Infodemic during Pandemic: Spread of misinformation at the time of Covid-19 through use of Whatsapp

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Abstract

The research was conducted in order to find out the consumption of fake news and misinformation spread by messaging app WhatsApp at the time of Pandemic. The research was conducted between the months of May 2020 to September 2020. WhatsApp is basically an app used for chatting among the people. The survey among the sample revealed that WhatsApp is successful in spreading fake news and misinformation during pandemic. The data collected from the sample shows that more than 80 percent people forwarded the messages without cross checking it. The research also shows that 67 percent of the total sample started to follow the fake information which came to them via WhatsApp.

Key Words: Pandemic, Infodemic, WhatsApp

1. INTRODUCTION

WhatsApp Messenger is a cross- platform instant messaging application that allows iPhone, Blackberry, Android, Windows Phone and Nokia smartphone users to exchange text, image, video, documents and audio messages for free. Whereas fake news is something which is spread without cross checking the facts.

1.1 Evolution of WhatsApp

WhatsApp was founded by Brian Acton and Jan Koum in 2009. Soon after realizing the demand for an instant messaging application, WhatsApp 2.0 was launched in its beta stage. People loved the idea of logging in with just a phone number and sending messages to contacts using the internet instead of operator SMS plans.

In India, viral misinformation on Whatsapp triggered real-world violence. At one point in 2018, experts could trace two dozen deaths to fake news, including false reports of child kidnappings that spread on the service. At present observers are concerned about the spread of the misinformation about COVID-19 most importantly on Social media platforms. Some describe it as a "crisis of public misunderstanding" shaped by Western digital corporations and social media platforms (Sohini Sengupta, 2020). The Director general of WHO has termed the phenomena as "Coronavirus Infodemic". The misinformation spread through WhatsApp forwards not only stirs up the emotion but also shapes public opinion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Magic Bullet Theory:

Hypordermic needle theory is also called as magic bullet theory. People were assumed to be uniformly controlled by their instincts and that they react more or less uniformly to whatever stimuli came along. The Magic bullet theory graphically assumes that the media's message is like a bullet fired from a Gun into the viewer's head. (Berger, 1995). Audience is immediately affected by these messages. The public   essentially cannot escape from the media's influence and is therefore considered as a "sitting duck" (Croteau & Hoynes, 1997).

The Epic Battle against coronavirus misinformation and conspiracy theories: Philip Ball & Amy Maxmen

On 19th March, the website Biohackinfo.com falsely claimed that gates planned to use a coronavirus vaccine as a ploy to monitor people through an injected microchip or quantum-dot spy software. Two days later, traffic started flowing to a YouTube Video which got almost 2 Million views. In the first few months of 2020, wild conspiracy theories about Bill Gates and the new coronavirus began sprouting online. Gates, the Microsoft co-founder and billionaire philanthropist who has funded efforts to control the virus with treatments, vaccines and technology, had himself created the virus, argued one theory. He would use vaccines to control people, declared a third. The Gates conspiracy theories are part of an ocean of misinformation on COVID-19 that is spreading online.

Coronavirus misinformation is a global issue, but which myth you fall for likely depends on where you live

In February, major social media platforms attended a meeting hosted by the World Health Organization to address coronavirus misinformation. The aim was to catalyse the fight against what the United Nations has called an "Infodemic". Usually misinformation is focused on specific regions and topics. But COVID-19 is different. For what seems like the first time, both misinformation and fact- checking behaviors are coordinated around a common set of narratives the world over. For instance, one misinformation narrative concerns the "origin of the virus". This includes the false claim that the virus jumped to humans as a result of someone eating bat soup.

