The Impact of Social Media on Youth in the UAE during COVID-19.

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Abstract: Social media platforms have become popular sources of information, especially during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the spread of misinformation and disinformation on these platforms has been a significant issue. The youth in the UAE, who constitute the majority of the population, were studied to explore how they used social media during the pandemic and how this contributed to spreading misinformation. It is argued that the increased social media use among youth during the pandemic led to the spread of misinformation, causing distress and anxiety. However, the youth took action to fact-check and verify false information. To combat information disorder, education about persuasive techniques to spread misinformation and access to fact-checking tools are necessary, and so is diversifying media exposure to minimize the impact of filter bubbles.

Keywords: COVID-19; misinformation; fake news; youth; UAE; fact checking

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Introduction

In recent years, social media has become a significant source of information, while the use of traditional forms of media, such as newspapers, magazines, and radio, has decreased considerably. Many people now have smartphones that allow them to access online media, and social media platforms have become popular sources of information, especially during crises. As of April 2020, Facebook had 2.5 billion followers compared to YouTube's two billion (Nguyen & Catalan, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, people were eager to stay informed about the latest developments, but users were at risk of being misinformed or disinformed about COVID-19 updates.

Misinformation and disinformation are closely related terms that were characteristic of COVID-19 updates during the pandemic. The former describes the unintentional spread of inaccurate or misleading information, while the latter occurs when false information is deliberately disseminated (Tumber & Waisbord, 2021). Despite concerns about false or misleading information regarding COVID-19, a study in six countries (Argentina, Germany, South Korea, Spain, the UK, and the US) argues that it is a minority who claim to have come across large amounts of such information from any source or platform; "bottom-up" misinformation from ordinary people was the most common type identified, with social media and messaging apps being the most concerning platforms. While worry about false information from news and government sources is less widespread, the research also shows that a significant majority are still concerned about it (Nielsen et al., 2020).

Therefore, it would be critical to identify the factors contributing to misinformation to prevent such occurrences. During uncertain times, people often try to make sense of situations by sharing information they come across (Ben Messaoud, 2021). This can lead to information being spread quickly, without verifying the credibility of the source, due to people's anxiety about staying informed. There are many other factors that contribute to this, highlighting the importance of researching misinformation during the pandemic. In the Arab region, research reveals that social media usage rates are very high among all social groups, especially the youth (Radcliffe & Abuhmaid, 2021), and especially in well-connected states such as the UAE. However, many users were exposed to deliberate as well as unintentional misinformation, thus creating the need for research on misinformation resulting from social media, especially during pandemics.

Research problem

This study's research problem is to explore the effect of exposure to mis- and disinformation on social media sites, especially during the peak of a glocal crisis like COVID-19. There is evidence that social media users are generally exposed to misinformation and this exposure could increase during crises as users crave information and tend to consume more news and information during crises (Nguyen & Catalan, 2020; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). However, many users were exposed to deliberate as well as unintentional misinformation, thus creating the need for research on misinformation resulting from social media, especially

during the peak of the global pandemic. The study's primary aim is to explore the effects of disseminating mis- and disinformation on social media platforms during the pandemic, taking the youth in the UAE, under the age of 35, as a topical case study since they constitute nearly half of the population in the UAE.

Study objectives

The study hypothesizes that the heightened use of social media platforms during the COVID-19 Crisis contributed significantly to the high rate of misinformation concerning the pandemic. It questions *how the youth in the UAE used social media as a source of information during the pandemic, how this use contributed to spreading misinformation, and the youth's response to various forms of misinformation*.

Study significance

The study contributes to shedding new light on the role of social media in spreading (mis)information. Although various regulations control how information is shared on social media, misinformation indicates that there could be gaps in such laws. Social media users may benefit from this study since they will awaken to the high rate of wrong or false information on such sites and be more careful when using them. Another contribution of this study is that it departs from previous studies that typically analyzed content (e.g., Khalifa et al., 2020; O'Connor & Ayad, 2021) or producers of it (Perreault & Perreault, 2021) as discussed below; instead, it uses qualitative research to delve into how users interact with (mis)information. By examining the experiences of users, this study shifts the focus from the content and its creators to the audience.

