How do the feedback loops differ across demographic segments (e.g., Gen Z vs. Boomers) and geographic regions (e.g., urban vs. rural), and what specific data points show which groups are most susceptible to the 'bandwagon effects' triggered by coordinated fake crowds?

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Executive Summary

Feedback loops for bandwagon effects triggered by coordinated fake crowds (CIB) differ significantly across demographic and geographic segments. Gen Z exhibits higher susceptibility due to extensive recreational screen time and reliance on social media for news, making them vulnerable to CIB's manipulation of algorithmic popularity metrics. Conversely, while urban residents show some resilience to AI fact-checks due to higher literacy, their dense platform engagement can accelerate bandwagon adoption, whereas rural populations are less responsive to digital interventions, relying instead on local trust networks.

Key Findings

Divergent Feedback Loops Across Demographics

The feedback loops for bandwagon effects are shaped by distinct information consumption patterns and trust mechanisms across demographic segments. The "bandwagon effect" is a conformity mechanism where individuals imitate others, driven by social proof from perceived popularity metrics [4]. "Coordinated fake crowds" (CIB) exploit these metrics through adversarial networks of authentic, fake, and duplicated accounts to deceive algorithms and amplify communication [1].

Gen Z, characterized by high recreational online time and heavy reliance on social media platforms like Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram for news, demonstrates greater susceptibility to misinformation and CIB-triggered bandwagon effects [2]. The Misinformation Susceptibility Test (MIST) revealed that only 11% of 18-29 year olds achieved a high score (correctly identifying over 16 headlines), while 36% received a low

score (10 or fewer correct) [2]. This contrasts sharply with older adults (65+), where 36% achieved high scores and only 9% received low scores [2]. This vulnerability is directly linked to recreational online time; 30% of individuals spending 0-2 hours online daily achieved a high MIST score, compared to only 15% of those spending 9 or more hours online [2]. Despite their digital fluency, Gen Z's constant exposure to algorithmically amplified popularity metrics creates a false perception of consensus, overriding critical evaluation [1, 2, 4].

Boomers and older cohorts, while often perceived as less digitally savvy, exhibit a different vulnerability profile. They tend to rely more on traditional media trust signals and institutional authority, primarily trusting local TV news, newspapers, and doctors for information [5]. This makes them susceptible to CIB that mimics institutional credibility or exploits trust gaps within their preferred information channels, particularly in rural communities where older demographics are concentrated [5].

Geographic Differences in Susceptibility and Intervention Effectiveness

Geographic regions exhibit distinct feedback loop characteristics and responses to interventions. Urban residents generally possess higher AI and media literacy, which makes AI fact-check labels more effective for them [3]. As the Colorado study found, "the AI fact-check label intervention was more effective for urban users" [3]. However, urban adults are also more likely to use social media for news and health advice [5]. This higher platform engagement creates a faster, more volatile feedback loop, where CIB's manipulation of algorithmic popularity metrics (likes, shares, views) can rapidly accelerate bandwagon adoption through social proof, despite higher baseline literacy [1, 4].

Rural communities, in contrast, show lower AI and media literacy, which significantly impacts their susceptibility and response to digital interventions [3]. Rural adults are "about ten percentage points less likely than urban adults to say they regularly use social media to keep up-to-date with the news or to access health advice or information" [5]. They place low trust in social media for health information, instead relying heavily on local TV news, local newspapers, and their doctors [5]. Consequently, AI fact-check labels have "no significant effects" among rural users [3]. While a commenting intervention (human-led moderation) produced a modest increase in positive attitudes toward vaccination among rural users, the automated AI labels failed to penetrate the rural feedback loop [3]. This suggests a fundamental mismatch between AI-driven platform interventions and rural audiences' trust mechanisms [3, 5].

Platform-Specific Vulnerabilities

Specific social media platforms show varying degrees of susceptibility, particularly among younger users. Snapchat users demonstrated the highest susceptibility rates on the MIST, with 53% receiving low scores and only 4% achieving high scores [2]. Audiences on TikTok, Instagram, Truth Social, and WhatsApp also showed high susceptibility to misinformation [2]. While the research highlights the role of popularity metrics (views, likes, comments) in CIB campaigns across platforms [1, 4], it does not provide specific quantitative differences in susceptibility rates between short-form video and traditional feed formats.

Systemic Risk and Intervention Mismatch

In the near term, Gen Z's reliance on algorithmic popularity metrics poses a greater systemic risk to information ecosystems. Their heavy recreational screen time and platform-specific usage create faster, more volatile feedback loops that CIB can rapidly hijack through manipulated engagement metrics [1, 2, 4]. This allows fake crowds to achieve broader, faster, and more volatile systemic amplification across digital networks [1, 4].

Historical CIB campaigns, such as Meta's 2021 removal of an anti-vaccine network, demonstrate how CIB exploits platform metrics to manufacture social proof and trigger bandwagon effects [1]. However, these campaigns also reveal the limitations of current platform interventions in rural areas. The 2022 Alabama vaccine misinformation study confirmed that AI fact-check labels, while effective in urban settings, are fundamentally mismatched with rural audiences' trust mechanisms due to lower AI literacy and a preference for local, trusted sources [3, 5].

The research does not identify specific named CIB campaigns between 2020 and 2025 that successfully triggered measurable bandwagon effects in rural communities by mimicking local trust networks with exact engagement metrics [1, 5]. While CIB operations are known to create false appearances of widespread support [1], and mimicking local trust networks is effective for pro-social campaigns [6, 7, 8], specific adversarial examples targeting rural areas in this manner are not detailed.

Implications

The findings imply that misinformation interventions must move beyond broad

demographic targeting to platform-specific and geographically tailored strategies. For urban residents, who possess higher AI literacy, AI fact-check labels are effective [3]. However, for rural communities, interventions should prioritize traditional local messengers and trusted community channels, such as local TV, local newspapers, and doctors, rather than relying solely on algorithmic or social media-based corrections [5]. Human-led commenting interventions show modest promise in rural areas where AI labels fail [3]. Given that rural adults frequently use Facebook (72% weekly) and YouTube (60% weekly) [5], interventions should be specifically tailored to these platforms, acknowledging their lower trust in social media for news and health advice [5].

Limitations and Caveats

The available research provides a strong foundation for understanding demographic and geographic differences in susceptibility to bandwagon effects. However, several limitations exist. Specific cost-per-impression and engagement-rate metrics for coordinated fake crowds targeting urban versus rural demographics are not reported. The comparative amplification efficiency of different platform algorithms (e.g., TikTok's For You Page vs. Facebook's News Feed) across these regions is also not detailed. Furthermore, while the mechanisms of CIB and rural trust are well-defined, the research lacks specific named CIB campaigns between 2020 and 2025 that successfully triggered measurable bandwagon effects in rural communities by mimicking local trust networks, along with their exact engagement metrics. The quantitative differences in susceptibility rates between short-form video and traditional feed formats are also not provided.

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