

COVID-19 and Fake News: Knowledge Assessment and Discrepancy of Social Media Users in the UAE.

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Abstract: Fake news and misinformation are everywhere nowadays, including news sources and social media. During the Covid-19 pandemic, people rely on news, especially news coming to them from social media. The study's objective is to understand why and how people rely on social media sources during the Covid-19 pandemic and what they do with misinformation and fake news related to the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition to that, the study aims to determine the essential issues and items related to Covid-19 among social media users.

The study will be relying on several mass communication theoretical concepts, such as agenda-setting theory and uses and gratifications theory. The study's methods will include a structured online survey distributed among social media users to understand the reasons for their consumption of news on Covid-19 and their level of trust in social media news.

Data showed that almost 64% of the respondents get their covid-19 news from social media in a daily basis. While in regards of the perception of participants concerning the fake news circulating in social media about Covid-19 pandemic, results showed that almost half (46%) of the respondents think that information shared about the number of infections and death due to covid-19 sometimes were fake and misinformation. In addition to that, data shows that more than half (87%) of the participants claimed that they check for accuracy before sharing any news on social media.

Key Words: Fake News, Misinformation, Agenda Setting, New Media, Social Media, Trust

Introduction

The transformation of traditional media into new media has brought tremendous changes to people's everyday lives. Most people use social media to get their information, spend their time, and check their news. Through social media, users see news alongside updates from friends, relatives, and acquaintances via comments and posts from influencers, famous people, and celebrities. The new technologies revolution converged into every detail of the people's lives, from traditional media to social media. The nations started focusing more on their digital lives, making everything necessary as essential survival items (Darwish, 2017).

Fake news has interfered with many aspects of life, and it misleads us to many incorrect ways of thinking. Many people use misinformation to gain and get what they need and what they want. In addition to that, fake news, misinformation and disinformation affect every part

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of life, including political and news sharing websites. In a global pandemic, which is a health issue, fake news and misinformation can be dangerous, yet the pandemic's pace makes the people rely on social media. Updated information is needed.

Literature Review

To understand the topic in a better way, it is needed to understand the concepts better. Some many terms and concepts can refer to fake news. Misinformation is misleading or inaccurate information created deliberately and propagated intentionally or accidentally (Wu et al., 2019). To push web traffic to the site, fake news websites publish untrue or fake facts. The aim is to deceive readers into believing the stories and by ads to make money. Also, to distribute fake news, social media platforms are used (What is Fake News? 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic breakage has caused considerable damage in many aspects of life, including health damage, economic damage, and many more. The subject of Covid-19 is vulnerable to misinformation and disinformation all over the world, as inaccurate or misleading articles on this subject are released. This is not only for individuals' lives in specific but for whole populations and the political system since this misleading information will have negative implications (Palade & Balaban, 2020). Misleading information and fake news will cause massive damage to the audience and social media users.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a crucial case. It has become a matter of life and death, and the climate provided by the pandemic has produced a multitude of falsehoods (Pennycook et al., 2020). There are many cases regarding fake news and COVID-19, in addition to many cases of misinformation and disinformation. The National Emergency Crisis and Disasters Management Authority (NCEMA) tries to refute fake news in social media. There was a case recently in the UAE, which was about fake news concerning five family members' deaths related to COVID-19. It was misinformation circulated on social media (Zaatari, 2020). In a broadcast, it was discovered and mentioned that the news circulated in social media was misleading and that the reporter and his interviewee were arrested. The interviewee noted that his entire family had the Covid-19 virus, and that was completely misleading information. (Maxwell, 2020).

Research Problem and Objective:

Fake news has been a massive problem for many previous years, and it still appears nowadays. The fake news phenomenon has affected many people, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social media platforms have a huge part in spreading fake news among the audience, creating trust issues regarding news sharing in social media. This issue affects the social media platform users, as they have a massive role in and connection to the fake news phenomena. This study will explore the relationship between social media platforms and the fake news phenomena during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United Arab Emirates.

Research Questions

As stated earlier, one of the objectives of this study is to understand whether people trust or distrust the news sources in social media during Covid-19 pandemic and their news consumption on social media related with the pandemic. In this regard, the study aims to understand whether there is an impact of news source on Covid-19 information and whether the source being a public figure, or news sharing account in social media is going to make a difference. The study also aims to explore the important COVID-19 issues of social media users. Thus, the RQs of the study are:

RQ1: What are the important COVID-19 pandemic issues for social media users?