Literature Review

Social media usage has increased rapidly over the years, especially during the pandemic, as people seek to socialize, share, and obtain information. Facebook was the most preferred platform, with 2.5 billion users as of April 2020 (Clement, 2020); the high usage of such sites has led to concerns about misinformation, but research suggests that many are confident about Coronavirus-related information published on Facebook (Khalifa et al., 2020; O'Connor & Ayad, 2021; Kalliny, 2021). Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are popular social media platforms in the Arab world, with Facebook having the highest usage rates; WhatsApp and YouTube were also commonly used, with WhatsApp being used for business communication during the pandemic, while Snapchat was preferred in Saudi Arabia (Radcliffe & Abuhmaid, 2021; Kalliny, 2021).

During the pandemic, social media caused an "infodemic" of inaccurate COVID-19 information. The high demand for updates and sharing experiences on social media platforms led to the spread of fake news. This was due to the increased usage of digital media and the far-reaching impacts of COVID-19 compared to previous pandemics (Yustitia & Asharianto, 2020; Gabarron et al., 2021; Ben Messaoud, 2021). The infodemic resulted from both fake

and trusted news sources claiming to be experts. Even reputable media outlets sometimes spread misinformation, adding to the confusion for social media users (Cushion et al., 2022).

Misinformation is prevalent due to the ease of access and affordability of social media platforms. These platforms promote uncontrolled information dissemination that is not subjected to criticism (Tumber & Waisbord, 2021). Social media actors prioritize financial gains over data quality, compromising information credibility, and as a result, many users consume misleading content, which they may tend to trust due to high viewership (Nguyen & Catalan, 2020). Moreover, people tend to spread information during uncertain situations, leading to a high rate of misinformation during the pandemic. Limited knowledge of the subject also made people vulnerable to consuming misleading content (Tumber & Waisbord, 2021; De Bruin et al.; 2021; Gabarron et al., 2021; Kalliny, 2021).

Mainstream media outlets, meanwhile, struggle to counter bias and ethical standards, allowing misleading content to spread. Thus, it was challenging to dispute misinformation related to commonly-held beliefs and conspiracy theories (Yustitia & Asharianto, 2020; Chauvet & Marty, 2017; Freiling et al., 2021). For instance, a popular conspiracy theory linked the 5G network to the spread of COVID-19, leading to the destruction of 5G phone masts in several countries and substantial economic losses. The theory was spread by anti-5G groups taking advantage of the crisis. The World Health Organization (WHO) refuted the claim, but some mainstream media outlets' focus on scoops at the expense of accuracy contributed to its spread (Cushion et al., 2022; Nguyen & Catalan, 2020). Conspiracy theories also included the idea that UV light and Hydroxychloroquine could cure the disease and that people in hot areas couldn't get infected. In fact, former President Donald Trump spread the misconception regarding Hydroxychloroquine. Thus, misinformation during the pandemic was rooted in controversial and unproven ideas, such as anti-5G, climate change denial, anti-vaccination, and flat earth theories (Enders et al., 2023; Freiling et al., 2021; Yustitia & Asharianto, 2020). On the other hand, O'Connor & Ayad (2021) highlight that Arabic-speaking individuals were susceptible to the high rates of misinformation since there were several Facebook pages and groups that used the language and that were spreading misinformation on the Coronavirus. It is worth noting that high social media usage rates were directly proportional to widespread misinformation on such platforms (Avaaz, 2020; O'Connor & Ayad, 2021). Consequently, the high spread of misinformation on social media led many people to lose trust in such sites in searching for reliable COVID-19 information (Lu et al., 2021; Khalifa et al., 2020; Overgaard, 2021).

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted the mental health of young people, as news coverage can be overwhelming (Young Minds, 2020). Biased information also leads to social stigma and adverse mental health effects (De Bruin et al., 2021; Zheng et al., 2020). Automation detection and fact-checking can curb misinformation, which is why social media platforms have doubled fact-checking and labeling efforts. The legislation also plays a significant role in the fight against misinformation, such as in Germany, where unauthentic content was fined and defamed (Jain, 2021; Niblock, 2021). In

addition, journalists are crucial in fighting misinformation, as they should conduct fact-checking and present unbiased, accurate information to improve news quality (Smyrnaios et al. 2017; Perreault & Perreault, 2021). Initiatives like CrossCheck and Falso's Fake have proven effective. Providing consistent and reliable information during disease outbreaks is also essential in preventing adverse mental health effects (Melki et al., 2020; Ben Messaoud, 2021).

