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Dissemination of Fake News and Information Disorder in Malaysia: A Descriptive Analysis

Azman Mat Isa[1], Norizan Anwar[1], Ahmad Zam Hariro Samsudin[1], Muhammad Rosyihan Hendrawan[2]

[1] Faculty of Information Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA Selangor Branch, Puncak Perdana Campus, 40170 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia
[2] Faculty of Administrative Science, Universitas Brawijaya, Malang, Indonesia

azmanmi@uitm.edu.my, norizan8027@uitm.edu.my, ahmadzam@uitm.edu.my, mrhendrawan@ub.ac.id
Tel: 060379622067

Abstract

Dissemination of fake news and information disorder became more apparent in Malaysia since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study aims to determine the factors of dissemination of fake news and information disorder which would help curbing the unhealthy practice from spreading in the society. No study on this issue was found. Quantitative methodology was adopted 303 respondents in the Klang Valley participated in the survey. Findings show that rules must be spelled out in detail to encounter the problem. Demographic and culture, knowledge and awareness are essential too. It is recommended that information and digital literacy must be inculcated to enable the society encountering fake news and information disorder.

Keywords: Fake news; Information disorder; Dissemination; Malaysia.

1.0 Introduction

There has never been a situation this generation experienced in the modern world when the Corona virus disease 2019 (COVID-19) emerged November 2019 which originally started in Wuhan, China. More than a third of the global population is on lockdown or some form of restriction (Kaplan, Frias & McFall-Johnsen, 2020) especially in most countries which are badly affected by COVID-19, including Malaysia. Despite tremendous effort by the government through frontliners treating and curbing the spread of the pandemic, there has been unwelcomed spread of fake news on social media by the public. Since the beginning of the pandemic in Malaysia, the Ministry of Health constantly updated its portal combatting fake news which started on 28 January 2020 way ahead of the implementation of Movement Control Order (MCO) which began on 18 March 2020. Aside, National Security Council (NSC) and Polis DiRaja Malaysia (PDRM) also issued stark warnings to those who spread fake news. Ministry of Communication and Multimedia Malaysia through national news agency, BERNAMA has been publishing compilation of fake news on daily basis. Indeed, it is worrying as fake news would lead to panic and chaotic situation among the public especially among those badly affected by MCO and the pandemic. Unfortunately, fake news has become part of new normal in the post-COVID-19 era.

For instance, on 19 April 2020, BERNAMA reports that the Inland Revenue Board (LHDN) denies claims that money not claimed by Bantuan Prihatin Nasional (BPN) recipients under the first phase because they do not have bank accounts will be forfeited if asked for

under the second phase. LHDN clarified that the recipients concerned can ask for cash payments at BSN branches from April 17 until Dec 31, 2020. This fake news would lead to worry and perhaps, panic among the recipients in B40 group. Understandably this group is the most badly suffered during MCO, therefore BPN would be a crucial source of income to help them undergoing this difficult phase. There is other fake news on the very same day which, Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) denies issuing a message asking for personal details of students for Bantuan Prihatin Nasional (BPN) transactions. Scammers are lurking for their prospective victims by disseminating misinformation. More surprising there was a former deputy minister and a member of Parliament who disseminated fake news on Facebook allegedly claimed that the Sultan Iskandar Building (BSI) in Johor Bahru turned chaotic after large crowds of Malaysians returned home from Singapore (BERNAMA, 2020). The consequence of such fake news would be gravely shall there were no immediate action taken by relevant authorities.

