



Rumors on Social Media Networking Sites and their Impact on Emirati Youth

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Abstract

The growth of rumors in social media has become a significant issue across the globe. Even the youth is well-aware of the wide dissemination of unverified information online and is additionally affected by them. The purpose of this study is to explore the impacts of rumors present across different social media platforms on Emirati youth. To meet this goal, qualitative research was conducted which was drawn from the constructivist paradigm. The target population were Emirati youth who were between the ages of 15 and 24 years old. Using convenience sampling, a total of ten participants were involved in the study. In order to collect the needed information for the research, a semi-structured interview was conducted to every participant using a 10-item questionnaire which consisted of open-ended questions. Using content analysis, findings then revealed two themes: (1) Emirati youth contribute to spreading rumors on social media; and (2) Rumors on social media have a negative impact on Emirati youth's social security. In other words, participants were involved in spreading unverified information online at least once in their life. These rumors were centered on celebrity news and activities in their communities. Also, findings suggested that the participants acknowledged the negative effects of the growth of online rumors on them and their social security. Consequently, it is recommended that Emirati youth learn how to recognize and detect rumors and to dig deeper into the issue before posting them online in order to verify the information. Also, the national government needs to work on implementing a national security strategy intended to reduce rumors online.

Introductions

The massive growth of the Internet paved the way for increased use of social media. Social media is defined as "interactive computer-mediated technologies that

facilitate the creation or sharing of information, ideas, career interests, and other forms of expression via virtual communities and networks (Wong, Ho, Olusanya, Antonini, & Lyness, 2021, p. 255).” It encompasses various platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Through extensive information-sharing, social media therefore enables relationships between users coming from diverse backgrounds, resulting in a more complex social structure (Kapoor, et al., 2018). There are various benefits of using social media. Many studies suggest that social media can improve education, considering how the use of advanced technologies such as digital media and social networks can foster effective teaching and learning processes by enhancing their communication and/or interactions (Faizi, El Afia, & Chiheb, 2013; Alhumaid, 2020). Additionally, social media is found to positively impact businesses. According to Irbo and Mohammed (2020), social media has become an important tool for many businesses because it helps them to improve their relationships with their customers by providing effective customer insights, enhancing customer service, and increasing brand awareness through social media marketing. Other positive benefits of social media, as indicated by Siddiqui and Singh (2016), are noted by how it allows exchanges between users without being in the same geographic area/location. It also serves as a venue for people to express their ideas, thoughts, feelings, and opinions. Young people, for one, can improve their communication skills and build their technical expertise by using social media (Susanty, et al., 2020).

However, amid these benefits, there is a fair share of disadvantages to using social media as well. To mention, social media use can bring about feelings of distress and fears. There is an increase in social isolation, thus increasing the risk of depression, anxiety, and other mental health disorders (Wilson & Stock, 2021). There is also internet addiction which is driven by the increased time spent on social media platforms (Drahošová & Balco, 2017). In relation, the use of social media contributes to the increased circulation of rumors. Despite not being necessarily harmful or untrue, rumors are commonly associated to negative aspects such as fake news and other types of misinformation which can create severe problems within the social network. Because of the unmoderated sharing of information across social media platforms, the spread of unverified information has consequently increased (Eismann, 2021).

There are different definitions of rumors. The most common states that rumors are “unverified and instrumentally relevant information states in circulation,” implying that rumors are information items whose veracity status remains uncertain due to the lack of evidence that supports its credibility (Zubiaga, Aker, Bontcheva, Liakata, & Procter, 2018, p. 2). Rumors across social media platforms can be easily believed and relied on by the public, thus creating a variety of consequences. As what Rahman and Jahan (2020) indicated, rumors can negatively affect the condition of the economy, create phobia in the society, and increase engagement in conflicts, among others. Young people who are wide social media users are also found to be directly influenced by the spread of rumors in these online platforms. The study of

