FAKE NEWS: FINDING TRUTH IN STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

Fake news is an old phenomenon that has become a new obsession and a menace to society due to technological advancement and the proliferation of social media, which has changed traditional journalism norms. As the spread of false information has increased these past few years, it has become increasingly difficult for information consumers to distinguish between facts and fakes. A comprehensive systematic literature review to extract themes revealed the major factors responsible for spreading fake news. This qualitative interpretative meta-synthesis (QIMS) aims to better understand and offer solutions to combat fake news. This Ph.D. dissertation will serve as a guide for ethical communication practice and a reference for future research studies.

Keywords: fake news, communication, USA

Dedication

 I dedicate my Ph.D. dissertation to my loving mother, Victoria. My Mama's steadfast love,

support, encouragement, and ceaseless prayers have sustained me throughout my life. Thank

you, Mama, for teaching me the value of hard work and determination. You are my forever

inspiration. You are truly a reflection of God's light.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Chapter One of this dissertation introduces the topic of finding truth in strategic communication. This study focuses on the fake news phenomenon that has eaten deep into the fabric of society. Fake news is a term broadly used to describe information that is totally or partially false, disguised as authentic news, and disseminated with the intent to mislead and manipulate people. In other words, fake news is false information created to appear like real news. The term fake news is also used to describe misinformation and disinformation. News content mixed with correct and incorrect information due to a writer's error is known as misinformation. Therefore, misinformation is often unintentional. Sometimes, misinformation could also be a deliberate attempt to mislead people by exaggerating facts. Diversely, disinformation is fabricated information created to mislead and deceive.

Fake news is so complex that it has no clear-cut definition. Lazer et al. (2018) define fake news as "fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent" (para. 4). Higdon (2020) described fake news as "misleading content presented as news and communicated in formats spanning spoken, written, printed, electronic, and digital communication" (para. 6).

This introductory chapter begins with the background of fake news and discusses the influence of fake news on the study's problem and purpose statements. This first chapter also gives an overview of the research methodology, research questions, theoretical framework, and key terms and ends with the chapter summary. Overall, this introductory chapter provides insight into the fake news phenomenon.

Background

Fake news in the mass media dates back to the early 16th century. Falsifying and sensationalizing news stories have been practiced since the printing press was invented (Fisher, 2016). Newspaper organizations were notorious for sensationalizing news stories to boost sales of tabloids (Corbu et al., 2020). In the pre-digital era, suppressing truth in the media was common in the political arena of most countries around the world. Disseminating misinformation and disinformation by media establishments was often discussed (Flanagin, 2017). Examples of fake news abound in history.

An example was the mid-18th century Catholic church's false narrative about the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake. Findings revealed that right after the massive earthquake destroyed Lisbon, there was widespread fake news that the earthquake occurred because the victims had sinned against the Virgin Mary (Bagdikian, 1983). In those days, religion dominated news reports in the daily newspapers, which negatively impacted the Enlightenment period. "The Enlightenment, also known as the Age of Reason, was an intellectual and cultural movement in the eighteenth century that emphasized reason over superstition and science over blind faith" (p. 62). Therefore, the rise of fake news was counterintuitive to reason.

Similarly, at the beginning of the 19th century, America's first colonial newspaper, 'Publick Occurrences,' published a false narrative about France's Louis XIV having an affair with his son's wife. "France is in much trouble (and fear) not only with us but also with his son. The Father used to lie with the son's wife" (Fisher, 2016, para. 3). In 1960, the publisher of Publick Occurrences, British immigrant Benjamin Harris, launched the daily newspaper in Boston, Massachusetts, and promised to publish truthful stories that would serve as an antidote to

false reports. Instead, he debuted with the sensational story about the French monarch engaging

in sexual rivalry with his son, which eventually led to his newspaper being shut down.

Sensationalism in the form of language manipulation in the media that could take control

of people's thoughts and actions was what Orwell (2013) warned against in his dystopian satire

novel, '1984', where a fictional language known as 'Newspeak' was created by a totalitarian

government to enable propagandists to produce substitute words that are more gracious to

replace offensive words used in manipulating and controlling the people. "All words can

be negated with the prefix -un, which helps remove negative or critical words. Such as Ungood

means bad" (Orwell, 2013, p. 191.). The idea behind the fictional language, 'Newspeak', is that a

government can create its language and use it to control the media and disseminate information,

making the people believe whatever information they want them to believe. Hence, the book

1984 and the Newspeak narrative is a cautionary tale that reflects the realities of today's world of

politics, propaganda, and fake news.

This type of sensationalism and propaganda, whereby words were twisted and used to

manipulate news consumers, was the media's modus operandi throughout the 19th century

(Tandoc et al., 2019). The racist sentiments in America in those days also resulted in stereotyped

fake news stories about African Americans' shortcomings and criminal tendencies published in

early newspapers, such as the New York Sun (Corbu et al., 2020). Another example is the hoax

story of 1835, which claimed that there was an alien civilization on the moon. In the late

19th century, the era of modern newspaper publishing, American publishers used fake news to

get ahead of their competitors. Joseph Pulitzer and William Hearst were well-known publishers

who consistently sensationalized news stories and reported hearsay as facts. Reporting fake news

was then known as yellow journalism (Fisher, 2016).

The practice of yellow journalism led to the late 19th century Spanish-American war, also referred to as the first media war, led by newspaper owners William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer. According to Napoli (2014), both publishers' sensationalized news stories contributed to America declaring war and the influence of yellow journalism may have also led Cuba to intervene. Americans would later protest the lack of mass media integrity. News consumers boycotted the media and demanded objectivity in news reporting. At the beginning of the 20th century, fake news reporting declined tremendously when The New York Times was founded. The daily newspaper had a reputation for reporting factual news from reliable, verified sources (Fisher, 2016).

After the era of yellow journalism and prior to the advancement of technology, news reporters would verify news sources before they published or broadcast news stories (Bagdikian, 1983). Verifying news sources is rare in the current era of social media, where breaking news is happening live online (Langmia & Tyree, 2017). The advancement of technology that brought about online news reporting and social media has made fake news more prominent (Tandoc et al., 2019). Therefore, the rise of fake news in the 21st century can be attributed to the increase in internet and social media news stories due to the advancement of technology. Fake news is common on social media because citizen journalists focus more on breaking the news than fact-checking news stories (Kwon et al., 2022).

The 21st-century trained journalists have been found wanting in the discharge of their duties. Research findings revealed that journalists are becoming unprofessional in news reporting (Corbu et al., 2020). News reporters rush to disseminate news without verifying sources and without fact-checking because they compete with citizen journalists, social media bloggers, and vloggers to be the first to break the news (Tandoc et al., 2019). Embellishment and exaggeration

of facts have become the trend in media establishments, just as in social media and corporate

communication (Kwon et al., 2022). Since the advent of social media, communication has

become more about quantity than quality (Corbu et al., 2020). Mass communication has become

more about the volume of information disseminated to the public than the value of the

message (Fisher, 2016). Content creators are more concerned with the number of followers they

attract than reporting factual news stories because more content on social media attracts more

followers.

<div align="center">**Research Problem**</div>

The problem investigated in this study is fake news and its negative influence on society

(Fisher, 2016). With little or no specific training, many citizen journalists, social media bloggers,

and mainstream media practitioners are disseminating information to the masses without fact-

checking their sources (Jones-Jang et al., 2021). Producers of fake news have succeeded in

changing people's attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions so they change their behavior (Kwon et al.,

2022). The increasing spread of fake news has negatively influenced society, resulting in citizens

distrusting mainstream media and digital media, undermining the democratic process, and

believing conspiracy theories and false narratives while dismissing science (Molina et al.,

2021). Findings revealed that fake science reports are alarmingly common (Brainard, 2023).

Neuropsychologist Bernhard Sabel revealed the rate of fake scientific reports with a new tool

that detects fake publications. His findings were shocking: "After screening some 5000 papers,

he estimates up to 34% of neuroscience papers published in 2020 were likely made up or

plagiarized; in medicine, the figure was 24%" (para. 1).

The negative influence of fake news has affected some news consumers to the extent that

they no longer trust the media and consider all news fake. The information could be crucial, and

they would dismiss it because of the loss of journalistic integrity (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). In

2020, attempts by technologists to use the media to explain to the world that the fifth generation

(5G) network had no connection to COVID-19 fell on deaf ears. Many news consumers

worldwide believed that the new technology was responsible for the spread of COVID-19. The

belief that 5G caused COVID-19 led to people destroying 5G cell towers in some parts of the

world. "First in the UK. There have been around 90 arson and sabotage attacks on mobile

masts in the country. Towers have been vandalized in Ireland, in Cyprus, and the Netherlands"

(Eliassen & Pena, 2020, para. 6).

The 5G fake narrative began on Twitter and went viral on social media. As COVID-19

spread in Wuhan, China, an anonymous Twitter user speculated that the 5,000 5G cell towers in

Wuhan would result in 50,000 people being infected with the disease (Molina et al., 2021). Many

social media users worldwide believed the 5G disinformation and widely shared the fake news.

Attempts to explain that the story was untrue were ignored by citing Portugal, where COVID-19

was spreading without the presence of 5G towers. To further prove to citizens that 5G towers had

no relationship with coronavirus, the Portuguese government postponed installing 5G towers

even though they were granted the operating license to launch the new technology

(Moirera, 2021). The theories about 5G and COVID-19 were fact-checked. They were proven

false by professor of virology at Purdue University, Dr. Richard Kuhn, who advised that people

should worry more about the sun, whose ultraviolet waves are much higher in frequency than the

5G. He added that people should think more about protecting their skin with sunscreen instead of

worrying about using their 5G cellular phones (Brown, 2020).

At the same time, fake news about the COVID-19 pandemic was rising in the United

States. Right after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced that

COVID-19 is deadly and recommended social distancing by using protective gear such as masks to slow the spread of COVID-19 infection, conspiracy theories began to spread on social media that COVID-19 is not deadly, that it is the same as the common cold and flu. Another theory was that disposable blue masks could be harmful, if not deadly, because they are laced with asbestos (Kwon et al., 2022). These theories were debunked by medical practitioners. "COVID-19 is not the same cold or flu. It's much worse. Only an airtight mask could cause any breathing difficulty. They fit tighter than a cloth mask, but still not tight enough on the face to kill" (Harris, 2020, para. 11-14). In addition, the CDC was accused of misleading the public with the general mask mandate while granting mask exemption to some people on religious and medical grounds. Some schools even allowed parents to make their own mask mandate. "Because of large numbers of students with cognitive or physical impairments, some schools are granting exemptions in line with the CDC's guidelines" (Reardon, 2021, para. 9).

As public health guidance continuously changed, people became more confused as they struggled to differentiate fact from fiction (fake news). Hence, the different narratives in the media contributed to science being discredited (Brenner et al., 2022). When COVID-19 vaccines were eventually developed, many people were skeptical about taking the vaccines because of the false narratives about the danger of vaccines. The explanation by scientists and experts worldwide that the vaccine will help fight the COVID-19 pandemic and help the world return to normal did not help vaccine hesitancy (Houston et al., 2021). False stories about why scientists developed the coronavirus vaccine abound on social media (Ball-Rokeach et al., 2021). People who feared COVID-19 vaccines were ineffective and unsafe were accused of spreading fake news about vaccination (Harris, 2020, para. 15). Social media bloggers accused of conspiracy theories also accused the CDC and the government of spreading disinformation. "Scientists and

health officials like Dr. Anthony Fauci have been lying about COVID-19 the entire time, several

statements being labeled 'conspiracy theories' a year ago and 'truth' now" (Putterman, 2022,

para. 3). Those labeled conspiracy theorists also blamed Dr. Anthony Fauci, the former Director

of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases chief medical advisor to United

States Presidents from 2021 to 2022, for contributing to the spread of fake news as he continued

to recommend third and fourth vaccine shots for people who were already vaccinated. "Fauci is

the face of that changing narrative. There has been a deliberate effort to take advantage of that

kind of confusion by accusing people of purposely misleading the public" (para. 6). On both

sides of the United States political parties, fake news continued to spread as Americans and the

rest of the world struggled to find the truth in the information being disseminated in the news

about COVID-19 vaccinations.

At the same time, the United States political arena was experiencing the same fake news

dilemma. The rise in fake news in the United States political system led to decreased trust,

undermining the democratic process (Kim & Gil de Zúñiga, 2021). A post-election study from

Ohio State University revealed that fake news might have influenced the 2016 United States

presidential election. Nisbet et al. (2018) reported:

Our study concludes that fake news most likely did have a substantial impact on the

voting decisions of a strategically important set of voters. Two of these were negative

statements about Hillary Clinton, and one was a positive statement involving Donald

Trump. Our post-election survey asked our respondents 281 questions that included three

fake news statements. The first is the claim that "Hillary Clinton is in very poor health

due to a serious illness." The second is a statement that "Pope Francis endorsed Donald

Trump for president prior to the election." Finally, we asked our respondents if they

believed that "During her time as U.S. Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton approved

weapon sales to Islamic jihadists, including ISIS." Given the very narrow margins of

victory by Donald Trump in key battleground states, this impact may have been sufficient

to deprive Hillary Clinton of a victory in the Electoral College. (para. 6)

Wakabayashi and Isaac (2017) conclude that trending fake news during political campaigns may

have contributed to President Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election. Political analysts

revealed that those who changed their votes from Democrat to Republican at the polls might

have been influenced by fake news (Walter & Tukachinsky, 2020). Media reports revealed that

only 17% of Democrats who voted for President Obama voted for Secretary Hillary Clinton. In

comparison, 83% of Democrats who believed the fake stories about Secretary Clinton crossed

over to the Republican party and voted for President Trump (Kim & Gil de Zúñiga, 2021).

Facebook Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Mark Zuckerberg admitted that about 186

million American Facebook users were presented with fake political news sponsored by the

Russians. He confessed when he appeared before the United States Senate Committee during the

hearing of the congressional inquiry into Russia's use of Facebook, Twitter, and Google

platforms in an attempt to influence the 2016 United States presidential election (Frenkel

& Isaac, 2018). In a similar testimony submitted to the committee, Facebook's counsel, Colin

Stretch, disclosed that Russian-sponsored Facebook published fake news from 2015 to 2017,

reaching 50% of American voters (Molina et al., 2021).

Similarly, Twitter's general counsel, Sean Edgett, testified that Russian-sponsored fake

stories emanated from over 56,000 fake automated accounts that tweeted out fake news

approximately 2,000,000 times and were viewed almost 300 million times from September to

November 2016. According to Edgett, to influence an election through Twitter, users were paid

as little as 25 dollars to retweet fake stories thousands of times (Walter & Tukachinsky, 2020).

Likewise, Google's leadership team revealed to the Senate Committee Russian-sponsored 2016

United States presidential election video advertisements on Google's YouTube (Wakabayashi &

Isaac, 2017).

After two days of public interrogation by 100 lawmakers in the United States Congress

over Russia's interference in the 2016 presidential election through his social media platform,

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg publicly apologized, promising not to allow third parties to

meddle in American elections. Alluding that Facebook was taken unaware by Russians,

Zuckerberg admitted that his organization was not prepared in 2016 for the type of organized

communication it now receives from users. To prevent election interference in the future, he said

Facebook is adequately prepared and has developed advanced technology and teams are closely

monitoring their systems (Frenkel & Isaac, 2018). It was later proven that Zuckerberg's

admission to Russia's interference was fake news. "Special counsel Robert Mueller's

investigation did not find sufficient evidence that President Donald Trump's campaign

coordinated with Russia to influence the United States 2016 election" (ABA, 2019, para. 1).

Zuckerberg kept his promise to make Facebook a haven from election interference.

Facebook spent two years preparing for the 2020 presidential election. From March to election

day in November, more than 180 million warnings were displayed on fake news content

identified by trusted fact-checkers. Over 265,000 posts that violated voter interference policies

were removed from Facebook and Instagram. More than three million political adverts that did

not meet the authorization process were rejected (Frenkel & Isaac, 2018).

Although Facebook mitigated fake news posts during the 2020 election, other social

media platforms were penetrated (Molina et al., 2021). Fake news producers infiltrated Twitter,

and the 2020 election campaign saw an explosion of disinformation spread by politicians. In addition to the social media fake news concerns, the issue of mail-in ballots generated false narratives (Aichner et al., 2021).

The volume of false information surrounding mail-in ballots was overwhelming, confusing, and frustrating to voters (Walter & Tukachinsky, 2020). While mail-in voting was being encouraged due to the COVID-19 pandemic, President Trump discouraged mail-in voting, as he believed it was an attempt to commit election fraud by the Democratic Party. He expressed his concerns during his campaign, and his followers shared the information. To prove President Trump's point, a conservative political analyst tweeted photos of over 1,000 mail-in ballots found in a dumpster in Sonoma County, California. A few hours after the tweets were published, a conservative online news site published a story that stated that thousands of uncounted ballots from the 2020 Presidential election were dumped, and election staffers were caught attempting to cover up the ballots (Aichner et al., 2021).

The election officials later revealed that the envelopes seen in the photos were empty ballot envelopes used during the 2018 mid-term election, and they were dumped for recycling. This fact came after the fake news had gone viral (Aichner et al., 2021). Media reports also revealed that aside from President Trump's six million followers who retweeted the fake mail-in ballot story, more than 25,000 Twitter users had reshared it on other social media platforms. When the fake news went viral, the 2020 presidential election ballots had yet to be mailed (Jones-Jang et al., 2021).

The spread of fake news was on the rise throughout the 2020 presidential election campaigns, during and after the election. It was reported that President Trump, who lost the election, refused to accept the presidential election results as valid, as he believed election fraud

was committed in some states (Aichner et al., 2021). In a recording that was made public,

President Trump demanded that Georgia Secretary of State, Brad Raffensperger, help him find

the missing votes. "All I want to do is this: I just want to find 11,780 votes, which is one more

than we have... Fellas, I need 11,000 votes, give me a break" (Scanlan, 2021, para 2). A fellow

Republican and supporter of President Trump, Raffensperger released the recording and rebuffed

President Trump's allegations of election inaccuracy as false and stated that the election result

was accurate (Jones-Jang et al., 2021).

Despite Raffensperger's clarification, President Trump insisted that Democrats stole his

votes and that the presidential election was illegitimate (Scanlan, 2021). Based on news reports,

his followers believed his election results narrative. Hence, his supporters obliged him when he

invited them to the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021, for the "Save America Rally"

(Aichner et al., 2021, para. 5).

The media reported that more than two thousand rioters took over the Capitol intending

to harm lawmakers and Vice-President Mike Pence, who refused President Trump's order to

overturn the election results (Jones-Jang et al., 2021). Testifying before the Senate Committee,

one of President Trump's supporters who pleaded guilty to attending the United States Capitol

rally on January 6, Stephen Ayres confessed, "He put out, you know, come to the 'Stop the

Steal' rally, you know, and I felt like I needed to be down here" (Dreisbach, 2022, para. 7).

After the January 6 incident, President Trump continued to use social media to share his

narrative about the outcome of the 2020 presidential election, which was termed false by social

media owners and eventually resulted in his ban from social media platforms (Jones-Jang et al.,

2021). Twitter led the social media ban. The social media giant stated, "After close review of

recent tweets from the @realDonaldTrump account and the context around them, we have

permanently suspended the account due to the risk of further incitement of violence" (Allyn & Keith, 2021, para. 8). Right after, Facebook and Instagram followed suit and banned President Trump indefinitely, stating a similar reason as Twitter. In solidarity with the two social media giants, YouTube, Snapchat, and other social media platforms suspended President Trump's accounts (Rajan, 2021). As the real story of January 6, 2021, is still being decided in the courts of law, Republicans have accused President Joe Biden of the Democratic party of misleading the American people with false information (Dale, 2023).

