



A Study on Perception of Fake News Disseminated over Social media During Covid 19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The fake news phenomenon is rampant today with the increasing use of social media. The more people are getting versed with digital technologies, misinformation is spreading its wings. Fake news or misinformation, has become a very prominent issue in recent years. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or Whatsapp, offer ground for the generation and distribution of fake news. This paper explores the role of social media in spreading fake news during the COVID-19 pandemic which caused a huge panic. The impact of social media on individuals often varies due to many factors. The spread of fake news on social media has been electrifying and it is designed to evoke a strong emotional reaction. The fake news is mostly eye-catching, outrageous, and shareable, and it can spread like crazy when it addresses a topic that resonates with its intended audience on social media. The objective of the paper is to analyze how one reacts to misinformation shared by others on social media and study the effects of these fake news are having on youth who are the target audience of this paper. In this study, quantitative survey methodology is used to obtain data from social media users

Keywords: Misinformation, Covid-19, Fake news, Social media, New media

1. Introduction

The fake news phenomenon is rampant today with the increasing use of social media. The more people are getting versed with digital technologies, misinformation is intensifying. Social media is an interactive technology that enables one to create and share information, ideas, interests, and other forms of expression through virtual communities and networks. The fake news generated on social media can be fabricated content, disinformation, imposter content, misleading information, all of which create havoc on society. Social media enjoys wide reach and misinformation which circulates on the digital interactive platform can create destruction to one's fame and reputation. Social media attract a huge audience and keep us connected. We were able to stay connected to our loved ones with the help of social media during the lockdown which was imposed during the Covid 19 pandemic. We had to follow social distancing measures to keep at bay from Covid 19. In the last few years, the coverage of COVID-19 pandemic has come to dominate the media, which results in increased attention on the pandemic as well as the viral spread of COVID-19 fake news online. Misinformation always spreads in a "florid" environment filled by functional illiteracy, information overload, confirmation bias and in the case of COVID -19, the spread of fake news does impose challenges and many dangers to the public related to their health and living. Human beings are inadvertently and not very expert at spotting fake information. This is because fake news often looks like real legit news. Especially in a pandemic, misinformation will spread more rapidly and widely, because the public response is very sensitive to epidemics and significant social events. Examples of COVID-19 misinformation include wrong understandings of the disease (its causes and effects), following instructions regarding false remedies and over-imaginative results which are drawn on how the spread of the virus will stop. Most of these false remedies have been nothing more than rumors but there were many who spread their false opinion as facts and many COVID-19 myths were politically motivated and those who reshared these myths are simply misguided by others. At such a crucial time, it was social media where we could socialize with peers, friends and family. But sometimes, we receive wrong information through social media. Misinformation/disinformation is incorrect or misleading information presented as fact, either intentionally or unintentionally. Social networking sites spread information faster than any other media and spread unreliable and false information among people. We know we are facing a terrible situation regarding Covid-19 and nowadays, we are gathering information about the same mostly through social media.

The social media has several utilities and plays a constructive role in our lives. It may influence our lives in various ways like transmission of information, socialization and providing entertainment (Tripathi, et al., 2022). A research paper published in 2023, "Believing and Sharing False News on Social Media: The Role of News Presentation, Epistemic Motives, and Deliberative Thinking" investigated how individuals distinguish between fake and real news and whether factors like news presentation and cognitive abilities of the individuals have a role in determining the spread of the fake news. The

results revealed that people who trust the content on social media as authentic have the capacity to determine right from wrong by observing the manner in which the content is delivered (Yan & Pan, 2023). In another study in 2021, "Fake news as a challenge for media credibility" the researchers stated that the 'digital natives' devote a large amount on time on social media platforms and are avid consumers of the social media. The study points out that despite of being available on the social media, these users still perceive the news on traditional media platforms to be more authentic than the social media content, as they believe it be mostly information which has been generated by the users (Fišer & Držanič, 2021). A study in 2020 "Sharing of fake news on social media: Application of the honeycomb framework and the third-person effect hypothesis" accepted that the fake news circulated on social media platforms is a big menace today and their study found that measures to bust news mostly fail as social media users who would be sharing real news intensively sometimes fail due to lack of time (Talwar et al., 2020).