RQ2: To what extent do social media users depend on social media as a news source for COVID-19?

RQ3: What is the role of news sources in creating trust in social media during COVID-19?

Theoretical Framework

This study will rely on several mass communications theories, of which one of them being the agenda-setting theory by media scholars Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald Shaw. They performed the foundational principle of agenda-setting theory in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in 1968. The theory's fundamental principles are as follows: a compilation of a set of news such as events, problems, and issues, where the journalists and press decide what to cover and when (Almistadi, 2014). This theory is related to the topic because social media sets the agendas to what they think is essential to the public, creating a margin of error, leading to misinformation and fake news, especially during the coronavirus pandemic.

The second theory that will be used is the uses and gratifications theory. This theory focuses on highlighting the adaptive opportunities for mass media users. The audience may understand or might receive different meanings from the media. Consequently, it is argued that correspondence behavior is better understood as a feature of the uses to which any person may put it, as well as the resultant advantages emerging from the usage of the media (Chaney, 1972). Uses and gratification theory will help understand why people rely on social media for news and for news around the COVID-19 pandemic.

The third theory this thesis will use is the new media theory, which is the theory theorizes the effects of the developments of technology: from the modern sociopolitical outlines adopted by communication that is computer-mediated, to the aesthetic and cultural meaning of digital society (Livingstone, 1999). Livingstone (1999) stated that adopting this more inclusive definition of digital media enables audiences to get a broader understanding of what is new. Next, and most simply, we see a large multiplication in media that are privately owned.

Methodology

The quantitative research method will include a structured online survey that will be distributed among social media users to understand their social media news consumption on Covid-19 and their trust to social media news. The sample of the quantitative survey will be simple random sampling, which means each user of the social media users will have an equal chance of being selected for the survey. The survey will include 300 participants which they are the social media users to fairly test the level of trustiness of the social media news.

Results and findings:

Table.1

		n. and %
Gender	Male	(111) 35.63%
	Female	(63) 64.37 %
Age groups	18-35	(95) 55 %
	36-50	(60) 35 %
	≥51	(15) 9%
Scientific qualifications	PhD	(4) 2.3%
	Master	(28) 16.7%

	Bachelor	(106) 61.2%
	High school	(31) 18.50%
	Secondary school	(1) 0.5%

A quantitative survey was created using SurveyMonkey to understand public intake of social media information about Covid-19, their trust in social media news, and counting fake news related to the Covid-19 crisis. The sample included 174 respondents, 35.6% of them males and 64.3% females. Moreover, 55% of the subjects were in the 18-35 age group, 35% were in the 36-50 age group, and only 9% were in the 51+ age group. Most of the participants have a bachelor's degree with a percentage of 61.2%, furthermore, few of the participants have PhD, while only 0.5% have a secondary school degree, and 18.5% have a high school degree.

Dependency on social media as a news source for COVID-19

To answer the RQ1, about the dependency level on social media to follow news concerning the pandemic, a special focus was put on participants' particularities of use (the social networks

most used and the frequency of use). The results are included in the figure 1.

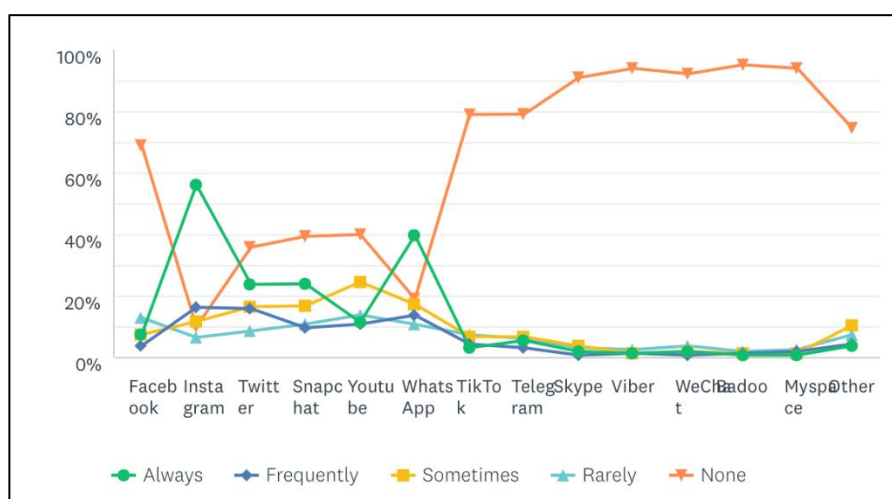


Figure 1 social media platforms used by respondents to get news about the Covid-19 pandemic.

