stay at home mothers, and thus these two groups may be overrepresented when compared to the overall population. This project will likely provide some ideas for how further studies could be conducted with a more general population, but the results themselves are niche.

Using a survey as the instrument is also problematic in some ways. Participants were asked to describe past examples of their information use behaviours. While the reliability of self-reporting always requires a degree of trust, it is possible that participants may struggle to recall examples of using information they specifically encountered in the SLMLMBOK group because it is not something they think about frequently. They were asked to comment on events in the past, which may impact how clearly participants can recall the different factors that played into their decisions. In a larger study, it would be ideal to use multiple data collection methods, e.g., Williamson's (1998) collection of data via phone diaries and interviews. The advantage of having participants keep a diary of use is that their behaviours remain fresh in mind and therefore they may be providing more reliable and useful results.

Future Research

To improve generalisability, future research could target a population with greater diversity in gender, age, and country of residence, among other demographics. A study similar to this one could be conducted with a more diverse target group. Such a study would benefit from using more sophisticated post simulations that allow for the manipulation of additional variables. Finally, future research could more holistically evaluate the impact of ecological factors, as described by Williamson (1998), on information use behaviour.

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APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORM

Welcome to our survey!

I invite you to take part in a research project called Sounds like MLM, but OK: Evaluating the Utility and Credibility of Information Encountered in a Facebook Interest Group. This study is being done by Katherine Luber. I am a Master of Information candidate in the Faculty of Management at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. I am doing this research for a class project in Human Information Interaction. This project is instructed by Dr. Cheryl Stenstrom. The information below tells you about our research and what you will be asked to do. It also tells you about any benefits, risks, inconveniences or discomforts you might experience. You can take part in this study if you are a member of the Facebook group Sounds like MLM but OK. You must be at least 18 years of age and be a current or former distributor for a multi-level marketing (MLM) company. You may also participate if you have a family member or close friend who is/was a distributor for an MLM. About 100 people will be taking part in this research.

You will be asked to complete a survey. This survey is intended to find out how people in Facebook groups use the information they come across to make decisions in their everyday lives. It will also explore how people evaluate the trustworthiness and credibility of information they see on Facebook. The target population for this study is the membership of the Facebook group Sounds like MLM but OK. Risks to participation in this study are low. It is possible that you may feel some psychological discomfort when considering some of the questions. Your participation is voluntary and you are free to stop at any time. You may also decline to answer any question for any reason. Completing this survey should take between 15-20 minutes.

It is your decision whether or not you want to take part in this research project. Even if you do take part, you can leave the study at any time for any reason. There will be no negative consequences to yourself. After you have submitted your response to this survey, please note that we cannot remove your responses from the overall data. This is because we do not collect information that will identify you specifically, so we are not able to identify which responses are yours from the general survey data. You may skip one or more survey questions if you do not feel comfortable answering or would prefer not to share.

All information you give to members of our research team will be kept private. When we share our project findings in a report and a class presentation, we will only talk about group results. These results may also be shared on the researcher's personal website. This means that it will not be possible for you to be identified. Any identifying information that you provide will be removed from the data during data analysis, and will not be linked to your responses.

If you agree to participate in this research project, please select the “I consent to participate in this project” radio button below. We are happy to share our results with you after April 6, 2020. If you would like to receive a copy of the report, please provide your email address at the conclusion of this survey. Your email address will not be linked to your survey responses and will only be used to send you a copy of the report.

If you have any questions, comments, or concerns about your participation in this research project, please contact me, Katherine Lubber, by email at kluber@dal.ca, or my instructor, Dr. Cheryl Stenstrom, School of Information Management, by email at Cheryl.Stenstrom@dal.ca.

I have read the explanation about this study. I understand what I am being asked to do and my questions about the study have been answered. I agree to take part in this study. I know that participating is my choice and that I can leave the study at any time.

☐ I consent

☐ I do NOT consent

I am 18 years of age or older.