## WhatsApp has a fake news problem: Saurabh Singh

WhatsApp is popular no doubt, but it also gets a lot of flak or negative press. For having failed to do enough to curb the menace of fake news on it's widely used platform. Globally of course, but even more so in India which is WhatsApp's biggest market. Its chatter's paradise is what it is, which is why it also holds a much greater responsibility towards the society as a whole. For some perspective, more than 400 million people in India are looking upto WhatsApp for their messaging needs. WhatsApp has come under the radar, for wrong reasons, quite a few times in the past, but novel coronavirus might just be the tipping point. Misinformation about COVID-19 can be as dangerous as the virus itself.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLGY

The design/ method adopted for this research was survey. Survey means asking people about their opinion and views regarding any phenomenon. The reason for selecting survey as the method to draw out information is because of the aim and objectives of the research. For this study sample size was 500 and each sample age was taken above 18 years. Sampling technique used for this research was simple random technique. The instrument adopted to conduct the research was questionnaires.
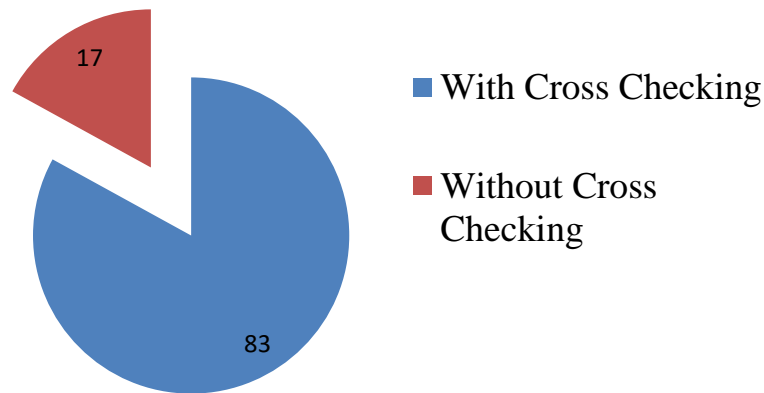
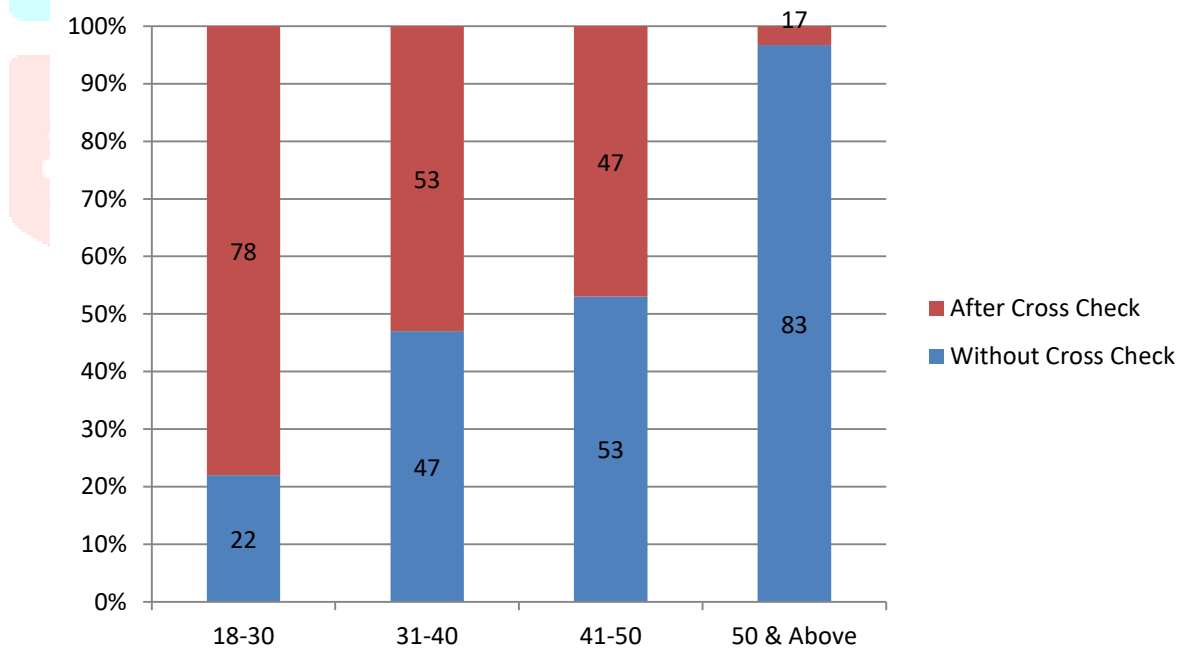## 4. DATA REPRESENTATION AND INTERPRETATION