However, combating misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic is challenging due to factors such as the cost and time required for machine learning tools, difficulty in distinguishing bots from real accounts, and the inability of platforms to regulate non-English content (Tumber & Waisbord, 2021). Some unreliable sources in Arabic have spread misinformation about COVID-19 (O'Connor & Ayad, 2021), which shows that misinformation-combating mechanisms are needed across all online sites. As for fact-checking sites, they have limitations and may not be effective enough. It takes time for misleading content to be removed, and many people may have already seen and shared it (Tumber & Waisbord, 2021). For instance, Facebook may take up to 22 days to caution the public about misleading content. Misinformation can also remain active on social media platforms undetected, which means more resources are needed to fight misinformation (Avaaz, 2020).

In summary, social media users encounter misinformation and disinformation but also rely on these platforms for information related to the virus. Misinformation increased during the pandemic, but social media platforms employed various mechanisms to combat it, such as fact-checking. However, the fight against fake news requires significant resources and ethical willingness from media users and creators. The above studies provide mixed results, generalize findings, and none focus solely on Arab youth. This study fills the gap by analyzing how social media affected UAE youth during the pandemic.

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded on Habermas' theory of the public sphere because of its interconnection with the concept of echo chambers, which is a significant contributor to misinformation. The theory, as proposed by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1992), defines the public sphere as common forums that offer platforms for the discussion of social issues, thus resulting in the development of public opinions (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). The theory also states that a sound public sphere should promote inclusivity by upholding rational arguments that form the basis for democracy. However, the formation of public spheres creates the challenge of echo chambers, whereby people tend to associate and build relationships with individuals with similar opinions. Humans are usually inclined to echo chambers because they require minimal intellectual activity. It is worth noting that digital platforms promote such inclinations since they often publish information that is suitable for segmented groups (or micro-targeting) rather than promoting neutral, unbiased data. As a result, they create unhealthy public spheres and undermine debates.

Like other online platforms, social media sites promote personalized public spheres to increase viewership, resulting in disinformation. Social media agents often create information that micro-targets individuals, who will read the message and accept it without reasoning since it supports their worldviews. The above scenario explains the concept of disinformation, an element of information disorder whereby data is shared to cause harm to a person (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Social media content creators usually focus on financial gains through increased viewership at the expense of the readers that will consume misleading messages. On the other hand, the recipients will disseminate that information to third parties who hold similar opinions, thus resulting in misinformation and the unintentional dissemination of false information. Therefore, the formation of digital spheres that promote certain world views significantly can eventually contribute to the spread of biased and misleading content. During the pandemic, people often believed online content, especially when shared by someone they knew, even when it appeared to be false. The fact that they did not apply cognitive reasoning, which defines healthy public spheres, to verify the authenticity of the information they received, caused them to be misinformed and disinformed.

In addition, scholars (e.g., Chambers, 2021) argue that there is a threat of fake news and post-truth attitudes to the presuppositions of the public sphere, arguing for the importance of the virtues of accuracy in countering fake news. Moreover, it is equally important to highlight the role of structural and regulatory features in the public sphere in facilitating and encouraging the virtues of accuracy, as well as the potential for citizens to become more digitally literate and thus responsible consumers of digital information.

Moreover, misinformation can sometimes be more convincing than actual information if it presents a version of reality that is easier to understand than the facts; for instance, some individuals may find the assertion that "vaccines cause autism" persuasive since it may explain why autism typically occurs around the same time as vaccinations, even though this assertion goes against scientific proof (Reyna, 2021). With the proliferation of social media platforms, sharing scientific messages becomes more effective if the message is communicated in a bottom-line gist. Gist communication here refers to the act of conveying the essential meaning of information rather than simply reciting all the details. This involves interpreting the gist of options and presenting multiple perspectives that align with the facts. Finally, it is crucial to address the misinformation directly and provide a clear and concise alternative explanation that makes more sense than the misinformation itself (Reyna, 2021).

