

The Consequences of the Misuse of Social Media as a Medium for News and Information

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Abstract

The emergence of the internet has allowed the existence of social media such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and many more. Modern society is able to connect and exchange knowledge and this has made life easier and better as we can use social media to connect with people across the globe, do business, make new friends or even as one of the sources of news. However, regardless of the advantages of social media, there are still people out there that took it for granted especially the misuse of these social platforms. Hence, this study aims to identify the factor that contributes to the use of social media as one of the sources of news and to measure the extent of the misuse of social media platforms as a medium for news and information. Qualitative research methodology has been applied in this study and the researcher conducted in-depth interviews in order to gain desired data. Findings of this study shows that social media has been one of the sources of news for the people due to the ability of this platform to rapidly disseminate news and information to the audiences. People are also aware of the social media misuse such as disseminating fake news and presence of parody accounts.

Keywords: *Social media, misuse, fake news, parody account, news and information*

1.0 Introduction

The emergence of the internet in today's era has really changed the way people live their lives. According to Mahyuddin & Sonny [1], the growth of broadband connection allows Malaysian netizens to have better access and connectivity to the internet. Undoubtedly, the internet has made life easier and convenient for us. For instance, the existence of social media such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and many more are because of this technology. Modern society is able to connect and exchange knowledge and this has made life easier and better as we can use social media to connect with people across the globe, do business, make new friends or even as one of the sources of news. For this reason, the people of the world have to be thankful for this existence. However, regardless of the number of benefits social media could have offered, the misuse of these social platforms has been so worrying.

2.0 Problem Statements

Online social media has changed the way people receive and share information. The concern about the dissemination of fake news is real, considering the rapid growth of the Internet and the massive use of these social platforms such as blogs, microblogs, Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and many others, which have led to the tremendous production and uncommon dissemination of news and information. Thus, giving a significant impact on the growth of news access through social media platforms. Fake news has long been at the forefront of worldwide debate. According to Wardle and Derakhshan [2], mistrust and misunderstanding are the effects of rumors and fake information on social media; but it is highly controversial to say that viewers are exposed to fake news. This can be supported by a survey that found out the online news websites and platforms had a fair to great extent of fake news [3].

Furthermore, the presence of parody accounts has also been one of the crucial media issues in Malaysia. Since there are increased numbers of social media usage amongst Malaysians [4], these parody accounts use a similar brand or logo that is almost similar to well-known bodies or organizations. These accounts then used to spread false news, mocking or even insults [5]. Hence, this study aims to identify the factor that contributes to the use of social media as one of the sources of news and to measure the extent of the misuse of social media as a medium for news and information.

3.0 Research Objectives

- i. To identify the factor that contributes to the use of social media as one of the sources of news.
- ii. To measure the level of user awareness on the misuse of social media as a medium for news and information.
- iii. To identify the impact of social media misused towards society

4.0 Literature Review

4.1 Social Media as News Provider

The use of social media in today's era allows people to consume news and information in a different way. With the help of the internet, news and information nowadays are available on the line and people can access it anytime anywhere. As mentioned by Flintham et al., [6], the spike of social media has changed both intentionally and unintentionally how people access and are exposed to a range of news. This can be supported by Bandari et al., [7], the convenience and relatively inexpensive nature of creating and sharing online content has significantly altered the ways of gaining public attention. And, news organizations are now focusing a large part of their focus on online mediums in which they can effectively disseminate their content to a large audience. In placing more emphasis, the statistics of Malaysians who get their news from varieties of sources. According to the statistics, 86% of the respondents agreed that they received their news online which includes through social media [8]. From these points of view, it can be said that social media indeed provides news and information to the people.

4.2 Misuse of Social Media: Sharing of Fake News and Parody Account

People are constantly exposed to online sources of information, such as social networking sites, which allow anyone to post content without the need for fact-checking or editorial judgment [9]. This is contradictory as compared with the way people consume news and information in the past. According to Chiou & Tucker [10], consumers previously focused on mass media such as radio and television, which

featured less and more well-established news outlets. Since users will have full responsibility on their usage of social media, they tend to spread fake news with or without conscious. Moreover, Mahid et al., [11], stated that with too much information flooding the internet, fake news seems to be an unavoidable part of the online news network, hence, the spread of fake news on social media has become the latest concern for online news communities. Furthermore, parody accounts are one of the ways of delivering fake news to the consumers. Khan et al., [12] mentioned that there are five categories of online fake news content. It includes satire and parody content. He added that, satire content is fun and entertaining; it contains sarcasm, false news, and humor to deliver news or information; it is intended to insult an individual, group, community, or religion; and it can be difficult for some readers to interpret the actual content of the message, leading them to believe it is true.