☐ Yes

☐ No, I am under 18

APPENDIX B: SURVEY

Demographic Information

1. What is your age range?
 - a. 18 – 24
 - b. 25 – 40
 - c. 41 – 60
 - d. 61 and over
2. What is your gender identity?
 - a. Female
 - b. Male
 - c. Non-Binary
 - d. Another gender (please specify if you are comfortable doing so)
 - e. Prefer not to say
3. In which country do you currently reside?
 - a. [Dropdown list]
4. Are you a current distributor for a multi-level marketing company (MLM)?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
5. Are you a former distributor for an MLM?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
6. If you are a former distributor, how long ago did you leave the MLM(s)?
 - a. Within the last year
 - b. Between 1 and 5 years ago
 - c. More than 5 years ago
7. Do you have a family member or close friend who is or was a distributor for an MLM(s)?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
8. How long ago was your friend or family member involved in the MLM(s)?
If multiple friends or family members have been involved, please choose the option that best reflects the most recent experience people in your circle have had.
 - a. They are currently involved
 - b. They quit within the last year
 - c. They quit between 1 and 5 years ago
 - d. They quit more than 5 years ago
9. Which MLM(s) did you or your friend/family member sell for? Select all that apply.
 - a. Lularoe
 - b. ItWorks
 - c. Younique
 - d. doTERRA
 - e. Young Living

- f. Scentsy
- g. Herbalife
- h. Color Street
- i. Thirty-One
- j. Stella & Dot
- k. Other (please specify)

Involvement with SLMLMBOK

10. How long have you been a member of the Facebook group Sounds like MLM but OK (SLMLMBOK)?
 - a. Less than 6 months
 - b. Between 6 months and 1 year
 - c. Over 1 year
11. How often do you post in the group?
 - a. Never
 - b. Occasionally (fewer than 5 times per month)
 - c. Frequently (between 5 and 10 times per month)
 - d. Daily or almost daily
12. How often do you comment in the group?
 - a. Never
 - b. Occasionally (fewer than 5 times per month)
 - c. Frequently (between 5 and 10 times per month)
 - d. Daily or almost daily
13. What do you use the group for? (Select all that apply)
 - a. To connect with others who have been harmed by MLMs
 - b. As a safe space to share frustrations
 - c. To share news about MLMs
 - d. To get information about new MLMs
 - e. For entertainment
 - f. Other (please specify)

Please rank your agreement with the following statements. In this section, “information” means anything you might come across when browsing posts in the SLMLMBOK Facebook group. For example, stories shared by members, news articles, questions, and photos and videos are some forms of information you may encounter. Think about the posts you see as well as the contents of the comments sections. In this context, examples of “everyday decisions” could include deciding to talk to a friend or family member about information you’ve read, making purchasing decisions, or deciding to join or leave an organization.

14. Overall, the SLMLMBOK Facebook group is a trusted source of information about MLMs.
 - a. Strongly agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Disagree

- e. Strongly disagree
- 15. The SLMLMBOK Facebook group is a place I go for entertainment and updates, but I do not use the information I read there to make everyday decisions.
 - a. Strongly agree
 - b. Agree
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Disagree
 - e. Strongly disagree
- 16. If you were or are a distributor for an MLM, have you used any information you have encountered in the SLMLMBOK group to make decisions about actions you took or will take?
 - a. Yes
 - i. Please describe a time when you did so.
 - b. No
- 17. Have you used any information you have encountered in the SLMLMBOK group to help friends or family members involved in MLMs?
 - a. Yes
 - i. Please describe a time when you did so.
 - b. No

Facebook as an Information Source

Please rank your agreement with the following statements. In this section, “information” means anything you might come across when browsing Facebook. For example, stories shared by friends, recipes, photos and videos, news articles, and ads are some forms of information you may encounter. Think about posts you see as well as the contents of comments sections.

- 18. I get a lot of my information from Facebook and other social media sites.
 - a. Not true
 - b. Somewhat true
 - c. Very true
- 19. I intentionally look to Facebook as a source of information.
 - a. No
 - b. Yes, for some topics
 - c. Yes, for most topics
 - d. Yes, for any topic
- 20. I share personal stories that I read on Facebook with the people in my life.
 - a. Never
 - b. Sometimes
 - c. Often
 - d. Always
- 21. I share news articles that I read on Facebook with the people in my life.
 - a. Never
 - b. Sometimes
 - c. Often
 - d. Always

22. I use the information that I find on Facebook groups to make decisions about my purchases or which companies and products I will support.
- a. Never
 - b. Sometimes
 - c. Often
 - d. Always
23. I use the information that I find on Facebook to make other types of choices.
- a. Never
 - b. Sometimes
 - c. Often
 - d. Always
- i. If any response other than “Never”: What kinds of choices do you make based on information you find on Facebook?

