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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Factors Influencing Users' Acceptance and Response to Fake News

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Interdiction:

In today's world, social media is recognized as a primary tool for information dissemination and communication among individuals and diverse communities. However, a significant challenge within this space is the proliferation of fake and inaccurate news, which can have negative impacts on public awareness, social behavior, and even political and social processes. These fake news items, which spread rapidly across social networks, are capable of capturing user attention and leading to the acceptance of misinformation due to characteristics such as emotional appeal, the use of inflammatory language, and misleading visuals.

"Acceptance" refers to the willingness or inclination of users to accept and comprehend specific information. Concerning fake news, this concept relates to aspects such as how users process

information and validate its credibility. Factors like personality traits, media literacy levels, and social contexts can influence this. Specifically, individuals with higher media literacy are better equipped to identify and evaluate misinformation. Additionally, honest and inquisitive personalities may naturally seek out facts and credible sources, while those with traits such as low curiosity or sensitivity to emotional news may easily trust fake news.

"Response" to news that users encounter refers to how individuals act in response to fake information. These responses may include how one responds to fake news, attempts to correct misinformation, or sharing news on social networks. User responses are influenced by various factors, including the level of confidence in evaluating information, fear of social consequences resulting from errors in judgment, and a sense of social responsibility to prevent the spread of fake news.

Moreover, user responses to fake news can be divided into positive and negative responses. Some users may demonstrate an effective and positive response by taking action to inform and enhance public awareness through correcting misinformation. On the other hand, some individuals may perpetuate the problem by re-sharing fake news.

Ultimately, the main objective of this research is to understand the viewpoints of social media users regarding factors influencing the believability of fake news. The results of this research can provide strategies to combat the spread of fake news in cyberspace and improve user behavior in identifying and rejecting such news. In this way, a better understanding of user acceptance and response processes can contribute to the development of effective techniques for disseminating accurate information and strengthening media literacy.

Several studies in Iran have addressed the believability of fake news in the media. However, a notable gap exists: few studies have directly examined the factors influencing users' acceptance and responses to fake news. While some research has touched on related topics, a comprehensive investigation of these specific factors remains limited. This study builds upon existing research by focusing specifically on the factors that contribute to the acceptance and rejection of fake news among social media users.

Method:

This research employs a quantitative research methodology, specifically utilizing a survey approach with convenience sampling. This method was chosen to efficiently gather data from a diverse group of social media users. The data collection process involved the distribution of a researcher-designed questionnaire online to a sample population consisting of individuals who are active users of social networking platforms. The questionnaire was designed to assess participants' perceptions and beliefs regarding various factors that influence the acceptance and spread of fake news.

Results:

The survey results indicated a moderate level of agreement among respondents regarding the believability of fake news, with an average score of 27.1 out of 50. This suggests that, on average, participants were somewhat inclined to believe fake news. The highest score recorded was 43, while the lowest was 16, indicating a range of individual responses. A majority of respondents (68%) scored between 21.6 and 32.6, suggesting a clustering of opinions around the average.

Analysis based on five categories of factors revealed that 51.4% of respondents expressed moderate agreement. Among the specific factors influencing the acceptance of fake news, the greatest agreement was associated with the impact of artificial intelligence advancements on the difficulty of detecting fake news (3.82), while the least agreement was associated with the notion that all news on social media is genuine (1.49).

Conclusions:

The research findings suggest that fake news has far-reaching effects on societies, leading to increased public distrust, weakened democratic institutions, reduced social participation, societal polarization, and the spread of social unrest. The loss of trust in traditional news sources, the use of fake news to manipulate public opinion, and the increase in political and social polarization are among the most significant challenges identified in this research. Furthermore, the dissemination of misinformation not only misleads social network users but can also endanger the psychological and social security of society.

To address these challenges, several strategies are proposed, which can be implemented at the individual, media, and policy levels. On an individual level, enhancing media and information literacy is essential. Citizens must develop the ability to critically analyze information, verify the accuracy of news from credible sources, and understand the motivations behind published news. Expanding education related to critical thinking, especially within the education system, can play a significant role in reducing the impact of fake news.

At the policy and media governance level, the implementation of regulatory laws on digital platforms and the strengthening of fact-checking systems are recommended. Collaboration between the government, media institutions, and technology companies to develop regulatory policies and create databases to detect fake news can increase the effectiveness of counter-measures. Additionally, enacting deterrent laws against the intentional production and dissemination of fake news will strengthen the accountability of social media users and media outlets.

Given the importance of this issue, future research should focus on examining the impact of educational interventions in reducing the believability of fake news, the role of new technologies such as artificial intelligence in combating misinformation, and the social and psychological effects of fake news on various groups in society. These approaches can pave the way for the development of more comprehensive policies to combat this phenomenon and maintain the informational health of societies.

Data Availability Statement

Data available on request from the authors.

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Ethical considerations

Not applicable.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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