Wardle & Derakhshan (2017) provides a typology of what they coin 'information disorder,' which includes mis-information or information that is false but not created with the intention of causing harm. It can be spread unintentionally, such as through rumors or misunderstandings. The second type is disinformation, or information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization, or country. It is often spread with the intention of manipulating public opinion or causing harm. The third type is mal-information, or information that is based on reality but used to inflict harm on a person, social group, organization, or country. Audiences or message receivers make sense of information

disorder by decoding the content in one of three ways: hegemonic, negotiated, or oppositional. Hegemonic decoding is when the interpreter accepts the message as it was encoded, such as when a person reads a news article and accepts the information presented as true without questioning. The negotiated decoding occurs when the interpreter accepts some parts of the message but rejects others, such as when a person reads a news article and accepts some parts of the information presented but questions or disagrees with other parts. Finally, oppositional decoding is when the interpreter rejects the message entirely, such as when a person reads a news article and rejects the information presented as false or biased. Wardle & Derakhshan (2017) also warn that certain groups may be more vulnerable to information disorder than others. These groups include those who lack digital literacy skills, those who rely on social media as their primary source of news and information, and audiences who are part of online echo chambers or filter bubbles, where they are only exposed to information that confirms their existing beliefs. Also vulnerable are those who are experiencing a crisis or emergency situation, where they may be more susceptible to false information.

This study operationalizes the above theoretical strands by focusing on youth in the UAE as one of the most digitally literate social groups to explore their vulnerability to this information disorder and whether their use of social media during the pandemic has confined them in 'filter bubbles' or helped push them to question information provided to them via various sources.

Methodology

Qualitative research was used as an appropriate method since the current study involves understanding concepts and gaining insights into social media usage and misinformation during the Coronavirus Pandemic. The research design depends on 20 semi-structured interviews as they required participants in two regions in the United Arab Emirates: Dubai and Sharjah. The qualitative method is advantageous because the results are specific, in-depth and reflect a real-life situation by placing a given phenomenon in a given context. By examining the perspectives and experiences of participants, this approach departs from the current research on social media platforms that lacks an adequate level of qualitative detail (Williams and Heikes, 1993).

Sampling

In terms of sampling, we used a combination of purposive and snowball methods in that the research draws on participants who are active users of social media platforms and are within a certain age range, contacted via referrals, which is a method that works best when trust is needed to initiate contact (Atkinson and Flint, 2001). Since the number of people targeted in the study was too large, purposive sampling was used to determine participants by selecting individuals who meet specific characteristics, i.e., youth residing in Sharjah and Dubai, aged between 18 and 24 years. The sample size was 20, divided equally among the two regions. The first researcher's personal network was used to identify willing participants,

and it is important to note that the goal was not to generalize but to understand experiences and perspectives (Miller and Bell, 2012).

Procedures

The interviews were held between February and June 2023. Raw quotes from the interview transcripts are therefore used below to give voice to the participants. It is important to note that this study is exploratory, hence the small sample size compared to quantitative studies. However, the sample size is sufficient to provide rich and in-depth information relevant to my research questions. To validate the emerging themes in the analysis phase, some participants were re-approached, as needed, to probe for further answers. The researchers also cross-checked the themes and resultant analysis to ensure consistency in reviewing the themes and codes.

The study received the ethics approval of the researchers' institutions. Participation was voluntary, and participants' privacy and confidentiality were guaranteed. Willing participants were emailed documents that provided further information about the research and how the interview would be conducted. The participants were given a brief regarding the study and have been anonymized to maintain their privacy and confidentiality.

Semi-structured interviews were used as they required participants to answer pre-designed open-ended questions individually and verbally (Seale et al., 2003). Some of the questions the participants answered were related to basic details such as age, gender, education level, marital status, and occupation. The research participants were asked to identify examples of misinformation spread on social media platforms during the peak of the pandemic, and these examples were discussed during the interviews. Thematic analysis was employed in analyzing the data, and the following themes emerged from the analysis: 1) the youth's use of social media for pandemic information, 2) how the use of social media contributed to misinformation, and 3) how the youth responded to misinformation.