1.1 Understanding the realm of fake news

Fake news is a term that refers to news outlets that pretend to be real but are actually fake. Fake news includes false stories about all sorts of topics that are crafted in order to appear real and get traffic and social shares. The meaning of the word misinformation is incorrect or misleading information that is presented as fact. Social media are those interactive technologies that facilitate the creation and sharing of information, ideas, interests, and other forms of expression through virtual communities and networks. But sometimes, we receive misinformation through social media. Social networking sites spread information faster than any other media. Social media enables the spread of unreliable and false information among people. During Covid-19 pandemic people were facing a terrible situation and could trust no one and hence they resorted to gathering information about the same mostly through social media. Rumours are unverified and instrumentally relevant information statements in circulation that arise in contexts of ambiguity, danger or potential threat and that function.

2. Materials and Methods

In order to achieve the objectives of the research, the quantitative research methodology was followed. An online survey was carried out among the participants. A questionnaire was created in Google form and was distributed to the undergraduate and postgraduate students of Adamas University. The primary data thus collected were analysed to understand the results which emerged from the study. A total of 103 respondents took part in the survey.

- To study the role of social media in spreading fake news during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To analyse the impact of fake news across social media.

3. Results and Analysis

Demographics

Among the participants, 64.1 % were male and 35% were females. Of the total respondents, 86.4% of students were undergraduates and 12.6% were postgraduates. Almost 50% of the respondents were in the age group 24-26 and the rest were in the age group 18- 23.

Most preferred social media platform

The respondents were asked which was their most preferred social media platform, which they used a lot. Most of the respondents said YouTube (60.2%), Instagram (58.3%), Whatsapp (44.7%), Facebook (41.7%), Twitter (41.7%). However, a few respondents also said that they spend their time also on Snapchat, Telegram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Reddit. So, these platforms are also popular among students at Adamas University. But the most widely used are Youtube, Instagram, Whatsapp, Facebook, and Twitter.

Social Media Platforms used to derive information

As can be seen in Figure 1 which shows that according to the responses collected, YouTube (60.2%), Instagram (58.3%) were the to be the most prominent platform.

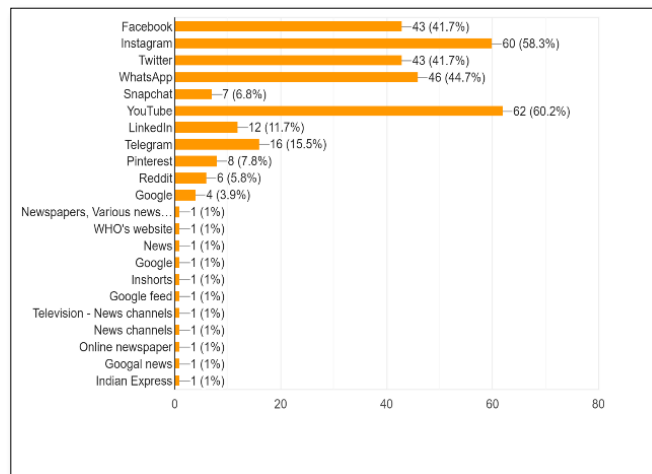


Figure 1: Social media platforms used to derive information

Most recognized platform for finding fake news on Covid-19

Figure 2 shows, according to the responses collected WhatsApp & Facebook were the primary sources of the fake news about Covid-19. The respondents opined that they found most of the fake news regarding covid mostly on Facebook (61.2%) and WhatsApp (67%). Results also revealed that people sometimes believe in social media news, but a trustworthy website remains WHO (71.8%). Most people also ignore the content (51.5%) where COVID-19 information shared by others on social media that they know is false instead of reporting it (43.7%). The study has important implications in devising interventions for people receiving misinformation through social media. One of the respondents informed us that the reason for widespread fake news on social media is that people never give a second thought before sharing content on social media. After receiving content like violent video clips, images, memes, etc. people forget to verify about fake or real and go on sharing them.

