



PRIMARY RESEARCH

The harm that comes with spreading misinformation in social media

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Keywords

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Abstract

The public has been overwhelmed with false information ever since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), and it has been difficult to distinguish what the facts or opinions are or if what they read is propaganda or biased. This research aims to know how everyone has faced this infodemic and their thoughts and experiences regarding the matter. This was done through a Qualitative method, with surveys distributed to gain insight regarding the matter. The results show that everyone is exposed to misinformation and fake news throughout the Internet and that almost everyone is facing the issue of doubting if what they read up is even real or fabricated, or if it is yet another biased opinion, another article to misinform and to spread panic and confusion in public. It has been concluded that this is an issue that needs to be addressed and which people should be wary about, and for everyone to be careful and make sure of the credibility of the news that goes around social media platforms before sharing it to avoid the spread of misinformation.

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INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization brought this concern to light and warned the public about the ongoing 'infodemic,' as misinformation is rampant and widespread across social media (Zarocostas, 2020). An infodemic is defined as excessive amounts of information concerning a problem to provide solutions but further complicate the problem at hand. Fighting fake news and the infodemic is the new front of the COVID-19 battle (Naeem & Bhatti, 2020). Misinformation about a concerning topic such as COVID-19 can alter and distort people's perception of the virus. This is a growing concern as fake news is prevalent and common on social media, which puts public health at risk (Naeem & Bhatti, 2020; Naeem, Bhatti, & Khan, 2021).

Misinformation is defined as false information that was shared and communicated without malice, and disinformation, on the other hand, is disclosed with the intent to mislead. The motivation for creating these messages is unclear. Still, there is a huge possibility that the reason behind such

behavior might have come from wanting to receive attention or the ideation of the conspiracy (Khan, Shahbaz, & Jam, 2019; Farooq, Farooq, Rauf, & Sharan, 2012; O'Connor & Murphy, 2020). This goes hand in hand with what McGonagle described fake news as, which consciously fabricated information to deceive individuals with facts that were yet to be certified and false (McGonagle, 2017). This type of information and alternative facts still finds their way on the Internet, feeding on the fear and restlessness of the public. People are frustrated and confused about how they couldn't foresee such tragedy to befall everyone, and this absence of uncertainty can make any kind of explanation credible and logical even though it may be false (Jam et al., 2014; Moscadelli et al., 2020).

Through a qualitative assessment, the public's concerns and personal experiences regarding the matter will be carefully assessed in this article to show the impact of this phenomenon. This will shed light on the risks misinformation does, along with the consequences it brings. Preventive

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measures and interventions to oppose this type of misleading information will also be discussed to bring more caution and awareness concerning the issue. Whether for diseases or the spread of misinformation, prevention is better than cure in times like these (van Der Linden, Roozenbeek, & Compton, 2020).

This research is being conducted to shed light on the growing concern of the large amounts of misinformation on social media regarding a worldwide pandemic. This phenomenon is causing a great deal of confusion; a study conducted in the United States reported that about 64% of the adults in the country are perplexed about the basic facts of the events because of the dissemination of fake news (Naeem & Bhatti, 2020).

Research Objectives

The study's research objectives are as follows:

1. To know how misinformation about COVID-19 affected everyone and their personal experiences regarding the matter.
2. The fake news is shared across social media and those that are mostly shared.
3. How to stop misleading information about COVID-19 from spreading on online platforms.

Research Questions

Following are the research questions of the study:

1. Where was the spread of misinformation mostly shared?
2. What was the fake news that was spread on social media platforms?
3. How did people react and face this infodemic?

LITERATURE REVIEW

A massive infodemic accompanied the sudden outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, and this overabundance of information has had people in a state of confusion and fear, resulting in the public having a hard time distinguishing if the information they've read is from a credible source or not (Naeem & Bhatti, 2020). In the United Kingdom, a poll showed that 46%, almost half of its population, was reported to be exposed to fake news about the virus. While the United States reported that it had 48% of its population exposed to misinformation. And about 66% of them reported seeing this daily, which complicates the scenario as repeated exposure to such media is known to increase the belief towards it, regardless of whether it's fake or not (van Der Linden et al., 2020).