Findings

How youth used social media for pandemic information

This study found that social media was the primary source of information for many youth during the pandemic. Social media platforms used by the youth during the pandemic were Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, WhatsApp, Twitter, and others. The study found that the youth used all the social media platforms and other platforms, such as Zoom and LinkedIn, during the pandemic. However, Instagram 11 (55%) and Twitter 7 (35%) were the most preferred social media platforms for accessing COVID-19 related information. Instagram was the most preferred platform because of trusted specific Instagram pages relating to the UAE COVID-19 situation. The mainstream news account pages on Instagram made the platform's number one choice. Most of those interviewed argued that Instagram provided the easiest way to access up-to-date information on the pandemic and other trending topics locally and internationally.
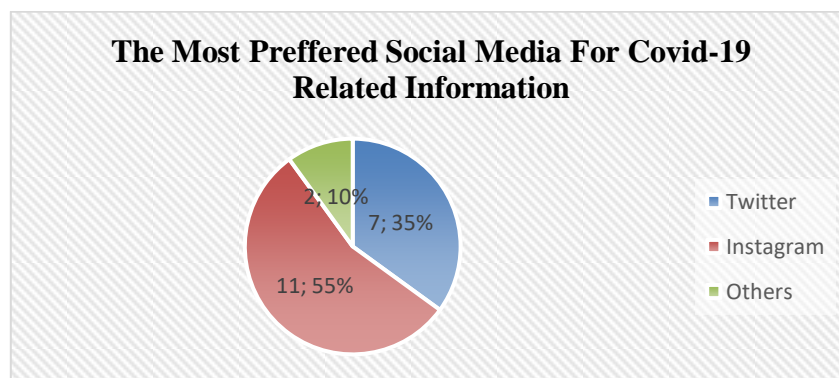
Figure 1: Social Media Platform Preference (compiled by the authors)

Twitter was the second most preferred platform because it was more convenient and less time-consuming compared to other platforms. Twitter was a fast-moving platform where people were constantly sharing up-to-date information about the pandemic. Moreover, Twitter had a large community of journalists, doctors, and scientists who were sharing reliable and credible information. It offered real-time updates on COVID-19 news and information, enabling users to stay informed about the virus and its impact on our daily lives. The study established that the youth relied on COVID-19 information from WHO's Twitter account. Twitter pages like that of WHO increased the credibility and reliability of information people look for in social media.

The study revealed that the majority of the interviewees, 11 of them (55%), spent between 6 to 8 hours on social media each day. One of the main reasons why people spent so much time on social media during the pandemic was because it offered the only means to interact with the outside world. Less physical interactions with family and friends increased people's reliance on social media for interactions. Interviewee 1 (Age 23) argued that what prompted the use of social media during the pandemic was "*Sitting in the house doing nothing, not able to go out or be social, it seems like the perfect way to get to know people, be social, texting friends and family, and finding out news about what was happening around the world. It was the only way to feel like you are outside when you can't be outside.*" Social media also provided the youth with access to COVID-19 information. In addition to connection and access to information, social media was the primary communication tool during the pandemic. The youth used social media to communicate with their friends, family members, and the outside world. Social media helped the youth to relieve anxiety and stress associated with the pandemic.

The study established that the youth used social media platforms to acquire information about the pandemic. 16 of the interviewees (80%) admitted to frequently using Twitter, Instagram, and other platforms to acquire information on the Coronavirus. The youth relied on government pages on platforms such as Twitter and Instagram for COVID-19 data, and generally, they used social media more during the pandemic compared to the pre-pandemic era. Almost all of the respondents replied that their use of social media and the time they spent on social media significantly increased during the pandemic because there was nothing

to do other than sit at home and follow the COVID-19 situation. The pandemic pushed people indoors, eliminating time spent in offices, malls, outside spaces, and other areas. Having been pushed indoors, the need to stay informed and up to date on the latest COVID-19 pandemic developments, local news, and other global developments increased the reliance on social media. One of the respondents said that "*I used social media more during the pandemic compared to the pre-pandemic era. I found that staying informed was important to me, and social media was an easy way to do that. I also felt a sense of connection and community with others who were also staying at home and trying to figure out how to navigate this new way of living*" (Interviewee 17, Age 20).