Pérez-Escoda, Pedrero-Esteban, Rubio-Romero, & Jiménez-Narros (2021) indicated that young people are highly exposed to online rumors which affect their level of trust with social networks, implying that spread of misinformation can reduce their trust on the information available online. On the other hand, it was revealed in the findings of He, Yang, Xiong, & Lai (2019) that although young people are more active in using social media platforms such as WeChat, they have lower rumor anxiety compared to older users. They also have lower intention to transmit rumors, thus reiterating that increase in the age of users leads to an increase in the rumor transmission intention and rumor anxiety. The findings additionally denoted that young people, as a result of their frequent use of social media, are better at using the Internet especially when it comes to gathering and analyzing information and also, in learning the truth (He, Yang, Xiong, & Lai, 2019).

The purpose of this research is to develop a broader understanding of the presence of rumors across social media networking sites, their prevalence and their impacts and to additionally identify the impacts online rumors have on Emirati youth. The research is motivated by the need to gain insights about how young people in the UAE perceive and respond to rumors they see on social media and how these rumors have affected them and others. More so, this research is important because it addresses the current gap in the literature where there is scarcity in the studies that specifically delve into the impact of rumors in social media on the youth, most especially in the UAE.

Concept of Rumor

There have been numerous studies about the conceptualization and origin of rumors. One of which dates as far back as the 1940s and the 1950s. For instance, in the study of Peterson and Gist (1951), rumors were defined as “an unverified account or explanation of events circulating from person to person and pertaining to an object, event, or issue of public concern” (p. 159). The authors additionally identified the different types of rumors which include retrospective rumors that centered on consequences of past events, predictive rumors which focused on future events, and rumors that were planted and methodically spread for the benefit of a specific group or individual, among others. Given the plethora of definitions and/or conceptualization of rumors, Turenne (2018) revealed that rumors are generally evanescent which means that they can disappear as fast as they are created and/or transmitted. Additionally, rumors can be categorized into seven: superstitious chains, solidarity chains, computer virus alerts, petitions, hoaxes, urban legends, and funny photos and fun stories (Turenne, 2018).

Because of the prevalent use of the Internet and the growth of social media, rumors have also spread out online. As what Meng, Li, Huang, and Li (2022) indicated, the generation and propagation of rumors have become more widespread because of social media. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are popular sources of rumors and this is evidenced by how they can influence political campaigns and elections. These sites are used primarily for

communication and networking and as a matter of fact, in 2011, the use of social media resulted in a revolution called the Arab Spring. Aside from rumors, social media is a popular tool for educating the public especially during the COVID-19 pandemic; however, the lack of gatekeeping has allowed dissemination of unverified information which could misguide citizens and create disharmony (Al-Zaman, et al., 2020). Chen and Wang (2020) had associated online rumor spreading to the process of epidemic sharing, noting that how it is a social contagion process that is influenced by social environments and behaviors of people. An example how online rumor sharing can take place was during the coronavirus outbreak. Several studies delved into how these online rumors had increased public fear and panic over the global health emergency. For example, Xiao, Huang, Zhang, Wan, and Li (2021) noted that rumors were widespread online during the pandemic. They were largely misinformation and had caused psychological over-reaction from the public. Similarly, Luo, Wang, Guo, and Luo (2021) found that with increased communication and interaction in social media, fear of COVID-19 increased which led to online rumor sharing.

Factors Influencing Rumors

There are several studies that have also looked into the factors that lead to rumor spreading. According to Meng, Li, Huang, and Li (2022), there are four main factors that contribute to the process of spreading rumors and these include external environment, spreading emotions, characteristics of rumor contents, and herd mentality. For one, the external environment is deemed a highly important aspect in the generation and spread of rumors, especially when there is so much uncertainty in the informatin environment. The spread of rumors is thereby a result of the lack of formal information and the need for the public to understand unclear facts (Meng, Li, Huang, & Li, 2022). This can be linked to the findings of Lee and Kim (2022) which revealed that people create and spread rumors in order to understand uncertain situations such as at the time of the coronavirus pandemic.