5.0 Theory Guiding the Study

Media effects theory would be the most suitable to be applied in this study. According to Borah [13], there are several theories that lie under media effects and some of them include Cultivation Theory, Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) and Exemplification Theory. From those theories mentioned, the researcher decided to choose UGT to be applied in this study. UGT was founded by Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch [14] that discusses how individuals actively seek out and make use of specific media to fulfill their needs [15]. As indicated by Hossain [16], the primary goal of UGT is to better understand why individuals choose certain types of media in order to fully understand social and individual gratifications, as well as to explain users' motivations when engaging with media. Some of many studies applied UGT to explore new media and communication technologies including [17, 18]. According to the study, information seeking is one of the many needs that users are trying to meet by using social media. Furthermore, the ability of social media in providing real-time news updates which was beyond the bounds of possibility print and broadcast media has made the public more informed, aware, and able to make better judgements on any matters that involve the public [19]. Since this study was to study the factors that have made social media as one of the sources of news to the people, therefore UGT aligns so much with the objectives of this study. Moreover, respondents of this research are expected to come out with their reasons for choosing social media in obtaining news and information and outlining the consequences it might have on them. In this case, UGT again would be the best option to be used because people are seen as active by the theorists of this theory as they may evaluate and assess numerous sorts of media to achieve communication goals.

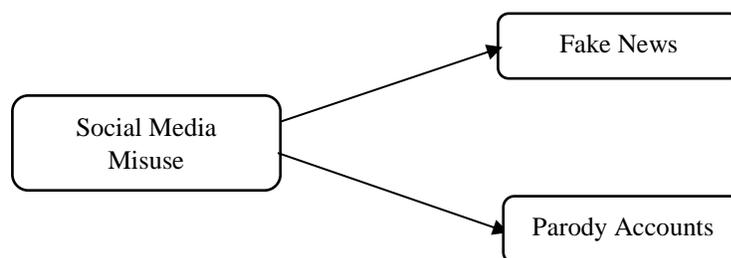


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework on Social Media Misuse

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of the study. The misusing of social media platforms in Malaysia marking a rise in number. Offensive content including obscene, indecent, false, menacing, or offensive in character with attention to annoy, abuse, threaten or harass any person were listed as social

media misuse. Therefore, it will cause the phenomenon of spreading fake news and the creation of parody accounts.

6.0 Methodology

The study mainly uses the qualitative method to attain its findings. Qualitative study is the natural setting that allows researchers to become more involved in the actual experiences [20]. It includes the process of describing, explaining, and interpreting the data collected from the research participants. In order to complete the study, the researcher decided to use an in-depth interview session in order to get an answer from the participants. In-depth interviews are easier since it is to speak to one person and grab his or her attention compared to in a group. Besides that, in an in-depth interview, a researcher tends to have a chance to follow-up on a question in more detail. According to Kvale and Brinkmann [21], interview knowledge is based on having straight forward information under the study by the interviewer asked to interviewee.

Moreover, four participants have been interviewed in this study. In the concept of data saturation, the minimum of two samples are needed to get the data saturation and usually there are more that are examined [22]. Before the interview sessions begin, participants are given a short briefing on the purpose of the study. The participants will also be explained about their rights to withdraw at any time and be aware about the protection of confidentiality. The interviews were audio-recorded, and notes were taken during interviews, after acquiring permission from the participants. This method enables the researcher to track key points for use during data analysis. Open-ended questions were used to encourage participants to openly express their experience and responses to the interview questions. Furthermore, the researcher used a purposive sampling method in the selection of the respondents. Purposive sampling is a select sample on the basis of the researcher's own knowledge of the population and the nature of research objectives. Thus, the researcher would purposely select Malaysian citizens who actively use social media and are well-informed about the misuse of the platform that aged between 18 – 30 years old to obtain desired data. The reason for selecting social media users is because it is crucial as it will help the researcher to have a representative picture of the misuse of social media as a medium for news and information. Young adults are chosen because they are more dominant in social media usage. This generation also grew up with computers that made them mastered to its use and often thought to be a tech-savvy and visually advanced of any generation [23]. Therefore, this generation would be the most significant sample for this study.