All 20 participants were avid consumers (not creators) of content on social media. Only three out of the 20 interviewed admitted that they created information on social media. Content creators shared their personal experiences with COVID-19 on social media. One content creator and consumer argued that "*while I did consume information on social media, I also shared helpful tips and advice with my followers or mutuals, as well as posting about my personal experiences and day-to-day life, which was a great way for me to stay connected and help others who are probably feeling just as isolated and alone during that time*" (Interviewee 17, Age 20). Consumers relied on trustworthy sources for COVID-19 information. These were specific government pages on different social media platforms.

Although most participants were consumers of information on social media, the majority frequently shared information they came across on social media platforms during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Information creators and consumers forwarded links to articles, shared videos, and other content both related to the pandemic and those that were not related to the pandemic. One respondent said that "*I often found myself forwarding links to articles, videos, and infographics with my friends and family through WhatsApp, which was our primary means of communication during the pandemic. I also would occasionally share these same resources on social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram, as I felt it was important to spread awareness about the virus and its impact on our daily lives*" (Interviewee 15, Age 24).

The study found that social media users shared information based on the seriousness of the information. Most interviewees said they consumed more information on social media at the earlier stages of the pandemic. However, as time went by and life under the pandemic became the norm, the consumption and creation of information on social media declined. One respondent said that "*as the time passed and the situation started to normalize, I gradually reduced my sharing of such information*" (Interviewee 19, 24). Notably, the study determined that the youth only shared information they perceived as important and from reliable sources such as those from the UAE government pages.

How social media contributed to the spread of misinformation

This study established that the increased use of social media during the pandemic significantly contributed to the spread of misinformation. Over 10 (50%) of the respondents said that they came across fake news concerning the pandemic more frequently on social media platforms. The study found that the youth encountered fake news concerning the

pandemic on social media multiple times throughout the pandemic, especially during its initial stages in late 2019 and early 2020. Interviewee 1 (Age 23) responded that he believed fake news "*was everywhere, whether it was about the cases, cures, preventions, and all, especially on Facebook and Twitter*." The fake news ranged from conspiracy theories to false treatments, which created a lot of confusion and panic among the public. The study further established that we came across fake news multiple times, especially during the early phase of the pandemic, when a lot of false and misleading information was circulated. One of the interviewees responded that "*I tried my best to be careful and verify the authenticity of the information before sharing it further*" (Interviewee 19, Age 24). Most of them replied that there was a lot of false and misleading information during the early phase of the pandemic.

Instagram and Facebook had higher rates of misinformation during the COVID-19 Pandemic than other media platforms such as Twitter. This is because they are the platforms with a high number of social media users. The platforms are the most preferred by users because they provide quick access to up-to-date information on the virus and the latest updates from authorities. Their ease of accessibility and content posting makes them the number one target for false information. One respondent said, "*In my experience, I found that Facebook had the highest rate of misinformation. This could be because Facebook is a widely used platform in the UAE and is often the first place people go to share news and information*" (Interviewee 19, Age 24)

Over 12 (60%) of the respondents less frequently came across fake news on popular news outlets in the Middle East. Although many came across fake news on social media platforms multiple times, they experienced less fake news on popular Middle East Platforms. All the people interviewed argued that the rate of misinformation during the pandemic was much higher during the pandemic compared to before. Interviewee 3 (Age 22) stated that he encountered misinformation much more because the pandemic was "*a large scale and worldwide event content creators and page owners falsify news, and spread rumors about it to gain popularity, and because people are sitting at home and ready to hear and receive any news, and due to the panic, that was spreading among people, so a person cannot be sure every time because of his feeling of fear and lack of alertness*." The rate of misinformation about the pandemic increased because the virus was new, and its symptoms and long-term effects were still unknown. Speculation increased the spread of fake news. People speculated about what would happen in the event of a full-blown pandemic. Some of the fake news encountered on different social media platforms during the pandemic was about the origins of the pandemic, how the virus spreads, theories about the pandemic, its potential treatments, and the whole saga about the virus vaccine. Interviewee 1 (Age 23) responded that the common fake news he found on social media was "*telling people to ignore recommendations to socially distance themselves from others. Essential resources were running out, and people went crazy shopping for food, Corona came from eating bats in China*." Most of the fake news claimed that were claims that the pandemic was a hoax or that the COVID-19 vaccine

was dangerous and ineffective. Other claims focused on bogus cures or treatments or misinformation about the severity of the virus.

