

Misinformation and Disinformation on TikTok

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Abstract. With the rise of social media, platforms like TikTok have become key providers of information. However, the low threshold for content generation has contributed to the widespread distribution of misinformation and deception. This study investigates the contrasts between misinformation and disinformation, emphasizing on their impact during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through content analysis, the study explores how misinformation about vaccines spreads on TikTok and how the platform's algorithm effects its reach. The data reveal that misinformation often emerges from ignorance, while disinformation is purposefully manufactured to affect public opinion. TikTok has introduced fact-checking and reporting methods, however issues remain owing to the platform's viral nature. The study comes to the conclusion that to minimize the consequences of false information and disinformation on social media, a multifarious strategy including platform control, outside monitoring, and better media literacy is required.

Keywords: Misinformation and Disinformation; TikTok Algorithm; COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, social media has become the main source of news and current affairs for most people. However, due to the low threshold for publishing and disseminating news, the complexity of news sources, the excessive amount of information, and the difficulty of timely audit, there is a lot of false information on social media platforms. Meanwhile, for financial or political purposes, deliberately provided false information also emerges endlessly [1]. This may mislead users, change their thoughts or attitudes, and eventually even change public opinion, causing bad effects on both users and the whole society. TikTok, as the recent most popular social media, also inevitably faces the problem of misinformation and disinformation.

2. Difference Between Misinformation and Disinformation

First of all, the two words that are only one letter apart need to be distinguished. Merriam-Webster (2021) defines misinformation as 'incorrect or misleading information' [2]. It includes false information that is spread, regardless of whether there is intent to mislead. The spread of misinformation could be very common. People are likely to make mistakes in the process of communication, so if you spread one information that is wrong, but you do not know it has a problem, then you are disseminating misinformation. As for disinformation, it is explained as 'false information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by the planting of rumors) in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth' [2]. It is deliberately misleading or biased information, manipulated narrative or facts. By contrast, the biggest difference between the two words is the intention. Misinformation is false but not deliberate, but disinformation is deliberately spreading misinformation. Misinformation is unintentionally sharing inaccurate and misleading information; the intent is not always malicious. On the contrary, disinformation refers to the deliberate dissemination to discredit a person or organization with the intention of deceiving [1].

3. Misinformation and Disinformation About COVID-19 on TikTok

3.1 The Rise of TikTok During the Pandemic

Under the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, people spent more time on mobile devices, which largely promoted the popularity of TikTok. In the first quarter of 2020, TikTok has been downloaded

315 million times worldwide, making it the most downloaded social media platform [3]. TikTok then became an important tool for health professionals to convey the right health information to the public. However, misinformation and disinformation about the COVID-19 vaccine are also constantly appearing on TikTok. Lately, a Wisconsin man with thousands of fans uploaded a video on TikTok stating that he refused to receive the COVID-19 vaccine. The audio transcript in the video is ‘You’re telling me in 40 years of research there is no vaccine for HIV for cancer, no vaccine ... the common cold, no vaccine. Yet in one year we’ve developed a vaccine for COVID-19, and you want me to take that ... thanks, but no thanks. This video was later marked as misinformation by the platform and deleted shortly after. Fact-checkers debunked the error of the video content by explaining the significant differences between the several diseases mentioned in the video and COVID-19, as well as the publisher’s ignorance and misunderstanding of mRNA vaccine development. This is typical misinformation about the safety and reliability of the COVID-19 vaccine on TikTok and may trigger concerns about the vaccine.

3.2 Misinformation vs. Vaccine Hesitancy

After the original video was deleted by the platform, the owner of this account did not respond or explain it, but this publisher is indeed a person who does not trust the role of the vaccine and refuses to be vaccinated. MacDonald (2015) said in his article that this delay in acceptance or refusal of vaccination despite the availability of vaccination services is vaccine hesitancy [4]. Many hesitators have concerns about vaccine safety and side effects, and in the context of continuous uncertainty and lack of professional knowledge, many of them will share their opinions on social platforms, which has led to ordinary users posting or spreading misinformation [5]. In addition to misinformation caused by ignorance and unprofessionalism, there is also disinformation deliberately posted on TikTok. Some content may be produced and spread by resolute anti-vaccine people, to exacerbate ordinary users’ worries and suspicions about COVID vaccines.

