"Exploring Online Misinformation on Social Media Platforms: A Thematic Analysis"
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Description of the research problem

The remarkable expansion of social media platforms and their growing impact on public opinion and decision-making are the driving forces behind the necessity of this study. These platforms allow for the sharing of knowledge, but they have also turned into a haven for the transmission of false information. Therefore, it is crucial to comprehend the characteristics of internet disinformation, how it spreads, and the effects it has on both people and society.

In addition to being important from an academic standpoint, the study of internet disinformation has broad societal applications. By shedding insight into the complex dynamics of online communication and the difficulties presented by misinformation in the digital era, this research advances the academic subject of communication studies. It provides information on the dissemination, consumption, and evaluation of information in social media ecosystems.

The report addresses the pressing need for developing efficient methods to stop the spread of false information from a societal perspective. Online misinformation has the power to deepen social divides, undermine public faith in authorities and the media, and obstruct democratic processes. By investigating the problem through a thematic analysis lens, this research seeks to offer useful insights into the patterns, themes, and meanings related to internet misinformation. Such understandings can guide the creation of interventions, regulations, and educational initiatives that enable people to assess information critically and navigate the complicated social media ecosystem.

Formulation of aims/objectives of the research

The main aim of this research is to identify the patterns and themes associated with the spread of online misinformation on social media platforms, examine the factors that contribute to the propagation of online misinformation, understand how social media users perceive and engage with online misinformation and investigate the impact of exposure to online misinformation on individuals' attitudes and behaviours.

Literature review

The proliferation of false information on social media has everyone's attention. In his study, Normandin (2022) made the case that because there has been such a significant rise in the amount of false information and fake news on the internet, terms like "misinformation," "disinformation," and "fake news" that were previously easily distinguishable and unreported are now frequently brought into the spotlight under the heading of "conflicting information" to highlight how important each person's position as a social signifier is and to satisfy their thirst for increased social acceptance rather than the factual accuracy of the information. The study suggests an interdisciplinary paradigm that might be used to regulate conflicting content on social media platforms as a legislative recommendation.

Still like the major populous of the world, the general public continued to consume this false information until it started hitting nearer to their soft spot. While COVID-19 was at its peak and the entire world was cut off from the world physically, social media became the primary source for information consumption, helping people track the news of the world and near dear ones.

It was only later highlighted by another team of academics, Gisondi et al. (2022) who conducted a thematic analysis of a conference on social media, ethics, and COVID-19 misinformation that a lot of data circulated on social media in the name of home remedies or side effects of vaccines caused way more panic and anxiety between the general public making the aftermath of COVID-19 even severe for the people. Their study emphasized the role and responsibility of large-scale social media companies in combating false information during the pandemic and identified evidence-based best practices for reducing the spread of false information on especially famous platforms like Instagram, Twitter and Facebook.

Almaliki (2019) in his study talks about how misinformation is an accepted and widespread phenomenon now and hence it has become crucial to find ways to understand the root of its initiation and coined the adoption of gamification as a technique to identify this misinformation and combat the spread of it on online media platforms. His study focused primarily on the need to introduce systematic and innovative approaches into the designing process of social media platforms by incorporating gamification elements, aiming to promote better digital literacy and discourage the widespread of false information.

Similar to Almaliki's approach, Roozenbeek and van der Linden (2019) also proposed a game-based approach to protect individuals against misinformation. But in their study, they focussed on the consumer aspect of this false information and introduced a gamification technique which enhances the target audience's cognitive and emotional resistance strategies through the game.

As the volume of misinformation is still on the rise, studies focusing on the human/consumer aspect of this false information have been coming up. One such study is by Weeks and Ardèvol-Abreu (2019) where they investigated the relationship between exposure to online echo chambers and the formation of populist attitudes. Their research shed light on the role ideologically homogeneous information environments play in the spread and acceptance of false information on social media platforms.

On similar grounds, Lewandowsky et al. (2017) and others proposed a thorough foundation for comprehending and navigating the "post-truth" world. His study emphasised the significance of cognitive elements, such as source credibility and prior beliefs, in the adoption and dissemination of erroneous information and offers suggestions for personal defence against its influence in the long run for the end user of this information.