The study found that the desperation for information led people to believe the fake news they found on social media. One respondent said that "*I believe that people were desperate for information; they may have been willing to accept any explanation, even if it was untrue. Others may have been misled by well-intentioned but poorly informed sources or have been exposed to misinformation without realizing it. Also, the rapidly changing nature of the pandemic and the limited information available early on may have contributed to confusion and uncertainty, making people vulnerable to fake news*" (Interviewee 19, aged 24). People believed most of the information they would find on different social media platforms due to the lack of knowledge and research on the virus itself. Everything was unknown at the time, so almost any information given to the audience was easy to believe or feed into.

The study also found that most of the youth verified or tried to verify the information they came across on social media platforms before sharing. However, some made little effort to verify the information they came across before sharing. They verified the information on social media platforms by comparing the messages with official government information. For example, people would verify any information relating to COVID-19 cases and deaths in the country by the official released figures by the government. It came out clearly that verification wasn't easy to do, especially in the early phases of the pandemic, because there was limited access to reliable information. The government's social media platforms had not been set to provide reliable information about the COVID-19 developments.

Most interviewees argued that the Arab-speaking youth were less susceptible to misinformation than those who speak English. However, one respondent argued that it's very hard to tell susceptibility to fake news based on language and mentioned, "*It is hard to say whether Arabic-speaking youth are more likely to believe misinformation than those who speak English. One possibility is that people who speak Arabic as their first language may be more vulnerable to misinformation in Arabic than those who speak English as their first language. There also may be cultural variables at play that influence how people respond to misinformation*" (Interviewee 19, Age 24). Interviewee 5 (Age 24) responded that "*Arabic-speaking youth were more susceptible to misinformation as they don't have the right resources to research information of the virus and that most of the news was published in English or Chinese language during the early time of the pandemic which created a language barrier.*" The study revealed that to some extent language barrier made it difficult for many to access and understand information from reliable sources, leading them to rely on fake news. Additionally, the lack of a comprehensive media literacy curriculum in the region may have also contributed to this.

The main impacts of misinformation and fake news on social media during the pandemic were distrust of social media platforms as a source of information, fear, stress, and

anxiety. Interviewee 7 (Age 24) responded, "*Misinformation and fake news led to an increase in stress and anxiety for me*." Interviewee 8 (Age 18) responded that misinformation and fake news caused "*personal stress and anxiety from the number of people believing and spreading the misinformation*." Interviewee 4 (Age 23) responded that misinformation caused panic about the pandemic. Interviewee 11 (Age 24) responded that fake news and misinformation made him/her panic and become scared of catching the virus. Interviewee 15 (Age 24) responded that misinformation caused him/her anxiety and fear. Interviewee 16 (Age 21) responded, "*I experienced stress and anxiety. I worried about the health and safety of myself and my loved ones, which only worsened my anxiety*." Interviewee 18 (Age 23) replied that misinformation "*had negative impacts on my mental health, I felt confused, overwhelmed, and unsure of what to believe. Plus, it led me to sharing incorrect information which possibly could have harmed others*."

Most of those not impacted by misinformation reported that their close friends, family members were indeed affected. Interviewee 3 (Age 22) responded, "*Personally, there were no negative effects, but I witnessed the effects on those around me, like my family members and friends*." This sentiment by Interviewee 3 is shared by almost all the respondents who were not impacted by social media misinformation. Previous exposure to misinformation on social media prevented most youth from being impacted by social media misinformation during the COVID-19 period. Interviewee 12 (Age 21) responded that misinformation "*had no effect on me. I am used to seeing misinformation on social media*."