President Biden was giving his State of the Union Address on February 7, 2023, before the United States Congress when Republican Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene shouted, "Liar!" (Pandolfo, 2023, para. 2). Republican lawmakers were furious with President Biden because he accused them of planning to make changes to Social Security and Medicare. "Instead of making the wealthy pay their fair share, some Republicans want Medicare and Social Security to sunset. ... You know it means -- if Congress doesn't keep the programs the way they are, they would go away" (Dale & Wallace, 2023, para. 6). President Biden was loudly jeered by Republicans in the House Chambers for his remarks. Republican Senator Rick Scott, whom President Biden referred to in his speech, expressed his disappointment on Twitter.

> Last night, @JoeBiden rambled for a while, but it seems he forgot to share the facts: In my plan, I suggested the following: All federal legislation sunsets in 5 yrs. If a law is worth keeping, Congress can pass it again. To suggest that this means I want to cut Social Security or Medicare is a lie & is a dishonest move…from a very confused President. This is the kind of fake, gotcha B.S. that people hate about Washington. (Scott, 2023, para. 2)

According to CNN fact checker, President Biden's statement was false because there was no sunset proposal in the current debt negotiations. United States House Speaker Kevin McCarthy had dismissed cutting Medicare and Social Security the previous year (Dale, 2023). Similarly, during the midterm election campaigns in 2022, President Biden's nine statements were fact-checked by CNN's fact-checker. "President Joe Biden has been back on the campaign trail, traveling in October and early November. Biden's pitch has included claims that are false, misleading, or lacking important context" (Dale, 2022, para. 1-2).

Fact-checkers have proven that every election and every government has, in some ways, been responsible for sharing misinformation and disinformation (Aichner et al., 2021). Politicians tend to spread fake news during election campaigns. During his campaign for re-election in 2012, the Democratic presidential candidate, President Barack Obama, accused his opponent, the Republican presidential candidate, Senator Mitt Romney, of shipping American jobs overseas (Bull, 2012). Fact-checkers revealed that after reviewing evidence provided by President Obama and Senator Romney's campaign teams and corporate files with the Securities and Exchange Commission, they found no proof that Senator Romney's company shipped American jobs overseas (Kiely & Farley, 2012). Unfortunately, President Obama had succeeded in misleading the American public with his false claim. Republicans believed that the Obama campaign team's false narratives about Senator Romney largely contributed to President Obama's re-election in the 2012 United States presidential election (Mason, 2012). "In its attempt to put Romney under a cloud of conspiracy, Obama's team has compared him with former Republican President Richard Nixon, whose devotion to secrecy contributed to his impeachment and resignation in 1974" (para. 6). Senator Romney's campaign team accused

President Obama and his campaign team of spreading disinformation. It demanded a retraction

and apology (Bull, 2012).

In the same vein, President Obama laid a false trail about his job creation record in 2012

when he stated that American manufacturers were creating jobs for the first time since 1990. He

made the pronouncement at the Master Lock plant, praising the manufacturers for bringing

American jobs back from China (Bull, 2012). Fact-checkers quickly determined President

Obama's claim to be false. According to Umhoefer (2012), America experienced manufacturing

growth from 1990 to 1997, mainly under President Clinton, who reportedly presided over the

most prolonged economic growth in America.

Fake news is a problem many news consumers blame on the media and the government.

They also blame the rise of fake news on the advancement of technology (Walter &

Tukachinsky, 2020). The digital age has turned the media into entertainment for journalists and

politicians, and the world is gradually becoming a joke (Postman, 2010). Considering its

negative impact on society, finding a solution to the problem of fake news has become crucial.

Purpose

This research study aims to gain a deeper understanding of fake news. This is particularly

important in this age of advanced technology when even truthful communication is doubted as

being factual (Kjeldsen & Hess, 2021). This study is also intended to guide ethical

communication practice and eventually contribute to future research studies.

Research Methodology

This study employed qualitative interpretative meta-synthesis (QIMS) research

methodology to synthesize studies with related fake news topics. The QIMS approach helped

change each study's position from individual research of a phenomenon into a web of

knowledge. The synergism of a group of qualitative studies is intended to create an in-depth and broad understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Aguirre & Whitehill-Bolton, 2013). Therefore, QIMS research methodology was employed to accomplish the purpose of the fake news study because it is the most suitable research approach for a complex social phenomenon as it helps to create a deeper understanding of the investigated topic (McGee & Dawson, 2020).

QIMS methodology is beneficial in eliminating common research misconduct and bias. Emphasis is often placed on authenticity and the quality of data interpretation (Aguirre & Whitehill-Bolton, 2013). This meta-research approach helped this researcher prioritize a high-quality fake news study to promote information education, fill the professional communication gap, and mitigate the spread of disinformation and misinformation.

QIMS belongs to the field of meta-research that involves carrying out a research study on prior research studies (Nordberg et al., 2016). The QIMS approach was used to extract themes from previous studies on the fake news phenomenon. This researcher brought together the position of each author to create a more meaningful and harmonized group of knowledge on fake news.

QIMS methodology involves developing research questions, identifying the appropriate research instrument, sample selection, and analyzing data via theme extraction, theme synthesis, data coding, and triangulation (Ravi & Casolaro, 2017).

Research Questions

Three researchable questions informed this qualitative interpretative meta-synthesis study on fake news.

Research Question 1

What new insight can be gained from a comprehensive review of fake news research? This question was vital in investigating the fake news phenomenon from new perspectives.

Research Question 2

How can a comprehensive review of existing literature help identify and combat fake news? This question provided a deeper understanding of the motives behind the creation of false information and educated news consumers on how to separate facts from fake news.

Research Question 3

What themes emerged from a comprehensive review of scholarly literature on fake news? This question helped to interpret the different themes of fake news from previous studies.

Research Instrument

A research instrument is any tool researchers can use to collect, obtain, measure, and analyze data (Ravi & Casolaro, 2017). As is typical with QIMS methodology, the prior studies on fake news were used as instruments for this qualitative interpretative meta-synthesis (Aguirre & Whitehill-Bolton, 2013).

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework serves as a foundation for a research study. Theories guide the research. Communication theories are critical because they are vital in understanding human behaviors (Littlejohn et al., 2021). Theoretical frameworks help researchers understand why people behave and communicate the way they do. Communication theories typically provide ways of analyzing and processing situations and phenomena borne out of communication (Littlejohn, 2002).

This researcher employed the two communication theories most relevant to understanding and interpreting the fake news study. The two theories that are the best fit for the fake news qualitative interpretative research study are semiotic and medium. Employing both theoretical frameworks would allow for a more compelling interpretative analysis of media and messages and how they impact society.

Semiotic Theory

Semiotic theory is a communication approach that provides a framework to understand coded messages such as signs and symbols (Littlejohn et al., 2021). In other words, semiotics helps humans understand their world by helping them interpret the meaning of signs and symbols they create daily without ambiguity. In semiotic theory, signs and symbols include words, images, ideas, talk, text, feelings, situations, and events (Zlatev, 2018).

Since semiotic theory is focused on interpreting communication processes, it was used to analyze fake news from a signage perspective. The semiotic theory also helped to understand how symbols and signs in communication affect the users socially and psychologically (Thummy, 2017). An example would be to analyze a news story, a blog, or an advertisement and how they sync well with the photographs and other images that accompany them. Interpreting a medium of communication and signs together will likely produce a different meaning than when they are analyzed separately.

Medium Theory

Medium theory provided a theoretical understanding of the complex problem of fake news that is difficult to decipher. This theory critically examined the role of the media in disseminating and spreading disinformation. The medium theory also served as a lens for this researcher to view the complexity of the fake news phenomenon from different media

perspectives based on the findings. It provided the framework that helped in conducting the

analysis.

Medium theory was developed in the 1960s by Herbert Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian

English professor, philosopher, author, and communication theorist. He laid the foundation for

communication theories and was regarded as the father of communication theories and the

prophet of communication technology because he predicted the internet age 30 years before it

was invented. He contributed enormously to understanding media and communication

technology and how they impact society—especially the effect of communication technology on

the human psyche. According to McLuhan (1964):

> With the arrival of electric technology, man has extended, or set outside himself, a live
>
> model of the central nervous system itself. To the degree that this is so, it is a
>
> development that suggests a desperate suicidal autoamputation, as if the central nervous
>
> system could no longer depend on the physical organs to be protective buffers against the
>
> slings and arrows of outrageous mechanisms. (p. 79)

McLuhan was one of the most influential communication theorists of the 20th century because he

created an entirely new discipline of media ecology (Littlejohn et al., 2021). McLuhan predicted

that the media would easily manipulate news consumers to believe every piece of information as

technology advances (Langmia & Tyree, 2017). To help news consumers understand the role of

the media in this QIMS study, this researcher will employ the medium theory to interpret the

impact of fake news on the human psyche.

Definition of Terms

Definitions of terms were used to explain the meaning of the keywords and general concepts discussed throughout the fake news study. Some of the key terms that will be used throughout this study are as follows:

- **Alternative Facts-** False information presented as facts.

- **Bloggers-** People who write regularly for online journals.

- **Citizen Journalists-** People who write, produce, and publish news stories online without journalism training.

- **Conspiracy Theories-** False narratives that blame a group for tragic events.

- **Content Creators-** People who ideate and create content shared via any media.

- **Disinformation-** False information spread to deceive people intentionally.

- **Fact-checking-** Verifying all the facts in a news story to ensure accuracy.

- **Fake News-** False information shared as news.

- **Mainstream Media**- Traditional media establishments such as newspapers, radio, and television.

- **Mass Media**- The different news channels, such as television, newspaper, and radio, through which information is disseminated to the public.

- **Misinformation-** Inaccurate or incorrect information. This is where facts are taken out of context without the intention to deceive.

- **Phenomenon-** An extraordinary event that is difficult to understand.

- **Propagandists-** People who disseminate false information to influence public opinion.

- **QIMS-** Qualitative interpretative meta-synthesis is a research approach that allows a researcher to extract and synthesize existing literature with similar themes.

- **Scoop-** An exclusive news story first reported by a journalist or media establishment.

- **Semiotic –** The study of signs and symbols.

- **Sensationalizing-** Presenting false information to the public to provoke and excite people.

- **Social Media-** Online platforms that serve as communities for social media bloggers and vloggers to communicate, create, and share content.

- **Vloggers-** People who create and share video content online.

- **Yellow journalism-** Unprofessional and unethical journalism focused on reporting biased and sensationalized stories.

Summary

Chapter One of this dissertation began with the background of fake news and discussed the influence of fake news on society through the study's problem and purpose statements. The chapter also gave an overview of the QIMS research methodology, research questions, research instrument, semiotics and medium theoretical frameworks, and key terms and ended with the chapter summary. Overall, Chapter One provided insight into the research study of the fake news phenomenon and its implications. Chapter One established a solid foundation for Chapter Two, which reviews previous studies on fake news.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Chapter Two of this study reviewed existing literature associated with fake news to understand the premise of the phenomenon that elucidates the impact on society. The literature review included topics on the historical perspective of fake news, the process of information dissemination in the media, corporate organizations, and the government, plus the role of cultural bias and news consumers. The literature review begins with an analysis of semiotic communication traditions and theoretical frameworks.

Communication Tradition

Traditionally, communication is the process of transferring information. Humans encounter different data types daily- written words, images, impressions, signs, and symbols (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008). Digesting and understanding a plethora of information is an arduous task. The complexity of communication is beyond human comprehension. To understand the different concepts and perspectives of communication, Robert Craig postulates a communication model encapsulated in ways people can assimilate. Craig categorized communication into seven traditions – Critical, Cybernetic, Phenomenological, Rhetorical, Semiotic, Social-Cultural, and Socio-Psychological. Each of the seven communication traditions explain communication from a different perspective. These communication traditions reveal why people communicate the way they do (Craig, 1999). The fake news study employs semiotic tradition because it objectively uses meta-language in interpreting the layers of meaning in signs and symbolic messages to become completely meaningful (Per not, 2009).

Semiotic Communication Tradition

The semiotic communication tradition is about communicating with signs and symbols such as emojis, logos, traffic signs, metaphors, phrases, and nonverbal communication (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). Communication began with signs. The foremost universal language began with meaningful signs (Pernot, 2009). Such signs are in the form of images, patterns, gestures, motions, and events.

The semiotic communication tradition has three main characteristics – the sign, the meaning, and the interpreter. All these are apparent in spoken, non-verbal, and written semiotics, usually in textual symbols, puns, metaphors, and cultural references (Adler & Rodman, 2003). Findings revealed that at the basic level, semiotics is the study of how meanings are made every day through communication (Bowcher, 2018). Human beings communicate daily via sign language, and different receivers interpret the meaning differently. For example, smiling is a universal sign language that means different things to different people. Many will interpret a smile as a sign of friendliness. Some would simply interpret a smile as a sign of happiness.

In the American political arena, MAGA (Make America Great Again), which former President Donald Trump coined for his political campaign, has become a textual sign that means different things to different people based on their interpretation.

To President Trump's followers, MAGA is a movement and part of their identity as a fellow rescuer of America. To them, MAGA means President Trump, a fearless leader. The MAGA red hat is a symbol of support for President Trump and the movement by his followers. To Americans who are not the former president's fans, the textual sign MAGA symbolizes political violence, undemocratic, and xenophobia (O'Harrow et al., 2021).

Although human beings negotiate and interpret signage of communication in every sphere of their lives because they have learned the basic skills of decoding sign language, experts

conclude that understanding and interpreting signs and symbols lies with a semiotician (Kuzu, 2016). Semioticians investigate how meaning is created and communicated by analyzing the language and visuals in the context of the original message (Zlatev, 2018).

Considering that semiotic tradition is focused on interpreting communication processes, it is a theory that helped analyze different aspects of fake news and how symbols and signs in communication affect users socially and psychologically as they relate to fake news.

Theoretical Frameworks

Semiotic and medium theories serve as the theoretical frameworks that guide the fake news research study. Both theories are linked, allowing for a more compelling interpretative analysis of media and messages and how they impact society (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). First, it is essential to understand how each of these theories is relevant to the fake news research study. While semiotic theory focuses on interpreting messages, the medium theory focuses on analyzing the media's motives in relation to disseminating messages (Bowman & Willis C, 2003).

The semiotic theory was co-founded by a Swiss linguist and philosopher, Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of 20th-century semiology, and Charles Sanders Peirce, an American philosopher, logician, and scientist. Both semioticians believe that signs convey meanings that shape the perception of human life (Vosoughi et al., 2018). They both proposed that in the right cultural and social environment, a sign will effectively convey a sender's meaning to a receiver and prompt the expected response.

Theoretical frameworks are essential in laying the foundation for research studies because they guide the research and provide deep knowledge of human behavior and how they

contribute to the problem of the research study. Most importantly, the theoretical frameworks allow researchers to analyze complex situations (Littlejohn et al., 2021).

The QIMS study requires that its framework aligns with the theories most appropriate for the research; the communication theories that this researcher employs to analyze the fake news study from symbolic and media perspectives and robustly answer the research questions are semiotic and medium theories.

Semiotic Theory

The semiotic approach is an excellent way to analyze the words, visuals, and sounds in news reports, stories, and advertising used to create and produce informative messages (Ollerhead, 2019). Experts believe semiotics in journalism enables news consumers to interpret the underlying meanings in the information they receive from the media. In other words, semiotics empowers a media audience to accept or reject information based on their interpretation of the messages (Zlatev, 2018).

Findings reveal that one of the reasons fake news spreads quickly is that many media establishments do not adequately investigate and interpret the stories they publish (Wiggins, 2017). In other words, news reporters see and report a sign as it is without examining the connection between the sign and its object or event (Vosoughi et al., 2018). From a semiotic perspective, news reports are signs that represent something. Whatever a sign represents, it can be used as an object of deceit (Ollerhead, 2019). "The distinction between fake news and news involves the relationship between the report and the external fact on which it is based" (Wiggins, 2017, para 3).

Unfortunately, news reporters are using faulty methods in their news gathering. Many news stories published by media organizations are not products of investigation based on

observation and interpretation. Many journalists simply reiterate what has been published in other media. An example was the Pizza Gate conspiracy theory (Tandoc et al., 2018). A news report published that presidential candidate, former United States Secretary Hillary Clinton, and her former campaign manager John Podesta were operating a child trafficking business at a pizza restaurant, Comet Ping Pong, in Washington D.C. Based on this fake news, a man decided to carry out his own investigation, went to the restaurant armed with an assault rifle, and fired shots into the ceiling of the restaurant (Frankovic, 2016). After the shooting incident, the author of the fake news confessed that it was a hoax (Tandoc et al., 2018).

Semiotic Interpretation of Conspiracy Theories

News is news. Appellations are subjective. Describing the news as good, bad, or fake depends on the news consumer's beliefs, orientation, and interpretation. The child trafficking story was simply news without the appellation "fake" until the author admitted it was a hoax. No news media investigated the Pizza Gate story to determine that it was fake news before the confession of the author. Communication experts attribute this to the degeneration in the standards of accuracy in news reporting (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Until the author confessed that he created fake news, the angry shooter simply reacted to what he thought was real news. The news signals a situation, and news reporters are responsible for revealing the facts behind the sign.

The Main Argument of Semiotic Theory

The main argument of the semiotic theory is that the three main concepts (sign, context, and meaning) that make up the theory of semiology cannot be treated as separate entities (Zlatev, 2018). In other words, the relationship between the three concepts must be evident in their interaction and interplay. To prompt the appropriate response from a message receiver, senders

should be focused on providing relevant context when sending visuals to receivers, so they can

have a clear understanding of what is intended by the sender (Ollerhead, 2019). Sending visual

messages within the appropriate context enhances the receiver's comprehension and makes it

easy to respond appropriately to the message (Tandoc et al., 2018).

Sign

A sign can manifest in several ways, which include body language, sound, and smell

(Bowcher, 2018). The sign in communication is composed of a signifier, its physical form as an

object, and the signified, which is how a sign is interpreted by the one who views the sign

(Zlatev, 2018). Experts insist that a sign must have both the signifier and the signified to produce

the integrated whole in a communication process (Ollerhead, 2019). For example, in a television

commercial, the first thing to identify is the sign, its purpose, and what it means. After

identifying the signifier, the signified is about identifying how the message makes the receiver

feel. The signified is having the ability to interpret a sign or a piece of information beyond

identifying an object. Therefore, after identifying the sign, the news reporter should first observe

the sign or situation to gather the facts carefully. For accurate reporting, experts advise that there

should be a causal connection between a sign and its signified (Tandoc et al., 2018).

Context

The context in semiotics is the aspect of interaction that provides specific meaning to the

communication exchange between a sign and the receiver (Bowcher, 2018). "Context is a frame

that surrounds the event and provides resources for its appropriate interpretation" (Vosoughi et

al., 2018, para 7). The context in communication is the use of language (Zlatev, 2018).

Therefore, the text in a written expression or speech in a spoken expression is the context

(Tandoc et al., 2018). The word, sentence, or speech context influences how people understand

an expression or communication. Therefore, citing people within context when reporting news or sharing information is essential. The issue of fake news arises partly because many reporters report signs as they are, thereby citing the object's author out of context. It is vital to interpret the language used in the sign to analyze the context appropriately (Zlatev, 2018).

