

Building Sociality through Sharing: Seniors' Perspectives on Misinformation

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to understand the perspectives of the seniors (aged 65 years and above) on misinformation in the Indian context. Interviews with 33 seniors who use social media regularly revealed three themes. The seniors viewed and rationalized sharing news irrespective of its veracity as a process of building sociality. Sharing information was also based on the logic of superimposing information with an epistemic ascription to the networks from where they received it. Finally, a kind of normative dualism becomes apparent from an acknowledgment of the role they may play in the spread of misinformation as agents on the one hand and a resounding need to stop it on the other due to its potential social ramifications.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Social and professional topics** → Age; Seniors.

KEYWORDS

Misinformation; Seniors; Sharing; Sociality; Social Media

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1 INTRODUCTION AND RELATED WORK

The surge of fake news online has given rise to several studies on both its macro and micro effects. An often-studied topic has been the millennial consumption of news through social media and their vulnerability in being exposed to hybrid sources of information [1, 4, 5], alongside issues such as echo chambers, network homogeneity, information literacy, ideological alignment and confirmation bias [1, 3, 7]. However, with the rise of the participation of seniors on social media [11, 12], especially in countries such

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as India which has the world's second largest online sphere [2], a paucity of studies on the fake news consumption by this demographic acts as the key motivator for this study. In the recent years, India has witnessed the rise of the new middle class, the emergence of cosmopolitan nuclear families, increase in transnational dispersal of families due to global labor markets [9] and the upsurge of smartphones providing digitally connected affordances to families [6]. All of these have contributed to the digitally-savvy middle-class seniors effectively mediating social media to ensure digital connectedness. In this paper, we explore the differential attitudes that the seniors who use social media have on the spread of misinformation. We also explore if information sharing has deeper social roots situated within the paradigm of the Indian ethos.

2 METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a semi-structured ethnographic interview format. Interviews were conducted with 33 seniors (aged 65 years to 82 years) in both the National Capital Region (north of India) and Chennai (south of India). There was a total of 14 men and 19 women participants, recruited through snowball sampling. All were either upper middle class or middle-class Indian citizens and were regular users of Facebook and WhatsApp. The interviews ranged from 12 minutes to 3.5 hours. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants.

3 RESULTS

We discuss three distinct themes that emerged from our interviews.

i) Sharing to Build Sociality: The loneliness and isolation arising from the changing structure of the new middle-class families in India (due to the rise of transnational and trans-local settlements) impact seniors. Connectedness is ensured through weekly or monthly video calls through social media. For example, though Ravinder, a 70-year-old homemaker interacts with her children overseas a couple of times a week, the rest of the time she feels bored and lonely. To combat this, for over six hours a day she exchanges WhatsApp messages from over 23 groups. Though she does not read these messages in detail, she forwards them as received. This hints at non-consumption of messages that are shared. Sharing became more important than the content of the information. Though normative discourses on functionality and the use of information sharing did surface, the practicality of socializing in everyday lives was key to them. Spreading messages on social

media was perceived as non-agenda driven sharing and pure sociality building process with no functional attributes. Information shared was more often as received and rarely followed by a remarks stating their thoughts on what they shared. Affirmations of testing the reliability of information shared online were frequently brought up with a qualifier that trust on the person who shared the information was a key criterion when information is exchanged as it was impossible to verify everything. Though the usefulness of shared information was an often-heard normative statement, it was apparent that passing information to groups was an attempt to build sociality.

ii) Epistemic Ascriptions to Networks: The epistemic validity of the information received by these seniors on online groups was mostly accepted at face value. Information is assessed as either falling into personal or non-personal categories and each has its valuation performed on it. It is deciphered based on who passed this information, often ascribing the veracity and the epistemic value of the information to the network or the person who shared it. For example, Rajat, a 70-year-old retired business-man stated "*I once received a piece of information on a change of a health insurance policy for seniors from a group which was a reading group with no seniors in it...I waited for the same message to be passed by the senior friends' group that I am a member of before I took it seriously...you just can't believe anyone...it should come from the right group*". However, on interviewing again, Rajat said that the information was a fake marketing strategy and his network had fallen for it. There were other cases where the ascriptions placed on the network had proved to be false, but that did not deter their faith in the information passed by the right kind of group (which was perceived as possessing the expertise for that kind of information). In case of non-personal information, on the contrary, there were cases where information, irrespective of its authenticity, was passed on just basing it on the ascriptions they associated with specific groups. The best examples pertain to religion. Messages with pictures of a god or goddess which when asked to be passed onto at least 20 people for their wish to be fulfilled, were passed with no questions asked.

iii) Normative Dualism: The seniors rationalized their practice of sharing information as a normative practice embedded deeply in the cultural framework of their native societies. Questions of how to categorize gossip or propaganda abound their interviews. Very often cultural attitudes and the existence of information dispersal processes in their societies even before the proliferation of digital tools and their role as a catalyst in helping spread information and thereby falling prey to misinformation was brought up. The spread of misinformation was often distanced from subjective personal practices and associated with the general nature of human behavior. Misinformation for them would coexist with information, and nothing could be done to stop it. However, they cognized on the ramifications of misinformation given the rate of its spread has increased with the proliferation of social media tools and felt a profound need to curb its spread.

4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Building sociality or having a more natural way to communicate with larger or smaller networks now have a platform-based affordance which these social media platforms offer. With this as a

point of inflection, delving deeper into the mechanics of the spread of information by these seniors point to some significant aspects. They typically employ a variegated sharing strategy. For example, impersonal messages generally shared in larger groups are seldom shared with their children over direct channels. Information shared on personal channels rarely makes it to the groups. However, epistemic validations through discussions of certain news could happen over phone calls, WhatsApp calls/messages, Facebook or even face to face communication with a close social circle. This is typical of the theory of scalable sociality [7] where these seniors strategically tend to move between the smaller and the larger groups depending on the nature of information shared. These can be viewed through the lenses of both polymedia [10] where there is a strategic choice of media based on what needs to be communicated and media multiplexity [8], which suggests that stronger ties communicate over multiple media. Non-consumption-based sharing is a significant aspect of these seniors who act as nodes in a larger social network. The more natural the form and the function of the information shared, the higher seems to be the receptivity with the seniors. Deception due to the congruence of form and function of shared information is apparent in the way the seniors describe their vulnerability. Though this study has a regional limitation, we hope that with the paucity of studies on the elderly and their participation on social media in an era of rising misinformation, this paper will act as a call for more such studies in the global south, specifically in countries like India which have a vast and growing digital population.

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