Age of the Samples
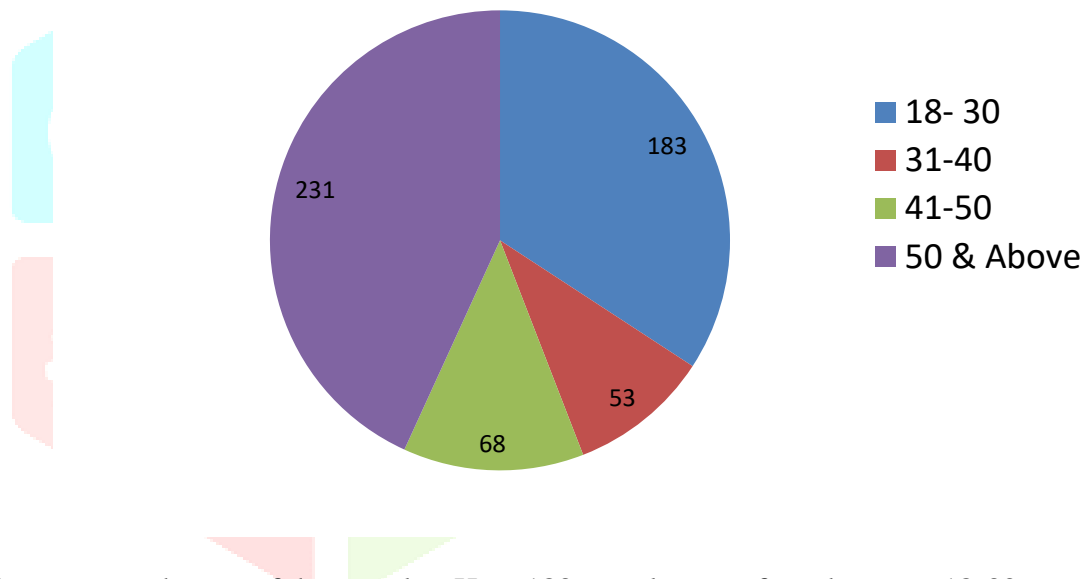
Graph 1 represents the age of the samples. Here 183 samples are of age between 18-30 years. 53 are between 31-40 years, 68 samples are between 41-50 years while 231 samples were of age 50 years and above.

Percentage Types of Forward

Graph 2 represents the nature of people in forwarding the messages received in WhatsApp. The graph shows that 83 percent of the total sample just forwards the messages without cross checking the facts while 17 percent check the facts and if found correct forward it to others.

Graph 3 represents the age wise percentage of samples forwarding the messages. The result shows that samples above the age of 50 and above forwards more messages without cross checking the facts. This often leads to viral messages, fake news or misinformation regarding any issue.

More importantly this survey was conducted during pandemic. This shows that people with more maturity are spreading more misinformation regarding COVID-19. During survey it was found that few people are applying few messages over them in order to be safe from COVID-19 without even cross checking the facts. Users on the messaging service had copied, pasted and forwarded misinformation and multiple version of fake news

continuously. The least percentage of samples who have forwarded the messages without cross checking is in the age between 18-30 years.

5. Conclusion

As government leaders and health professionals race to contain an outbreak on the verge of a pandemic, they are simultaneously battling another hard to defeat problem: the explosion of half-truths and misinformation. With 2 billion users globally, WhatsApp has emerged as one of the world's most popular messaging systems. In order to curb the spread of misinformation every person must stop forwarding the messages/ news/information which are not factually correct. As it is wisely said that False information causes panic in the population and hinders the investigative work of the competent authorities.

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