Even though there are so many precautions being taken now and awareness about fake news, the consumer is still forced to consume this false information in more subtle forms. Pennycook and Rand (2019) looked at the effectiveness of warning labels on false information, and their findings showed that by implying that other tales without warnings are true, warning labels might unintentionally increase the perceived accuracy of false information. They continued their investigation the next year to examine the

inferred truth effect and its implications for the eradication of disinformation. Their research shows that when corrective information is presented in the context of the initial erroneous information, it is more effective.

All these studies revolved around the effects of misinformation on the mindset of an individual making it seem like an individual problem which may dilute its relevance, shifting the focus towards other larger problems but a recent study by Starbird et al. (2019) looked into how social media platforms let slacktivism turn into activism. The paper explored pieces of evidence that testimonies highlight how false information and conspiracy theories can not only affect an individual but rather affects people as a group affecting the entire community's perception.

Formulation of the research question

Research Question 1: How do social media users perceive and engage with online misinformation, and what are the consequences of exposure to misinformation on their attitudes and behaviours?

Research Question 2: Are social media users able to identify the difference between fake news and real news?

Research method

Thematic analysis is a particularly well-suited analysis technique because it is a flexible and adaptable method that can be applied to various research questions and data types. It focuses on exploring and understanding the complexity of the research topic in a detailed manner. In the case of online misinformation, the thematic analysis will enable us to delve into the diverse aspects of misinformation, including its sources, content, dissemination patterns, and impact. (Braun & Clarke, 2006). By closely examining the content, context, and perspectives of social media users, the researcher will gain a comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to the spread of misinformation and its potential consequences. It also provides contextual understanding which will help in understanding the specific contexts in which misinformation arises, the motivations behind its creation and dissemination, and the impact it has on individuals and communities. Lastly, as thematic analysis prioritizes participant perspectives and experiences, it will provide a means to give voice to the individuals involved in the spread and consumption of online misinformation.

Although it has lots of pros, there might be some challenges which one might face while the thematic analysis. As thematic analysis involves interpretation, and researchers' subjectivity and preconceived notions there is a risk of researcher bias, which can impact the validity and reliability of the findings hence one needs to verify the study from an unbiased judge or fellow researcher to get rid of this bias. It is a time-consuming process that involves multiple steps, including data familiarization, coding, theme development, and interpretation hence one will be needing to establish clear deadlines to make sure the study is on schedule. The capacity to generalise the results to larger populations or situations may be constrained by the thematic analysis's traditional focus on an in-depth investigation of a particular sample or context. Instead of creating generalisations, the focus is on comprehending the depth and complexity of

the phenomenon. Hence, the overall thematic analysis would be an ideal analysis technique for Exploring Online Misinformation on Social Media Platforms.

Unit of analysis, sample, and data collection

Unit of Analysis

Individual social media postings or user-generated content would be the unit of study for the thematic analysis of online disinformation on social media platforms. One can study the themes and patterns in the data by looking at each post or piece of material as a separate analytical unit.

Population and Sampling

Users of social media who actively share or consume content about the study's issue, such as false information about COVID-19, would make up the population. Selecting a representative sample is crucial due to the size and diversity of social media platforms and users.

Sampling Method

This study would benefit from using a purposeful sampling strategy. Pointing out specific social media sites like Twitter, Facebook, or YouTube that are well-known for their role in the spread of false information and platforms with a high user base, platforms with a history of disinformation events, or platforms that are well-liked by particular demographic groups may all be included in the selection criteria.

Expected Number of Cases

The size of the sample would depend on the goals of the study, the resources at hand, and the frequency of material that was relevant. A smaller sample size with rich and diverse content would be more manageable and relevant because thematic analysis entails in-depth qualitative research. Hence, the expected number of cases will be kept to a sample size of 15 cases.

Data Collection

There are numerous data-gathering techniques that can be used to gather the pertinent data for thematic analysis:

- **Manually gathering data from social media sites:** It can be done by using particular keywords, hashtags, or topic-specific queries. The choice can include both recent and old-fashioned content, allowing for an investigation of how disinformation online changes over time.

- **Web scraping:** Using predetermined search parameters, web scraping technologies can retrieve postings, comments, and other publicly accessible content. When using web scraping tools,

ethical considerations and adherence to platform terms of service and privacy guidelines should be observed.

● **Database sources:** Utilisation of existing databases that have gathered and preserved social media content, depending on the research aims to collect the relevant data for thematic analysis, several data collection methods can be employed. For example, academic research databases, social media monitoring platforms, or publicly available datasets provided by social media companies can be valuable sources of data. These databases can provide a wider scope of content for analysis.