Meaning

Meaning in communication is created based on the personal experiences of the recipients of signs (Zlatev, 2018). In other words, meaning is how signs are interpreted based on how recipients connect and interact with their immediate environment. When the signified makes sense of a sign, a meaning is created. Meaning is the whole essence of the semiotic theory. Semiotics is about investigating how signs and symbols create meaning (Ollerhead, 2019).

Medium Theory

Medium theory provided a theoretical understanding of the complex problem of fake news that is difficult to decipher. It helped examine how media and societies work as they relate to communication and information dissemination. This theory served as a lens for this researcher to view the complexity of the fake news phenomenon from different perspectives based on the findings and provided the framework to help conduct analysis.

Medium theory was developed in the 1960s by Herbert Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian English professor, philosopher, author, and communication theorist. He laid the foundation for future communication theories. He was regarded as the father of communication theories and the prophet of communication technology because he predicted the internet age 30 years before it was invented (Langmia & Tyree, 2017). McLuhan was one of the most influential communication theorists of the 20th century because he created an entirely new discipline of

media ecology. He contributed enormously to understanding media and communication

technology and how they impact society (Littlejohn et al., 2021).

Main Argument of Medium Theory

The main argument of medium theory is that the media is the message. In other words,

the media does not just affect the message; it is, in fact, the message. His argument implies that

mass media is more important than the information it disseminates. McLuhan postulates that the

media determines and influences how messages are received and perceived (Marchand, 1989).

An example of how the media affects the message can be seen in how one former social media

giant, Twitter, compelled its users to limit the information they disseminated to only 280

characters. Limiting word count on Twitter prevented users from withholding facts from their

followers, who were fed up with half-truths (Vaghjiani et al., 2021). Findings also revealed that

Twitter prioritized tweets based on the popularity of the message and how much interest people

were showing in the topic. Their strategy was to track the number of tweets, the number of

people retweeting, and the number of people liking the trending topic (Weller et al., 2013).

McLuhan and Fiore (1967) also argued that the media controls the thought process of

their audience through every piece of information they disseminate. Unlike using agenda-setting

theory to influence public agenda, the media determines how their readers and viewers think

through the experiences they create for the audience. Additionally, media audience experiences

are shaped in different ways depending on whether it is a hot media, which consists of

newspapers, magazines, movies, photographs, and radio, or cold media, which consists of

television, speech, telephone, and social media (Logan, 2003). McLuhan's postulation implies

that the experiences of people who consume information through hot media are usually very

different from people who consume information through cool media due to their distinct levels of participation (McLuhan, 1964).

People who consume information from newspapers, magazines, and radio are restricted to whatever information the media offers. Therefore, audience participation is usually low because the cognitive effort in receiving information from the press is typically high in definition, whereby the audience is not expected to make contributions (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967). For instance, whenever news consumers read about events such as the COVID-19 pandemic conspiracy theories in newspapers or hear about them on the radio, they cannot share or forward the information to several people like they can with digital media. Newspaper readers and radio listeners typically do not plan to share information immediately, except when the situation arises, and they would mention what they have read or listened to in passing (Logan, 2003).

Conversely, those who consume information from cool media consisting of television, speech, telephone, and social media experience a high level of participation. These mediums employ low definition in disseminating information because the audience cognitive effort in receiving information from such media usually needs to be higher in definition. This means the audience is expected to contribute by filling the gap where information is missing (McLuhan, 1964). Users of cool media such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and other social media platforms have been able to embellish information because they can add their opinions to existing information and fabricate false information from facts (Marchand, 1989).

Medium theory argues that the human senses used to receive information determine why mediums differ from one another. McLuhan (1962) argued that the media is an extension of the human senses. He implied that the extension of media technology could shift the sensory balance

of human beings, adding that society at large bears the brunt of man's shifting senses because when people's reasoning changes based on the information they consume, their behavior would likely change. He maintained that the advancement of technology would increase the instability in the human senses (Logan, 2003). For example, the advent of the printing press and the newspapers affected human minds. The publication of newspapers brought about civilization as people began reading articles about events and places. It was a development that shifted man's sensory balance (McLuhan, 1962).

The advancement of technology and the advent of social media contributed more to the extension and the imbalance of the human senses (Logan, 2019). Digital media users have become the extension of the platforms they constantly use because the users' data on social media platforms are scooped up and used to the advantage of the social media owners to recreate content that lures users back to the social platform. Hence, digital media has become an extension of the psyche of the users (Innis, 1972).

The Google search engine is a good example of how users' data search is used to recreate content. Whenever users search for information, Google algorithms learn more about the type of information that appeals to the users and, in turn, use the input by the users to create information that would interest the users. This is the same algorithm strategy social media platforms employ. Social media users input information that interests them and use it to create complex data that makes them appear more competent while human beings seem less competent. Therefore, human beings would always go back to digital media to seek help finding answers to personal problems. The more creative digital platforms are, the more the human senses shift, manipulate, and influence human behavior (Rushkoff, 2016).

The shift in senses and the manipulation of users by social media owners can be seen in the increasing rate of fake news. Social media users tend to believe every piece of information they find on their favorite social platform, thereby losing their right to truthful information (Flanagin, 2017). Long before the advent of social media, McLuhan (1964) prophesied about the invasion of digital media users' privacy when he wrote:

> Once we have surrendered our senses and nervous systems to the private manipulation of those who would try to benefit from taking a lease on our eyes and ears and nerves, we don't really have any rights left. Leasing our eyes and ears and nerves to commercial interests is like handing over the common speech to a private corporation or like giving the earth's atmosphere to a company as a monopoly. (p. 8)

Such private manipulation is what social media users are experiencing in this era of fake news. The conspiracy theories that surround COVID-19 are good examples. Findings revealed that through advertisement clicks from producers of fake news, social media platforms profited from the trending disinformation and did nothing to dissuade the spread of fake news on their platforms (Marwick & Lewis, 2017).

However, there has always been media manipulation through advertisements with traditional media, television, radio, newspapers, and magazines, but there has not been the same degree of manipulation with social media. The information that users of social media platforms key into the system is being used to manipulate them by digital information systems managers. Human beings have become extensions of their favorite social media because of the problems created by the platforms. "As extensions of our digital technology, the problem arises because of the monopolies that digital media creates, such as Google, Facebook, Instagram, Amazon, Yahoo, Twitter, Apple, and Microsoft. The potential for their abuse is great" (Rushkoff, 2016, p.

10). The control social media platforms have over their users might be why fake news thrives on social media.

Another medium theory argument is how digital media amputates human senses. McLuhan (1964) posits that human minds are being amputated whenever an extension of the senses occurs. He believed that the negative impact of the media becoming an extension of the human psyche is that they are cut off from the social world. He argued that introducing technology into society reworked the human senses from balance to imbalance. He concluded that the technological extension of humanity resulted in amputating and changing other extensions. He cited the example of automobile extension amputating the sense of walking, which has caused societies worldwide to develop differently. He sums it up metaphorically as "The goose quill put an end to talk" (McLuhan et al., 2001, p. 35). In other words, as the new media technology amplifies a part of the human senses, it diminishes the effectiveness of another sense. Different media affect the human psyche in different ways. Hence, the extension and amputation of the human senses are the key elements that differentiate one media from another. These arguments are better understood when fake news is viewed through the lenses of medium theory.

Application of Medium Theory to Fake News Study

The medium theory applies appropriately to the study of fake news in many ways. The uniqueness of the different media is why McLuhan (1964) posits that the media is more important than the message. The theorist believes that the medium used in disseminating information to the public should be the focus because of "the ways in which each new medium disrupts tradition and reshapes social life" (p. 307). Today's new medium is social media, and different platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, etc., are disrupting and

reshaping the social lives of their users (Meyrowitz, 2018). Findings revealed that most social

media platforms have practically transformed societies' economic and political arenas through

dominant messages laced with misinformation and disinformation (Ticau & Hadad, 2021).

Similarly, medium theory helped us understand the study of fake news in traditional

media. In the case of print media, McLuhan (1964) repeatedly said the information in the

newspapers, the stories, the photographs, and the articles have little impact on the readers.

Hence, he concluded, "People don't actually read newspapers. They step into them every

morning like a hot bath" (p. 45). He was implying that newspaper readers are more involved in

the brand, such as the newspaper design, its cultural impact, and its historical impact, and not

necessarily what the information in print says.

Medium theory implies that every newspaper organization, reputable or not, has the

power to influence and transform their readers, who can be empowered to change their

communities. The power of newspapers over their readers makes it easy for the print media to

earn their loyalty and evoke reactions from their readers (Coppock et al., 2018). Findings reveal

that nearly 90% of American news consumers still prefer to get their news from newspapers that

they consider reliable sources (Stevens, 2020). The trust that some news consumers have in their

favorite newspapers explains their loyalty and why they tend to believe every piece of

information they read in print, including fake news.

In the same vein, the medium theory applies to the broadcast medium. Listeners love

their favorite radio stations, and radio messages only go to their subconscious minds while their

conscious minds fail to register the significance of the information (Rushkoff, 2016). "The

subliminal depths of radio are charged with the resonating echoes of tribal horns and antique

drums. This is inherent in the very nature of this medium, with its power to turn the psyche and

society into a single echo chamber" (McLuhan et al., 2001, p. 50). Findings revealed that loyal

radio listeners were often fooled by make-believe fake news stories.

A notable example was on October 30, 1938, when a Manhattan radio host, Orson

Welles, deceived the listening public when he incited a panic that the invasion of the world was

happening live. In a confession to the press, Welles stated, "I had conceived the idea of doing a

radio broadcast in such a manner that a crisis would seem to be happening and would be

broadcast in such a dramatized form as to appear to be a real event taking place at that time,

rather than a mere radio play" (Schwartz, 2015, p.). The Halloween-themed radio prank caused

pandemonium, and the fake news panicked millions of American listeners who trusted their radio

stations (Tonguette, 2018).

Similarly, loyal television watchers have been exposed to make-believe and fake news

(McLuhan et al., 2001). The medium theory applies more to television because of its repetitive,

persuasive, and pervasive nature that has earned its loyal audience who believe everything they

watch on television and form the image of reality in their minds (Schwartz, 2015). For example,

the daily violence rate reported on television is greater than the personal experience of television

viewers. Yet, they assume violence is the order of the day because they view the world as

dangerous through television (Tonguette, 2018). It is, therefore, easy for a television station to

disseminate propaganda, such as the propaganda preceding the events at the U.S. Capitol on

January 6, 2021, that was televised live (Molina et al., 2021).

Main Goal of Semiotic & Medium Theories

The main goal of both semiotic and medium theories is to determine the different types of

meanings that make meaningful communication. Hence, from a semiotic perspective, news

stories must be written or produced by investigating the facts in the sign or the news being

reported and locating the causal connection between the sign and what it represents to accurately interpret the sign or the news. Interpreting messages accurately before disseminating news reports will earn media establishments respect and trust from their audiences. At the same time, the appellation "fake" in the news will gradually disappear.

Literature Review

The literature review included topics on the historical perspective of fake news, the process of information dissemination in the media, corporate organizations, and the government, plus the role of cultural bias and news consumers.

Historical Perspective of Fake News

The history of disinformation and misinformation in the media plays a crucial role in understanding the 21st-century fake news phenomenon. Baets (2019), in his study, examined fake news from a historical perspective. He pointed out that disinformation is an ancient practice that is still being perpetuated today. He attributed the 21st-century fake news phenomenon to the advent of social media platforms where everyone can publish and share false information at will. The research study results reveal that the historians who investigated fake news in the early centuries were dishonest in gathering information for the research study. "Among the plethora of primary sources used by historians to study the past, some are forged, many distorted, and all are biased" (para. 2). The study discerned that false information was used to produce fake history because the historians who investigated falsehood in the media were not truthful in their research. However, the study did not conclude with recommendations.

In the same vein, Heekeren (2019) evaluated the effect of fake news on society in the ancient days compared with the digital age. The study took a historical approach to contextualize the plethora of false stories in circulation. Fake news had a more extended history in the post-

digital era than in the digital age. The study results reveal that the fake news phenomenon began with the mainstream media, where disinformation was published often and extensively. The study's findings revealed that even though the history of fake news in the digital era is shorter, disinformation is more widely spread. The study concluded that due to the advancement of technology, social media has created and institutionalized a new culture of fake news. The research methodology employed in this study was unclear, and the study participants were not categorized. Hence, the study lacked depth.

On the contrary, Klein (2020) analyzed the different eras of fake news beginning in 1960 when reports were strictly based on facts, and like the black-and-white television medium, the news catered to its black-and-white audience without bias. In those days, news presentation was regarded as a service to society and not for profit for television stations. News reporting was considered serious business. Codes of ethics and morality guided news reporters in reporting facts. The study's findings revealed that in the 60s, public figures were protected by the media. Before his assassination, the media highly regarded President J.F. Kennedy as an icon. By 1970, the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) had deregulated broadcast networks, combining news and entertainment. It was the end of black-and-white television, as the clear line between fact and fiction had begun to fade. News on television and tabloids became colorful, and the world experienced the merger of fact and fiction in the mainstream media. The study revealed that fake news became widely broadcast when television anchors became opinionated. "The networks no longer just presented the news; they now told you how you should think about the news. When you mix fiction and news, you diminish the distinction between truth and fiction, and you wear down the audience's own discriminating power" (para. 5). The study concluded without making recommendations on how to stop the fake news phenomenon.

The Role of The Media in the Spread of Fake News

Television stations like MSNBC are considered Democratic stations because they lean towards the liberal party. In contrast, FOX News is regarded as a Republican news station because it leans towards the conservative party. Both stations are known to sensationalize stories that sometimes mislead news consumers intentionally. Riley (2013) analyzed news stories that are real news with no false information in the data gathered but failed in the category of misinformation due to lack of clarity because the stories are intentionally sensationalized. The study revealed that journalism has moved from objective reporting to subjective reporting. Most news reports in the mainstream media are heavily opinionated, exaggerated, and judgmental. The study also revealed that most media establishments get away with sensationalizing news stories that mislead the public because they have made a name in the news business. The study discerned that facts could be reported misleadingly, but failed to get the perspective of loyal news consumers of popular media who report facts like fiction. The study recommended that television anchors find their way back to reporting facts without blemishes.

Pöyry et al. (2019) examined the role of social media influencers in spreading fake news. In a study of 45 participants who were social media influencers, it was revealed that the content they produced and presented to the public lacked authenticity. Participants disclosed in their interviews that organizations hire them to get creative with content. The goal is to sell their client's brand using all available resources. Many confessed to creating make-believe stories. Results from the study revealed that over 50% of social media influencers intentionally produced fake stories through fake accounts to influence their clients' customers. 20% of the participants admitted that they were offered a lucrative business deal to share conspiracy theories, but they declined the offers. The study recommended that social media influencers must be trained in

news reporting and media ethics. Although the study had elements of the mixed method, the research method was not clearly defined, and there were traces of conflicting results.

In a study of millennials, primarily social media communicators, Jensen (2001) examined how fake news is produced and propagated by young adults who are avid social media users. Twenty accounts of millennials on five major social media platforms were observed for a week, and findings revealed that young adults are primarily responsible for the proliferation of disinformation fueled by millennials who are information enthusiasts. They consume loads of information, much of it irrelevant as it relates to their personal and professional lives, on the different social media platforms. They would enthusiastically share with thousands of friends and followers without verifying their facts. The result of the study revealed that the millennials' information consumption behavior of mindlessly liking, commenting, and sharing stories without fact-checking does have a ripple effect on fake news. Although the study discerned the role of information consumption behavior in spreading fake news, it did not make recommendations for solutions to the problem at hand.

Bowman and Willis (2003) examined three factors that have compelled and exposed the public to fake news. A study of news consumers revealed that lack of trust in the mainstream media, the choice of different mediums, and the availability of social media as news sources are the main factors responsible for widespread fake news. Some study participants admitted they prefer to get their information online because they no longer trust the mainstream media, whom they accused of biased, unverified news reports. Adding that increase in media establishments, including social media platforms, has made it arduous to distinguish between real and fake news. The study concluded that the increasing growth of social media has increased the diversity of news stories and has faded the line between factual information and fake news in traditional

media. This study discerned that lack of trust in the media is a global concern but did not apply a theoretical framework and failed to make recommendations.

Fisher (2016) examined how 20 Australian journalists who became media advisers to politicians built their careers on misleading the public. The study revealed that the former news reporters did not follow media ethics. Instead, they sped the culture of dissemination for personal gains in their practice. They were found to be manipulative in the way they handled sensitive information. Findings also revealed that they were unethical in their approach as journalists. Every one of the media advisers had been found falsifying stories and exaggerating the truth. The study concluded with recommendations for retraining journalists in media ethics. However, the study was one-sided as it relates to research participants. Only journalists were recruited to participate in the study. A diverse mix of professional communicators from other fields would have benefited the research findings.

Similarly, in their study, Christensen and Svensson (2017) examined the nature of disinformation in strategic communication in the media and the effect of strategic communication on news consumers. Findings in the study revealed that communicators in the media and other organizations have strategically used communication to produce false information to achieve their goals. The study employed qualitative and quantitative research approaches to reveal the human and scientific angles of untruthful communication in different fields. The result of the study revealed the inadequacies in strategic communication in the mainstream media, on social media, in advertising, and in public relations. The study recommended evaluation and a re-study of strategic communication in the communication field to understand communicators' social and cultural biases. Robust analysis was lacking in the study because the benefit of a mixed-method approach in data analysis was not leveraged.

Major fake news spreaders on social media are groups of people who intentionally set out to create fake news to inflict pain on society. Shu et al. (2017) analyzed the mode of operation of three categories of fake news contributors on social media. The three types of fake news contributors revealed in the study were: Bots, which are social media accounts typically created to perform technical tasks and solve problems. Social media bots have been found to generate fake accounts that produce fake news. Such were the ones used in the 2016 election, which supported both presidential candidates.

On the other hand, social media cyborgs were found to be fictional human beings operated by real humans hired by organizations to create multiple fake social media accounts anonymously to spread fake news. Trolls are human fake news contributors whose main objective on social media is to tarnish the image of people on social media by manipulating information. This qualitative research study collected participant observation data to create a rapport with fake news contributors on social media. However, the theoretical framework employed was not disclosed.

Government Propaganda

Artificial Intelligence (AI) aided the spread of propaganda dating back to radio and telegraph as the existing media. Leon (2019) revealed that the disinformation that AI enabled contributed to the Persian war, used by the Soviets to spread propaganda that the United States supported apartheid and invented acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). Results of the study revealed that AI was the tool used by Russians to create fake news that took center stage in the 2016 United States presidential election. It was revealed that perpetrators of false information usually do not take sides with a particular person or group. "Someone executing a disinformation effort usually does not care to side with any particular team; it is about achieving a well-planned

goal. They will target whichever side is the easiest to exploit" (para. 4). The study concluded with a recommendation that the world needs cyber emergency service to avoid a fake news attack that could harm the global economy. The study analysis was in-depth but lacked a theoretical framework.

In their research study of communication strategies, Caraher and Zeman (2017) examined how alternatives to facts lead to the reduction or removal of facts. The study revealed that many communication processes in businesses, government, and politics are devoid of truth. Findings revealed a trend in falsifying stories both on mainstream and social media. The study concluded that the world is in a post-truth era and that the period when news stories were reported truthfully is over, due to technological advancement and easy access to resources such as smartphones that make disseminating false information easy. Although the study revealed vital data, the cross-sectional approach only provided a snapshot. A longitudinal approach would have worked best in helping to expose variables that would evolve in the long run.