In addition, the researcher uses thematic analysis to analyze the gathered data. Thematic analysis is one of the most frequently used methods of qualitative analysis. In thematic analysis, the task of the researcher is to identify a limited number of themes which adequately reflect their textual data. According to Boyatzis [24], thematic analysis is free to the researcher to do with the team once they get the result of research. Hence, the researcher will accordingly group all the gathered data once the interviews are done. By this method, it will be easier to read the finding because the answer will be themed according to the question.

7.0 Findings

There are seven major themes identified from the results of this study. Theme 1, Theme 2 and Theme 3 answered the first research objective of this study while Theme 4 and Theme 5 answered the second objective. Not to forget, the third research objectives are answered as per Theme 5 and Theme 7. Each theme is discussed as per below:

- i. Factor that contributes to the use of social media as one of the sources of news

Theme 1: Social media is used as one of the sources of news

When the respondents were asked about their understanding on the use of social media as one of the sources of news, all four Participants agreed that social media play a role to disseminate news and information in the fastest ways. As from their point of view, the ability of social media to channel news via many platforms, has made all news and information can be rapidly disseminated to all audiences. Moreover, all participants stated that they used social media as one of their sources of news. For instance, Participant 1 stated that:

“Back then, I used to read the newspapers but as the day goes by, technology tends to take over these traditional elements and surprisingly, they are a lot faster to retrieve.”

Moreover, when the researcher asked for their opinion on the way mainstream media reports news, all participants claimed that most mainstream media are bounded by the state and government. They can hardly report the true colors when it comes to politics. Hence, all of the participants agreed that mainstream media will not be able to report the true colors of the news, especially something related to politics.

“Most media report the true color of a news unless when politics are in the picture, that is when the media gets to sugar coat the content.” - Participant 1

“Some of it, yes. Some of it, no. Especially when it comes to news related to our government issues or scandal, our mainstream media will usually cover up the bad and wrong side and display only the good side of the news” Participant 3

Therefore, from these findings, we know that the easy access to social media and its ability to rapidly disseminate news and information have been the obvious factors of adopting these platforms. This finding can be supported as mentioned in Forbes, 50% of Internet users indicated they first read about breaking news on social media before hearing about it on the news. Many internet users may spot breaking news on their feeds and visit news websites to learn more. According to the survey, traffic to news sites referred from social media increased by 57% [25].

Theme 2: Social media news is realistic

The researcher did ask for their opinion whether news reported by social media are realistic or not. According to Participant 1 and 2, news and information reported through social media will only be realistic when it is published by verified and trusted accounts. They said that:

“It is realistic if we were to search news on verified websites such as The Star and Berita Harian, verified news platforms will provide realistic information just like how the latest news is provided from the traditional mainstream media.” – Participant 1

“We have to choose the platform carefully because some media can't be trusted. If it is for fun or leisure, we can opt for a lighter platform and if it's for educational information, we can go for platforms that are heavier and trusted.” – Participant 2

Moreover, Participant 3 agreed to the above statement as she claimed that it is depending on the website or accounts that published the news. The respondent also thinks that most news from social media is more realistic as compared to the traditional mainstream media because social media reports uncensored news and more detail. However, Participant 4 has its own opinion claiming that there is no

way the social media would report realistic news because fake news can be easily viral throughout all platforms and the news came from anonymous hands. Therefore, users need first to confirm the legitimacy of the news reported in social media. [26] also mentioned that it is crucial for social media users (those who share and those who consume) to check the reliability of shared content on social platforms.

Theme 3: Social media is as important as traditional mainstream media in disseminating news

Nowadays, many newspaper publishers in Malaysia have created their own social media accounts to also report news via online. This has made the news as reliable as the reported news in the newspaper. According to all four participants, social media news could be as important as the news provided by traditional mainstream media. This is because:

In this era of pandemic, some news and information companies have gone bankrupt due to people getting news from social media and online. This shows that social media can be very important in the future”- Participant 1

“It is easier to have access and for people who are always on the go, watching or knowing about the latest information from their phones can be handy and helpful.” - Participant 2

Participants 3 also had the same thoughts where social media is extremely important in reporting news because it is the fastest way for the people to access the news. In addition, as expressed by Participant 4, because social media is such an on-the-go platform, it is so important for the people as they can use it anytime and anywhere.

