



RESEARCH PAPER

Gratifications behind Sharing of Fake News on Social Media
Regarding Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

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Due to their potential for causing serious damage, disinformation and fake news have greatly concerned the researchers of mass media globally during the vulnerable times of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study objectives are to identify the motivations behind sharing of fake news regarding COVID-19 on social media and to examine if the results of the current study are consistent with the previous study findings of Apuke & Omar (2021) relating to Nigeria. We have conducted a survey (N=300) by testing six hypothesis using the theoretical framework of uses and gratifications. The study results differ from that of the previous study and have indicated that entertainment and pass time are the major gratifications behind sharing news regarding COVID-19 on social media in Pakistan. The research recommends the government and policymakers in designing a strategy for controlling the spread of fake news related to health sector on social media in Pakistan.

Introduction

Freedom of speech has been the slogan of media and journalism for a long time however, the perils of uncontrolled freedom to share and disseminate information masquerading as verifiable truth on social media can lead to fatal consequences and can cause chaos in the society (Hartley & Vu, 2020). COVID-19 has affected the world in enormous magnitude and has impacted the social domains including journalism and media in such a way that citizens who usually remain far from the information have reconnected with the news (Casero-Ripollés, 2020). Social media has become a place to disseminate fake news and disinformation rapidly (Rampersad et al., 2019) and apparently the main reason being that as compared to traditional mainstream media, the user has switched to the role of producer on nascent social media (Piller et al., 2012; Van Dijck, 2013). The important question arising here is, how can media users detect fake news? The possible answer as suggested by many researchers is the attainment of a particular group of intellectual, practical, and emotional abilities which are prerequisites for creating content on social media and detecting fake news and misinformation, called social media

literacy (Mansell & Ang, 2015). The exponential growth of fake news particularly in the times of COVID-19 has increased the urgency to conduct researches related to fake news (Ouedraogo, 2020; Shirish et al., 2021).

The study offers conceptual replication (Bouter & Riet, 2020) of important research published by Apuke & Omar (2021) in the same area. The biggest merit of replicating important studies i.e. (Apuke & Omar, 2021) is that they can provide policymakers with important information which is a pre-requisite for creating an effective policy (Makel et al., 2012), it also helps in the validation of study methodology and findings for generalization to different populations, however, it has been argued that variations in results are expected while replicating a study design (Cherry, 2020). The study conducted by Apuke & Omar (2021) is an important study to understand the motivations behind sharing fake news during the time of COVID-19.

The aim of the study is twofold, firstly, to uncover the gratifications behind the usage of social media for sharing news related to COVID-19. Secondly, to examine if the results of the study by Apuke & Omar (2021) are consistent with the current study findings. The study survey asks various questions which help to identify the understanding of users regarding the authenticity of social media resources. Also, the study discusses the various reasons which could have affected attaining different results from the previously conducted studies. The study contributes substantively to the limited research conducted in the context of COVID-19 and fake news sharing in Pakistan. The paper has been organized as a review of the literature followed by method, data analysis, and discussion leading to the conclusion. The study implications and limitations have been discussed as well.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

Uses and gratifications theory has helped in the research of various traditional and emerging media studies thereby proving its compatibility with studying both newer and older forms of electronic media. Uses and gratifications theory has always provided a cutting-edge theoretical approach to various forms of mass media (Ruggiero, 2000). With the changing media ecosystem, the existing theories of mass media could be employed to understand the use of social media by the audience. Social media platforms offer a plethora of uses and gratifications to consumers that traditional media could never (Musa et al., 2015). The primary purpose of using social media includes major gratifications like socializing, entertainment, self-status seeking, and information, however, these gratifications are dependent on the demographics of the audience (Park et al., 2009). Some researchers have identified social interaction, information seeking, pass time, entertainment, relaxation, communicatory utility, convenience utility, expression of opinion, information sharing, and surveillance/knowledge about others as major gratifications of using social media (Whiting & Williams, 2013).