Misinformation and its Effects

A recent research study showed that most fake news comes from social media. The research analyzed about 1,225 fake news stories regarding COVID-19, and social media came first (Naeem & Bhatti, 2020).

This shows that misinformation about the virus has found its fertile ground on social media and is proliferating widely on its platform. In times like these, people are prone to scapegoating, whether through ethnicity, religion, wealth, or gender; these can all become dividers that would further heighten public unrest (B. Ilyasova, F. Bekmukhametova, & Jam, 2019; Moscadelli et al., 2020).

There were false theories that the virus was also bioengineered in a lab in Wuhan (van Der Linden et al., 2020), or similarly, there were those that concluded that the Chinese government had created the virus and that the US government had told them to do so (Apuke & Omar, 2021). There was also a rumor spreading through social media that neat alcohol could cure the virus, which resulted in hundreds of Iranians dying from poisoning (Hamid, Jam, & Mehmood, 2019; Naeem & Bhatti, 2020; Waheed, Kaur, & Kumar, 2016).

False messages were also shared with photos and voice notes to spread this false information that used local accents to increase its credibility (O'Connor & Murphy, 2020). Many also started believing that consuming salty water, eating oregano, or drinking bleach would be an antidote to the virus (Apuke & Omar, 2021), similarly gargling lemon with salt water and injecting yourself with bleach (van Der Linden et al., 2020). A whole conspiracy film called "Plandemic" appeared online and garnered millions of views. This video became one of the prime examples of coronavirus-related misinformation. The videos promoted health advice that further damaged it otherwise, suggesting that wearing a mask activates the virus (van Der Linden et al., 2020).

The messages that are spread in these posts usually have common features, where they claim that they have insider information but do not provide credible resources or references. The tone in their messages is usually alarmist and suggests that if the action that has been said is ignored would have serious consequences. These messages trigger fear in the reader, further alarming them and making them anxious, and pushing them to share it with their family and friends with fear (O'Connor & Murphy, 2020).

Social media has been an outlet and has become the major source of information about the crisis (Naeem & Bhatti, 2020). A recent analysis showed that the most viewed Youtube video regarding coronavirus contained misleading

information, yet that video gained over 62 million views. A YouGov survey found that about 28% of Americans and 50% of Fox News viewers believe that there were microchips in the COVID-19 vaccine that Bill Gates is planning to use on people (van Der Linden et al., 2020). This shows that with the public's urgency to find treatment for the virus, fake news continues to spread bigger and get even more proliferated throughout social media, which many experts find to be a big threat and problem of the pandemic (Lampos et al., 2021; Waheed & Kaur, 2016).

Health Threat

Misinformation regarding the health issues of COVID-19 causes a threat to the public (Apuke & Omar, 2021). Instead, the public would believe the false information, making an individual disregard usual healthy behaviors and instead start doing inaccurate and misguided practices, which would, later on, make the virus worse. This would compromise the virus getting treated earlier and make the recovery process much longer (Hartley & Vu, 2020).

There are patients with serious illnesses who don't have COVID-19 and are scared of contracting the virus in the hospital (O'Connor & Murphy, 2020). This goes to show that the dissemination of false news is detrimental to everyone's health, may it be physical, mental, or emotional, and not for the public to not just blindly follow any false news or measures that are shared online (Apuke & Omar, 2021; Waheed & Kaur, 2019).

Human Behavior

Reports show that fake news about COVID-19 has been linked to mass poisonings and mob attacks (Depoux et al., 2020). Yet people continue to share information without considering the possibility of whether it is credible or not. Sharing fake news can be unintentional, but its creation could also be highly intentional because it's human nature to reshare content even if it's false, yet the individual has just done this out of wanting to help others (Apuke & Omar, 2021).

People's beliefs and perspectives are also big factors when it comes to believing information. In the 'post-truth' era, when the virus wasn't still as big, there were people that continued to believe what appealed to them and disregarded credible and referenced news coming from authentic sources (Naeem & Bhatti, 2020). Individuals not willing to engage in health practices were less likely to also social

distance and take care of their hygiene (Hartley & Vu, 2020). People who believe the virus was probably created are less likely to comply with health guidelines nor accept a COVID-19 vaccine (Freeman et al., 2022; Waheed, Klobas, & Ain, 2020).