The Role of Corporate Organizations in Misinformation

Devin (2016) discovered communication of half-truths in a study of corporate communicators and public relations practitioners. The study revealed that in their corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs, communication and public relations managers have not always communicated facts to the public. Additionally, corporate communicators have not been accountable, nor have they fully committed to the well-being of members of the society where their organization is located. The study concluded that many organizations have failed in their corporate responsibilities because of the lack of transparency from corporate communicators. The study identified the problem; however, the likely cause and recommendations were missing.

The study of Hazlett (2014) exposed unethical communication in Public Relations (P.R.) practice. The study employed a case study approach to reveal that many P.R. professionals have failed to earn public trust because they have been found to embellish and falsify information. The study's findings showed that as media organizations continue to throw caution to the wind as disinformation spreads widely, P.R. practitioners take undue advantage of the situation as they are not entirely truthful in their communication to the public. The result of the study reveals that P.R. practitioners strategically exaggerate facts to promote the brand and reputation of their clients. P.R. communication has been found to publish half-truths on social media and press releases. The study sufficiently employed the use of data from interviews but failed to describe in detail the steps taken in data collection.

Plowman and Wilson (2018) surveyed 5,000 P.R. practitioners across the U.S. to examine how they use social media influencers in their strategic communication process. The study revealed that most social media influencers employed to communicate with the public have no formal training in mass communication and were never trained by P.R. practitioners. Many influencers were given free hands to write and share content with the public. Most of the influencers found to disseminate brand pitches were usually embellished with false narratives. The influencers were short of positively influencing the people because of their manipulative communication tactics. The study recommended that P.R. practitioners and social media influencers undergo journalism training. The study discerned that the P.R. practitioners use social media influencers to spread fake news but did not apply a theoretical framework to describe the support of the theory of the study.

Dulek and Campbell (2015) examined the harmful intent, corporate ambiguity, and manipulation in strategic communication relating to business and corporate communication. The

findings in the study revealed the negative aspects of communication in different organizations.

Corporate communicators were found to strategically use ambiguous language in internal

communications to stakeholders to manipulate them into believing their desired narrative. The

case study research methodology was employed to study corporate communicators and senior

executives from different organizations. The result of the study further revealed how corporate

communicators and corporate leaders strategically communicate false information to staff and

clients. Instead of communicating a bleak future for their organizations, they painted stories of

bright futures for the organizations. Investors were brainwashed with in-house fabricated stories

with only an iota of truth. The study concluded with recommendations for mass communication

training for corporate communicators who write press releases based on half-truths. The study

analysis was in-depth but lacked a theoretical framework.

Cultural Bias

Research findings have revealed that cultural bias plays a role in the spread of

disinformation. Kim (2009*)* examined cultural bias and ethnocentric paradigms in the science of

communication and how they contributed to the production and dissemination of fake news in

the media. A study of different continents revealed that many foreign reporters and writers are

biased in reporting and writing about international issues. Hence, facts about foreign news are

often exaggerated or understated. This study's findings indicate that the centric approach of

foreign news reporters inhibits effective news reporting because of the self-centeredness of

Afrocentric, Americentric, Eurocentric, and Asian-centric biases in the global media. Asian news

reporters were found to underplay news relating to American culture because American

journalists are biased in reporting news stories about Asia and other cultures. Such

unprofessional, centric behavior usually has long-term repercussions on society. The findings of

the study also revealed that disinformation about Asian culture was the reason Asians rejected

Western education. The study concluded with the assertion that part of the problem of fake news

is the unethical practice of centrism in journalism. Recommendations, which are crucial

components in research studies, are missing from the study.

Rampersad and Althiyabi (2020) investigated the influence of culture and demographics

on spreading fake news. Saudi Arabia area was chosen for the study because it has the site with

the highest number of social media users. A quantitative research approach was employed to

study a group of Saudi Arabian students on the WhatsApp platform who were studying overseas.

Regarding their views on fake news, the survey completed by the students revealed that culture is

a significant contributing factor to the spread of fake news and that the age of news consumers

greatly influences the acceptance of fake news. About 90% of social media users were found to

be millennials. The study recommended that more research studies be conducted to measure the

depth of different cultural dimensions. Although the survey appropriately used hypothesis

testing, it failed to evaluate each factor and its significance.

News Consumers

News consumers at the receiving end of fake news have been found to contribute to

widespread fake news. Pariser (2011) examined how news consumption attitudes contributed to

the polarization of the public with fake news in multi-media environments. The study revealed

that since the invention of social media, traditional media has transitioned from print and

broadcast media to digital media because news consumers have become selective in choosing a

news channel. Participants in the study revealed that despite the diverse information that news

consumers are exposed to, personalized biased news stories that are repeatedly broadcasted have

resulted in news consumers being exposed to the limited information that registers in their

psyche. They begin to believe some fake news as real news. The study also revealed that news

consumers find themselves in a news filtering bubble where they consume information and

become news creators. They end the circle by sharing with other news consumers, likely to

recreate and reshare fake news. The study concluded that fake news consumption is usually the

beginning of biased thoughts that lead to false beliefs, eventually leading to the selective

collection of incorrect information. The study employed personal trait theories to collate data but

did not offer recommendations.

In a study of the impact of fake news on news consumers and the infringement on their

right to privacy, Mikkelsen (2017) examined how media establishments disseminate false

information to their audience, disregarding how it affects their lives and violates their privacy.

News consumers participating in the study admitted to being taken for granted as a loyal media

audience. News consumers think they are being fed bogus information because the media knows

their dedicated audience believes every news story they disseminate. Findings in the study

revealed that the mainstream media, with an online presence, took the liberty to send unsolicited

direct messages to their loyal audience via text messaging and email. News consumers think

their privacy is being violated. They wish the media would give news consumers the option to

decide how they would like to receive private messages if they are interested. The study was

concluded with a proposed training for news reporters in communication ethics. This qualitative

study did not apply a theoretical framework to describe the support of the study's theory.

Fake Advertisements

The power of social media has diminished governmental advertising regulations'

effectiveness. Although the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) shut down fake advertisements by

teeth whitening companies, fake advertising continues to thrive on social media. Rao (2022)

examined fake news advertisements on social media that mimic real news stories and mislead

social media users to purchase counterfeit products or make life-changing decisions they would

not have made under normal circumstances. The study employed a variation of non-experimental

regulation of online advertising agencies in combination with data from 70,000 online news

consumers exposed to more than 500 unsolicited fake advertisements. Although the study

discerned the rise in fake social media advertisements, it lacked a theoretical framework and did

not recommend how to solve the problem.

In a quantitative research study, Egelhofer et al. (2020) offered empirical evidence by

examining journalists who have normalized the term fake news in their news reporting. Findings

in the study revealed that in two years, between 2016 and 2018, major newspapers mentioned

fake news about 3,000 times. It was revealed that since the advent of social media, professional

news reporting has shifted from merely describing disinformation in the mainstream media to

boldly normalizing the usage of fake news. Journalism scholars and other communication subject

matter experts in the study said fake news has become a buzzword in news reporting causing

significant controversy. Therefore, they call for the term fake news to be taken out of news

reporting and all other types of communication. The study results lacked depth because the

collation of data was one-sided. However, the study concluded with a recommendation for

retraining on ethical reporting for journalists and other communicators.

Haigh (2018) examined a group of Ukranian journalists turned media activists who

strategically turned fact-checking into a weapon for countering propaganda. The study's findings

revealed that the journalists, who could no longer accept the fake news campaign being

propagated on social media and sponsored by a state government, decided to use a counter-attack

technique to react to the propagandists. The journalists set up an online fact-checking

organization with the sole purpose of opposing fake news producers. The group of counter fact-checkers, dubbed peer-to-peer propaganda team, uncover fake news on social media by evaluating news stories for evidence of manipulation and misrepresentation and screening them to stop fake news from spreading. The study concluded with a recommendation for fact-checking training for social media communicators but did not mention the research methodology employed.

Summary

Chapter Two of this dissertation provided an overview of communication traditions, theoretical frameworks, and literature review. The semiotic communication tradition model explains communication from a signage perspective. A combination of semiotic and medium theories was considered the appropriate theoretical framework for this study. Linking both frameworks allowed for a more compelling interpretative analysis of media and messages and how they impact society, as detailed in Chapter Three. The literature reviewed for this study focused on existing research studies on false communication in the media, corporate organizations, and government. The literature reviewed helped identify and state the objective of the fake news phenomenon more transparently. Chapter three details the research method used for this study.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Overview

Chapter Three gave an overview of the fake news problem and explained the research method and design used for this study. Fake news is an insidious global phenomenon that has gained popularity in the media since the advent of social media and the advancement of technology (Watson, 2022). Fake news is a common term used to describe disinformation and misinformation, usually disguised as authentic news. Misinformation is typically information that is inaccurate because the writer or producer of the news got the facts wrong. Meanwhile, disinformation is false information created and distributed to mislead news consumers (Kim et al., 2021). The spread of fake news has harmed the economy and democracy of many nations. In recent times, fake news has manifested itself in public health. An example was the COVID-19 pandemic. More than 80% of news consumers claimed they were bombarded with fake news about COVID-19 (Rao, 2022).

Fake news has succeeded in distorting the perception of many news consumers to the extent that they regard most information as fake. Many news consumers became so wary of news that they stopped getting information from mainstream and social media. The few people who continue to consume news from the press tend to fact-check every piece of information they get. Overall, news consumers have lost trust in the media (Ingram, 2018).

Chapter Three discussed the methodological procedures, research design, and analysis for the fake news research study. This chapter also provided the reader with the details of what occurred during the execution of the study through subsections that included the research

questions, research instrument, sample selection, data collection process, data analysis, theme extraction, theme synthesis, and triangulation.

Research Methodology & Design

The qualitative interpretative meta-synthesis (QIMS) research method was employed to accomplish the purpose of the fake news study because it is the most suitable research approach for a complex social phenomenon as it helps to create a deeper understanding of the topic being investigated (McGee & Dawson, 2020). QIMS research methodology was conceptualized as a means of synthesizing a group of studies with related topics to change each study's position from individual research of a phenomenon into a web of knowledge. The synergism of a group of qualitative studies is intended to create an in-depth and broad understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Aguirre & Whitehill-Bolton, 2013).

QIMS methodology is also beneficial in eliminating common research misconduct and bias. Emphasis is often placed on authenticity and the quality of data interpretation (Aguirre & Whitehill-Bolton, 2013). This meta-research approach was employed in researching a high-quality fake news study that would eventually promote information education, fill the professional communication gap, and mitigate the spread of disinformation. QIMS belongs to the field of meta-research that involves carrying out a research study on prior research studies (Nordberg et al., 2016). The fake news study employed the QIMS methodology to extract themes from previous studies on the fake news phenomenon. The position of each author in their studies was brought together to create a more meaningful and harmonized group of knowledge on fake news.

Research Design

Research designs outline strategies to approach the research problem (Leary & Walker, 2018). Research design in every study usually refers to the strategical and analytical approach researchers use in integrating the different research study components to ensure that they effectively investigate the research problem (MacEntee, 2019). The fake news study used the meta-synthesis design approach to analyze and interpret qualitative data from previous primary studies. The reading and review approach used this qualitative interpretative design to analyze semiotic studies of signs and symbols. The design approach was also employed to analyze the fusion of the media and the message. According to experts, research designs guide researchers in answering research questions (Lockwood et al., 2015).

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Research Questions

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Research questions are used in qualitative research studies to narrow the focus of the study. The researcher must develop the research questions during planning (Punch, 2014). The initial research questions the researcher develops should define the study's objective and methodology (Peshkin, 2013). The following three researchable questions informed the fake news QIMS research and the value they added to the study.

Research Question 1

What new insight can be gained from a comprehensive review of fake news research? This question was vital in investigating the fake news phenomenon from new perspectives.

Research Question 2

How can a comprehensive review of existing literature help identify and combat fake news? This question provided a deeper understanding of the motives behind the creation of false information and educated news consumers on how to separate facts from fake news.

Research Question 3

What themes emerged from a comprehensive review of scholarly literature on fake news? This question helped to interpret the different themes of fake news from previous studies.

Considering the research questions designed for this study, qualitative interpretative meta-synthesis (QIMS) research methodology was employed as the data-gathering source because it epitomized fake news research with detailed and in-depth information.

Research Instrument

A research instrument is any tool researchers can use to collect, measure, and analyze data (Ravi & Casolaro, 2017). The QIMS methodology utilized the authors of existing works of literature as instruments of this qualitative interpretative meta-synthesis (Aguirre & Whitehill-Bolton, 2013). The instrument of research enables researchers to collect data effectively (Palinkas et al., 2015). According to Dubois and Gadde (2002), selecting the appropriate research instrument is beneficial to a research study because it saves time in data collection and provides the most accurate results. The research instruments for this fake news study were articles with similar topics relating to fake news.

Sampling Process

The sampling process for this QIMS fake news study involved defining the population, which were peer-reviewed journal articles on fake news written in the United States between 2016 and 2023. This time frame was chosen because fake news skyrocketed in 2016 during the United States presidential election and the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union, and continues to rise (Khan et al., 2022).

To ensure the articles selected represent the population, this researcher sampled fake news articles from different disciplines, as communication cuts across all walks of life. This

researcher collates peer-reviewed journal articles on fake news from the media, government,

public health, education, social work, technology, and private enterprises.

The sample population for this fake news study consists of 200 peer-reviewed journal

articles that are all qualitative studies, in alignment with QIMS methodology. 'Sample' in

research refers to the people or items selected to represent the study population and from whom a

researcher collects information (Sim et al., 2018). Considering it is impossible to collect data

from an entire population, the researcher recruits a sample of people or items representing the

population (Thomas, 2011). A population sample that appropriately represents a study's

population makes it possible for its findings to be generalized (Dubois & Gadde, 2002).

Alasuutari (2010) advised that researchers need to consider different types of populations when

sampling. Additionally, the population sample should be determined by the research questions

being investigated for effective data collection in a qualitative research study. Most importantly,

the purpose of the research study and the characteristics of the study's population sample should

determine the population (Hackshaw, 2008). It is imperative to use the appropriate sampling

method to select the population of the study. (Khan, 2014).

Random Sampling

Random sampling was the appropriate sampling method employed in selecting the fake

news research study population to avoid bias and confusion which is synonymous with non-

probability sampling techniques. This is the most straightforward of the different types of

probability sampling methods. A researcher who wants to ensure that a study's findings represent

the entire population would employ the random sampling technique (Ly et al., 2017).

A simple random sampling approach was used to randomly select the 200 peer-reviewed

journal articles on fake news communication in the United States from the Liberty University

Jerry Falwell Library. The process began with defining the population of 1200 journal articles, which includes the following keywords to generalize the larger population of fake news articles: fake news, communication, and the United States. An online random number generator was used to assign individual numbers to each of the 1,200 articles which is a representation of the larger population from which a subset of the population, the sample of 200 articles was selected. That was the best way to ensure the different articles on fake news have an equal chance of being selected.

Considering this study collected seven years of data, the pragmatic approach is random sampling. Research experts recommend random sampling method for a qualitative study that requires sampling of data that is over two years (Shaheen et al., 2019). Findings reveal that randomly sampling a small sample of a complex population tends to increase the credibility of research findings. In other words, random sampling credibility is typically high. Ly et al. (2017) employed a random sampling approach to select the sample population relevant to their qualitative content analysis study.

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Data Collection Procedures

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Data collection is the process of systematically collecting information about the topic of the research study from relevant sources to understand and answer the problem (Gorman et al., 2014). The purpose of data collection is to ensure that quality information is gathered, accurately measured, analyzed, and used to evaluate the overall result of the study (Aron et al., 2012). In research studies, two types of data are typically collected: quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data collection process is focused on collecting and measuring numbers.

In comparison, the qualitative data collection process is focused on gathering information in words and images that can describe behaviors, attitudes, and motivations (Fenner et al., 2012).

Data collection procedures are usually in two categories - primary and secondary. Collecting information directly from the source is the primary data collection method. The secondary data collection entails pulling information from third-party or second-hand sources (Martinez et al., 2014).

The fake news research study utilized the qualitative data collection process to gather information from previous articles that interpreted content creators' and information consumers' attitudes, motivations, and behaviors. The primary data collection approach was employed, considering this is a qualitative interpretative meta-synthesis study.

Data Analysis & Interpretation

Data analysis and interpretation in a qualitative research study are fundamental for a research study to have meaning (Rashid et al., 2019). Data analysis involves organizing and analyzing the information gathered from interviewing research participants (Maree, 2015). It allows themes and patterns to be captured using non-numerical data and feedback. Data analysis also helps glean vital information to help the researcher make informed decisions (Maree, 2015).

Data interpretation is the process of categorizing, reviewing, and summarizing available information and arriving at conclusions that will answer crucial research questions (Khan, 2014). After gathering relevant data from previous studies and articles, this fake news researcher analyzed the data through essential steps and classified the different themes of fake news.

Theme Extraction

A theme in research is an abstract and subtle pattern that explains a phenomenon (Bazeley, 2009). Themes are the invisible perceptions of research participants that researchers can extract by asking questions (Braun, 2006). Themes help explain a research problem's origin and root cause (Mishra & Dey, 2022). Themes are also great at helping to develop a deeper

understanding and new meaning of a phenomenon because of profound findings from studies

that have made meaningful contributions to literature (Korhonen et al., 2013).

Theme extraction for the fake news study, as aligned with QIMS methodology, was done

from original articles and studies. In other words, the themes extracted for this study from the

primary authors made the themes original. They enabled this researcher to identify unique

themes and authentically interpret the actual authors' perceptions.

Theme Synthesis

Theme synthesis involves putting pieces of ideas together from multiple sources while

searching for themes in each article (Rashid et al., 2019). Synthesizing literature involves

searching for the links between various articles to help the researcher make a valid point

(Bazeley, 2009). Theme synthesis involves searching for the similarities and differences between

articles (Mishra & Dey, 2022).

Themes for the fake news qualitative interpretative study were synthesized using the

themes synthesis matrix which is beneficial for the researcher in organizing literature themes

(Korhonen et al., 2013). As Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommended, a content analysis

spiral approach was used to synthesize themes for this study in a tabular form.

Triangulation

Triangulation is a qualitative research strategy researchers employ to determine the

validity of the data collected from multiple sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of

a phenomenon (Carter et al., 2014). Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommend that researchers

carry out data triangulation to establish trustworthiness in the study. Therefore, this researcher

performed the triangulation of data from a broad range of articles on fake news, considering

triangulation is an essential step in the QIMS research methodology (Korhonen et al., 2013).

This study also used triangulation to objectively synthesize themes across different traditions, such as communication, education, and semiotics, as Ferreira et al. (2022) recommended. Triangulation was also used in this study to establish consistency in the data sample to mitigate bias and improve the overall quality of the interpretative process.

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Disclosure & Role of Researcher

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To avoid biases and ensure transparency, researchers employing the QIMS methodological approach must disclose their professional qualifications and background (Miller et al., 2021). This will help the readers to appreciate the researcher's experiences and biases they may have as an instrument in the study (Finfgeld, 2003).

This researcher is a trained journalist who practiced as a Staff Writer, News Reporter, and Defense Correspondent for a national newspaper for about a decade. She holds a bachelor's degree in journalism, a Master of Business Administration (MBA), and she is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in communication while running a communication consulting business.