The second factor leading to rumor spreading is spreading emotions which according to Meng, Li, Huang, and Li (2022) is mainly about the influences of fear and anxiety. This means that people create and share rumors because they are driven by fear and anxiety, just like what happened during the COVID-19 pandemic where online rumor sharing about the virus was highly prevalent (Luo, Wang, Guo, & Luo, 2021). Li, Li, and Zhou (2022) had additionally noted in their findings that emotional instability is a factor of rumor sharing online, further suggesting that people who have anxiety, fear or unstable emotions are more likely to make and spread rumors. A similar finding was shared by Sun, Cheng, Zhang, and Yang (2020) wherein they mentioned that the higher the anxiety level, the higher the likelihood for the person to create, believe, and spread rumors. This is because anxiety can negatively affect an individual's thinking ability, thus making it easier for them to spread and believe unverified information.

The third factor which influences creation and transmission of rumors is the rumor contents' characteristics. As mentioned by Meng, Li, Huang, and Li (2022), people create rumors about matters that are relevant or important to them. For example, people shared countless rumors about the COVID-19 pandemic across different social media platforms because at that time, it was the most relevant and/or most significant event with global implications. The rumors that were shared online during the pandemic were primarily centered on contracting the virus and on preventing the infection (Xiao, Huang, Zhang, Wan, & Li, 2021). Finally, the fourth factor that leads to the creation and propagation of rumors is the herd mentality. Meng, Li, Huang, and Li (2022) had determined that herd mentality. According to the authors, rumors spread once one person believes a rumor because through herd mentality, more people will be influenced to believe the rumor as well which causes a rumor cascade. The same notion was also emphasized in the study of Pröllochs and Feuerriegel (2022), entailing that spread of rumors online is fast because of herding tendencies. This is characterized by a larger cascade depth in the proliferation of rumors in the online environment.

Effects of Rumor Spreading

Spreading rumors, may it be online or not, can have various implications. In business, for example, spreading rumors can have a detrimental impact on the brand's image and consequently influence the decision-making and sharing behaviors of the customers (Zhang, Zhu, Huang, & Xiao, 2022). Rumors can also lead to organizational blame especially at the time of uncertainty or crisis. In the empirical research of Nekmat and Kong (2019), it was found that spread of online rumors would increase the likelihood of having more people believe the unverified information, thus posing a threat to organizational reputation. Generally, proliferation of rumors across social media platforms is considered a major challenge nowadays. According to He, Yang, Xiong, and Lai (2019), the high prevalence of online rumors spreading or sharing has caused a problem to governments, companies, and individuals. There were instances where individuals have become wary of their of their privacy and security because of these online rumors. However, they continued to be a part of the world of social media.

As rumors were found to be influenced by emotions, Cui (2022) had also noted that online rumors could have an impact on emotions. Spreading or sharing rumors online was revealed to be a result of the users' need to relieve their emotional tensions, hence creating social instability. This entails that as much as the generation and propagation of online rumors were driven by uncertainty, anxiety, and emotional instability, it could also create negative reactions which have adverse consequence on personal actions and thinking (Pröllochs, Bär, & Feuerriegel, Emotions in online rumor diffusion, 2021). This is why rumors could be a cause of public panic and social disruptions. Cui (2022) had additionally noted that online rumor spreading can lead to increased public mistrust. For instance, in the case of the health care industry, any health-related rumor can aggravate

uncertainty and undermine the trust relationship between the public and the government. More so, if unaddressed, these rumors would result in social crises.

Online Rumor Spreading in the UAE

Social media has become such a widely used tool in the Arab region and the Arab Spring is proof of how social network services can influence political mobilization. Specifically, Twitter was the one which contributed significantly during the Arab Spring (Al-Zaman, et al., 2020). In the UAE, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter were popularly used. Google subsequently ranks third as the most commonly used site. As what El-Sayed, Firoz, and Dzamtoska (2015) indicated, the UAE is a highly digitally connected country, with 99 percent of the homes have mobile phones and approximately 80 percent have access to stable and reliable internet and have social media account. In line with these statistics, the UAE is a leader in digital transformation, most especially in terms of artificial intelligence (AI) technology, e-commerce, and smart learning development (Alaleeli & Almajjar, 2020). It is additionally pointed out by Al Naqbi, Al Momani, Davies (2022) that the use of social media in the UAE is the most prevalent among the youth and with that, the young Emirati populations are highly influenced by social media. Even their perceived level of national security is found to be predicted by social media use. (Habes, Ali, et al., 2022; Tahat et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2022).