Prevention

This concern has also been raised by the World Health Organization's Director-General, who said that the pandemic isn't the only one we are fighting, but also the infodemic. Much of the misinformation shared is about conspiracy theories that provide little to no support at all and diagnosis and pseudoscientific therapies as a cure (Naeem & Bhatti, 2020). The authorities have urged its citizens to confirm the genuineness of what they read online before sharing it (Huynh, 2020). Or practice contact tracing, wherein you would ask who sent the information, what the source was if there is a way to know if it could be trusted or not (Llewellyn, 2020).

Many policy interventions are already focusing on verifying the news seen online, helping social media users identify what's authentic or not (Hartley & Vu, 2020). Social media platforms have also monitored and disparaged misleading information about COVID-19. Facebook has also blocked advertisements encouraging pseudoscience, while Youtube has blocked several conspiracy theorist channels. It is best to discourage misleading information and not take part in spreading it, and instead promote knowledgeable decision-making skills when faced with news about the matter (Naeem & Bhatti, 2020).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As for the methodology, this was approached with the Qualitative Method, which meant I'll need to obtain first-hand data from my participants.

Participants

This was done by handing out surveys to everyone of any age and gender since the topic is primarily about the pandemic, which has affected everyone globally. The survey was done in Google Forms, and it garnered 118 responses overall.

Those who mostly answered the survey were in the range of 19-25, which was 58.5%. Those who mostly answered were females, with a percentage of 55.9%. There was a wide spectrum of nationalities among those who answered the survey, with Filipinos being the highest as shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Summary of the respondents'

Response Summary	Count 118	Percentage
Age		
13-18	12	10.2
19-25	69	58.5
26-30	17	14.4
31-40	11	9.3
41-50	7	5.9
51 & above	2	1.7
Gender		
Female	66	55.9
Male	44	37.3
Neither	8	6.8
Nationality		
Filipino	56	47.5
Americans	15	12.7
British	9	7.6
German	5	4.2
Pakistani	3	2.5
Indians	3	2.5
Dutch	3	2.5
Swedish	2	1.7
Others	22	18.6

Data**TABLE 2.** Survey Response

Survey Query	Count 118
Which of the following social media accounts do you currently have?	
Facebook	90
Youtube	99
TikTok	56
Snapchat	45
Pinterest	52
Reddit	56
Instagram	88
Twitter	68
Tumblr	23
Whatsapp	74
Messenger	77
Telegram	77
Discord	2
None	2
Which social media platforms below have been more frequent in spreading misinformation regarding COVID-19?	
Facebook	108
Youtube	39
TikTok	53
Snapchat	15
Pinterest	13
Reddit	20
Instagram	39
Twitter	38
Tumblr	12
Whatsapp	29
Messenger	27
Telegram	16
None	3

Out of all the social media listed above, most participants answered having Youtube. Despite Facebook not taking the first place of most social media users in the previous sur-

vey question, many still chose Facebook, having seen most of the misinformation on their platform.

TABLE 3. Survey response

Response Summary	Count 118	Percentage
In your experience, do you believe there are posts (on social media) that have spread misinformation about COVID-19?		
Yes	109	92.4
Not sure	7	5.9
No	2	1.7
Have you personally believed something from social media regarding COVID-19 that turned out to be fake later?		
Yes	36	92.4
Not sure	27	5.9
No	55	1.7

This query asks the participants if they believe that there are posts on social media regarding COVID-19, and a lot agree that there were, which shows that most of the public is aware that there's much misinformation around social

media. A lot of the participants didn't end up believing in something that is not true about COVID-19. Yet there is still a lot, about 30.5%, affected by this misinformation.

TABLE 4. Survey results

Survey Query
Can you specify & give a brief detail of an instance where you believe the information was incorrectly portrayed on social media about COVID-19?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Covid is a hoax, a global conspiracy for the government to control their citizens. • It can be cured through home remedies. • It came from pigs or bats. • Covid turns you into a zombie. • Anti-vaxxers say the vaccine has a microchip and could kill you. • It originated from China, and somehow it turned into a fact that all Asians are infected. • There's been a rise in hate crimes against Asians around the world, and racist people are acting upon their hatred to justify their actions despite the exaggerated information. • It was created by the Chinese to rise and destroy the world. • Relatives believe in the rumors they see on Facebook. • Parents don't even think they should take the vaccine because their Facebook friends told them it's too political.

