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Exploring the factors that influence the credibility of fake news within social media users

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Detailed Abstract

Main message of the article

This article aims to highlight and present the key factors contributing to the credibility and acceptance of fake news in social networks and new media, ultimately enhancing users' media literacy.

Research questions

The study's central question is, "What factors influence the credibility of fake news among social network users?"

The sub-questions

1. What contextual factors influence the credibility of fake news?
2. What are the intervening factors that influence the credibility of fake news?
3. What causal factors influence the credibility of fake news?
4. What approaches can be used to deal with the credibility of fake news?
5. What are the consequences of the credibility of fake news?

Method

The research used a mixed exploratory approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to collect and analyze data. The participants in the qualitative portion of the study were experts in media and social communication sciences, such as university faculty, researchers, radio and television professionals, managers in charge of government media, individuals with master's and doctorate degrees in media studies, and seasoned journalists. The qualitative analysis was conducted using grounded theory and employed theoretical sampling techniques. Corbin and Strauss' 3-step coding method was utilized to analyze data gathered from "semi-structured" interviews conducted with experts in the field of social communication science. The quantitative section of the study focused on individuals who are Iranian active users of foreign social networking sites like Telegram, Instagram, Twitter, etc., as well as Iranian social networking sites such as Ita, Bale, Soroush, etc. who are active members in at least one of these networks. The researcher used the "available" sampling technique to quantify the study. A survey was used to collect user data in the quantitative part of the research. After testing the questionnaire, a total of 425 surveys were handed out. In this part, the quantitative data was gathered from 393 questionnaires that became the basis of the analysis. Based on Cochran's formula, an initial test was carried out on 10% of the sample size, which equated to 384 individuals. In this study, the data gathered from the semi-structured interviews was analyzed using the grounded theory approach, consisting of three stages: open, central, and selective. Initially, the interviews with experts in social communication sciences regarding the impact of fake news on social network users' trustworthiness were carefully examined. The initial analysis of the interviews was conducted through the method of "open coding." During the "central coding" stage of the interviews, the ideas developed during the open coding were carefully examined, and common themes were pinpointed. These themes were categorized into sixty concepts, and during the selective coding phase, they were further classified into "causal factors," "contextual factors," "intervening factors," "strategies to deal with fake news,"

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and "consequences of fake news." Ultimately, a theoretical framework was established regarding the "factors that influence the credibility of fake news among users of social networks."

Findings

This study identifies various factors contributing to the credibility of fake news, such as the lack of transparency from news sources, psychological factors, how news is presented visually, the frequency of fake news occurrences, and insufficient media literacy.

Other identified factors include the societal context, including cultural, social, political, and economic factors, a growing distrust in mainstream media, and the rapid spread of information through social media platforms. Factors that influence the credibility of fake news, such as "advancements in fake news production techniques," an "Unhealthy political atmosphere," and "source," have been identified.

The study also highlights the impacts of fake news, such as fostering societal conflict and discord, undermining democracy, decreasing civic engagement, fueling polarization, and deceiving the public.

"Methods for addressing fake news also involve promoting media literacy, transparency, and providing accurate information. Additionally, efforts can be made to enhance professionalism in the media industry, educate the public through mainstream media outlets, enforce regulations to oversee platform operations, and offer fact-checking resources to target audiences."

Conclusion

Overall, studies indicate that having a low level of understanding about media is linked to a higher likelihood of falling for fake news, especially on social media sites. Findings from the numerical portion of the study showed that the average score for factors influencing how believable fake news is was around 49.2. This indicates that the respondents largely agree on the factors that affect the credibility of fake news. The statement that received the highest level of agreement from the respondents was "Low media literacy among social network users impacts the believability of fake news," with an average rating of 4.38.

Proposals

- Using longitudinal surveys to assess the effectiveness of tactics employed in fighting misinformation involves studying the same individuals over a period of time.
- This study compares research findings on the factors impacting the trustworthiness of false information in Iran with similar studies in other nations. Analyzing the disparities and parallels between the outcomes of this study and foreign research can help determine the universal factors and those influenced by each country's cultural and national contexts. This study offers solutions to combat fake news. Collaborating with news and media organizations, cyberspace policy groups, and non-governmental organizations focused on media literacy is crucial for implementing and evaluating the effectiveness of these suggestions in decreasing the credibility of fake news.

Keywords: Fake news, Instagram, Media literacy, Social media