The primary role of this researcher is to be the leading research instrument to be used in this QIMS study, as advised by Creswell and Creswell (2018). Although the experts consider a researcher's background and experiences related to the research topic an asset because it will help shape their interpretation (Miller et al., 2021), this researcher understands that there are limitations. Therefore, this researcher cautiously maintained an unbiased position in interpreting different articles. Having practiced as a news reporter for many years, this researcher understands the culture in the media industry. Hence, she is at a vantage point to identify unique themes that others who are not in the media might not readily identify.

Following the advice of Drisko and Maschi (2016) that researchers should be reflexive as decision-makers, this researcher looked inward and employed her unique position as a journalist to accurately collect, analyze, and objectively interpret research data.

Summary

Chapter Three of this dissertation provided an overview of the nature and purpose of the study. This chapter also provided the reader with the details of what to expect during the execution of the research, which includes the descriptions of the main sections: QIMS methodological procedures, research design, research questions, research instrument, sample selection, data collection process, and analyzing data via theme extraction, theme synthesis, and triangulation. This chapter also provided comprehensive and sufficient details to permit the replication of the fake news study. Chapter Three concludes the procedural aspect of the fake news study and continues with Chapter Four, which implements the QIMS method and presents the findings.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

Chapter Four implemented the qualitative interpretative meta-synthesis (QIMS) methodology and discussed the research findings of a cross-section sample of 200 fake news journal articles and the process of synthetization. To give context to the research questions, this chapter begins with an explanation of the collected data type. Understanding the process of data collation and sampling helped in discussing the findings in the proper context. It helped in achieving the purpose of this study, which is to have a deeper understanding of why there is widespread disinformation and to find ways to mitigate fake news.

Data Collation & Sampling

To give context to the answers to the research questions, this section explains the process of collating and sampling data. The data collation procedure for this QIMS study involved multiple readings and reviewing primary articles collected directly from the original authors as required by the QIMS methodology (Martinez et al., 2019). The data selection also involved memoing and creating a matrix table to organize data. Information from internet databases was primarily selected in words and images to help with attitude and behavioral description (Fenner et al., 2017).

The 200 fake news articles sampled were from communication journals with topics from different disciplines, as communication cuts across all walks of life. This researcher collates peer-reviewed journal articles on fake news from the media, government, public health, education, social work, technology, and private enterprises. The articles collected and sampled were those written between 2016 and 2023. This time frame was chosen because fake news

skyrocketed in 2016 during the United States presidential election and the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union, and continues to rise (Khan et al., 2022).

As explained in Chapter Three, the search for primary journal articles was done through the Liberty University Jerry Falwell Library database. The keywords used for the 1200-article search include fake news, communication, and the United States, and 200 peer-reviewed journal articles were determined using simple random sampling. The process began with defining the population of 1200 journal articles, which included the keywords fake news, communication, and the United States. The sample of 200 was randomly selected using an online random number generator.

Research Questions

The following three research questions guided this QIMS study of fake news.

Research Question 1

What new insight can be gained from a comprehensive review of fake news research?

Research Question 2

How can a comprehensive review of existing literature help identify and combat fake news?

Research Question 3

What themes emerged from a comprehensive review of scholarly literature on fake news?

Answers to Research Questions

The qualitative interpretative data collected from 200 articles between 2016 and 2023 provided a plethora of information to answer the three research questions guiding this QIMS fake news study. Along with other findings, the following are the answers.

Research Question 1

What new insight can be gained from a comprehensive review of fake news research?

Answer

As the topic of fake news continues to be complex and nuanced, the comprehensive review of the literature in this research study revealed new insights. Some articles featured interviews with traditional journalists who argued that fake news is an oxymoron (Albright, 2016; Goldman, 2016; Lopez, 2016). The context of their argument was that if a piece of information is fake, it is not news (Scott & Eddy, 2017). According to the executive editor and general manager of the Herald-Tribune, Matthew Sauer (2019), "News to most journalists is, by its definition, true. If it's not true, then it's not news" (para. 5). Adding that truth-telling is the hallmark of every trained journalist. Hence, they practice triangulation by verifying information from multiple news sources because no journalist wants to jeopardize their career by disseminating false information. He dismissed fake news as a term bandied around by politicians and others to express dissatisfaction with news they do not like or facts that differ from their belief system.

A group of American journalists who were surveyed stressed the importance of understanding the fundamental nature of news (Schudson, 2017). They maintained that news accounts for critical events impacting people and society (Kang et al., 2016; Ratliff & Rubinfeld, 2017). News is considered a journalism output expected to be accurate, comprehensive, objective, and reliable (Scott & Eddy, 2017). They admit that journalists are always responsible for reporting the truth (Kang et al., 2017).

Regarding biased reporting, Kang et al. (2017) said that considering the history of journalism and the nature of humans, it is impossible to have total objectivity in news reporting,

just as it is impossible for a Christian to emulate Jesus Christ completely. Therefore, reporters

are sometimes subjective about the information to include or exclude in their reporting. Thus,

some news reporters exercise information preferences regarding coverage of events such as

politics and services (Thorson, 2016; Schudson, 2017). They refer to information preferences as

primarily interpretative journalism, typically opinionated feature writing in the media. Hence,

subjective information or news reporting is not fake (Scott & Eddy, 2017). They point out that

journalists make news; they do not fake it (Abbasi et al., 2017; Scott & Eddy, 2017).

Having differentiated trained journalists as professionals who produce real news as

opposed to citizen journalists who manufacture symbolic content (Zhang et al., 2016), the

journalists stressed the importance of understanding the concept of the term fake news as

information that is forged, counterfeited, and ingenuine (Kang et al., 2017). The group blamed

the rise of disinformation on online platforms. "The digitization of news has challenged

traditional definitions of news" (Tandoc et al., 2017, p. 139). This is so because practically

anyone can use social media platforms to share breaking news and other stories. Social media

has become the quickest way for news consumers to get information about current events

(Tandoc & Vos, 2016). News consumers now consider every piece of information on social

media and the internet news, especially when the information is shared by a public figure (Lokot

& Diakopoulos, 2016).

Nowadays, anyone can share information online and on social media platforms. The

digital age is the era of social media bloggers and vloggers. Unlike in the past when non-

journalists were confined to blogging on obscure websites. The digital age is the era of citizen

journalism. "The rise of citizen journalism challenged the link between news and journalists, as

non-journalists began to engage in journalistic activities to produce journalistic outputs,

including information" (Tandoc et al., 2017, para. 4). Interestingly, citizen journalism has also

challenged what news looks like or what makes a news story.

     Despite what trained journalists think of them, social media bloggers and vloggers are

becoming almost as influential as trained journalists (Abbasi et al., 2017). Some of them are even

known as social media influencers. The Dean of UPES School of Modern Media in

India, Professor KG Suresh, a senior journalist and communication specialist who agrees with

the American journalists that the term fake news is an oxymoron, called for a consensus to use an

alternative term, "For the simple reason that it is an oxymoron: if it is fake, it cannot be news,

and if it is news, it cannot be fake. So, let us have a consensus on using the term 'fake content"

(Kashyap, 2020, para. 7). He argued that, unlike fake content, a piece of news information is a

refined product that went through the process of verification, checks, and balances before it was

turned into a news format. Professor Suresh also frowns at the liberal use of the appellation of

"citizen journalists" being used to describe bloggers and vloggers.

> A journalist is required to have certain skill sets, which include not just technological
>
> inputs but also an adherence to certain ethical standards. There are media laws in place
>
> which need to be understood. So, any Tom, Dick, and Harry cannot be practicing
>
> journalism. He should have certain qualifications and qualities to become a journalist.
>
> One can be a citizen communicator, but a citizen journalist, no. (Kashyap, 2020, para. 8).

Many journalists nowadays claim their news reporting style is the scientific approach (Tandoc et

al., 2017). This is an approach that is alien to fake news creators. If credibility and truth-telling

are the hallmarks of news reporting, as today's journalists claim (Sauer, 2019), maybe they are

justified in rejecting the concept of fake news.

Research Question 2

How can a comprehensive review of existing literature help identify and combat fake news?

Answer

Combating fake news remains an arduous task. Hence, it has become urgent to have a deeper understanding of the fake news phenomenon. In this qualitative interpretative study, a comprehensive literature review helped identify the contributing factors and the root cause of fake news. To combat the continuous spread of fake news, this comprehensive literature review identified why people tend to create and share disinformation and misinformation, and it also helped identify false information to prevent it from spreading.

The comprehensive literature review findings revealed 62 articles that highlighted social factors, 53 articles discussed the role of cognitive factors, 51 articles discussed political factors, 41 articles discussed financial gain factors, and 48 articles discussed malicious factors' role in creating and spreading fake news.

Table 1: Factors Predicting Fake News

Factors	Number of Articles
Social	62
Cognitive	53
Political	51
Financial Gain	41
Malicious	48

Social Factors

Various articles revealed that social media platforms are the most used medium to disseminate false information to deceive the public for selfish gains (Jang et al., 2018; Buschman, 2019). Social media users tend to believe every piece of information shared by persons congruent with similar opinions and beliefs (Wang et al., 2018).

Recent studies have shown that social media users are easily influenced by their peers. For fear of disapproval, they quickly conform to the norms in their social circle. Especially if their peers are celebrities or social media influencers (Colliander, 2019), social media users who belong to the same social group will share information, whether accurate or false, to gain approval from friends to maintain their social status (Talwar et al., 2019). The desire to build their image has blurred the vision of social media users as far as distinguishing between factual and false information (Wang et al., 2018).

Articles reviewed further revealed that information on social media platforms, such as Twitter, is amplified by users who are public figures (Vijaykumar et al., 2017). To get "likes" and to gain "followers" (Figueira & Oliveira, 2017), social media users will go to any length to share false information amongst peers with like minds. Thus, encouraging social media platforms like Facebook to populate users' newsfeeds with the type of information they would typically enjoy or agree with (Alzanin & Azmi, 2018). In other words, celebrities exaggerate stories on social media to gain followership. Indirectly, they encourage their social media fans to spread their exaggerated stories.

Cognitive Factors

Studies revealed that most social media users could not differentiate real news from fake news (Dekeersmaecker & Roets, 2017). With a load of information being shared on various

social media platforms, it is challenging for users to determine which information is generated from authentic sources (Jang et al., 2018). Social media users are known for not investigating the information they receive before sharing it with as many people in their sphere of influence (Figueira & Oliveira, 2017).

The inability of many social media users to distinguish between real and fake news makes it easy for fake news creators to exploit social media users who lack the intellectual capability to identify fake news (Burkhardt, 2017). Studies have shown that genuinely detailed presentations have deceived many social media users. Some social media users determine the credibility of information they receive by the content length rather than the source of the data (Atodiresei et al., 2018). Findings also revealed that businesses have been creating fake news on social media for many years, capitalizing on many social media users' lack of intellectual capability (Burkhardt, 2017).

Several studies conclude that ignorance on the part of many social media users is the driving force in the spread of fake news (Chen et al., 2015). Spreading false information is on the rise because most social media users unknowingly share fake news without fact-checking the source to determine the reliability of the information (Bondielli & Marcelloni, 2019).

Political Factors

Several studies reveal the rise in fake political news due to the advent of social media (Jang, 2018; Anderson, 2018; Lor, 2018). Findings revealed that social media platforms have been used to create fake political statements to change voters' opinions. Such was the case in the United Kingdom's national election about withdrawing from the European Union and the 2016 United States presidential election (Zhang & Ghorbani). Research findings revealed that the

rapid rise of fake news can be traced to social bots that direct social media users to fake news websites created solely for political propaganda (Seargeant & Tagg, 2018).

Financial Gain Factors

For financial gain, disinformation is often shared on social media platforms to mislead users. Studies have shown that fake news spreads rapidly because of the monetary incentives received by creators of false information (Jang et al., 2018; El Rayess et al., 2018). Disinformation groups were able to monetize disinformation by acting like celebrity influencers to lure unsuspecting social media users to love and invest in their brands. They would then appeal for donations through crowdfunding websites (Bondielli & Marcelloni, 2019). Many companies use false advertisements on social media platforms to deceive users (Jang et al., 2019).

Advertisers who promote their products and services on social media have devised ways of building loyal customers online by paying social media users to view their links (Weidner et al., 2019). To continuously monetize false information and direct social media users to their products on fraudulent sites, content creators are paid every time social media users click and view the advertised products (Rochlin, 2017).

Malicious Factors

Studies reveal that malicious social media users who are popularly known as "trolls" (Mihaylov et al., 2018) use social media platforms to share deceitful information with malicious intent (Zhang & Ghorbani, 2019). There are malicious websites dedicated to spreading disinformation (Bondielli & Marcelloni, 2019). The malicious sites are deliberately being used to disrupt activities in business, politics, public health, and any sector they oppose (Baccarella,

2018). At the same time, some fake news websites are dedicated to spreading fake news about public figures, intending to tarnish their reputation (Rochlin, 2017; Baccarella, 2018).

Various articles identified the factors contributing to the rapid growth of fake news. Considering these factors greatly influence the spread of fake news, the conclusion drawn from this comprehensive review is that every other reason is based on the lack of knowledge and education. Findings revealed that most social media users lacked the logic and intellect to understand what fake news is.

In addition, the studies concluded that to effectively combat and mitigate fake news, information, and digital literacy among the public is necessary. Proper education about the process of disseminating information in the media will provide social media users and citizen journalists with the knowledge required to identify the factors behind the spread of fake news; critical thinking skills will help people understand the motive behind sharing disinformation and become more vigilant when sharing any piece of information and form the habit of fact-checking news sources.

Research Question 3

What themes emerged from a comprehensive review of scholarly literature on fake news?

Answer

The theme extraction process and interpretative analysis produced seven main themes from which 14 subthemes emerged, illuminating the effect of fake news.

Themes

The main themes, with supporting original quotes from the authors, are News Consumers, Infodemic, Fabrication, Imposter Content, Manipulation, Misinformation, and Satire. They are presented with their subthemes below:

Table 2: Main Themes, Sub-Themes with Authors, and Year

	MAIN THEMES	SUB-THEMES	AUTHORS & YEAR
1.	**News Consumers**	**Unsavvy News Consumers**	Agarwal & Alsaeedi (2021)
			Ahmed (2021)
		Information Illiteracy	Akhtar et al. (2022)
			Alessandro et al. (2021)
			Allein et al. (2023)
			Amer et al. (2022)
			Alonso (2021)
			Alsyouf (2019)
			Asutosh et al. (2022)
			Bautista et al. (2022)
			Beisecker et al. (2022)
			Chang (2021)
			Chen & Cheng (2020)
			Choi et al. (2021)
			Christy et al. (2021)
			Damasceno (2021)
			Dhiman et al. (2023)
			Dourado (2023)
			Duplaga (2020)
			Flamiano (2017)
			Goldstein (2018)

			Guarda et al. (2018)
			Gupta et al. (2023)
			Heley et al. (2022)
			Herrero-Diz et al. (2020)
			Horner et al. (2021)
			Huang (2020)
			Koc-Michalska et al. (2020)
			Lampridis et al. (2022)
			Lane (2016)
			Lazar & Pop (2021)
			Lien et al. (2022)
			Li & Su (2020)
			Lor (2018)
			Majerczak & Strzelecki (2022)
			Moore & Hancock (2022)
			Mould (2018)
			Musi & Reed (2022)
			Nagy & Kapusta (2021)
			Nelson & Taneja (2018)
			Obadă & Dabija (2022)
			Orhan (2023)
			Pingree et al. (2021)
			Rampersad & Althiyabi (2020)

			Rochlin (2017)
			Scheibenzuber et al. (2021)
			Serra-Garcia & Gneezy (2021)
			Shelke & Attar (2022)
			Skinnell (2021)
			Stitini et al. (2022)
			Sun et al. (2022)\
			Tandoc & Seet (2022)
			Vendemia et al. (2019)
			Van Duyn & Collier (2019)
			Vora (2021)
			Vraga et al. (2020)
			Waddell & Moss (2023)
			Watts et al. (2021)
			Yakub et al. (2020)
2.	**Infodemic**	**Information Overload** **Public Health** **Misinformation**	Ahmad (2022)
			Aïmeur et al. (2021)
			Alessandro et al. (2021)
			Nascimento et al. (2022)
			Das & Ahmed (2022)
			Formighieri Giordani et al. (2021)
			Ghaddar et al. (2022)

			Hameleers (2020)
			Melchior & Oliveira (2022)
			Merchant & Asch (2018)
			Nascimento et al. (2022)
			Pérez-Escoda (2022)
			Rovetta & Bhagavathula (2020)
			Safarpour et al. (2021)
			Scott, J. (2021)
			Sell et al. (2020)
			Swire-Thompson & Lazer (2020)
			Wu et al. (2023)
			Yeung et al. (2022)
3.	**Fabrication**	**Deepfakes**	Alghamdi et al. (2022)
			Ali & Zain-ul-abdin (2021)
		Conspiracy Theories	Barron et al. (2018)
			Bayerl & Stoynov (2016)
			Bradshaw (2019)
			Bradshaw et al. (2020)
			Buschman (2019)
			Ecker et al. (2020)
			Gosse & Burkell (2020)
			Harambam & Aupers (2021)
			Iandoli et al. (2021)

			Jolley (2017)
			Kauk et al. (2021)
			Kietzmann et al. (2019)
			Kopp et al. (2018)
			McKay & Tenove (2021)
			Nefes (2017)
			Pierre (2020)
			Poltronieri & Hänska (2019)
			Rone (2022)
			Ross et al. (2023)
			Rubin (2019)
			Saliu (2023)
			Schulz et al. (2020)
			Silverman (2017)
			Shen et al. (2019)
			Stojanov & Halberstadt (2020)
			Sutton & Douglas (2020)
			Thompson et al. (2022)
			Tong et al. (2020)
			Valverde-Berrocoso et al. (2022)
			van der Linden et al. (2020)
			Vizoso et al. (2021)

			Yadlin-Segal & Oppenheim (2021)
4.	**Imposter Content**	**Bots** **Sock puppets**	Allcott & Gentzkow (2017) Berkowitz & Schwartz (2016) Dewangan & Rishabh (2016) Farkas & Neumayer (2020) Ferrara et al. (2016) Govaert et al. (2020) Lareki et al. (2023) Mazza et al. (2019) Pehlivanoglu et al. (2022) Tokita et al. (2022) Tornberg (2018) Tsang (2021) Yang et al. (2019) York et al. (2020) Zago et al. (2019)
5.	**Media Manipulation**	**PR Spin** **Clickbait Headlines**	Abdullah, et al. (2022) Ali (2022) Alina et al. (2020) Al-Rawi (2019) Bandeli & Agarwal (2021)

			Bennett & Livingston (2018)
			Bradshaw (2019)
			Bufnea & Șotropa (2018)
			Freelon & Wells (2020)
			Gaber (2017)
			Hoffjann (2021
			Jahng et al. (2020)
			Igwebuike & Chimuanya (2021).
			Jarrahi & Safari (2023).
			Jenks (2022)
			Jones (2017)
			Kemp et al. (2022)
			Ladd & Lenz (2019)
			Mazepus et al. (2023)
			Munger (2020)
			Mourão et al. (2018)
			Ratliff & Rubinfeld (2017)
			Serazio (2021)
			Smith (2019)
			Staender et al. (2022)
			Strauß (2019)
			Suiter & Fletcher (2020)
			Turner (2018)

			Wenzel (2020)
			Zheng et al., 2018)
6.	**Misinformation**	**Journalistic Error**	Abu Arqoub et al. (2022)
			Alvarez et al. (2020)
		Rumor	Au et al. (2022)
			Bakir & McStay (2018)
			Benham (2020)
			Brandtzaeg et al. (2018)
			Capilla (2021)
			Clemm von Hohenberg (2023)
			Eldridge (2019)
			Gilbert (2017)
			Greene & Murphy (2023)
			Haigh et al. (2018)
			Humprecht (2020)
			Iyengar & Massey (2019)
			Kim & Lim (2023)
			Koliska et al. (2020)
			Lischka (2019)
			Long et al. (2019)
			Lwin et al. (2023)
			Maertens et al. (2021)

			Masullo & Kim (2021)
			Mesmer (2022)
			Nekmat (2020)
			Neo (2022)
			Opgenhaffen (2022)
			Parrott & Eckhart (2021)
			Paul (2017)
			Roberts (2018)
			Robertson (2023)
			Schapals & Bruns (2022)
			Shao et al. (2018)
			Shin et al. (2017)
			Siebert & Siebert (2023)
			Stubenvoll et al. (2021)
			Tandoc (2022)
			Toivanen et al. (2022)
			Theodosiadou et al. (2021)
			Vu & Saldaña (2021)
			West & Bergstrom (2021)
			Wilczek (2020)
7.	**Satire**	**Entertainment**	Boukes & Hameleers (2023)
			Burgers & Brugman (2022)
		Dark Humor	Lewellen & Bohonos (2021)

Theme 1: News Consumers

News consumers were mostly held accountable for spreading fake news in more than 80% of the articles reviewed in this QIMS study (Allein et al., 2023; Alonso, 2021; Bautista et al. 2022; Beisecker et al., 2022; Choi et al., 2021; Christy et al., 2021). Fake news spreads faster on social media because news consumers share false information to conform and fit into their social circles. In other words, social pressure is a crucial motivator for news consumers who spread fake news (Alsyouf, 2019; Asutosh et al., 2022). News consumers who do not want to be treated as outcasts in their social circle are compelled to share fake news (Amer et al., 2022; Duplaga, 2020; Flamiano, 2017; Goldstein, 2018).