The participants were asked what the incorrectly portrayed news that had personally reached them regarding COVID-19 was, and these were the ones that were mostly said.

This is part of the participant feedback that was concerning because it had people not getting negatively affected due to the virus, but due to their kind, those who are people just like them. Since there is false information that the virus somehow originated in China, this later turned on all

Asians around the globe having the virus and being infected. Because of this, there's been a rise in hate crimes against Asians, and racists are using this as an excuse to justify their hatred.

People have their loved ones, and relatives believe in what they read online. This also personally affects their health and well-being.

TABLE 5. Summary of the respondents'

Response Summary	Count 118	Percentage
Do you personally research/educate yourself to address & confirm the authenticity of this news based on reliable sources?		
Yes	71	60.2
Sometimes	40	33.9
No	7	5.9
If so, what was your reaction to the information you've taken from a reliable source?		
I understood better and agreed	71	60.2
I got confused	12	10.2
I was surprised	7	5.9
I knew it was fake already	22	18.6
Other	6	5.1
Have you tried confronting & informing people on the same social media post about its authenticity?		
Yes, always	5	4.2
Yes, often	15	12.7
Yes, sometimes	48	40.7
Never	50	42.4
Have you tried confronting & informing people on the same social media post about its authenticity?		
They discussed, agreed & thanked	20	16.9
They argued but later agreed	33	28
They got offended & fought	30	25.4
Other	35	29.7

This shows that people usually do more research about this topic to confirm the authenticity of what they've read online. And their reaction to this is mostly positive, and they just chose to understand the situation better and agree.

But this part of the survey asks if these people have tried confronting someone and informing them about its authenticity, but the results show that most would rather not. It is seen that people have very contradicting answers to one another about choosing to either confront someone with the information they have or not. Also, the reactions of some of the people that chose to confront this problem turned out to be negative because this came off as their knowledge being questioned regarding the pandemic.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The results of the surveys show that many people believe that misinformation regarding COVID-19 is rampant and widespread across social media platforms. Many people voted on Facebook as the social media with its platform has most of the misinformation happening, which answers one of the research questions of what platform this mostly occurs on. [Naeem and Bhatti \(2020\)](#) have also said that Facebook has become one of the major sources of information about the virus ([Naeem & Bhatti, 2020](#)).

Many people also shared that most of the social media outlets they use have some misinformation in them. This shows that people should be wary of the media and news they consume. This brings us to our previous point earlier: peo-

ple need to confirm the genuineness and authenticity of the news they have read before sharing them ([Huynh, 2020](#)). This will lessen the circulation of misinformation on social media platforms and promote news that comes from credible sources.

The survey also answered how people faced this pandemic and how it was for them. Plenty of people had their loved ones and families believing in the fake news they had read online, and then there were those who saw plenty of propaganda and harmful misinformation up online. From fake news saying that 5G would cause symptoms of the virus ([van Der Linden et al., 2020](#)) to people themselves turning down the vaccine itself due to "hidden dangers" ([Uscinski et al., 2020](#)), people are being affected by the point their health is being put at risk due to this fear. It is important to note that the perception of these risks distorts an individual's thinking, which leads to preventative health behaviors ([Dryhurst et al., 2020](#)).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we could say that misinformation about social media is indeed rampant and is affecting everyone. And through the survey, we could see how it personally affected people and the risks they put in along with their health. And trying to inform someone about what is right is met with harsh criticism. We should be more open-minded about constructive criticism and accept that we could be wrong. Just as the World Health Organization Director-General said

earlier, We are not just fighting the pandemic but also an infodemic (Naeem & Bhatti, 2020). At times like this, it's best to look after one another and prevent misinformation from spreading, fact-check information we all read online (Llewellyn, 2020), and make sure it is true.

One of the limitations of this survey was the number of participants it had. Since this does affect everyone globally, a higher number of participants is best to get more accurate

results of what the public has personally gone through. A more detailed survey would also be good other than broad questions, which would help the research gain more insight into people. And for each age group to have an equal number of participants so that everyone's perception on this matter would be equally compared and taken into consideration for large-scale research such as this.

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