Despite the damaging effects of the spread of fake news on online social media, it is largely not known as to why people continue to share fake news (Talwar et al., 2019). The threat of fake news is quite imminent as it possible for firms, governments and even individuals to generate and disseminate information or news to serve their own agendas to a large audience quickly through social media (Chayko, 2017). In addition, fake news could be a result of information disorder whereby mis-information, dis-information and mal- information might lead to harmful consequences (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). To this end, this study attempts to determine the factors why people engaged in spreading fake news and information disorder.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Fake News
Acceptance of fake news by demographics and culture on social media found that culture has the most impact on the spread of fake news. This is followed by age. However, gender and education do not pose great influence on spread of fake news (Rampersad & Althiyabi, 2020). Meanwhile, another study Talwar et al. (2019) explored several factors that contribute to spread of fake news. A research framework was developed based on these two models.
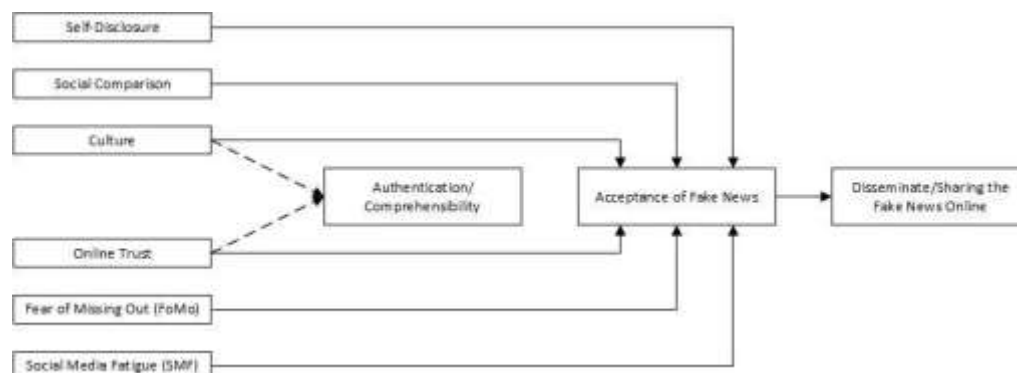

Fig 1: Research framework adapted from Talwar (2019) and Rampersad & Althiyabi (2020).

2.2 Information disorder
Information disorder comprises mis-information whereby when false information is shared, but no harm is meant; dis-information is when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm and; mal-information is when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

2.3 Factors of Fake News and Information Disorder
Self-disclosure
Self-disclosure means sharing of personal information with others (Gibbs et al., 2006). There are many reasons why one shares information either about oneself or information in his or her possession. Popularity has been identified as a driving force behind online self-disclosure (Christofedes at al., 2009). One would share whatever news thought to sensational and exciting without being concern for its being fake or true as long as it attains attention of others.

2.3.1 Social comparison
Comparing oneself with others results in a drive to enhance oneself what else on social media platforms which provide new and exciting means for people to practice social comparisons online (Cramer et al., 2016). It has become a trend where people share travel stories and information about impressive purchases with online friends on social media (Lin et al., 2018). Social comparison would lead to gain social approval and build positive image should ones realized the importance of authenticating the news before sharing. Social comparison is also related to academic background which makes them more concern about accepting and disseminating news on social media (Shuhidan et al., 2021; 2019;).

2.3.2 Culture

Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another (Hofstede, 1991). This concept is adopted as it provides clear, useful, communicable and widely employed dimension of culture including power-distance; individualism versus collectivism; femininity versus masculinity and; uncertainty avoidance.

2.3.3 Online trust
Trust is an ethical issue and a social phenomenon that has to be studied at individual, interpersonal, inter-organizational and systematic level (Lane, 1998 & Fukuyama, 1995). In other words, trust is the willingness to believe someone based upon positive expectation from his or her past behaviour (Mayer et al., 1995). However, worth noting that trust is always in a circle with risk and uncertainty (Isa, 2009). Meanwhile, online trust has emerged as an important aspect in a world where content is freely generated by users (DuBois et al., 2011). There is not many research investigated relationship between trust and spread of fake news, hence this study attempts to find whether there is a significant relationship between the two.

2.3.4 Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)
FoMO is a psychological reaction, like anxiety, that individuals may experience when they feel excluded from their social or peer groups. Therefore, seeking popularity and sense of belongingness are considered to be key drivers of FoMO (Beyens et al., 2016).