Fake News on COVID-19:

The outbreak of COVID-19 has been associated with a large amount of misleading and fake news on social media which can have a negative influence on

the widespread adoption of health-protective behaviors in the population (van Der Linden et al., 2020). Every government had to balance the polarity between freedom of expression and individuals' right to be protected from the adverse effect of erroneous news therefore, governments across the world have executed various techniques to oversee COVID-19 including giving public warnings, advertising campaigns, holding press conferences to fight the dissemination of bogus and misleading information (Rodrigues & Xu, 2020). Globally, various strategies have been opted to stop misinformation and fake news spread related to COVID-19 through social media including increased efforts by WHO to monitor social media platforms by collaborating with Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. (Carrion-Alvarez & Tijerina-Salina, 2020). It has also been suggested that health literacy should be improved by utilizing specific interventions to improve informal and formal communication related to COVID-19 (Moscadelli et al., 2020) also, it has been suggested that mass media interventions could be enforced to help minimize the spread of COVID-19 misinformation (Ahinkorah et al., 2020).

Two important studies have been conducted so far in the domain of gratifications behind fake news sharing on COVID-19 in Pakistan. One of the studies concluded that altruistic motivation is the main predictor of fake news sharing between people while no significant effect of entertainment was observed on fake news sharing. Also, the information sharing, socialization, information seeking, and time pass gratifications were found to be affecting fake news sharing among people during COVID-19 (Adnan et al., 2021). The current study is different from this study as the findings vary as compared to the study by Adnan et al., (2021). Another study in Pakistan on a similar research area conducted only on Facebook users concluded that the primary motivations behind sharing news related to COVID-19 were entertainment, socializing, and status-seeking (Malik et al., 2021). The difference between the study conducted by Malik et al., (2021) and the current research is that we have analyzed five major social networking sites in Pakistan as compared to Facebook only.

Gratification Constructs and their Relationship with Fake News Sharing on COVID-19

Altruism: *Altruistic* abilities help people to form social bonds and people with altruistic behavior are more likely to help strangers without expecting any reward in return (Tedrow, 2019). Altruism is also defined as giving something to someone without expecting anything in return (Apuke & Omar, 2021). It is also termed a defensive mechanism in the transformative process of instinctive feelings which are an essential part of human psychology (Shapiro & Gabbard, 1994). Many factors influence the altruistic behavior in human beings including upbringing and socioeconomic status (PsychologyToday, 2022). Therefore, the altruistic attitude in human beings can act as an active motivation behind sharing news on important issues without expecting any reward or response in return.

Information Sharing: Information sharing is a well-researched gratification construct in various studies. People share information to escape from reality, pass time, and for entertainment purposes as their habit (Taghipanahi et al., 2020). It was found that information sharing along with pass time and socialization motivates people to share news instantly on social media (Sampat & Raj, 2022). There has been a significant influence of information sharing gratification on news sharing on social

media (Thompson et al., 2019). Therefore, the information sharing gratification may have a strong relationship with news sharing on social media, especially in times of pandemics.

Information Seeking: Information seeking is an important gratification behind content consumption on social media (Qin, 2020). The desire to know more leads to an active information-seeking behavior among individuals and ultimately leads to the propagation of fake news on social media (Duffy et al., 2020). Scarcity of information leads to increased panic during the time of pandemic which motivates people to seek more information using various social media platforms thereby leading to the circulation of news that is not from authenticated sources. Therefore, information-seeking gratification could be related positively to sharing of fake news regarding COVID-19.

Socialization: Socialization has a positive relationship with user satisfaction while using social media for fulfilling gratifications (Bae, 2018). Also, socialization has been found as the strongest motivation behind news sharing on social media (Lee et al., 2011). Socialization gratification proved to be a major motivation behind news sharing on social media (Malik et al., 2021). Socialization gratification positively predicted false information dissemination (Chang et al., 2017). Therefore, socialization can have a positive relationship with fake news sharing during the times of COVID-19.

Entertainment: It was found that entertainment was not a significant predictor of news sharing intention on social media (Ma et al., 2011). The entertainment gratification behind sharing fake news on COVID-19 remains a question. It has been argued that there are no studies that have shown entertainment gratification to be related to fake news sharing during the pandemic, however, due to social isolation during the COVID-19, the tendency of people to use social media for entertainment has increased which might affect the sharing of news related to the pandemic as well (Apuke & Omar, 2021). However, a recent study conducted in Pakistan found that entertainment gratification foresees the spread of bogus news positively (Ghaznavi et al., 2022). Therefore, the current study aims to examine if a positive relationship exists between entertainment and fake news sharing related to COVID-19 in Pakistan.

Pass Time: The use of social media during times of COVID-19 has increased globally (Putra et al., 2022). It has been suggested that pass-time gratifications lead to instant sharing of news on social media platforms (Ghaznavi et al., 2022; Sampat & Raj, 2022). Therefore, it can be predicted that pass-time gratification and fake news sharing on COVID-19 share a positive relationship.