4. The Impact of Misinformation and Disinformation on TikTok

4.1 The Role of Social Media in Public Perception

Young people usually rely on social media for health information, and their health literacy levels are often relatively low. This limits their ability to critically evaluate the content on social media, so they are particularly vulnerable to misinformation and disinformation about vaccines spread through social media [6]. Additionally, it is very common for young people to post thoughts on social media, and then coupled with mistrust and ignorance, they also may become the publisher of misinformation. Publicity on social media plays an important role in influencing public opinion [7]. The motivation of vaccine opponents and conspiracy theorists is to increase people’s distrust and antipathy of the COVID-19 vaccine through disinformation about side effects and death cases. A previous study by Wilson and Wiysonge (2020) has also indicated a link between disinformation and reduced vaccination coverage [8].

4.2 TikTok's Algorithm and the Spread of Misinformation

When a video about the COVID-19 vaccine is posted on TikTok, followers of the first publisher will first see the video. Then, the algorithm will spread the video based on the keywords in the content and background audio, as well as the selected hashtags, so that more TikTok users who may be interested will receive the video. In fact, after the video of the refusal of vaccines mentioned above was deleted, the background audio was kept separately, and it still could be used and spread on the platform. Moreover, on TikTok, users often reuse popular audio tracks to make their own videos. The tracking data of a research organization found that before that audio was completely deleted by TikTok, more than 4,500 videos about it had been produced and viewed more than 16 million times. This kind of audio template retention mode, which is different from other platforms, makes misinformation on TikTok easier to spread. Not everyone has a good understanding of the vaccine

manufacturing process and the scientific theories behind it. In the context of increased uncertainty caused by the pandemic, many ordinary people do have a lot of concerns, which leads them to frantically search for relevant information on social media and this is the time when people are most likely to encounter misinformation and disinformation. For disinformation that is specially produced, the producer will choose influencers with more followers to publish, and choose popular hashtags, so the algorithm may recommend the video to more users [9].

5. TikTok's Countermeasures Against Misinformation

Regarding how to deal with this problem, TikTok has launched a series of measures. Firstly, the community guidelines explicitly prohibit false or misleading content, including misinformation related to COVID-19, vaccines, and anti-vaccine disinformation. They have a specially trained team that constantly checks and is committed to identifying and removing false or misleading content, and accounts that spread this information. In 2020, TikTok introduced enhanced in-app reporting capabilities. If users find the content, they believe contains deliberately deceptive information, they can report it by selecting the 'misleading information' category in the app, which also includes a COVID-19 subcategory. When users report any content as 'COVID-19 Misinformation', it will be sent to a priority review queue, managed by internal dedicated teams and upgraded to third-party fact-checkers. Secondly, if TikTok cannot verify the accuracy of the information in a video, the video will include a label stating that it contains unverified information. If users try to share the unverified video, the platform will send out a message with a 'warning' icon asking if they are sure they want to share. Because TikTok is a very fast platform, users often act in a hot state, in other words, act on emotions. Through the prompts, the platform aims to promote users' further thinking and deliberation [10]. Finally, TikTok is also committed to disseminating correct scientific information about COVID-19 vaccine to users. Through cooperation with the World Health Organization and other authorities, TikTok continues to publish authoritative and verifiable information in order to break misinformation and disinformation. Users can also find answers to frequently asked questions about coronavirus and vaccines through official authenticated accounts or COVID-19 Hub, as well as advice on staying safe. Banners directing people to the hub were added to videos and public service announcements (PSAs) also were added to relevant COVID-19 and vaccine hashtags [11].

6. Conclusion

The viral trend of users repeating the same music or voice clips to create their own videos is the core part of TikTok, but at the same time, it also increases the difficulty of review and management. TikTok, as a newly emerged social media in recent years, has quickly become popular in a short period of time and has accumulated a larger number of users from all over the world. In the face of misinformation and disinformation related to the COVID-19 vaccine, TikTok has introduced many policies and procedures, which indeed have achieved certain effects. However, due to the huge amount of information and the fact that it often spans multiple countries and regions, it is still quite difficult to completely eliminate misinformation and disinformation.

Accordingly, this requires continuous supervision and improvement of the platform itself, external supervision, restriction by laws and regulations, and improvement of the users' own information identification and judgement capabilities. Only with the joint efforts of multiple parties can we effectively combat misinformation and disinformation on TikTok and use it as an essential platform to promote correct and trusted information.

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