2.3.5 Social Media Fatigue (SMF)
SMF is a subjective experience that comprises negative emotions such as anger, disappointment, tiredness, exhaustion, and reduced energy, resulting from continuous use of social media (Ravindran et al., 2014). Understandable, this leads to information overload which includes fake news, misinformation and disinformation. SMF also leads to more errors and negative outcomes like confusion and frustration (Logan et al., 2018)

2.3.6 Comprehensibility
Comprehensibility refers information that is understandable and informative with breadth and depth (Teng et al., 2017) and pertains to the degree of difficulty that communication receivers report in attempting to understand a message (Kang, 2010). In the context of fake news, it refers to the degree of facticity (Rampersad & Althiyabi, 2020), which would enable identification of information disorder.

3.0 Methodology
This study adopts quantitative method. A comprehensive literature review enabled identification a research framework model (Fig. 1). Subsequently, based on models by Talwar (2019) and Rampersad & Althiyabi (2020) a questionnaire was adapted in order to capture data on respondents' knowledge, awareness, skills, action and so forth in relation to the field of study.

4.0 Findings
This section discusses the findings from this study by explaining the demographic profile, and descriptive analysis conducted to identify dissemination of fake news and information disorder.

4.1 Common Method Variances
The data collection for this study is from a single source, i.e., all questions in independent and dependent variables are answered individually by respondents. Due to that, a common method bias analysis was conducted to measure the threat in the dataset. The Harman single factor test was executed and the results showed that when all items were constrained to one factor, the total variance explained was 19.05%. Common method biases are normally present when the total variance explained surpasses 50%. Based on the result, it can be safely assumed that the dataset is free from common method bias.

4.2 Demographic Profile
Table 1.0 presents the demographic profile of the respondents. Out of the 303 respondents, 86 were females and 217 were males. The respondents were aged between 15 to 64 years old, with a majority, i.e., 191 and the lowest, i.e., 3 of them were aged 55 to 64 years old. Meanwhile, 274 of the respondents are Malay and the minority is Indian, i.e., 1. For highest education level, 72% are bachelor's degree and the lowest percentage is 1% which doctorate degree and SPM/GCE respectively.

Table 1. Demographic Profile

		Frequency	Percentage (%)
1. Gender	Male	86	28%
	Female	217	72%
2. Age (years)	15-24	191	63%
	25-34	51	17%
	35-44	21	7%
	45-54	37	12%
	55-64	3	1%
	65 - ...	0	0%

3. Ethnic	Chinese	2	1%
	Iban	9	3%
	Indian	1	0%
	Kadazan	5	2%
	Malay	274	90%
	Others	12	4%
4. Highest Education Level	UPSR	0	0%
	PMR/SRP	0	0%
	SPM/GCE	2	1%
	STPM	11	4%
	Certificate	5	2%
	Diploma/ Professional Certificate	40	13%
	Bachelor's degree	219	72%
	Master's degree	24	8%
	Doctorate degree	2	1%

4.3 Descriptive Analysis

A descriptive analysis of each variable used in this study is shown in Table 2. A Likert scale ranging between 1 to 5, i.e. 1 is strongly disagree and 5 is strongly agree was used. The results show that the mean value for the disseminate and sharing the fake news online, authentication and comprehensibility, culture: uncertainty avoidance and social media fatigue (SMF) is 3.40, 3.25, 3.74 and 3.24 respectively which indicating that many respondents agree to all the variables/dimensions. Meanwhile respondents feel neutral for acceptance of fake news, i.e., 2.80, self-disclosure, i.e., 2.48, social comparison, i.e., 2.89, culture: masculinity/femininity, i.e., 3.05, culture: power distance, i.e., 2.31, online trust, i.e., 3.08 and fear of missing out (FoMO), i.e., 2.59.