Material and Methods

We created an online survey using Google Forms. The survey was filled online by a random sample of (N=300) students within an age group of 18-34 who are active users of social media. The sample size has been chosen as per the sample size recommended for factor analysis research (Tabachnick et al., 2007). Correlation analysis was used to analyze the relationship between study variables using SPSS 25.

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument was adopted from (Apuke & Omar, 2021), and no changes were made in the process of adopting the instrument for study. The instrument shows good values of convergent validity as reported in Apuke & Omar (2021).

Table 1
Convergent Validity of Instrument

Constructs	Cronbach Alpha
Altruism	0.96
Information sharing	0.94
Information seeking	0.85
Socialization	0.94
Entertainment	0.86
Pass Time	0.89
Fake news sharing on COVID-19	0.82

Hypotheses

To understand the gratification behind sharing fake news on COVID-19, the study tests six hypotheses as follows;

- H₁: There is a significantly positive relationship between fake news sharing on COVID-19 and altruism gratification.
- H₂: There is a significantly positive relationship between fake news sharing on COVID-19 and information sharing gratification.
- H₃: There is a significantly positive relationship between fake news sharing on COVID-19 and information-seeking gratification.
- H₄: There is a significantly positive relationship between fake news sharing on COVID-19 and socialization gratification.
- H₅: There is a significantly positive relationship between fake news sharing on COVID-19 and entertainment gratification.
- H₆: There is a significantly positive relationship between fake news sharing on COVID-19 and pass-time gratification.

Results and Discussion

The following tables present the data analysis followed by a relevant discussion on the results obtained. The age group has been divided into two groups as presented in Table 2. As shown in Table 2 most of the sample respondents belonged to the age group of 18-24 (225) who are mostly bachelor's students (165). Female students constitute quite a significant part of the sample as (180) filled up the survey.

Table 2
Sample Demographics

		Frequency	Percentage (N=300)
Age	18-24	225	75
	25-34	75	25
Gender	Male	120	40
	Female	180	60
Education	Bachelors	165	55
	Masters	36	12
	M.Phil./PhD	99	33

According to Table 3, the highest number of respondents used Instagram as their primary social media account (50%), followed by WhatsApp (29%) and then Facebook (15%). Only 5% of the respondents used Twitter and the least percentage was for TikTok (1%) in the sample. According to the Global State of Digital 2022 report, global internet users aged 16 to 24 prefer Instagram to other social platforms (McLachlan, 2022). Therefore, the higher percentage of this age group in the study sample is a reason for the higher level of Instagram users in the current study.

Table 3
Frequently used Social Networking Sites

SNS	Frequency	Percent
Twitter	15	5.0
Facebook	45	15.0
Instagram	150	50.0
TikTok	3	1.0
WhatsApp	87	29.0
N	300	100.0

Table 4
Relationship between study variables

Hypothesis	Hypothesis Relationship	r values	p values (N=300)	Results
H ₁	Altruism and Fake News	.37**	.000	Supported
H ₂	Information Sharing and Fake News	.51**	.000	Supported
H ₃	Information Seeking and Fake News	.48**	.000	Supported
H ₄	Socialization and Fake News	.48**	.000	Supported
H ₅	Entertainment and Fake News	.71**	.000	Supported
H ₆	Pass Time and Fake News	.74**	.000	Supported

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The value of Pearson's correlation coefficient is interpreted as if the coefficient value lies between ± 0.50 and ± 1 , then it is said to be a strong correlation. If the value lies between ± 0.30 and ± 0.49 , then it is said to be a medium correlation. When the value lies below $\pm .29$, then it is said to be a weak correlation. The correlation analysis for testing gratifications factors responsible for sharing fake news on COVID-19 shows diverse results.

According to Table 4, the analysis output depicts the strength of the relationship between study variables. The first hypothesis of the study H₁ measures

if there is a significantly positive relationship between fake news sharing on COVID-19 and altruistic gratification. The value of r between altruism and fake news on COVID-19 shows a significantly positive correlation between them ($r=.37, p=.000$). However, this can be interpreted as a medium correlation between the two variables.

The second hypothesis of the study H_2 measures if there is a significantly positive relationship between fake news sharing on COVID-19 and information sharing gratification. The value of r between information sharing and fake news on COVID-19 shows a significantly positive correlation between them ($r=.51, p=.000$). This can be interpreted as a strong correlation between the two variables.