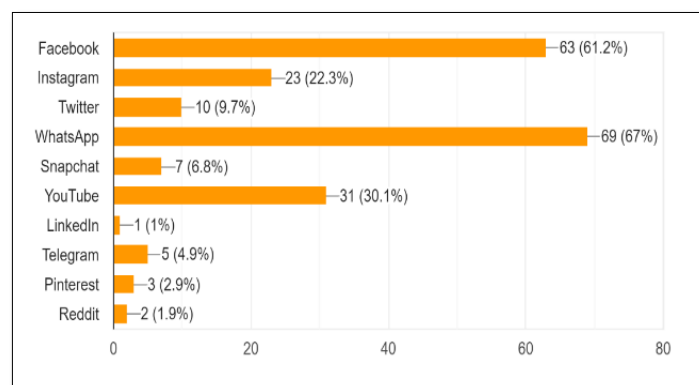


Figure 2: Most preferred social media platform for information on Covid - 19

The reaction of audiences to fake information on social media

A majority of the respondents have not been a part of resharing posts which might be fake news. 72.3% of people accepted that they do not check any news or information before resharing, however, 12.8% said that they might have reshared and forwarded information without checking. Only 14.6% of the respondents said yes, they do first crosscheck and verify information with authentic sources and then reshare the information. Figure 3 shows according to the responses collected either people ignored the content, or they reported the content in the first place. Almost 51.5% of the respondents said that they ignored when they faced any fake news content on social media i.e., they did not take any action. 43.7% said that they reported the content immediately in order to control the spread of such fake news and curb the practice. 18.4% said that they also commented on the content which could spread fake news, in order to draw the attention of the audience.

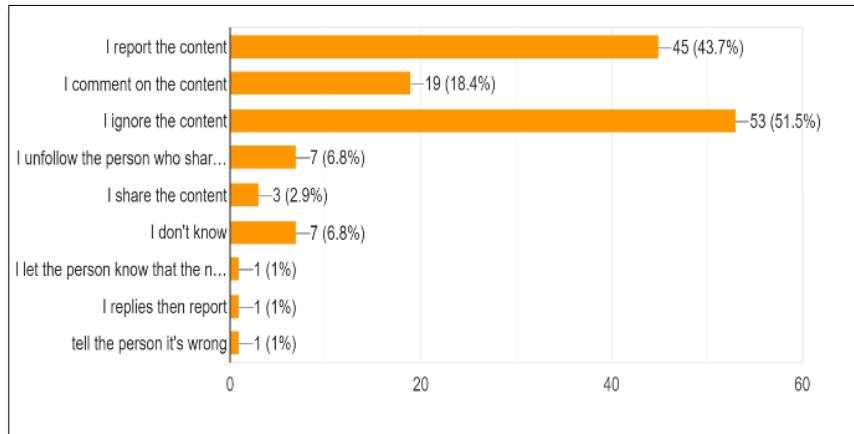


Figure 3: Action taken by people on spotting misleading on social media

People’s awareness of fake news in social media

Figure 4 shows, according to the responses collected from the majority of the people are somewhat aware of the fake news while some of them are very aware of the same. Almost 61.2% of respondents said that they were somewhat aware of the fake news phenomenon but lacked the clarity to understand it completely. 32% reported that they are very aware and are extremely conscious and are quite vary of resharing information which might contribute to the spread of fake news. Only a very small number of respondents opined that they know nothing about fake news. Interestingly, a small portion of the respondents also claimed that it doesn’t really matter to them whether the information is real or fake. They were only eager to reshare the information, without knowing the genuineness of the information.

