Chapter 2
Antecedents Driving the Intention to Share Unverified COVID–19 Information on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Infodemic refers to the influx of inaccurate or deceptive information on social media during a pandemic. The sharing of unverified COVID-19 information on social media is pervasive in Malaysia, which leads to adverse consequences stemming from misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information. Drawing upon the cognitive load theory (CLT) and self-determination theory (SDT), this research examined the antecedents driving unverified COVID-19 information sharing on social media in Malaysia. Based on 309 validated online survey responses, the PLS-SEM analysis revealed that except for trust towards online information; the proposed factors, self-disclosure, information overload, entertainment, and fear of missing out (FoMo), were found to predict the intention to share unverified COVID-19 information sharing on social media in Malaysia. Theoretical implications are discussed through CLT and SDT, and practical recommendations for government agencies, social media administrators, and public members to curb unverified COVID-19 information sharing on social media in Malaysia are offered.

INTRODUCTION

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the director of the World Health Organization (WHO), noted that "We're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic. Fake news spreads faster and more easily than this virus, and is just as dangerous." (Twitter, 2020). The statement characterizes *infodemic,* which concerns the influx of inaccurate or deceptive information during a disease outbreak. In the age of information abundance, social media has become a popular choice for people to exchange news and information. Unfortunately, social media has also become a tool for perpetuating unverified health information regarding COVID-19.

Notably, the three categories concerning unverified health information are misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information. Misinformation refers to false information that is inadvertently or unintentionally forwarded. For instance, during March 2020, a notion that drinking warm water can inhibit and even kill the invading virus with stomach acid emerged. The baseless information was regrettably disseminated widely and rapidly through social media (Ambrose, 2020). Disinformation refers to the fabrication and sharing of fake news with malicious intentions. During the early Ebola outbreak, certain parties have intentionally fabricated and disseminated the rumors that healthcare workers were harvesting patients' organs (Dzieza, 2014) and that the Ebola virus was a government's hoax to receive fundings and donations (Cheung, 2015). Mal-information refers to the deliberate distortion of the original information misused and repurposed with malicious intentions. For instance, certain parties manufactured the Covid-Vegan memes by stitching together a picture depicting a large amount of vegan food on a supermarket shelf with the caption claiming that people were avoiding vegan products amid the pandemic (Chiorando, 2020).

According to Lewandowsky et al. (2012), people rarely retract or correct unverified information that they have shared, even when they have realized later the need to perform the retractions. Unverified information related to daily affairs tends to be repeatedly diffused through the sharing on social media for a long time (Wen & Zhang., 2018). This is worrying as unverified COVID-19 information can cause adverse public reactions such as over-reacting and under-reacting as well as self-isolation behaviors (Zarocostas, 2020; Pennycook et al., 2020). Furthermore, misleading information can cause citizens to hold and exhibit unproductive views and actions that inhibit strategies aimed at improving the pandemic situation (Kanekar & Thombre, 2019).

From a theoretical perspective, research on the behavioral and psychological factors that drive the intention to share unverified COVID-19 information on social media is scant. While studies on unverified information sharing have been conducted

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