The third hypothesis of the study measures if there is a significantly positive relationship between fake news sharing on COVID-19 and information-seeking gratification. The value of r between information seeking and fake news on COVID-19 shows a significantly positive correlation between them ($r=.48, p=.000$). However, this can be interpreted as a medium correlation between the two variables.

The fourth hypothesis of the study measures if there is a significantly positive relationship between fake news sharing on COVID-19 and socialization gratification. The value of r between socialization and fake news on COVID-19 shows a significantly positive correlation between them ($r=.48, p=.000$). However, this can be interpreted as a medium correlation between the two variables.

The fifth hypothesis of the study measures if there is a significantly positive relationship between fake news sharing on COVID-19 and entertainment gratification. The value of r between entertainment and fake news on COVID-19 shows a significantly positive correlation between them ($r=.71, p=.000$). This can be interpreted as a strong correlation between the two variables.

The sixth hypothesis of the study measures if there is a significantly positive relationship between fake news sharing on COVID-19 and pass time gratification. The value of r between pass time and fake news on COVID-19 shows a significantly positive correlation between them ($r=.74, p=.000$). This can be interpreted as a strong correlation between the two variables. Figure 1 shows the outcome of the current study using the structural model presented in the study (Apuke & Omar, 2021).

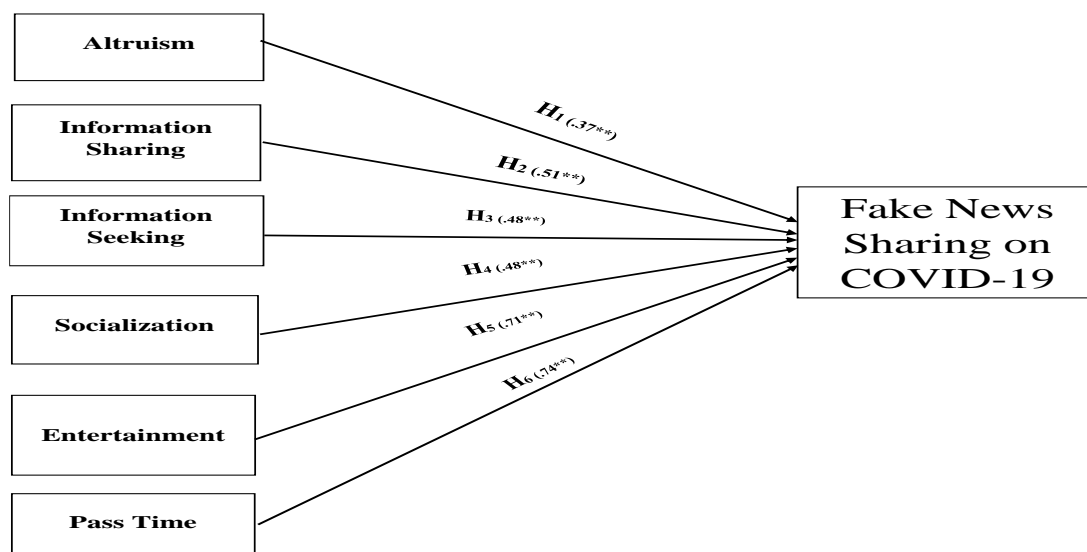


Figure 1: The Structural Model of Fake News Sharing on COVID-19 Adapted from Apuke & Omar (2021)

As the current research aims to compare the current research results with the study conducted by Apuke & Omar (2021) therefore, a comparative analysis of both studies has been presented in Table 5

Table 5
Comparative Analysis of Current Study Results with Apuke & Omar (2021)

Gratifications	Apuke & Omar (2021)	Current Study
Altruism	0.44**	0.37**
Information Sharing	0.34**	0.51**
Information Seeking	0.24*	0.48**
Socialization	0.28**	0.48**
Entertainment	NS	0.71**
Pass Time	0.22*	0.74**

Conclusion

The current study has adapted the research design of an important study conducted in a similar area where the sample was taken from Nigeria (Apuke & Omar, 2021). The study conducted in the parameters of Pakistan shows similarities and differences in the previously attained results about the six gratifications measured in both studies related to the sharing of news related to COVID-19 among respondents.