The high level of social media usage and Internet penetration in the Arab region has also led to increased online rumor spreading. Based on the findings of Khalifa, et al. (2022), it was found that people from Arab countries engaged in rumor spreading during the COVID-19 pandemic for numerous reasons. (Habes, Alghizzawi, et al., 2023) These include ease of publishing and disseminating news and information about the virus across social media platforms, the lack of censorship in social media content, the lack of awareness about the adverse consequences of online rumor spreading about COVID-19, the proliferation of fake accounts, the lack of accurate information about COVID-19, and the absence of transparency in government agencies and official bodies such as the Ministry of Health (Khalifa, et al., 2022). The same thing had happened years before where social media was used to generate and spread rumors about Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in various Arab countries. According to Auter, Douai, Makady, and West (2016), there have been several health rumors and stories about MERS which led many people to develop confusion about the health concern. This then denoted how important it is to spread and share accurate information across social media, especially when it is health-related as this could create public panic.

Methodology

Research Design

In order to accomplish the goal of this study, qualitative research is conducted. Qualitative research, according to Teherani, Martimianakis, Stenfors-

Hayes, Wadhwa, & Varpio (2015), is "the systematic inquiry into social phenomena in natural settings" (p. 669). Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research uses non-numerical data and is guided by the constructivist or post-positivist paradigm. Constructivist beliefs focus on the existence of multiple realities, instead of a single truth. Qualitative research is inductive and therefore involves development of theories and answering descriptive and/or interpretative questions. It is also flexible which uses smaller samples (Coyle & Tickoo, 2007). As also noted by Daniel (2016), qualitative research allows a better understanding of meanings and events being studied. Unlike quantitative research, this approach collects non-statistical data which are unique, thereby helping researchers to have factual and descriptive information about the topic. However, there are also disadvantages to using qualitative research such as issues with replicability and difficulty in simplifying findings and observations. (Al Olaimat et al., 2022; Habes, Al-Adwan, et al., 2022; Habes, Elareshi, et al., 2022; Habes, Pasha, et al., 2023).

Qualitative research is deemed appropriate and/or suitable for this research because it allows a more in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives about social media rumors. At the same time, this approach allows the researcher to have a more meaningful conversation with the participants regarding the latter's experiences and exposure to online rumors and how this had affected their lives and the people around them. This would help understand the extent of impact that online rumors have on the youth and how any adverse implication of online rumors can be possibly addressed.

Population and Sample

The target population of the research are the Emirati youth. The definition of youth adopted in this study was derived from the United Nations (n.d.), stating that the youth are a group of people who are between 15 and 24 years old. To gather the sample, the researcher used convenience sampling where participants classified as youth and are willing to undertake the research were selected. A total of 10 participants took part in the research. Of the sample, 70 percent (n=7) were female and 30 percent (n=3) were male. Majority of the participants were 22 years old (n=4; 40%) while the rest were 23 years old (n=2; 20%), 20 years old (n=2; 10%), 21 years old (n=1; 10%), and 24 years old (n=1; 10%). Most of the participants were university students (n=7; 70%) while the remaining 30 percent (n=3) were already working in the private sector.

Data Collecting Instruments

The data collecting instrument used in this research was an interview questionnaire consisting ten primary questions which were prompted with some other questions for follow-up. (Elareshi, Habes, Al-Tahat, et al., 2022; Habes, Ali, et al., 2021).