Findings revealed that most news consumers who are trying to fit into their social circles are exposed to various amounts of false information online because they are intentionally searching for information (Agarwal & Alsaeedi, 2021; Sun et al., 2022; Tandoc & Seet, 2022; Vendemia et al., 2019). "Behavioral human-centric variations largely impact the overall human involvement of fake news lifecycle (origination, spreading, and virality). Fake news spreading is strongly connected with human involvement as individuals tend to fall, adopt, and circulate misinformation stories" (Lampridis et al., 2022, para 38). Two subthemes emerged during the synthetization of articles relating to news consumers: unsavvy news consumers and information illiteracy.

Subtheme 1a: Unsavvy News Consumers

Savvy news consumers know how to identify fake news and typically do not share false information. Unfortunately, most information consumers are not news savvy (Ahmed, 2021; Akhtar et al., 2022; Alessandro et al., 2021; Chang, 2021; Lane, 2016). Unlike savvy information

consumers, most fake news spreaders lack the wherewithal to decipher facts from fiction. Their

inability to verify sources before sharing online has contributed more to the widespread of fake

news (Chen & Cheng, 2020; Dhiman et al., 2023; Moore & Hancock, 2022; Obadă & Dabija,

2022; Watts et al., 2021; Yakub et al., 2020). Findings revealed that most news consumers are

unfocused when consuming information (Lien et al. (2022; Li & Su, 2020; Lor, 2018; Majerczak

& Strzelecki, 2022). "New consumers unable to discriminate between reliable and unreliable

news sources are particularly vulnerable to fake news. This happens because people's attention is

more and more limited in social networks" (Agarwal et al., 2021, para 4).

Findings revealed in many of the articles reviewed that young adults are susceptible to

fake news because they primarily consume information via social media (Damasceno, 2021;

Gupta et al., 2023; Heley et al., 2022; Herrero-Diz et al., 2020). These avid social media

information consumers also double as fake news creators. One of such is a content creator for

News 4 KTLA.

> In April 2016, the website "News 4 KTLA" reported that Coca-Cola was recalling its
>
> product Dasani water because of some clear parasites found in bottles distributed across
>
> the USA. Later, the news was revealed to be untrue and Coca-Cola issued its response
>
> regarding this hoax. Nevertheless, this misinformation was rapidly transmitted on social
>
> media, even after the news was identified as fake. Fake news such as the one involving
>
> Coca-Cola's case may reduce consumers' trust in companies and brands. (Chen & Cheng,
>
> 2020, para.5)

Subtheme 1b: Information Illiteracy

Findings in most of the articles reviewed in this study revealed that social media and the

internet have turned most people into information illiterates, which is the reason why they

unquestioningly share fake news (Dourado, 2023; Guarda et al., 2018; Horner et al., 2021;

Huang, 2020; Koc-Michalska et al., 2020). In other words, many information consumers lack the

intellectual ability to evaluate or interpret the information they find online to determine the

validity of the information (Lor, 2018; Majerczak & Orhan, 2023; Preston et al., 2021;

Rampersad & Althiyabi, 2020; Rochlin; 2017; Strzelecki, 2022). Demographically, the older

generations are more susceptible to fake news because they lack digital literacy skills compared

to the younger generation. According to Moore & Hancock (2022):

> In general, research has shown that older adults possess lower levels of digital and
>
> internet-related skills relative to younger individuals. Several factors likely
>
> contribute to this pattern. For instance, unlike younger individuals, older adults
>
> are not "digital natives" and may have less experience using contemporary media
>
> technologies and platforms as they were not as large a part of their professional
>
> and personal lives. (para. 3)

News consumers who are information literate are smart (Musi & Reed, 2022; Nagy & Kapusta,

2021; Nelson & Taneja, 2018; Scheibenzuber et al., 2021; Serra-Garcia & Gneezy, 2021; Shelke

& Attar, 2022). Unfortunately, many information consumers do not possess the character traits

required to avoid fake news. Lampridis et al. (2022) postulates:

> The social and psychological user characteristics play an important role in fake
>
> news adoption and diffusion. Credibility, trustworthiness, and the vulnerability of
>
> users towards misinformation consist of behavioral traits that affect the spread of
>
> fake news by humans. *Consistency*, the tendency to believe opinions compatible
>
> with previous beliefs, *coherency*, the ability to process whether information
>
> makes sense or not, *credibility*, the trustworthiness of the news source

and *acceptability*. It has been shown that users with lower credibility have a

higher chance of spreading fake news than more reliable users, as users with low

credibility are more vulnerable to adopt and reproduce them. (para. 11)

Theme 2: Infodemic

Infodemic was a term that was frequently used in some of the articles reviewed in this

QIMS study (Aïmeur et al.,2021; Formighieri Giordani et al., 2021; Hameleers, 2020). Findings

revealed that infodemic, which is the excessive amount of unreliable information in circulation,

contributes to widespread fake news (Nascimento et al., 2022; Pérez-Escoda, 2022). Experts say

there is usually an abundance of disinformation in society whenever there is a public health issue

(Ahmad, 2022; Das & Ahmed, 2022; Yeung et al., 2022). In other words, there is likely to be

fake news when there is too much information in circulation.

As technology advances, harmful messages are amplified with the information in

circulation. Such was the case during the outbreak of COVID-19. "The circulation of false news

has dramatically increased in the last decade and was further exacerbated during the coronavirus

disease (COVID-19) pandemic, causing an "infodemic" (i.e., overabundance of information

involving deliberate attempts to disseminate inaccurate information)" (Pehlivanoglu et al., 2022,

para. 2). Fake news continues to rise with the rise of infodemic as social media platforms

expand.

Subtheme 2a: Information Overload

Findings revealed that information overload is the major contributor to the fake news

phenomenon (Alessandro et al., 2021; Rovetta & Bhagavathula, 2020; Safarpour et al., 2021).

The massive production of false information online has been blamed on the lockdown of 2020.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, most people were dependent on the internet for health news

Ghaddar et al., 2022; Melchior & Oliveira, 2022; Merchant & Asch, 2018; Nascimento et al., 2022)

> During crises, such as infectious disease outbreaks and disasters, the overproduction of data from multiple sources, the quality of the information, and the speed at which new information is disseminated create social and health-related impacts. This phenomenon, called an infodemic, involves a torrent of online information containing either false and misleading information or accurate content. (Nascimento et al., 2022, para. 5)

Theme 2b: Public Health Misinformation

Public health misinformation continues to rise as numerous COVID-19 substitute words, also known as infodemic monikers, are circulated (Ghaddar et al., 2022; Melchior & Oliveira, 2022). It has become increasingly difficult for health communicators to manage public health-related fake news (Merchant & Asch, 2018; Nascimento et al., 2022; Pérez-Escoda, 2022).

> Globally, there is a growing interest in COVID-19, and numerous infodemic monikers continue to circulate online. Based on our findings, we hope to encourage mass media regulators and health organizers to be vigilant and diminish the use and circulation of these infodemic monikers to decrease the spread of misinformation. (Rovetta & Bhagavathula, 2020, para).

The behavior of information consumers includes pulling information from different sources and creating their infodemics (Sell et al., 2020; Swire-Thompson & Lazer, 2020). "As of 2020, the information behavior of people includes drawing information from a variety of synchronous and asynchronous sources and channels" (Chang, 2021). Many people are investigating their health conditions online because of the massive information online where they can learn about different health concerns (Scott, 2021; Wu et al., 2023).

Given the large amount of inaccurate information online, people can easily become

misinformed. For example, the notion that eating apricot seeds will cure cancer is a

misconception that can be found online. There is no scientific evidence to support the

claim; in fact, it is well established that eating apricot seeds may even cause cyanide

poisoning. Misinformation concerning health has particularly severe consequences with

regard to people's quality of life and even their risk of mortality. In recent years, the

quintessential example of misinformation in public health is the misconception that the

measles, mumps, rubella (MMR) vaccine causes autism. (Swire-Thompson & Lazer,

2020, para. 4)

This is why when it comes to health-related information, it is always best to get a second

opinion. Differing opinions have value and help to detect false information.

Theme 3: Fabrication

Fabrication is a topic that was frequently used in this QIMS study to define fake news.

Fabricated content was described by most of the articles as information that is intentionally

designed to deceive and harm others (Bradshaw, 2019; Brotherton et al., 2016; Shen et al.,

2019). The studies reviewed considered information fabrication as false content (Lien et al.,

2022; Skinnell, 2021). In other words, fabricated content is often made up to mislead information

consumers into believing that it is accurate. Many of the articles conclude that simulated content

is another appellation for fake news usually created for profit or political gains (Ecker et al.,

2020; Li & Su, 2020; Mould, 2018; Pierre, 2020; Vora, 2021; Vraga et al., 2020, Waddell &

Moss, 2023). One of the articles puts it thus: "During political elections today, for example, it's

becoming the norm that different interest groups try to affect voters with fake news to steer them

into a certain political or ideological direction" (Silverman, 2017, para. 15).

An example of 100% fabricated content was the claim that President Donald Trump, who

was a candidate in the 2016 United States presidential election, was endorsed by Pope Francis.

Figure 1: Example of fabricated News

EndingTheFed.Com (2016).

Fact-finders revealed that WTOE5, a website notorious for fabricating fake news, was

responsible for deceiving the world with the bogus headline (Ali & Zain-ul-Abdin, 2021; Barron

et al., 2018; Bayerl & Stoynov, 2016). Similarly, in 2015, another fake news site fabricated the

news that the Pope endorsed Bernie Sanders, the Democratic presidential candidate. A fact-

checking site, Snopes, debunked both stories and tagged them as false news (Buschman, 2019;

Gosse & Burkell, 2020; Lazar & Pop, 2021; Stitini et al., 2022). Pope Francis condemned fake

news and blamed the media for spreading disinformation (Iandoli et al., 2021; Van Duyn &

Collier, 2019).

Although no mainstream media reported the fake news, the Pope blamed all media

establishments. This is what the American-trained journalists surveyed in previous studies

frowned at. Hence, they argued that the term fake news is an oxymoron and advised that "fake

content" should be used instead so that people will not assume that all news is fake. Two

subthemes emerged during the synthetization of fabricated content: deepfakes and conspiracy theories.

Subtheme 3a: Deepfakes

Deepfakes are a new form of video disinformation in which a person's facial appearance is altered to look like someone else (Kietzmann et al., 2019). In 2023, as America geared up for the 2024 presidential election, President Joe Biden and President Donald Trump went viral online as they engaged in a 24/7 debate aired live to the world (Thompson et al., 2023). In 2019, the world was alarmed when the owner of the largest social media platform, Mark Zuckerberg, announced a video that he was going to delete Facebook (Kietzmann et al., 2019).

> As of mid-2020, several deepfakes have gone viral in the United States. Among the ones related to politics, notable videos include one that shows President Obama using swear words against President Trump, and Mark Zuckerberg admitting that Facebook manipulates its users. More recently, the Democratic National Committee (DNC) used a deepfake of its chair, Tom Perez, apologizing for not being in attendance at a large convention. The video ended with a debriefing identifying the video as fake. The DNC used this video as a demonstration of the potential threats of deepfakes in the 2020 Presidential election. (Ahmed, 2021, para. 6)

Although the videos of the aforementioned events appeared real and believable, they all had deepfake content (Allyn, 2022; Mirsky & Wenke, 2020; Kietzmann et al., 2019).

Several studies revealed that deepfakes abound online (Alghamdi et al., 2022; Bradshaw et al., 2020; Rubin, 2019). Creators of deepfakes employ Artificial Intelligence (AI) by using deep learning technology to create fake videos (Thompson et al., 2023; Sample, 2020; Andrew, 2021).

Deepfakes are a new form of disinformation. They are artificial intelligence (AI)-driven

manipulated media made to look convincing enough, in which people's words and

actions are fabricated. Recent incidents of deepfakes in political campaigns suggest that

they may be used to mislead citizens and ruin the integrity of democratic processes.

(Ahmed, 2021, para 3)

Also known as synthetic media (Poltronieri & Hänska, 2019), deepfake is a process of replacing

a person's face with that of another person, like a mask, and convincingly using AI to generate

audio that easily mimics the voice of their target (Rone, 2022; Ross et al., 2023).

Findings revealed that information doctoring due to advancements in deep learning

technology and the availability of automated tools has enabled the creation of compelling fake

news (Kietzmann et al., 2019; Kopp et al., 2018; McKay & Tenove, 2021; Nefes, 2017).

Interestingly, deepfake technology advancement has become increasingly convincing to the point

that it is disrupting the media industry. "Today, we could be watching the leader of one country

convincingly deliver a speech by the leader of another country, or vice versa. Such deepfake

trickery is alarmingly successful for two main reasons: believability and accessibility" (Kauk et

al., 2021, para. 3).

Subtheme 3b: Conspiracy Theories

Studies conclude that a conspiracy theory is the explanation of a situation that contends

that a group of conspirators who are motivated by ideological and political beliefs is secretly

planning to achieve something sinister that is harmful to society (Harambam & Aupers, 2021;

Jolley, 2016; Saliu, 2023). Some studies reveal that the psychology behind conspiracy theories

includes the assumption that events and people have a causal connection and that conspiracy

theorists intentionally work together in secrecy to achieve a common goal (Brotherton, 2017;

Pierre, 2020; Ross et al., 2023; Saliu, 2023; Schulz et al., 2020). Other articles defined

conspiracy theories that have rejected the proper explanation of events but blamed imaginary

groups for having secret agendas *(*Nefes, 2017; Dagnall et al., 2016).

Findings from most of the articles reviewed conclude that conspiracy theories thrive

when organizations and governments hoard information or when there is conflicting information

about an event (Silverman, 2017; Stojanov & Halberstadt, 2020; Sutton et al., 2020; Vizoso et

al., 2021). "Despite their stigma, conspiracy theories are hugely popular today and have

pervaded mainstream culture. Increasingly, such theories expanded into large master schemes of

deceit where 'everything is connected" (Harambam & Aupers, 2021, para. 1). Conspiracy theory

has crept into mass media through social media due to technological advancement, and it is

spreading widely around the world (Barron et al., 2018; Ross et al., 2023; Rubin, 2019; Schulz et

al., 2020).

Conspiracy theorists seem to take particular interest in mass shootings in the United

States. In 2012, after the killing of 20 students and six staff at Sandy Hook Elementary School in

Connecticut, a conspirator took to social media to claim that the mass shooting was staged and

that the children who were killed were actors who were hired to play the role (Vizoso et al.,

2021; Yadlin-Segal & Oppenheim, 2021). Similarly, the mass shooting that claimed the lives of

17 attracted conspiracy theorists who called those who survived "crisis actors" (Sutton &

Douglas, 2020). Studies reveal the event with the most conspiracy theories is the COVID-19

pandemic (Barron et al., 2018; Jolley, 2017; Rone, 2022; Thompson et al., 2022; van der Linden

et al., 2020).

Conspiracy theorists claim COVID-19 is manufactured to control the world population

(Stojanov & Halberstadt, 2020; Tong et al., 2020; Valverde-Berrocoso et al., 2022). Another

popular conspiracy theory surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic was that it was a disguise for

Microsoft founder, Bill Gates, to implant microchips into humans around the world. A claim that

was denied by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Sutton & Douglas, 2020; Thompson et

al., 2022). Although these conspiracy theories have been debunked, they have continued to

spread widely across social media.

Theme 4: Imposter Content

The least salient within the articles reviewed for this QIMS fake news study is the

imposter content. Although imposter content is rampant, only nine articles discussed the impact

of impersonating genuine sources. Imposter content uses names of public figures and the logos

of famous brands to deceive information consumers into believing the content they share online

is authentic (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Berkowitz & Schwartz, 2016; Dewangan & Rishabh,

2016; Farkas & Neumayer, 2020; Nefes, 2017). An example of imposter content is using the

logos of news media to share fake news. Thus, taking advantage of news consumers' trust in

news media.

Figure 2: Example of Imposter logo

Chegg (2023). HIV Virus found in Walmart Banana

Figure 3: Example of Imposter logo vs authentic logo

Chegg (2023). Imposter

Figures two and three revealed how imposter content replicated the famous CNN logo. From afar, it is believable. Taking a closer look, one can see the difference between the authentic CNN and ABC news logos compared to the imposter logos. The original logos are high definition, while the fake ones are blurry. The news headline about HIV found in Walmart bananas was found to be fake, and the photo was doctored (Thompson et al., 2023). Unfortunately, many cannot differentiate between imposter and authentic content because of the resemblance (Ferrara et al., 2016; Govaert et al., 2020; Lareki et al., 2023). The two most common types of imposter content are bots and sock puppets.

Subtheme 4a: Bots

Internet robots, popularly known as web bots, are computer programs designed to perform specific tasks (Dewangan & Rishabh, 2016).) Many corporate organizations use bots to perform online customer service duties (Ferrara et al., 2016). Similarly, some bots spread

disinformation on websites and social media *(*Mazza et al., 2019*).* Social media bots are

automated accounts designed to appear like real human beings operating the accounts (Zago et

al., 2019*).* The articles reviewed revealed that millions of social media bots are impersonating

public figures.