A brief overview of the comparison between the two studies in Table 5 shows that the relationship between altruism and fake news sharing on COVID-19 shows a value of 0.44** as compared to the value of 0.37** in the current study which shows that the respondents in the current study show a weak altruistic attitude as compared to the previous study. The values obtained between information sharing and fake news sharing on COVID-19 were attained as 0.34** as compared to 0.51** in the current study which indicates a stronger desire of the current sample to share news related to the pandemic for the gratification of information sharing. The information-seeking and fake news sharing on COVID-19 were achieved at a value of 0.24* previously as compared to 0.48** in this study which points out toward a stronger information-seeking gratification of respondents from the previously conducted study. The relationship between socialization and fake news sharing on COVID-19 was 0.28** as compared to 0.48** in this study indicating a stronger socialization gratification. The figures regarding pass time and fake news sharing on COVID-19 were achieved as 0.22* as compared to a much stronger value of 0.74** in the current study which shows that respondents in the current study are using social media for sharing fake news regarding COVID-19 for pass time gratification. The biggest difference in results obtained in this study is in terms of entertainment gratification which comes at a strong level of 0.71** in the current study while Apuke & Omar (2021) did not find entertainment as a significant factor affecting the intention to share fake news related to COVID-19. Conversely, the results of entertainment gratification in the current study indicate entertainment as a strong gratification involved in sharing fake news regarding COVID-19 on social media.

The comparison of the above-mentioned results establishes the validity and reliability of the study instrument as it has the capability of giving relationship strength while being conducted in a different geographical location. Nigeria and Pakistan are both developing countries. An important consideration regarding the responsible use of social media is dependent on many factors including the literacy rate of a country. The literacy rate of Nigeria as updated of 2018 is 62% (Statista, 2022a) and that of Pakistan in 2018 is 57% (Statista, 2022b). It has been argued that a higher media literacy rate particularly information literacy as compared to a general literacy rate of a country can significantly increase the likelihood of identifying fake news stories (Jones-Jang et al., 2021). However, no statistics have been found regarding the media literacy rate in both countries as it's rarely measured. Another important factor in the usage of social media in the country comes from the rate of internet penetration. As of 2022, the internet penetration rate in Nigeria stands at 51% (KEMP, 2022a) and 36.5% for Pakistan of the total population at the start of 2022 (KEMP, 2022b). Diversification of media use, frequency of media use, and media education have a positive correlation with media literacy (Xuan & Xiaomeng, 2015). The higher internet penetration rate in a country points out a higher frequency, diversification, and education of media users among the masses. The marked difference between the two countries appears in the reported cases of COVID-19 as in the case of Pakistan the reported cases stand at 1,528,800 and 255,766 in Nigeria (Statista, 2022c). The difference between the statistical figures for reported cases of the pandemic could be a reason for stronger and significant relationships between higher gratifications and fake news sharing on COVID-19 in Pakistan as compared to the study in Nigeria as people living in areas with higher levels of pandemic spread have more urge and panic to using social media in the times of emergency without fact-checking and authenticating news from official and valid sources. As it has been found that stressful quarantined people adopt irrational spontaneous reactions in sharing false information without paying much attention about their accuracy (Ouedraogo, 2020).

All gratification constructs show a positive relationship with the spread of fake news regarding COVID-19 on social media. The notable outliers in the study results are the gratifications of entertainment and time pass as motives behind spreading fake news related to COVID-19 on social media. This raises a red flag as such leisure time gratifications should not be ideally associated with spreading news related to serious business in the health sector. This also shows low levels of media literacy and identification of fake news among respondents of the chosen sample.

Recommendations

The study has addressed an important area related to gratifications behind the usage of social media for spreading fake news regarding COVID-19. Since the advent of the pandemic, a lot of researchers are conducting studies to identify the potential challenges faced particularly in media usage. It has been suggested through a mathematical model that direct efforts by social media platforms and governments, along with informal pressure from social networks, can reduce the likelihood that users who encounter fake news embrace and further circulate it (Hartley & Vu, 2020). Therefore, the current research suggests the following implications in the area of fake news and the use of social media.

1. Media literacy can play a key role in the identification of authentic sources for news sharing. The government needs to take steps to help the general public in increasing awareness regarding fake news and hoax created on social media.
2. Media professionals should organize workshops and seminars regarding media literacy starting from educational institutes to spread awareness among youth regarding the identification of fake news.
3. The authentic news resources should enhance their access to popular social media platforms targeting youth who are active users of social media.
4. The relevant authorities including FIA should devise a regulation to control the spread of fake and unauthenticated news which can cause chaos and confusion in society. The current PECA (Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016) needs to be amended/reviewed by all stakeholders on a priority basis so that a balanced legal framework is provided.

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