- ii. The level of user awareness on the misuse of social media as a medium for news and information

Theme 4: People are aware with the misuse of social media

Furthermore, other objectives of this study have been answered. The participants have been asked about their awareness of social media misused namely the spreading of fake news. All participants claimed that they experienced receiving fake news that was shared through social media platforms especially from WhatsApp. Participant 1 shared her experienced with fake news:

“Once, a friend of mine forwarded a picture on WhatsApp and it said that “The number of cases today is 7000 cases”. Another friend of mine instantly told her to double check and turns out, it is fake news. We then advised her to not blindly forward any news without validating them.” – Participant 1

Participant 2 also has its own experience dealing with fake news. According to her:

“Since there is cheap marketing everywhere, there are advertisements where they need you to click the pop up and fill your number to claim your wins. It is not true, because if it is coming from a giant company, they will not do such lowly marketing. For instance, bank do have our personal information and they don’t need us to submit a new one” – Participant 2

Not to forget, Participant 3 and 4 also used to receive fake news from the social media platforms. As mentioned by the Participants:

“I have received a few fake news quite a few times before, especially on WhatsApp. Usually, the news is shared and sent by the older generation. In my opinion, the fake news is easy to be detected but somehow some people still got deceived by it” – Participant 3

“There was news on the fake death of a person. Later the news was discarded from some of the social media, but some blogs are still gaining profits by not bringing down the fake news.” – Participant 4

In addition, majority of the Participants did mention about the spreading of false information of the current situation of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country including misinformation, conspiracy theory and bogus. However, on the positive side, although these Participants happened to receive fake news disseminated through social media, they have never shared the news to other people. This clearly shows that they have a high level of awareness on this one kind of social media misused.

Theme 5: Parody accounts appeared more in Twitter

Next, all participants were asked about the presence of parody accounts in social media. All the Participants claimed that parody accounts are so familiar on Twitter. The most compelling evidence is the presence of Astro Awani, a pay television news channel. The participants said:

“I have seen one on Twitter where it is a parody account imitating one of the well-known news platforms in Malaysia – Astro Awani. The parody account is named “Astro Awatni”. It can really confuse the readers if they are not aware of the username.” - Participant 1

“Yes, if you are on Twitter, there are many parody accounts you can find there.” - Participant 2

“Yes, especially Twitter. It has the most parody accounts that can deceive people.” - Participant 4

All in all, all participants are aware of the presence of parody accounts in social media as most of them used to read news reported by these accounts. As highlighted by one of the participants:

“Make sure to check out the verified ones if you need to do some information’s’ digging.” - Participant 2

iii. The impact of social media misused towards society.

Theme 6: Older generations tend to be the most affected by social media misuse

Additionally, all four participants agreed that the misuse of social media, especially fake news, would have a negative impact on society. The participants agreed that the impact is more to the older generations. As mentioned by Participant 2, old generations will be badly impacted as they did not know much about filtering the news that they want to follow. The same thought is also voiced by Participant 1. The participant added that fake news might not affect those who are tech-savvy but for

the older people and senior citizens, it can cause unnecessary panic. These statements are also supported by Participant 3 and 4 by saying:

“They will get influenced by the news if they don’t filter it thoroughly.” – Participant 3

“With so much false information on many platforms, senior citizens especially, tend to trust everything that comes across them and start to circulate it.” – Participant 4

Theme 7: Social media misused will be the main issue in the country

Not only that, three out of 4 participants believed that the misuse of social media, especially the fake news will be one of the main issues in this country. As highlighted by Participant 1, Malaysians should be more aware of the news they read or received. This is because, in this digital world, news can spread as fast as the lightning with just one click and with that, it can have many consequences if they are not true. Together with Participant 1, Participant 2 and 3 also agreed that the misuse of social media in Malaysia will be the main issue in this country if it is taken lightly. As mentioned by Participant 2, many consequences will line up if people are not aware of the news they are reading, whether it is confirmed or not. Participant 3 added that:

“Fake news is all about racist ideas. For instance, if someone spread something hateful about any specific religion, the other people from different religions might hate everyone from that religion that was involved in the fake news.”

On the other hand, as for Participant 4, he believed that fake news is important to society. According to him:

“This is to educate people to not easily believe in viral issues or news.”