Data showed that almost 64% of the respondents get their covid-19 news from social media in a daily basis. The pattern through which information about covid-19 is spread across social media platforms is normally uniform. Social media platforms used to get information about covid-19 includes Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, YouTube, WhatsApp, Tik Tok, Telegram, Skype, Viber, WeChat, Badoo, Myspace, and many others, but according to the survey results (fig. 2), participants always use Instagram (79%), WhatsApp (40%), snapchat and twitter (23%). Facebook is rarely with only (12%). Most of the participants almost never use Viber, Badoo or WeChat.

Main issues related to COVID-19 pandemic, followed by social media users

In this part, the author is enquiring about the most important issues related to Covid-19 pandemic that social media users follow the most (RQ2); a question about the perception of the survey participants towards fake news spread via social networks and social media platforms were designed the results are in figure3 as follows:

Do you think that some of the following published news related to COVID-19 on social media, were fake?

Answered: 172 Skipped: 2

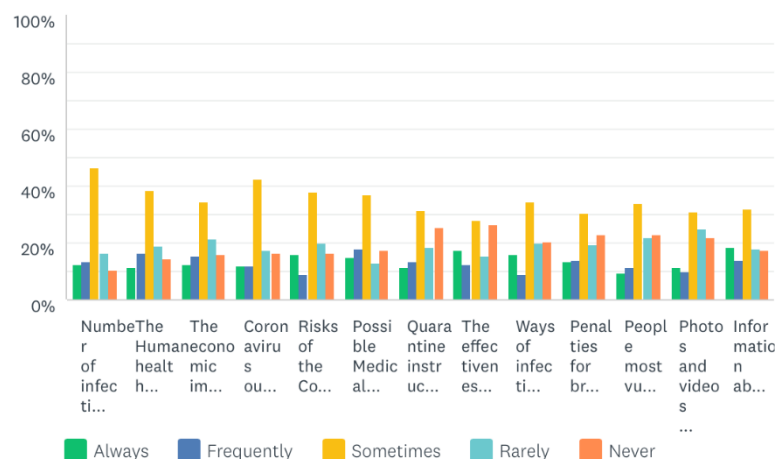


Figure2. perceptions about fake news in Social Media

In regards of the perception of participants concerning the fake news circulating in social media about Covid-19 pandemic, results showed that (46%) of the respondents think that information shared about the number of infections and death due to covid-19 sometimes were fake. In addition to that, almost (42.2%) of the participants believe that coronavirus (Covid-19) outreach origins were also sometimes fake. On the other hand, (26%) of the participants think that the effectiveness of wearing masks and gloves are never false and most of times true. While only (11.4%) believe that the instructions of quarantine are always incorrect information and never correct information, and (26.3%) of the participants believe that quarantine instruction are never fake.

The ways of infection transmission seemed to be a bit vague during the very first months of Covid-19 as not too much information about the virus were known, so (34.7%) of the participants think that the ways of infection transmission were false and fake as it was unclear. In addition to the possible medical treatments also had a percentage of (36.9%), both percentages were close to each other. Furthermore, (38.6%) of the participants believe that the human health implications regarding Covid-19 were also inaccurate information.

The role of news sources in creating trust in social media during COVID-19

Questions measuring the credibility of social media (RQ3) were included in the survey; the findings are summarized in figure 3 and 4 as follows:

Do you check for accuracy before sharing news on social media?

Answered: 171 Skipped: 3

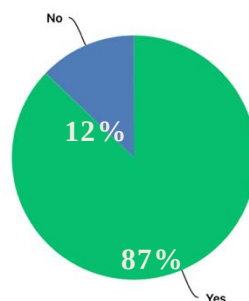


Figure3. Accuracy before sharing news on social media

Data shows that (87%) of the participants claimed that they check for accuracy before sharing any news on social media. On the other hand, only (12%) of them do not check for accuracy before sharing any news on social networks platforms.