Information Trustworthiness

Please rank your agreement with the following statements.

24. I can tell that the information I’m seeing is true based on my knowledge of the person sharing it.
- a. Never
 - b. Sometimes
 - c. Often
 - d. Always
25. I evaluate if an article is likely to be true based on my knowledge of the website’s reputation
- a. Never
 - b. Sometimes
 - c. Often
 - d. Always
26. In what ways do you evaluate the trustworthiness of information you see on Facebook?

Evaluating Trustworthiness & Credibility

In this section, you will be asked to view two simulated Facebook posts and comments that have similar content to what you might find while browsing Sounds like MLM but OK. Please read the posts and answers the questions below.

Post 1**Jennifer Anne**

so it looks like Young Living is the next mlm up to get sued for falsely advertising health claims they can't back up....

www.buzzfeed.com/young-living-washington-atty-general

Like · Comment · 1 hour ago · 🌐

👍 11 people like this.

Sam Alex I was really excited to see this too! Definitely feeling some schadenfreude right now
35 minutes ago · Like · 👍 3

Maria Jane super shocked by this but its about time!!
11 minutes ago · Like · 👍 1

Write a comment ...

Post 2**Jennifer Anne**

my sister just shared this post with me. another win for the anti-mlm crowd??

www.mlmwatch.org/young-living-sued-by-washington-atty-general

Like · Comment · 1 hour ago · 🌐

👍 96 people like this.

Sam Alex It's about TIME!!
35 minutes ago · Like · 👍 15

Maria Jane I was doing some reading up on this and I think it's interesting how long YL has managed to evade a lawsuit of this scale. I'd be really interested to hear how this goes, in the wake of what's been going on with LLR.
10 minutes ago · Like · 👍 8

Write a comment ...

27. Have you seen posts with similar content in the SLMLMBOK Facebook group?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
28. Which of these posts seems more credible or trustworthy to you?
 - a. Neither
 - b. Post 1
 - c. Post 2
 - d. Both

29. How did you make this decision?

Final Thoughts

- 30. Are there any other thoughts you would like to share about how you use information you find in the Facebook group SLMLMBOK?
- 31. Are there any other thoughts you would like to share about how you evaluate if information you find in the Facebook group SLMLMBOK is trustworthy?

Report Copy

If you would like to receive a copy of the final report, please enter your email address here. Your email address will only be used to send you the report. It will not be linked to your survey responses. A copy will be sent to you on or after April 6, 2020.

APPENDIX C: SAMPLE QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative data were thematically analysed and coded. Below are selected examples from the qualitative responses to survey question 26. Some statements have been assigned more than one code. The sample below is not an exhaustive list of how each statement has been coded; it is intended to instead provide an illustration of the type of analysis that was done.

In what ways do you evaluate the trustworthiness of information you see on Facebook?

Code	Participant Statement(s)
Corroboration with Additional Sources	By checking a second or third source if necessary.
	Validity of the source; cross-referencing
	External corroboration and independent knowledge
	By verifying it with other trusted sources
Source Reputation	If I can find the information on multiple websites.
	Knowledge of the information source; additional articles, information, research, reading sourcing conflicting view points. Depends on what the information is and how I will use or process that information
	Reputable source
	Assess the source, but also conduct independent research
	Reputable source, strong research based material, non biased, checking info against other reputable sources
Quality of Evidence	If it's from a news station I'll assume its true
	Checking the sources of information and their credentials or references.
Style & Tone	If it's a blog post I see if it have sources. Sourcing is important
	Tone of the article and language used is a huge indicator of trustworthiness I have found.

	Who is sharing, where is it hosted, format, does it sound like it could be true or is it overly emotional
Use of Fact-Checking Websites	Snopes, reputability, discussion with spouse
	Google to confirm what I read with other sources (e.g., news websites or Snopes)
Type of Website	Presence of ads, credentials of author, .com or .gov/etc.
	Who is sharing, where is it hosted, format, does it sound like it could be true or is it overly emotional
Confirming with Others	Looking for a secondary source in another area, contacting someone trusted who is an expert on the topic
	Snopes, reputability, discussion with spouse