Process

To facilitate collection of data, one-on-interviews were conducted. Interviews are a popular qualitative research technique that allows the researcher to ask open-ended questions to the participant and examine the situations in a more in-depth manner while also having the capacity and the opportunity to further look into complex questions. Generally, interviews are a very flexible method for data collection (Coyle & Tickoo, 2007). There are three types of qualitative research interviews: standardized or structured, semi-standardized or semi-structured, and unstandardized or unstructured. For this study, a semi-structured interview was performed. According to Ryan, Coughlan, & Cronin (2009), a semi-structured interview enables a more flexible interview approach, considering that the researcher was able to ask unstructured questions based on the responses of the participants to the structured questions. As a result, the researcher can explore further into the topic while also giving the participants an opportunity to express and/or explain their thoughts, feelings, and opinions better.

Analysis of Data

Content analysis was used to analyze the interview data. It is described as “a systematic and objective means of describing and quantifying phenomena” (Elo, et al., 2014, p. 1). Since the research utilized qualitative research, a deductive approach to content analysis was adopted. This involves identifying overarching themes based on the patterns observed from the interview data. Coding of the contents is the fundamental notion behind this method of data analysis. (Elareshi, Habes, Youssef, et al., 2022).

Findings and Discussion

There are two themes that emerged based on the data analysis performed. These themes include: (1) Emirati youth contribute to spreading rumors on social media; and (2) Rumors on social media have a negative impact on Emirati youth’s social security.

Theme 1: Emirati youth contribute to spreading rumors on social media

Majority of the participants mentioned that they had spread rumors on social media at least once in their life. One of the participants said that engaging in social media had given her significant amount of freedom to express herself and her opinions. Another participant mentioned that social networking sites could be considered a free space where he could easily communicate with his family and friends and share information which were still unverified at the time of posting (Elbasir et al., 2021). He further reiterated how easy it was to share information in social media platforms because all his other friends and family members were also

doing the same thing. Most of the topics that the participants were interested to gossip about included celebrity-related news and activities in their respective communities. According to one participant, she never bothered to check or verify the truth of the information she posted on social media especially when others were already posting or spreading the same information. As one of the participants said, spreading rumors online was not a conscious thing. She said that she did not bother to check if the things she saw or posted online were true or not.

The participants had additionally revealed that being a part of the online rumor spreading could be due to the fact they weren't called out for it. One of them said that nobody had ever told him he was already spreading rumors because he and others were spreading the same information and mostly, the things he posted did not originally come from him. If there was anyone to blame for starting a rumor, that would not be him (Elareshi, Habes, Ali, et al., 2021). Despite being involved in spreading rumors on social media, all participants had not been a victim of rumors or false information (Ali et al., 2021; Elareshi, Habes, & Ziani, 2021; Habes, Elareshi, et al., 2021; Salloum et al., 2021). As one of the participants mentioned, there was not any rumor specifically targeting him because most of the information being spread online was either health-related, celebrity-related, or about politics. All of them also said that they had not spread rumors that harmed others and/or their image. One of them said that his posts are mostly harmless because he never attacked people or companies. The same goes for others who revealed that their posts were health-related news, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the other hand, there were two participants who had not contributed to spreading rumors on social media. One of them said that she knew how everything posted online would have dire consequences. She also mentioned that she was not particularly active on social media because she was constantly busy with work. When she had the time to check her social media accounts, she would rather check on her family and friends instead of spreading rumors. She further revealed that posting rumors online was nothing but a waste of her time and that she'd rather do more productive things than be on social media and share rumors. The other participant who also had not engaged in online gossip said that she was not comfortable spreading unverified information. According to her, she did not want to be the bearer of what could be false information. She recalled her friend who had an unfavorable experience on social media where she was blamed for posting unverified information which she also just got from another person's post. The participant said that this was a lesson for her not to over-engage in social media and to always think before posting because this could create adverse implications on her, her friends, and her family.