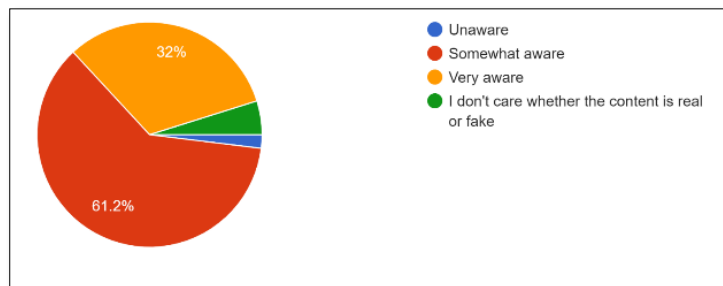


Figure 4: People’s awareness of fake news in social media

Impact of publishing more news related to Covid-19 on social media

Figure 5 shows that a large section of people agree that social media has acted as a catalyst in spreading fear and panic amount of people. Around 59.2 % of respondents said that fake news does spread fear and panic in society. However, 27.2 % were not sure about it. The data collected shows that no one responded that they believe news on social media to a large extent. Only 16.5% respondents informed that they often find themselves trusting the information or news which they find on social media. Also, 20.4% said place trust in the information sought from social media. However, it should be noted that the majority (63.1%) sometimes end up believing news which they get from the social mediums which in fact reiterates that unsuspecting audiences of the social media can fall prey to the fake news and unknowingly be a part of it. Thus, it be inferred that social media does have an impact on the users and does have a role in circulating fake news.

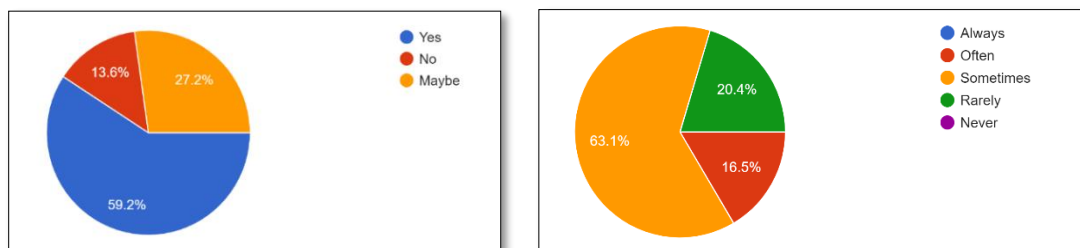


Figure 5: Impact of publishing news related to Covid-19 in social media

People's most 'trusted' sources of information

Figure 6 shows, according to the responses collected the most trusted source of information is WHO followed by Newspapers. According to the responses collected people trust WHO (World Health Organisation) followed by Newspapers. According to the responses collected most of the people always check the original resource while few of them don't bother to check the original resources.

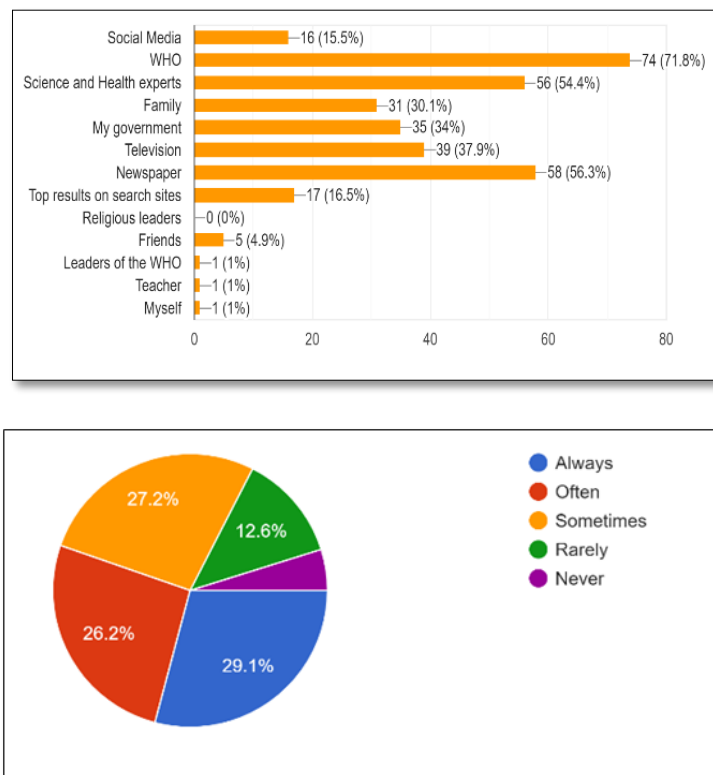


Figure 6: Trusted source of information and cross checking the information

Importance of media literacy in identifying what's genuine and what's fake in terms of news

According to the responses collected Media Literacy plays a vital role in identifying what's genuine and what's fake in terms of news. Majority of the people don't even fact check before passing on the message, while some of them consider social media platforms as one of the main reasons of spreading misinformation. According to the responses collected majority of the people do check if the news is true or fake with the trusted sources like government sites or well-established newspapers and only then forward. And some people get verified from real genuine sources and understand the nature of fake news. Also, people should be made aware of the hazardous impact of spreading false information.