Conclusion

The research project "Exploring Online Misinformation on Social Media Platforms: A Thematic Analysis" attempts to look into the themes and scope of online misinformation that circulates on social media platforms. Online misinformation has the ability to derail attempts to improve public health, weaken trust in institutions, and polarise beliefs.

The theme analysis is likely to expose the strategies used by individuals disseminating false information, including the use of emotive language, image alteration, and social prejudice exploitation.

In conclusion, the study emphasises the significance of combating online disinformation on social media platforms. By detecting these trends, the consumer can better understand the techniques used to distribute misinformation and devise tailored interventions to counteract them.

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Appendix

Next Plan of Action

Orientation: I will start by carefully reading and becoming familiar with the chosen studies and other literature. This will facilitate the development of a thorough awareness of the research environment as well as the fundamental ideas, theories, and procedures of online disinformation on social media platforms.

Initial coding: I will begin the analysis by coding the data initially. To do this, the data from the studies and literature must be methodically arranged into useful units. Identify major concepts, patterns, and ideas connected to online disinformation, including how it spreads, what influences it, how users perceive and engage with it, and how it affects people and society.

Creating the initial themes: After the initial coding is finished, I will evaluate the data and look for any new themes or trends. In order to capture the substance of the data and reflect the research objectives, I will look for reoccurring concepts, ideas, or views. For our topic, we will consider the following initial themes: The Impact on society and democracy, User behaviour and perception, Measures to counteract misinformation, and the Function of social media platforms.

Themes organisation and refinement: After that, I'll organise and improve the original themes. To create consistent and unique themes, I shall bring together comparable codes and concepts. Consider how the themes interact with one another by looking for links and interconnections between them. This procedure aids in ensuring that the themes adequately capture the salient features of online disinformation on social media platforms and are thorough, mutually exclusive, and collectively exhaustive.

Reviewing and validating themes: I will examine the themes found in relation to the study's problem, goals, and data. Make sure the themes adequately address the research's questions and objectives while also reflecting its content and context. To verify the uncovered themes and make sure they are sturdy, get feedback from colleagues or subject-matter experts.

Themes definition and naming: I will offer precise definitions and succinct summaries for each theme after it has been examined and approved. ensuring that the themes' names accurately reflect their subject matter and range.

Summarising: Last but not least, I'll examine and understand the information contained inside each theme. Extract from the studies and literature pertinent conclusions, proof, and knowledge that supports and exemplifies the ideas. Choose important phrases or examples to illustrate each issue and give readers a thorough grasp of the internet disinformation spread through social media.

Other resources that have been used until now and can be used while the implementation

Online Research Databases

JSTOR: https://www.jstor.org/
PubMed: https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/
Google Scholar: https://scholar.google.com/

Social Media Analytics Tools

Brandwatch: https://www.brandwatch.com/
Talkwalker: https://www.talkwalker.com/
Sprout Social: https://sproutsocial.com/

Data Visualization Tools

Tableau: https://www.tableau.com/
Infogram: https://infogram.com/
Datawrapper: https://www.datawrapper.de/

Qualitative Data Analysis Software

NVivo: https://www.qsrinternational.com/nvivo-qualitative-data-analysis-software/home
MAXQDA: https://www.maxqda.com/
Atlas.ti: https://atlasti.com/

Online Survey Tools

Qualtrics: https://www.qualtrics.com/
SurveyMonkey: https://www.surveymonkey.com/
Google Forms: https://www.google.com/forms/about/
Ethnographic Research Techniques:

Participant Observation:
https://methods.sagepub.com/reference/the-sage-encyclopedia-of-qualitative-research-methods/n537.xml
In-depth Interviews:
https://methods.sagepub.com/reference/the-sage-encyclopedia-of-qualitative-research-methods/n306.xml
Field Notes:
https://methods.sagepub.com/reference/the-sage-encyclopedia-of-qualitative-research-methods/n210.xml

Academic Writing Guides

Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL): https://owl.purdue.edu/

APA Style Guide: https://apastyle.apa.org/
The Craft of Research (Book): Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, Joseph M. Williams
YouTube Channels and Videos:

Helpful videos

TED Talks: https://www.youtube.com/user/TEDtalksDirector
Crash Course: https://www.youtube.com/user/crashcourse
Qualitative Research Methods (Sage Publications): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Nr9uKS44Zs