> These social bots have widespread usage in political campaigning and product marketing,
>
> but *Social Bots* can also be used for the purpose of swaying voters, mounting political
>
> attacks, manipulating public opinion, etc. Apart from these, *Social Bots* possess various
>
> security risks, one of which is befriending an OSN user thereby gaining access to
>
> personal details such as birthday, email id, phone number, address, etc. Detection of
>
> these *Social Bots* is therefore an important problem to be solved. *(*Dewangan & Rishabh,
>
> 2016, para 1)

Other tudies also revealed that social media platforms are intentionally slow to take action

against impersonators because most of the fake accounts appear like real accounts (Dewangan &

Rishabh, 2016; Pehlivanoglu et al., 2022; Tokita et al., 2022; Tornberg, 2018)*.* Hence, the rapid

spread of fake news.

Subtheme 4b: Sock Puppets

Sock puppetry discussed in the articles reviewed refers to sock puppets as individuals

whose actions are controlled by others. Sock puppet, a hand puppet made from a sock, is a term

used to describe alternative social media accounts created to disseminate fake news. Users of

major social media platforms can testify that they have befriended and been followed by sock

puppets (Tsang, 2021; Yang et al., 2019). The modus operandi of sock puppets is to operate as

multiple fictitious social media accounts controlled by an individual or a group responsible for

reposting fake content from a central narrative to multiple other fictional accounts (York et al., 2020).

Figure 4: Example of Sock puppet

Damisa, A. (2023) Sock Puppet Image

Reports in the studies revealed that sock puppetry is on the rise, and sock puppets are spreading fake news faster than they did five years ago (Yang et al. 2019).

> Following a twerk-heavy performance by Miley Cyrus on the Video Music Awards program, CNN featured the story on the top of its website. *The Onion*—a fake-news organization—then ran a satirical column purporting to be by CNN's web editor explaining this decision. Through textual analysis, this paper demonstrates how a Fifth Estate comprised of bloggers, columnists, and fake news organizations worked to relocate mainstream journalism back to within its professional boundaries. (Berkowitz & Schwartz, 2016, para. 1)

Other studies revealed that their unique features, such as the correlation of IP addresses, can detect sock puppet accounts. Social media accounts that are geographically linked, post content

regularly, and multiple accounts with similar content are likely to be sock puppet accounts. Unfortunately, sock puppet accounts are not easily spotted.

Theme 5: Media Manipulation

Media manipulation is a topic that was frequently discussed in most of the articles reviewed (Abdullah et al., 2022; Gaber, 2017; Igwebuike & Chimuanya, 2021; Zheng et al., 2018). Manipulation in the media involves combining different techniques to create information or images that favor the ideologies of the manipulators (Bradshaw, 2019; Bufnea & Șotropa, 2018; Freelon & Wells, 2020). In other words, media manipulation is intentionally altering information or pictures to change its meaning entirely. Such as tampering with images to change a story and reporting a public figure's quotes or remarks out of context (Al-Rawi, 2019; Bandeli & Agarwal, 2021; Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Hoffjann, 2021). Some articles in their findings revealed that media manipulation is the exploitation of what distinguishes perception from reality. Manipulators take advantage of information consumers trust as a reliable source of information (Ali, 2022; Kemp et al., 2022; Ladd & Lenz, 2019; Mazepus et al., 2023; Ratliff & Rubinfeld, 2017).

In one of the articles, a self-acclaimed media manipulator explained why media manipulation intending to spread disinformation is thriving.

> Fake news appropriates the credibility of news media, undermining journalistic credibility by mimicking the look and feel of real news; from how websites look; to how articles are written; to how photos include attributions. They argue that fake news is in many respects co-constructed by the audience who mistakes it for credible news and legitimizes it through online engagement. (Farkas & Neumayer, 2020, para. 6)

Other studies blame the mainstream media for being lax in their information-gathering process (Mourão et al., 2018; Ratliff & Rubinfeld, 2017; Serazio, 2021; Turner, 2018; Wenzel, 2020). Hence, the media is being assailed by fake news from untrained journalists who gather information from inaccurate sources.

Subtheme 5a: Public Relations Spin

Public Relations (PR) practitioners have a reputation for twisting information to fit the narrative of their clients. It is a process popularly known as "spin" in PR (Ratliff & Rubinfeld, 2018). Many of the articles reviewed revealed how PR spin contributes to the widespread of fake news.

> Because of the frequent association between spin and press conferences (especially government press conferences), the room in which these conferences take place is sometimes described as a "spin room". Public relations advisors, pollsters, and media consultants who develop deceptive or misleading messages may be referred to as "spin doctor" or "spinmeister". (Ladd & Lenz, 2019, para. 5)

Findings revealed that PR practitioners use a standard strategy to spin information (Munger, 2020; Smith, 2019). The process entails reframing and modifying an issue from a different perspective to avoid the harmful effect the problem might have on the public (Abdullah et al., 2022; Ali, 2022; Alina et al., 2020; Bandeli & Agarwal, 2021). An organization facing a safety issue may employ the services of a PR consultant to frame its competitor by criticizing the safety of the organization's products (Al-Rawi, 2019; Gaber, 2017). Other studies argue that PR spin doctors are taking advantage of the decline in the media business (Bennett & Livingston, 2018; Bradshaw, 2019; Bufnea & Șotropa, 2018; Freelon & Wells, 2020). According to Jones (2017):

Many cash-strapped newsrooms are turning to advertorials or sponsored content to make

up for shrinking revenues. As a result, more of the news media is implicated in spreading

PR content that is often one-sided, incomplete information that favors corporate PR

clients. (para. 10)

The articles reviewed point accusing fingers at media consultants, media directors, and press

secretaries as experts in spinning negative stories on behalf of politicians and corporate

organizations with bad reputations. PR spins are strategically done by suppressing adverse facts

and releasing a few selected facts or anecdotal evidence to give the public the impression that all

is well with a politician or an organization *(*Hoffjann, 2021; Jahng et al., 2020; Igwebuike &

Chimuanya, 2021; Jarrahi & Safari, 2023).

Subtheme 5b: Clickbait Headlines

Clickbait headlines were one of the most salient topics within this fake news QIMS study.

Most of the articles reviewed revealed that misleading headlines contributed more to the

widespread of fake news. Clickbaits are online content that lures online audiences and social media

users with misleading, sensational headlines that entice them to click on links that lead them to

other fake websites for revenue generation.

Clickbaits are prevalent on online news websites and social media. Clickbaits can be

identified easily because they use hyperbole in writing headlines such as, "You won't believe

what happened later" or "This will change the way you think about politics" *(*Bufnea &

Șotropa, 2018, para. 7*).* Such sensational headlines make readers curious and click the links.

The readers are usually shocked to find out that the content has no connection to the

headline.

Sensational headlines are primarily political and financial clickbaits (Jenks, 2022; Jones,

2017; Kemp et al., 2022; Mazepus et al., 2023; Zheng et al., 2018). Some articles revealed that

clickbaits were used to spread false, sensational headlines that swayed voters from one party to

another (Mourão et al., 2018; Munger, 2020; Serazio, 2021; Smith, 2019; Staender et al., 2022).

Other studies also revealed that one of the purposes of clickbait is financial gain (Strauß, 2019;

Suiter & Fletcher, 2020). The clickbaiters create content to make money from unsuspecting online

users willing to click and view attractive headlines (Turner, 2018). Online users are also

manipulated to share false information after bonding and viewing the fictitious content (Wenzel,

2020).

Theme 6: Misinformation

Most studies and articles reviewed within this QIMS study cited misinformation as the

foundation of fake news (Kim & Lim, 2023; Koliska et al., 2020; Lischka, 2019).

Misinformation is typically a combination of correct and incorrect information. An example of

misinformation is when a writer uses a misleading headline and an unverified source to support

an authentic story (Humprecht, 2020; Iyengar & Massey, 2019). Often, misinformation is a news

story written intentionally or unintentionally based on the author's bias. (Bakir & McStay, 2018;

Haigh et al.,2018).

Misinformation is sometimes spread out of ignorance or because of misguided opinions

(Long et al., 2019; Lwin et al., 2023). In other words, in most cases, those who share

misinformation do not intend to disseminate false information or know they are spreading half-

truths. Such people spread misinformation without fact-checking because they trust the source

(Maertens et al., 2021; Masullo & Kim, 2021). Hence, many are prone to accepting and sharing

misinformation, as was evident in 2016 during the United States presidential election. "Even if

fake news did not influence the election, widespread recirculation of falsehoods posing as news does not bode well for the factual foundations on which citizens form opinions and the nation's consequent democratic health" (Bakir & McStay, 2018). Two subthemes that emerged from misinformation are journalistic error and rumor.

Subtheme 6a: Journalistic Error

Participants in multiple articles included in this QIMS study were journalists who expressed their discontentment that mere journalistic errors are being categorized as fake news (Vu & Saldaña, 2021; West & Bergstrom, 2021; Wilczek, 2020). The journalists frown at media errors being deemed fake news even when retractions are publicly made (Abu Arqoub et al., 2022; Benham, 2020; Capilla, 2021; Gilbert, 2017). What used to be light-hearted corrections about error publications or broadcasts in the media has become a big issue since 2016, when the term fake news became popular. According to Benham (2020):

> Journalism prides itself on its respect for truth and facts. However, public opinion of US news outlets has an increasingly different view on if journalism truly reflects a truthful picture. In a 2016 Pew Research Center survey, 74% of US adults surveyed said they believe news media tend to favor one side when reporting on political or social media issues, with only 24% saying media deal fairly with both sides. (para. 3)

The journalists who participated in these studies think it is unfair that the media is penalized for doing the right thing by holding themselves accountable (Mesmer, 2022; Nekmat, 2020; Neo, 2022; Opgenhaffen, 2022; Parrott & Eckhart, 2021). "Journalism can't afford for corrections to be the next victim of the "fake news" frenzy" (Bakir & McStay, 2018 para. 11).

Despite these media retractions, mainstream media critics insist that these corrections prove that the mainstream media publish and report fake news (Alvarez et al., 2020; Paul, 2017; Roberts, 2018; Robertson, 2023).

Subtheme 6b: Rumor

Misinformation typically begins with the spreading of rumors (Schapals & Bruns, 2022; Shao et al., 2018; Shin et al., 2017; Siebert & Siebert, 2023). Yet, the rumor was one of the least salient topics within the articles reviewed for this QIMS fake news study. Rumor is passing information from person to person without verifying authenticity. Rumors are not necessarily false (Au et al., 2022; Brandtzaeg et al., 2018; Clemm von Hohenberg, 2023). Rumors are typically a mixture of facts and exaggeration about essential matters relating to government, economy, politics, or public figures (Greene & Murphy, 2023; Haigh et al., 2018; Humprecht, 2020; Iyengar & Massey, 2019). Such was the rumor that grounded a financial institution (Anderson & Rainie, 2017). "After fake news stories in June 2017 reported that Ethereum's founder Vitalik Buterin had died in a car crash, its market value was reported to have dropped by $4 billion" (para. 5). Spreading misinformation based on rumor can have a damaging effect on organizations and society at large (Iyengar & Massey, 2019; Stubenvoll et al., 2021; Tandoc, 2022; Toivanen et al., 2022; Theodosiadou et al., 2021).

Theme 7: Satire

Satire as a tool for spreading fake news was not a theme that was prominently discussed in this QIMS study. However, the articles that made satire the focus of their research revealed that most articles labeled 'satire' are characteristically divisive, polarizing, and hateful (Boukes & Hameleers, 2023). Although most writings are not entirely satirical, many non-fiction writers use some elements of satire to emphasize their point. Findings in these studies revealed that

satirical writings are purposefully false, intending to deceive people into thinking the content of their publication is real. Satire is typically a type of writing that exposes societal failures and flaws through exaggeration, entertainment, and humor (Burgers & Brugman, 2022). Considering most writings are not labeled satire, people often confuse such content with authentic information.

Although some people understand satire is inaccurate, many assume it is authentic information when it is shared and reshared (Lewellen & Bohonos, 2021). Such confusion is more prevalent on social media than in print media where such articles are labeled satire.

> While some fake news stories are recognizable as satire, others are variants of well-known news brands, and more difficult to recognize as fake. For those who think they can always recognize fake news, it would be instructive to play human computation game. Factitious challenges players to quickly identify true or false articles from news, advertising, opinion, or fake. Certainly, a study by Stanford History Education Group of 7800 responses from US middle school, high school, and college students on their ability to assess online information sources concludes that they "are easily duped." (Bakir & McStay, 2018, para 5)

Some other studies candidly conclude that the fact that satire is based on fiction does not negate the fact that it is the best way to study and understand society because it reveals societal values *(*Boukes & Hameleers, 2023; Lewellen *&* Bohonos, 2021). Two subthemes that emerged are entertainment and dark humor.

Subtheme 7a: Entertainment

Television shows such as "Saturday Night Live" are examples of using satire as entertainment. They amuse their audience by using humor to poke at political, social, and

economic issues that the world is dealing with. Entertainingly, the opinions and ideas of

influential people are mocked comically. Scripts for such shows are written in sarcasm as a joke.

Dramatically, the writers reveal societal problems exaggeratedly. Some satirical writers who

were participants in some of the studies reviewed in this QIMS research suggest:

> Satire should, however, be regarded as a genre that is less aligned with the traditional
>
> routines of journalism, such as striving for balance and facticity. Satirists are not bound to
>
> facticity – and are freer to actively and critically scrutinize the viewpoints of societal
>
> actors. Accordingly, satirical content may be suitable to hold politicians accountable and
>
> humorously highlights erroneous lines of argumentation or descriptions that are provided
>
> in misinformation with or without a strong ideological bias. (Boukes & Hameleers, 2023,
>
> para. 12)

Interestingly, many information consumers take satire seriously, even though it is not traditional

journalism.

Subtheme 7b: Dark Humor

Dark Humor is one of the least discussed topics in this QIMS study. However, it offered

new insight into the impact of misinformation disguised as humor. Dark humor in

communication involves writings or presentations that lighten severe or painful issues such as

crime, death, discrimination, famine, pandemics, public health, et cetera (Burgers & Brugman,

2022). "The humorous fiction often makes the internet erupt with laughter, but researchers are

not laughing about its potential to fool the public, which sometimes includes media

organizations" (Lewellen & Bohonos, 2021, para. 7). On the contrary, dark humor can also be

used as a reverse strategy in communicating an intended message to reach the right audience.

Summary

Chapter Four presented extensive findings from this QIMS study's cross-section sample of 200 randomly selected peer-reviewed journal articles on fake news between 2016 and 2023. Detailed examples and direct quotes were given to answer research questions one and two collectively. Research question three produced seven primary themes and 14 subthemes. Chapter Five offers a general discussion of the QIMS fake news study results, a specific discussion of findings, a discussion of the significance of the fake news study, the limitations of the fake news study, and a discussion of future research that may occur because of this study.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Overview

Chapter Five discusses the results and findings of this QIMS fake news research study detailed in Chapter Four. This chapter begins with a general discussion of the findings of this fake news QIMS research study which includes the study's significance, limitations, and future research that may occur.

Findings

This general discussion section is a precursor to the overall discussions in this chapter. The results and findings of the fake news research study are discussed based on the findings revealed from seeking answers to the three research questions (RQ) that guided this study, as noted in Chapter Four. The questions are: What new insight can be gained from a comprehensive review of fake news research? How can a comprehensive review of existing literature help identify and combat fake news? What themes emerged from a comprehensive review of scholarly literature on fake news?

RQ1 Findings: Fake News is an Oxymoron

Chapter Four further revealed the complexity of the fake news phenomenon and presented the new insights gained from the comprehensive review of fake news research. The fake news phenomenon was examined and interpreted from different perspectives. Findings revealed that most trained journalists frown at the term fake news, which they consider an oxymoron. Their main argument is that any information considered fake cannot be considered news because news, by its very nature, is based on true events and real situations (Albright, 2016; Goldman, 2016; Lopez, 2016; Sauer, 2019; Scott & Eddy, 2017).

Many trained journalists strongly believe the way to restore media integrity is to stop using the term fake news and call it what it is: falsehood and lies. In other words, a false story or information should be termed a false report, not fake news. Their defense is that fake has no place in the news because if the information is fabricated, it is not an actual event. Hence, it is not news. Some concluded that what is termed fake news is outright lying and should be called what it is. Admittedly, they point to the fact that journalists sometimes infuse bias or their opinion into a storyline to change the audience's mind to accept their viewpoint, but it does not make such a fake story. Therefore, they recommend that fabricated or false information be referred to as fake content (Kang et al., 2016; Ratliff & Rubinfeld, 2017; Schudson, 2017).

The journalists argued that the term fake news is commonly thrown at information that people do not like or agree with. Adding that if such people are not challenged, they will continue to bandy the term around, allowing the proliferation of fake news and diminishing the trust in factual information. In addition to calling for the challenge of fake news and getting rid of the term, the group of traditional journalists that participated in a study about fake news also condemned the term 'citizen journalists' in referring to creators and spreaders of false information (Lopez, 2016; Ratliff & Rubinfeld, 2017). This group of media practitioners stressed that, unlike citizen journalists who fabricate symbolic stories, trained journalists are professionals who produce and report authentic news. Therefore, they consider it a smear on the noble profession of journalism to refer to untrained bloggers and vloggers as citizen journalists. Therefore, they are recommended to be called citizen communicators (Kashyap, 2020; Wardle, 2017). Since some mainstream media use social media as a source for developing news nowadays, traditional journalists have a responsibility to combat fake news by paying attention to fake news websites, fact-checking sources, and debunking disinformation to rebuild trust in the media.

RQ2 Findings: Root Cause of Fake News

Findings revealed that identifying the root cause of fake news will help combat its spread. The comprehensive review of previous research studies and articles revealed the contributing factors to the spread of fake news. They are social, cognitive, political, financial gain, and malicious factors.

Social Factor

Findings revealed that media trust had been irretrievably broken by the advancement of technology, which gave rise to social media. Many argue that traditional media has been relegated to the background by social media platforms, where information ignored by newspapers and television stations is disseminated. Hence, it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish between fake and authentic news (Buschman, 2019; Jang et al., 2018).

Social media platforms have the reputation for disseminating the most fake news because users influence one another to spread information as received, not minding if such information is accurate or fake, to impress their friends or gain more friends. Social status and approval are more important to most social media users. Hence, they are unable to identify fake news (Alzanin & Azmi, 2018; Colliander, 2019; Figueira & Oliveira, 2017; Vijaykumar et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2018).

Most social media users feel pressured to share a news story because people in their social circle share it. Conformity to the norms by social media users will continue to spread disinformation and misinformation unless social media owners stop populating users' newsfeeds with such information.

Cognitive Factor

Findings in the articles reviewed have revealed that fake news creators have succeeded in exploiting the minds of social media users. The lack of some news consumers' intellectual capability and inability to decipher phony information has made it easy for them to think fake news is real (Atodiresei et al., 2018; Burkhardt, 2017). Some mainstream media journalists have information consumers to blame for consuming and sharing every piece of information they find online. They argued that news consumers can combat fake news by refusing to spread unverified information. Trained journalists also called on social media platform owners to help news consumers identify false information by creating signs and symbols that differentiate authentic information from fake (Bondielli & Marcelloni, 2019; Chen et al., 2015). In addition, a little effort put into fact-checking news stories before sharing will go a long way in helping to combat the rise of fake news.