Youth's response to misinformation

This study established that fake news was greatly experienced during the pandemic's early stages. Over 14 (70%) of the interviewee realized that there was an infodemic at the early stages of the pandemic. They realized that some information on social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook was not authentic because they contradicted reliable sources such as those from the UAE government and Health Department. The interviewee realized the infodemic after they began paying attention to the COVID-19 news they were consuming on social media platforms. One interviewee said, "*Some information I came across seemed too sensational or outrageous to be true, leading me to question its authenticity*" (Interviewee 16, Age 21). The study established that "*the rapid increase of unverified information and conspiracy theories about the pandemic made it difficult to determine what was true and what was not, resulting in widespread confusion and anxiety*" (Interviewee 16, Age 21). At the beginning of the pandemic, the interviewees rarely fact-checked the information they read on social media. However, after they realized the infodemic regarding the pandemic as time went by, they actively tried to fact-check the information before consuming and sharing it. Social media users who were keen on fake news made a habit of double-checking the authenticity of the pandemic information before sharing it with others. The study determined that the youth used fact-checking initiatives provided by different social media platforms to check the validity of the information they read and shared on social media platforms. Interviewee 2 (Age 19) fact-checked fake news by

conducting more internet searches using search engines such as Google. Over 10 respondents (50%) perceived Twitter to have authentic information about the pandemic. Most of them found Twitter to be a reliable platform for news and updates as it featured tweets from the government, experts, and other credible sources such as WHO. Although Twitter was perceived as the most authentic platform, most had confidence in only UAE news outlets such as WAM, Gulf News, and Khaleej Times Emirates. They only had confidence in reliable UAE sources.

Most respondents emphasized the need to verify the information before consumption or sharing to prevent friends and family members from being misinformed concerning the COVID-19 Pandemic on social media. One respondent replied, "*I tried to inform my friends and family about the importance of verifying information before sharing it. I explained to them how to spot fake news and what to look for when evaluating a source. I also encouraged them to read reliable sources and not to take everything at face value*" (Interviewee 16, Age 21)

Finally, the study revealed that spreading awareness is the most critical tool to combat the spread of misinformation in social media in case of another infodemic. Misinformation existed long before the pandemic and will continue until people become more aware of it and gain the right skills not to become victims of it. The study found that it is critical to fact-check information, including those from reliable sources, to combat misinformation in the events of the infodemic.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the above study has provided some insight into the use of social media by UAE youth during the pandemic: First, Instagram and Twitter were the most preferred platforms for COVID-19 information; most spend 6 to 8 hours on social media daily, using it to connect with family, friends, and the outside world, acquire critical information, and educate themselves. Second, the consumption of pandemic information declined as it became a norm. Increased social media use also led to the spread of misinformation among UAE youth, causing distrust, fear, stress, and anxiety. Third, fake news about COVID-19 was prevalent on Instagram and Facebook, leading to confusion and impacting decisions about vaccines and guidelines. Conspiracy theories increased distrust in social media content. Finally, most UAE youth fact-checked and verified information before sharing it on social media. They used credible resources like the World Health Organization and fact-checking tools provided by social media platforms. Thus, their efforts prevented the spread of misinformation and increased trust in social media.

This study has confirmed that the increased use of social media among UAE youth during the pandemic significantly contributed to the spread of misinformation. This confirms previous research (e.g., Buchanan, 2020; Pennycook et al., 2021), which argues that users of social media platforms tend to share misinformation as a matter of habit, not to mention the platform algorithms that push certain ideological content at the expense of others. The

heightened use of social media during the pandemic led to increased misinformation being spread about the pandemic, causing distress, fear, stress, and anxiety among the youth. However, several participants in the UAE took action by using available tools to fact-check and verify false information, which helped to minimize the impact of the misinformation.

The study reiterates the arguments made by Wardle & Derakhshan (2017), namely that to combat information disorder, we should focus on educating the public about the threat of information disorder and the persuasive techniques used by those spreading mis-information, dis-information, and mal-information. Also needed is to disseminate fact-checking and verification tools to help people identify false information. More importantly, the audience should diversify exposure to different media forms in order to minimize the impact of filter bubbles.

Although this study has limitations due to a small sample size, it provides evidence that future studies could explore further. These studies could investigate how misinformation during the pandemic affected the social media behavior of youth. It would be crucial to understand how the experience of misinformation during the pandemic impacted their present and even future social media behavior.

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