Theme 2: Rumors on social media have a negative impact on Emirati youth's social security

The findings indicated that all participants agreed with rumors having a negative effect on their social security. As one participant stated, rumors violated

a person's privacy which was unacceptable. Because of the prevalence of rumors across social media platforms, participants felt that their security and privacy were both at risk. They said that rumors could compromise their security which would only impact their overall quality of life. Another participant mentioned that his greatest concern about the proliferation of unverified information on social media was the possibility of him becoming the victim. When he saw the kind of gossip being spread online a few times, he said he could not even imagine how it would feel if they were about him. Another participant said that rumors could have adverse psychological impacts on the victim as she witnessed it firsthand on her friend who became the center of these online rumors. These responses from the participants about the dangers of rumors and their negative effects could be aligned with the studies of El Smary & Al Khaja (2013) and of Al Suwaidi & Alomosh (2022). For one, El Smary & Al Khaja (2013) noted that most of the information being spread online were false and fabricated, thereby possibly creating damage on one's public image and/or reputation. Being a victim of rumors could negatively affect one's emotions and thinking (Pröllochs, Bär, & Feuerriegel, Emotions in online rumor diffusion, 2021). This relates with what one of the participants said about rumors creating anxiety, panic, and fear among victims. Nonetheless, as Cui (2022) indicated, emotions are greatly influenced by rumors as much as rumors are greatly influenced by emotions. This is why despite the rumors not being targeted towards a particular group or individual and could be about an event such as the COVID-19 pandemic, they create emotional tension and instability (Al-Shakhanbeh & Habes, 2022; Salloum et al., 2021). Al Suwaidi & Alomosh (2022), in one hand, also reiterated that rumors adversely affected the youth's sense of social security and safety.

One participant added that the growth of online rumors did not only make her feel uneasy or unsafe on social media, but they also triggered negative emotions and thoughts. It got to the point that she became uncomfortable with the people she interacted with because of the possibility that they were spreading rumors about her online. She said that the prevalence of online rumors had made it difficult for her to trust people, even if they were her friends. Another participant shared the same viewpoint. According to her, she was using social media to get the latest news about all kinds of topics from celebrity to politics; yet, with the uncertainty of the veracity status of this information, there was always doubt on whether to believe the news or not. As one participant said, rumors could either be true or not and it would be a shame if the rumors happened to be false information and she was the one who created and spread them. El Smary & Al Khaja (2013) had also noted a similar context where they shared how rumors being spread online could violate privacy which could cause distress and confusion. As a matter of fact, their findings additionally revealed that all the rumors on social media had affected their decision-making process. Even as simple as buying a product, rumors could be a great factor which could influence people's purchasing and consumption behaviors. According to one of the participants, rumors that are highly damaging

to image and/or reputation could influence decisions and impressions about the person, the company, and the government.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Rumors on social media have become very much prevalent given the tremendous growth of the Internet and increased social media use. Young people are directly affected in all this especially since they are active users of social media. As this study suggests, rumors on social media platforms would create negative impacts on the Emirati youth's security and privacy and would also even trigger negative feelings and emotions such as distress and confusion. Aside from how the spread of online rumors can negatively impact the young populations, the findings also indicated that the Emirati youth have contributed to the creation and propagation of online rumors at least once in their life. This means that many young people in the UAE have used social media platforms to create and spread rumors; however, these rumors were not specifically intended to cause harm or damage to an individual, a company, or the government.

In order to address the issue, there are certain actions or practices that Emirati youth can do. One of which would be to successfully recognize and detect rumors by assessing the reliability of the information and the credibility of the information source. This would help young people weigh their options as to whether or not they share the information (Alzanin & Azmi, 2018). Second, there must be conscious effort to find out the truth. According to Gjylbega (2018), reading more about the information being spread, checking for evidence and assessing the trustworthiness. It is the responsibility of the user to check whether information shared online or in social media reflects the truth or the facts. Third, the government should set up a national strategy to help reduce the proliferation of online rumors. The importance of having a national security strategy intended to combat rumors spread online from the perspective of an Emirati youth is noted by how this initiative would help protect the security and privacy of the population or the public from any violation as a result of increased spreading or sharing of online rumors. As what Al Naqbi, Al Momani, & Davies (2022), setting up a nationwide security strategy would help reduce dissemination of false information.

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