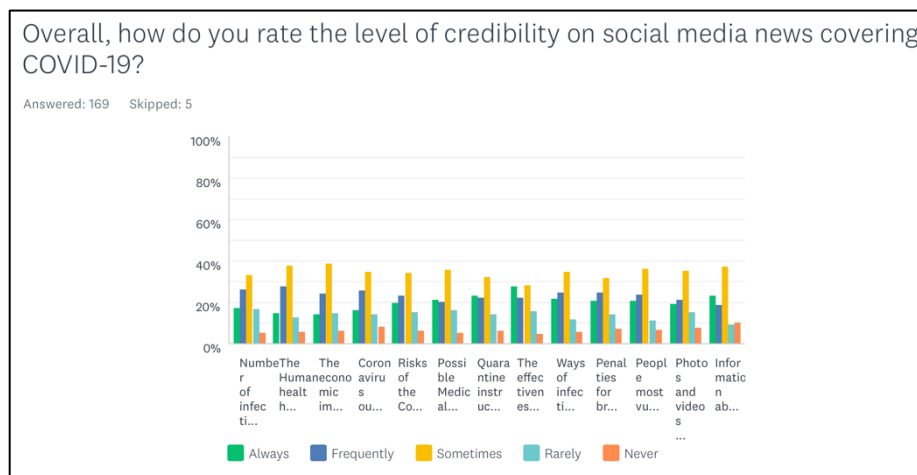


Figure 4. Credibility on social media news covering covid-19

As shown in figure 4, (39%) of the participants think that the economic implications of the virus have average credibility; in addition to that, (37%) of them feel the same about the Covid-19 vaccine information. (28%) of the respondents think that news related to the effectiveness of wearing masks and gloves are extremely high on credibility, while only (4%) think that it is extremely low.

Discussions

The results indicate that participants receive their daily news about Covid-19 mainly from the social media platforms but from the official government social media account. In addition to that, most of them believe that some of the news they get from the social media platforms are fake as it contains misinformation and disinformation. These findings are in line with what was indicated by O'Connor & Murphy, (2020); they claimed that during the early stages of covid-19 in the world, scientists and researchers could not provide all the information required by society; it created an informational gap, which facilitates the quick spread of fake news. Besides, according to Van Der Linden et al (2020), false information about Covid-19 on social media has accelerated globally; the information may be brought about by their inability to identify whether the information provided is credible or not. It may be caused by the false information that they get from fake sources. Fake information is perceived as readers' minds polluter, making them mixed specially when compared to news provided by credible sources, such as the Ministry of Health, and from National Crisis and Emergency Management Authority...etc. Nekliudov et al. (2020), states that media consumption does affect the general idea about covid-19. As the results indicated, that the most and frequently used social media platform is Instagram, which allows for posting pictures, videos and illustrations with the ability to write a caption about it.

Moreover, the results contribute to a clearer understanding of finding out fake news in social media during Covid-19 pandemic. It is found that most people check for accuracy before sharing any news on social media platforms, but they believe that most of the news spread on social media platforms regarding Covid-19 have credibility while few of the sources does not have credibility. Participants claim checking for credibility and accuracy

before they share any news regarding Covid-19 pandemic, by visiting the official government social media accounts such as Ministry of Health, World Health Organization and National Crisis and Emergency Management Authority in UAE; this confirms a high level of awareness of the participants and their non-drift towards fake or incorrect information. Similar results were found by (Pennycook et al. (2020); they showed that the sharing reasons could vary from one individual to another, whereas some individuals check for news accuracy. Resulting that most of the social media users check for accuracy from the official government social media accounts before sharing any news, regarding Covid-19.

The studied sample seems to be aware of how to distinguish between fake news and true information. This could be logic due to the education level of participants (university students), and due to the media literacy, that they have regarding the Covid-19 news. This answers the third research question, about the perception of the sample concerning the credibility of news on social media regarding Covid-19.

Conclusion

To summarize all of the above, the findings indicate that participants receive their daily news about Covid-19 mainly from the social media platform; they believe that some of the news they are getting is fake and contains misinformation and misinformation. In addition to that, some participants believe that they would encounter fake news when using the social media as a news source, but on the other hand, some of the participants would use fact-checking websites to check the credibility of some news sharing social media accounts.

It is found in the results, that in regards of the social media type, a few of the social media platforms such as Skype, Viber, WeChat, Badoo, Myspace, are not used among the participants. It may be the reason behind having some specific news regarding covid-19.

Certain topics related to covid-19 pandemic interest respondents specifically, such as the number of infections and deaths daily, the human health complications, the effectiveness of wearing masks and gloves, ways of infection transmission and, information about Covid-19 vaccine. Participants claim that even though they mainly rely on social media as a source of information gathered during the Covid-19 pandemic, they appear aware of its limits, which is why they set out to check facts and research the accuracy of news sources; the respondents' awareness was therefore demonstrated.

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