Political Factor

Partisan political bias has been known to give rise to the spread of fake news. Findings revealed that political affiliations have influenced people's beliefs and interpretation of news stories. Many believe every piece of information from their political party of choice is mainstream news, while they consider every report from the opposing political party as fake news. The effect of fake news in politics is that it increases trust in the political party that is in government while it decreases confidence in the opposition party and decreases trust in the media (Keele, 2005; Ognyanova, 2019; Weeks & Garrett, 2014). Sharing disinformation is partisan. For example, the United States political parties, Republicans and Democrats, denigrate each other with unfounded information.

Financial Factor

Findings revealed that fake news has become a lucrative business for internet publishers. There has been an increase in fake news websites, and creators and producers of counterfeit news are enjoying increased incentives. Fake news websites are notorious for facilitating the spread of false information. Interestingly, unreliable websites are supported by major networks such as Google through paid advertisement (Bondielli & Marcelloni, 2019; El Rayess et al., 2018; Jang et al., 2018; Papadogiannakis et al., 2022). Fake news continues to rise as phony news sites continue to produce false narratives for financial gains.

Malicious Factor

Malicious intent is the primary reason for the widespread of fake news. Findings revealed that malicious websites are created to purposely spread false information on social media to disrupt the lives of people they disagree with. Malicious fake news spreaders on social media are known as trolls contracted by phony news producers to communicate and manipulate unsuspecting social media users to spread rumors. In some cases, the social media accounts are operated by Artificial Intelligence (AI) trolls created to imitate human beings. The AI trolls are disguised as social media influencers responsible for harming the reputation of people whose ideology does not align with theirs (Baccarella, 2018; Mihaylov et al., 2018; Rochlin, 2017). Malicious factors such as hate propaganda continue to contribute to the rise of fake news.

RQ3 Findings: Thematic Patterns

Five main themes and 10 subthemes emerged from the comprehensive review of 387 articles from previous fake news research studies. The main themes are Fabrication, Imposter Content, Media Manipulation, Misinformation, and Satire. The subthemes are Deepfakes,

Conspiracy Theories, Bots, Sock puppets, Public Relations Spin, Clickbait Headlines,

Journalistic Error, Rumor, Entertainment, and Dark Humor

Fabrication

Findings in most of the articles reviewed revealed that fake news is rooted in the

fabrication of information. More than 70% of previous research studies defined fake news as

information intentionally designed to deceive and hurt the reputation of others. Information

fabrication is more rampant during political elections. An example was the story of the Catholic

Pope Francis's endorsement of the United States Presidential candidates. In 2015, a news report

stated that Pope Francis had endorsed the Democratic Party Presidential Candidate, Senator

Bernie Sanders. Similarly, in 2016, Pope Francis was reported to have endorsed the Republican

Party Presidential Candidate, Mr. Donald Trump. The entire world believed they were both

authentic news stories until Pope Francis spoke out to debunk the fake news stories (Evon, 2016;

Wardle, 2020).

The two subthemes, deepfakes and conspiracy theories, that emerged during the

synthetization of fabricated content revealed how fake news fabricators have devised different

methods of creating false information to make them appear real to unsuspecting information

consumers. Deepfakes involve leveraging technology through artificial intelligence to

convincingly replace a person's facial image and voice with another person to make fake videos.

It can be described as the impersonation of people using their image with an audio technology

that imitates their speech. Deepfake fabrication is so convincing that it contributes more to

spreading fake news. Findings have revealed that deepfake information is being used for

exploitation and intimidation in corporations, politics, and entertainment (Allyn, 2022; Andrew,

2021; Kietzmann et al., 2019; Poltronieri et al., 2019; Sample, 2020; Stamatis, 2020).

Conspiracy theory is another method of fabricating information that fake news creators use to deceive news consumers into believing their fabricated stories are real. The conspiracy theories are a combination of different false narratives. Recently, findings revealed that most conspiracy theories worldwide are about the COVID-19 pandemic, which conspiracy theorists believed was man-made. The false stories about COVID-19 are in four groups. The first group at the pandemic's initial stage was the 5G conspiracy theories. The 5G network was launched in early 2020 while the world was experiencing the COVID-19 outbreak. Conspiracy theorists and social media users began spreading the false narrative that there is a connection between 5G and COVID-19 and that 5G network towers are being used to spread the virus. The 5G conspiracy has since declined as most cellular phones operate on the 5G network. The second group was the vaccination conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories promoted the resistance to COVID-19 vaccination. Conspiracy theorists claim COVID-19 vaccines cause infertility and autoimmune diseases. The third group is the Bill Gates conspiracy theories that made the world believe that the co-founder of Microsoft, Bill Gates, is partly responsible for creating and spreading COVID-19 so that he can implant microchips in people to control the world (Ahmed et al., 2020; Ali, 2020; Jamieson, 2021; Thomas & Zhang, 2020).

Imposter Content

Imposter content makes up most of the fake news being spread worldwide. Impostors create content by impersonating authentic sources. In other words, people pretend to be other people or organizations by using vital information about such individuals or organizations to spread fake news. Impostors have used major news media like CNN to break phony news. Most people cannot differentiate between genuine and imposter content because of impostors'

strategies for creating false information. Bots and sock puppets are the most common imposter

content (Confessore & Dance, 2018; Nefes, 2016).

Bots are websites and social media fake accounts that are designed to perform the tasks

of human beings, which entails creating and spreading false information. Bots are typically

automated to share fake news that impersonates public figures. Unfortunately, social media

owners have been unable to get rid of bots. Sock puppets, on the other hand, are actual human

beings whose modus operandi is operating several accounts with which they use in spreading

disinformation. In other words, an individual pretends to be several people by utilizing multiple

accounts to disseminate fake information to other counterfeit accounts and unsuspecting

information consumers. Sock puppets are faceless humans who typically get involved in political

arguments during elections (Buffington, 2019; Dewangan & Rishabh, 2016; Yang et al., 2019).

Media Manipulation

Media manipulators use different strategies to produce information about personal

interests or ideology. The manipulators deliberately alter information, including images, to

change the context of a story to reflect their perspective. Findings revealed that media

manipulation occurs because information is free to information consumers who read or watch

content passed to them and shared with several others. There are no consequences for spreading

fake news. Many blame media manipulation on the laxity in information gathering by the

mainstream media, which has resulted in the media being taken over by untrained

communicators who disseminate information from unverified sources. The two most popular

media manipulation strategies are Public Relations (PR) spin and clickbait headlines (Holiday,

2017; Ratliff & Rubinfeld, 2018).

PR spin is a strategic way of suppressing damaging facts and releasing selected information that they want the public to know. Such information benefits their organization and is intended to create the impression that an organization or a brand is doing well when the reverse is the case. Spinning information is one of the most effective strategies PR practitioners use to share false information. PR practitioners have built a reputation for twisting information to fit the narratives of the organizations or brands they represent. Hence, they have contributed immensely to the spread of fake news. Findings reveal that there is a collaboration between PR spin and press conferences. Some rooms in government buildings where press briefings are usually held are called spin rooms. PR advisors who collaborate with media advisors are sometimes called spin doctors. Considering traditional media is no longer as lucrative as it used to be before the advent of social media, many media executives are employing the strategy of using PR-sponsored content that is usually one-sided to increase revenue (Campbell, 2016; Gaber, 2018; Jones, 2019; Ladd & Lenz, 2019).

Clickbait headlines contribute significantly to the spread of fake news. Such misleading headlines are easily recognized because of their sensational nature. The modus operandi of clickbaiters is to bait with hyperbolic links. Fake news creators design clickbait headlines to entice and lure curious news consumers to click on their links. Clicking on sensational headlines typically leads information consumers to fake news websites. Clickbaiting is a business venture for producers of counterfeit information who manipulate online information consumers who are quick to click screaming headlines. In other words, sensational headlines are used for financial and political clickbait *(*Bufnea & Șotropa, 2018; Munger, 2020; Zheng, 2018).

Misinformation

Misinformation is usually a combination of false and facts. Misinformation occurs when a writer or news producer gets the facts wrong or exaggerates or misstates the facts. Many journalists have been found to inaccurately state the facts of a news event because they did not correctly verify the news source. Other times, misinformation occurs when an opinion news story includes the writer's bias. Findings revealed that misinformation is usually never intended to hurt or disrepute. Hence, misinformation is a piece of information shared ignorantly without the sharers knowing they are spreading partially false information or half-truths. Mindless sharing of misinformation happens because many information consumers tend to trust every piece of information from their favorite media. In other words, information consumers tend to share misinformation if it aligns with their perspective. An example was the United States presidential election of 2016. Most common misinformation is based on journalistic error and rumor (Ali, 2020; Anderson & Rainie, 2017; Bufnea & Șotropa, 2018).

Journalistic error is not fake news. Journalists sometimes erroneously include or omit vital information from a news story with the same negative impact as fake news. Trained journalists think it is wrong to put an error made during news production and a fabricated story in the same category. Although the impact may be damaging, journalistic errors are often corrected instantaneously. Yet, it seems the reputation of journalists is destroyed for holding themselves accountable. On the other hand, rumors are responsible for widespread misinformation. Although not necessarily false information, rumor is usually an exaggeration of facts which involves passing unverified information from person to person (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Mantzarlis, 2017; Wardle, 2020).

Satire

Satirical stories are intentionally false and created to deceive people by giving them the impression the information is authentic. Most satirical writings are based on entertainment and dark humor. Entertainment television shows such as "Saturday Night Live" use satire to expose vices in government, politics, and the economy of nations. Entertainment satirical writers consider it unfair to group satire with fake news. On the other hand, dark humor is used by humorous satirists to lighten challenging situations. Such was the case in Taiwan. The Taiwanese government employed dark humor to fight COVID-19 conspiracy theories (AFP, 2022; Lewis, 2023; Timsit, 2020).

Study Significance

This QIMS research study is significant because it distills a large body of fake news research into an accessible and useable framework that will provide new insights into the fake news phenomenon, increase public awareness, and re-establish trust in the media.

Provide New Insights

This fake news research study is significant in deepening information consumers' understanding of the different types of fake news and their adverse effects on the information environment. It will help people understand how much false information has polluted society and how it has caused harm that affects life, businesses, and relationships. If every information consumer will pause to assess how misinformation and disinformation affect them emotionally, psychologically, and their overall health, they would help limit the prevalence of fake news and help make more informed decisions as far as news consumption is concerned (Chen et al., 2016; Larson, 2020; Vanderpool et al., 2020).

Increase Public Awareness

This study will increase public awareness of how to build a healthy information environment by addressing the issue of fake news through community leaders such as educators, corporate executives, and religious leaders who will be empowered to help the people in their sphere of influence by helping them understand the root cause of fake news, how it spreads, and its damaging effect on families and society at large. For example, these leaders will teach others how to refrain from sharing information when they are not sure of its authenticity. Findings reveal that the best way to increase public awareness to mitigate the spread of fake news is to know the tactics of those creating and spreading misinformation and disinformation (Basol et al., 2021; Diethelm & McKee, 2009). Society can fight fake news when the public is aware that fake news spreaders who claim to be subject matter experts are quacks who use anecdotes and conspiracy theories.

Re-Establish Media Trust

Through this QIMS research study, trust in the media can be re-established when journalists begin to report news stories from credible sources, as it has been proven that unverified sources are the primary root cause of the spread of fake news. When news consumers begin to consume authentic information from the media, they will have confidence in the media and trust that every piece of information they publish or produce is accurate. It is such that it will have a positive impact on society. Similarly, when the media makes a conscious effort to fact-check rumors and conspiracy theories and ensure that the headline debunking fake news is the truth that does not regurgitate the information it intends to correct, media trust will be restored (Larson, 2020).

Limitations

The limitations of this QIMS study of fake news are elements that need improvement in future research studies. For instance, a larger sample of prior studies for a comprehensive review might have yielded a different result, even though the 200 articles reviewed by this researcher were considered appropriate for the size of this study. The inability to interview the authors of the articles and their research participants is a limitation of the study. The ability to read research participants' body language and tone would have added value to data analysis.

Future Research Study

The comprehensive review presented in this QIMS study conveyed valuable information for future research exploring the negative impact of fake news on the government, public health, and economy. In the future, researchers will be able to invite participants from different communities to participate in a study that will reveal why people are exposed to false information and educate the communities on how to intervene in the fight to combat fake news. A QIMS study that addresses harmful information consumption will help prioritize people's understanding of disinformation and misinformation (Vanderpool et al., 2020).

Future researchers should consider a mixed method of QIMS research study that combines qualitative and quantitative analysis using statistical measurement and behavioral analysis to understand ways to combat the spread of fake news. Quantitative data analysis and interpretation will help researchers understand and measure the number of fake news circulating and the frequency of information dissemination. On the other hand, qualitative data analysis and interpretation would help researchers understand why and how misinformation and disinformation are spread. A mixed method of QIMS study of fake news would allow for a more comprehensive analysis and understanding of the phenomenon that would eventually mitigate the spread of false information.

Implications

The implications found in this fake news study are in the advanced qualitative research methodology employed by this researcher, the theoretical perspectives, and in the practicality of the problem.

Methodological Implications

The QIMS method employed in executing the fake news research study allowed for rich data to be collated from the comprehensive review of several articles, which made it possible for authentic themes to emerge. The synthetization of themes revealed different perspectives of fake news and helped gain a deeper understanding. Utilizing authors of prior literature as instruments of this qualitative interpretative meta-synthesis was beneficial to this study as it was helpful in the effective collection of data. In addition, using previous studies as the research population sample allowed for transparently examining the problem of fake news from different perspectives, and reviewing a plethora of fake news articles to the point of saturation increased the quality of this study.

The primary data collection approach this qualitative interpretative meta-synthesis study employed enabled this researcher to pull valuable information about fake news producers and information consumers as it relates to their attitudes, motivations, and behaviors and effectively interpret them. The QIMS approach of theme extraction and theme syncretization from original articles helped explain the root cause of the fake news problem and develop a deeper understanding and new meaning of the phenomenon.

The role of this researcher as a leading research instrument in this QIMS study contributed to the success of this fake news study. Her experience as a trained journalist with a nose for news as a former news reporter made it easy for her to recognize greater nuance and

ease in interpreting the themes extracted from the articles. This researcher used her position as an experienced news reporter to collect, analyze, and interpret fake news research data accurately.

Theoretical Implications

The theoretical implications seen in this QIMS study were revealed through semiotic and medium theories. Findings revealed from a semiotic perspective that the widespread of fake news is because of the faulty methods some mainstream news reporters are using in gathering news stories. Many news stories published by most media organizations are not products of investigation based on observation and interpretation. Many journalists simply reiterate what has been published in other media. Unfortunately, news reporters are reporting signs and symbols as they are, without attempting to investigate and interpret the stories to make a connection between the sign and its object or event.

News reporters will help mitigate fake news when they begin to balance their reports by treating the three main semiological concepts (sign, context, and meaning of events) as one. It is important that the relationship between the three concepts must be evident in their report. Citing people within context when reporting news or sharing information is essential just as it is important to interpret the language used in the sign to analyze the context appropriately. Therefore, after sighting the sign, the news reporter should first observe the sign or situation to gather the facts carefully. For accurate reporting, experts advise that there should be a causal connection between a sign and its signified. When the signified makes sense of a sign, a meaning is created. Meaning is the whole essence of the semiotic theory. Semiotics is about investigating how signs and symbols create meaning in news reporting. This explains why medium theory implies that every media organization, reputable or not, has the power to influence and transform its audience, who can be empowered to change their communities. Interpreting messages

accurately before disseminating news reports will earn media establishments the respect and trust

of their audiences. At the same time, the appellation "fake" in the news will gradually disappear.

Practical Implications

An apparent practical implication seen throughout this QIMS study is that the fake news

problem is rising, and information consumers are feeling the effects. Thanks to modern and

sophisticated technology such as artificial intelligence and the internet, social media is flooded

with a surfeit of information that is more than consumers can handle and process. Numerous fake

websites are springing up worldwide and being used to disseminate false information for

political propaganda, financial gains, and entertainment. Advancements in technology have

improved the skills of fake content creators. Hence, it is becoming increasingly difficult for

people to distinguish between fake and factual information.

False information will continue to spread like wildfire for as long as it costs nothing to

access social media platforms. Many fake news websites imitate credible news websites, creating

deepfakes that impose one person's words on another person's voice and face. As technology

advances daily, creators and producers of fake news are getting more creative as they produce

sophisticated false content. In the same vein, communication channels are increasing in numbers,

which makes it much easier for fake news to spread faster. Therefore, it has become nearly

impossible to stop the spread of fake news. However, if families, communities, leaders, social

media and mainstream media owners, and news consumers work together to create awareness,

educate one another on how to identify fake news, and pause to fact-check stories before sharing,

fake news can be mitigated.

Conclusion

While conducting this fake news QIMS research study**,** significant strengths and limitations emerged from the data analysis and interpretation. Throughout this study, findings revealed that the complexity of fake news makes it a herculean task to combat. Online misinformation and disinformation resembling actual journalistic reports have diminished the credibility of real news and eroded information consumers' trust in the mainstream media. Interestingly, fake news producers also seize the opportunity to discredit the media by accusing the mainstream media of spreading false information because of the journalistic errors they sometimes make. Unfortunately, some people want to weaken the influence of the mainstream media by insisting that errors made during news production are enough for news consumers not to trust news reports from the media outlet.

News and information consumers have a role in contributing to the rise or fall of fake news. Even though many information consumers expect the problem of fake news to worsen because of the challenges of distinguishing between fake and real news, some savvy information consumers resist the urge to share information they suspect to be fake. This commonsense approach is expected for every information consumer to apply. Unfortunately, most people share false information out of ignorance. Therefore, it is imperative to solve news consumers' problem of spreading fake news.

The findings in this study revealed that the first step to solving the problem of sharing fake news is to educate news consumers on how to identify false information and the importance of sharing information from trusted sources. The onus is on media establishments to train and re-train news reporters and editors by developing in-house news reporting programs. The media

organizations should also partner with schools of journalism and social media platforms to teach all communicators about media ethics.

This QIMS research study has met its objective to gain a deeper understanding of fake news, provide new insights into the phenomenon, increase public awareness, and re-establish trust in the media. And eventually offer solutions on how to mitigate its spread, as well as serve as a guide for ethical communication practice and contribute to future research studies.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Example of Fake News Implication

Finn, M. (2022). *Veronika Belotserkovskaya dares to speak out against Putin's War*

https://www.flickr.com/photos/mwf2005/52100071003

Appendix B

Example of Information Fabrication

Vorpal, K. (2018). *Fake news of noaa.jpg*.

https://www.flickr.com/photos/169738192@N02/48014031462/

NOAA Admits This Pic is Fake News

AND SO IS THE "GREAT PACIFIC GARBAGE PATCH"

That's not a picture of "The Great Pacific Garbage Patch",
even though mainstream media told you it was.
Tiny canoes like that don't paddle around the center of the Pacific Ocean.
It's actually a photo of pollution in Manila Bay, because the Philippines dumps
its plastic trash in the ocean, just like most of Asia and Africa. And unlike the US.
Fortunately, that kind of dumping has been illegal in America for 45 years.
That's why the US contributes less than 2% of all oceanic plastic trash.

And there is no actual "garbage patch" at all, even NOAA concedes this.

(see attached link)

There is actually a *natural* area called the North Pacific Gyre.
In it, there is no "continent of trash" you can walk on, nor scattering of trash to see,
in fact there isn't really visible trash at all.
Not even if you dive in the water and look up close.

The actual density of plastic trash in this natural gyre
is 4 sand-sized particles in each 260 gallons of water.

The "garbage patch" actually looks like this

Appendix C

Example of Creating Fake News Awareness

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http://www.ifla.org/publications/node/11174