As discussed on the above, it can be said that the misuse of social media platforms will be one of the many issues that the country should deal with as it will also affect the social order as a whole. As studied by [26], fake news, without a doubt, poses a threat to a variety of areas of life, threatening not just economic and political stability, but also people's well-being and lives.

8.0 Discussions

From the findings, social media has become the prominent tool for sources of news and information to the people. This is because all respondents are aware of the role played by social media in disseminating news and this eventually assists Malaysians to receive and share news in the fastest way possible. This statement is based on the opinions from the participants saying that, because of the many platforms of social media, news now can be rapidly shared to all audiences. As has been noted, the ability of social media to transmit the news in the fastest way has contributed to the use of social media as the new source of news in addition to the traditional media. As mentioned by [26], one of the most appealing aspects of social media is that it is fast and free.

Moreover, as we are living in an era of digitalization of the media, the findings found that social media have the tendency to be as important as mainstream media because the respondents find the news reported through verified channels are as realistic as the traditional mass media. Since people nowadays rely on mobile technologies, the possibility of them relying on the internet to gain news is there. In accordance with the UGT, it can be stated that there are various gratifications sought by social media users to fulfill their needs and wants. As mentioned on the above, it is not possible for traditional media to serve a real-time

news update to the people therefore they will find another alternative to suit their needs for news and information. If users develop a habit of utilizing social media sites, they are more likely to use them more frequently and with more satisfaction, resulting in continuous use of this platform [27].

Furthermore, the findings also suggest that all respondents are aware of the misuse of social media as they experienced receiving fake news. This is because they used to read 'news' reported or shared by individuals and the parody accounts in social media. It is undeniable that everyone is able to write up their thoughts and share what they feel through social media. Therefore, this might contribute to the mislead of information to the society. Not to mention, since all participants experienced social media misused especially receiving fake news through social media, they however never forward the news to others. Obviously, these have shown that they are so much aware of this matter. Afterall, it is again back to the users of social media in making wise consideration to perceive any news they gained on social media.

In addition, the misuse of social media will bring harm to society in the future. Fake news for instance will affect their way of thinking and actions. Undoubtedly, fake news will make it hard for the societies to see the truth of a situation. As indicated in previous research, all the false information circulating around can lead to misleading information and potentially destroying the "news ecosystem's balance." The fundamental problem is that most consumers don't pay more attention to the falsified information, while those that falsify it are constantly attempting to cause more confusion. As a result of this process, people's capacity to distinguish between truthful and incorrect information is hampered even more [28, 29]. It is also important to realize that the skeptical minded of consumers to the news media stems from the so much false information they received from the fake news. Similar to the emergence of parody accounts in social media. Although these accounts only used satire and humor to spread fake news, somehow it might affect people's mind and action.

9.0 Conclusions

Today, the role of social media as a dissemination of information is obvious. For instance, mainstream media such as *Utusan Malaysia*, The Star, New Straits Time, theSun, *Berita Harian*, Sin Chew Jit Poh, Nanyang Siang Pau, and few others are now available online by having an official website and social media account. This has eventually changed the way people gain and consume news in their daily lives. This can be supported by [30]. The research indicated that, since becoming a prominent and expanding source of news and information for hundreds of millions of people, social media has drastically reshaped the news and media sectors.

Given these points, no matter how beneficial social media is in providing news to the people, we cannot deny that the misuse of these new communication technologies will always be in a debate. These various types of fake news, particularly when detached from their primary sources and contexts, such as with exaggerated or misleading articles or irrelevant or unrelated text, can have a wide range of negative consequences including confusion and distress of the people [6]. For instance, as reported by SAYS, one of Malaysia's local news companies, parody accounts in social media have been used to deliver fake news. The current popular parody accounts in this country include '*Bermana*', a play on 'Bernama' which serves as Malaysian National News Agency. Moreover, the Islamic Development Department's (JAKIM) was also parodied by '*MyJakim*'. Both parody accounts used Twitter as their platform [5].

To summarize, social media is a platform that cannot be controlled by anyone. It is the owner of the account that will be responsible with anything posted on their social media. As mentioned by Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) in a statement, Twitter has suspended *Bermana*

after a complaint has been made. However, suspension or closure of the account, on the other hand, is a reactive and temporary measure. Similar accounts can be recreated, so the public must exercise caution so as not to be swayed [31].

9.0 References

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