So, here we can see that when the respondents were asked which is their most preferred social media platform they used a lot, most of the respondents said YouTube (60.2%), Instagram (58.3%), Whatsapp (44.7%), Facebook (41.7%), Twitter (41.7%). However, a few respondents also said that they spend their time also on Snapchat, Telegram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Reddit. So, these platforms are also popular among students at Adamas University. But, the most widely used are YouTube, Instagram, Whatsapp, Facebook, and Twitter. The respondents opined that they found most of the fake news regarding covid mostly on Facebook (61.2%) and WhatsApp (67%). Results also revealed that people sometimes believe in social media news, but a trustworthy website remains WHO (71.8%). Most people also ignore the content (51.5%) where COVID-19 information shared by others on social media that they know is false instead of reporting it (43.7%). The study has important implications in devising interventions for people receiving misinformation through social media. One of the respondents informed us that the reason for widespread fake news on social media is that people never give a second thought before sharing content on social media. After receiving content like violent video clips, images, memes, etc. people forget to verify about fake or real and go on sharing them.

4. Discussion

The detection methods which are used to spot misinformation/fake news include content-based methods, context-based methods, and propagation-based methods, which are categorized based on the information they rely on, and early detection methods, which focuses on detection earliness in addition to accuracy, says Liang Wu, Fred Morstatter, Kathleen M. Carley, and Huan Liu. The COVID-19 pandemic puts forth a substantial challenge to the maintenance of global human wellbeing. Not unlike other global challenges, such as anthropogenic global warming, which depends on the actions of citizens of an area. Therefore, the quality of the information to which people are exposed is large. Misinformation about COVID-19 has proliferated on social media (Frenkel, Alba, & Zhong, 2020 0; Russonello, 2020). Experimentally increasing reliance on emotion and decreasing reflective thinking leads

to an increase in belief in false news content (Bago, Rand, & Pennycook, 2019). In addition, we gain insight into the spread of COVID-19 misinformation by drawing on recent research that focuses specifically on the sharing of fake and misleading news (Pennycook et al., 2020). Fake news challenges human communication, producing tension, misunderstanding, and disbelief. In this age of digital communication and social networking, it gets new momentum worldwide. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the world is in grief with half a million dead; the healthcare systems across the globe are in disarray. In such a situation, online fake news poses a new threat to public health communication as more people now depend on the internet to get health-related information (Mayhew 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) states that the pandemic is accompanied by an “infodemic” (i.e., information epidemic). While true information helps to mitigate the pandemic-led crisis, false information may intensify it. For instance, a single medicine-related fake news claimed at least 800 lives and 5800 more had to admit to hospitals (Coleman, 2020).

5. Conclusion

The results obtained from the survey clearly indicate that social media platforms do contribute to the spread of fake news and the students have indicated that though they are avid users of social media, they hardly believe what they see on social media. They always look up trustworthy websites and other authentic sources for getting important information. In many cases students accepted that quite often they might fall in the trap of misleading sources and clickbait information and it was very prominent during Covid 19 pandemic. The pandemic was a crisis and it was hard to find authentic information at that time thus it became very difficult to differentiate between real and fake information. The times were very uncertain and none knew what is happening, so from wherever people got any information about the virus or its prevention they believed them to be true. Avid users of social media are prone to the spread of fake news as they are more likely to trust on information generated on such platforms. However, there are members of the younger generation who despite being passionate about social media and aware of their surroundings and made sure to cross check facts from official sources like WHO and other government websites. They rechecked information before sharing it with others and depended on newspapers, mainstream media for authentic information. Social media in itself is not a harbinger of fake news, its only users of the social media who knowingly or unknowingly help in its transmission. Social media could play a positive role in reception of information which can be circulated to a wide audience owing to its factor of easy accessibility, immediacy and popularity among the younger generation. As suggested by the respondents, media literacy is very essential and rudimentary in this media prominent age so that all users of the social media have knowledge of fake news phenomena and measures to bust it.

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