Table 2. Overall Average for Each Variable

Overall Average of …	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness
… Disseminate & Sharing the Fake News Online	3.40	1.116	-0.318
… Acceptance of Fake News	2.80	1.021	0.074
… Authentication & Comprehensibility	3.25	0.969	-0.178
… Self-Disclosure	2.48	1.093	0.356
… Social comparison	2.89	1.096	0.015
… Culture			
Masculinity/Femininity	3.05	1.148	-0.112
Power distance	2.31	1.134	0.517
Uncertainty Avoidance	3.74	0.931	-0.48
… Online trust	3.08	0.896	-0.071
… Fear of missing out (FoMO)	2.59	1.133	0.221
… Social media fatigue (SMF)	3.24	1.028	-0.087

5.0 Discussion

This research was conducted involving samples in the Klang Valley which embraces Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya and the state of Selangor. With level of education ranging from minimal SPM (Malaysia Education Certificate) to highest PhD, the findings showed that their respond to fake news and information disorder is of value in curbing dissemination of fake news and information disorder.

The highest mean value is the aspect of culture of avoiding uncertainty proves that respondents believe that it is important to have rules spelled out in detail so that people always know what they are expected to do. In addition, they also believe that people should avoid making changes when their outcomes are uncertain. They also believe that it is better to live in a society with specific rules and regulations as opposed to a more flexible society. This is consistent with a study by Rampersad and Althiyabi (2020) on fake news acceptance by demographics and culture on social media discovered that culture has the most significant impacts on the spread of fake news. Age also has greater influence but gender and education do not pose a great influence on the acceptance of fake news in particular cultures. Meanwhile, the second highest mean value is dissemination and sharing the fake news online. Respondents share and recommend news of interest, video and links that they received on social media. In fact, they even follow views and comments that are made on social media. This shows that they are selective about what news or information that they received and shared with others which reflects their level of information and digital literacy is higher perhaps due to their academic background which makes them more concern about accepting and disseminating news on social media (Shuhidan et al., 2021; 2019;). The third highest mean value is authentication and comprehensibility. It reflects that they measured and verify the news that they consume through social media. Hence, they avoid spreading fake news and information disorder. Lastly, they also agreed that SMF affected them when the amount of information available on social media makes me tense, overwhelmed, exhausted and even requires them to take effort to concentrate in my spare time after using social media. SMF also leads to more errors and negative outcomes like confusion and frustration (Logan et al., 2018). This would be of great concern as anxiety and depression become more worrying in Malaysia. Fatigue users can be expected to be less inclined to authenticate news before sharing hence increase the potential spreading fake news.

On the hand, respondents showed their disapproval on culture in the aspect of power distance as they stressed that political leaders should be careful not to ask the opinions of citizens too frequently, otherwise the leader might appear to be weak and incompetent.

Arguably, the academic background of respondents determines their stance. Findings also show that respondents are very careful about self-disclosure as they did not reveal a lot of personal information and their presence at any place on social media. Indeed, this awareness is essential in safeguarding themselves and their families. Another finding worth noting is in the aspect of FoMO where the respondents showed that they are not fear or worries about their friends' experiences and achievements. This is a good indicator that our society is not prone to FoMO as a study by University of Trent Nottingham (2016) found that it made people more reckless online, making them vulnerable to harassment, critical comments and gossip.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Dissemination of fake news and information disorder is no longer seasonal. The pandemic COVID-19 is just the peak but it has become part of the new normal in today's complex digital world. Although this study shows not those worrying findings, the results might be different if respondents are from different demographic and culture in the society. Hence, the findings cannot be generalized. Worth noting that demographic, culture, knowledge and awareness are central to the way how ones encountered fake news and information disorder. The findings also would be beneficial for the government to formulate and implement comprehensive policy on fake news and information disorder. It is also essential to educate the public about the danger of spreading fake news and disinformation which is just like wild fire. In doing so, more effort must be channeled to increase information and digital literacy to enhance awareness and ethical use of social media hence minimize dissemination of fake news and information disorder. It should be a continuous effort to educate the community until curbing and ignoring fake news and information disorder becomes a culture in the society. Limitation to the research was limited duration and difficulty to get respondents during MCO.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This research paper contributes to the field of Library and Information Management

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