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## Fact versus Fake: How Smart People are Losing Rationality during Infodemic

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### ABSTRACT

The present study is an attempt to understand the propagation of health-related fake news in India during COVID-19 pandemic in diversely distributed WhatsApp groups comprising uneven groups of members. Ten different WhatsApp groups were selected covering demographic and socio-economic profile and ten most important health-related fake news were studied. Different fake news circulation paths like forward, react, multi-forward, reference etc. were analyzed for different groups. It was observed that older generations - boomers were more susceptible towards fake news and they tended to distribute the fake news in different groups. Male boomers actively circulate pseudo-science information whereas female boomers distribute faith-based information in the WhatsApp group. Levels of education, social media influence or ignorance, technology access, age, gender and understanding played a major role in the distribution and propagation of fake information during times of COVID. It can be also inferred that easy availability of data and devices, lack of understanding of the game of social media and unscientific baggage of age-old beliefs were some factors for over-dependence and reliance on fake news.

### KEYWORDS

Fake News, WhatsApp Group, Misinformation, COVID-19, Mal-information, Misinformation

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## THE PUSH FOR DIGITAL INDIA CAMPAIGN: AN INTRODUCTION

On August 15, 2020 Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his public speech announced in his that six lakh villages in India will be digitalized with optical fiber network in the next 1000 days as part of Digital India program. That will be many steps ahead for the colossal mine of data content consumption in India. With over 560 million Internet users in India (Keelery, 2020) at present it is the second largest internet market in the world. Since the world went virtual during the pandemic lockdowns, there has been an exponential growth of unverified data content and information that has little control of the knowledgeable or subject matter experts. Constraints of writing/manual typing and editing, creating and storing data is in its easiest form now. Filtering verified versus unverified, misinformation versus information and mal information versus factual is the biggest challenge human minds are facing now. The large volume of misleading and false, half and alternate truth during the time of pandemic is the reason for World Health Organization to refer to the term Infodemic (WHO, 2020) implying the pandemic of information about the problem that is viewed as being a detriment to its solution in these times. This has if not the same but similar kind of impact on the social well-being of people these days. Arguably it is true that the pathogen causing corona virus can be traced, mapped and cured with people's immunity and medical support, misinformation, false information and disinformation created with deceitful purposes by governments, vested interest or inadvertently is hard to be traced, filtered and put to rightful use. It is therefore not surprising that ordinary's people's ability to detect lying vs. truthful witnesses is mediocre (Brennen, 2020). Just as the impact of the pathogen that disrupts smooth operation of body systems, the viral mis-content disrupts the smooth functioning of societies and its thinking minds. It is still far-fetched to process the surfeit of information in the short time that it travels before the adverse effect of misinformation could be filtered and debunked. During the pandemic subjective and inter subjective matters like trust and reliance factors, past experiences, pre-meditated beliefs and the sources of public information about health risks played very important roles in the spread of the misinformation. The global pandemic of fake information spread faster than the Corona Virus through social media platforms and other outlets, however, state regulation on social media (Sengupta, 2020) is not the answer as free speech is all the more necessary in times of a lockdown. Be it the times of global danger such as the COVID-19 or other times of lesser significance, fake information is increasingly being recognized as a major threat of societal unrest and worry. World leaders identify the challenge of addressing the issue of an "Infodemic" and have listed its solution as a priority to safeguard sanity of the world. Time and again it has been observed that educated and experienced people, policy makers, think tanks, political leaders, academics, students and social influencers considered "Smart people" in the

larger community for being digitally resourceful and tech savvy on the internet have fallen for the fake. Just like the Corona pandemic, the Infodemic has spared none.

The impact of misinformation is million times more with social media multiplying the effect and taking it farther at a bullet pace, like the viruses that travel with people faster and further. This is the new challenge caused by the travel time of information and needs to be fixed by debunking the fake portion with facts. The correct version must travel faster to be able to mitigate the impact. The challenge is not only to make sure that people are informed; it is also about making sure if people are informed to act appropriately, much ahead of fake news reaching them.

While enabling people to identify unscientific claims and hoaxes, is the way forward to build rational immunity (Sule, 2020), to be able to halt the infectious spread of misinformation has proven to be highly intricate due to lack of cohesive public reliability and trust.

The information and behaviors of smart people were assessed for this study during the pandemic through diverse public and family chat groups across three most populated states of India and mapped the social conversations, reactions, responses and triggers for action in the larger community. The study interviewed and examined responses of such smart people to understand how easily rationality is lost and why. Through the randomly selected WhatsApp chats groups it was examined the factors that made smart people vulnerable to prepare, care and assess the quality of information that passed through them and why they fail to see through the fakery in the information.

### **WhatsApp University: A Ticking Bomb**

Usually, all fakes begin with portions of true content, so its influence is never totally discredited says the Indian Scientists Collective COVID-19. The mainstream media already terms the source of such half or fake spreads from “WhatsApp University” implying the information is disseminated through WhatsApp without much substance, evidence or verification. Indeed, much before the COVID -19 pandemic that held the world to standstill, Indians were already exposed to large amounts of false, purported, biased, innocent, faith-based, unscientific information to rule their lives. The spurt of social media in the last decade amplified its impact beyond imagination. There have been evidences of war conspiracies, terrorist attacks, communal tensions, health disasters, accidents, stampedes, violence, gender-based crimes, human trafficking etc. through the rapid spread of fake news in the country of 1.3 billion people. Although there are strict cyber and criminal laws that forbids creating, sharing, forwarding and editing of real information that can have adverse impact on social

harmony, most Indians have had little understanding towards the “Infodemic” thus bringing little regard for law and for being misguided by the anonymous. The reasons for such behaviors have been attributed to simpler traits, such as sheer entitlement, titillating joy, little knowledge, inherent biases, societal inequality, innocent behavior or little means to verify. The final fall out of fake and unreal content creations have been even more dangerous, social evils such as lynching of human beings, acid attacks, domestic violence, rapes, extortions, suicides have been mainstreamed and overlooked by the larger community. The incidents do not form part of sensational news any longer, rather news has made its way into the hearts and minds of people with caveats of “ifs and buts”, bringing unrest and anarchy in the otherwise organized news sector. The most dangerous consequence of the widely and unabated spread of fake news was felt particularly during times of COVID-19. Several remedial measures did the rounds based on hearsay, old beliefs, dependence on quacks and mistrust in governments posing greater threat towards the spread and effect of the disease. Although besides the health news, socio and economic effect has also been particularly devastating at times. Circulated majorly through WhatsApp, these misinformation, mal-information and dis-information are creating a false hope, misunderstanding and erosion of trust among the citizens irrespective of gender and age. The present study is an attempt to understand the spreading of health-related fake news among multiple diverse WhatsApp groups during COVID-lockdown period.

### **Tracking and Tracing Fake News:**

An example in this scenario was that of a viral message during the early days of COVID -19 is presented below. The origin of the post remains unknown. If true, the message deserved to go viral and reach everyone. It was circulated widely through social media platforms particularly WhatsApp, until it fizzled out on its own although there were mass spreaders of the message in India as people prepared for the pandemic.

#### *Important Letter Regarding Corona Virus:*

*Hello, I'm Laila Ahmadi from China, student at the Faculty of Medical Sciences at Zanjan University. The Corona virus or COVID-19 will reach any country sooner or later, and there is no doubt that many countries do not have any sophisticated diagnostic kits or equipment. Please use as much natural vitamin C as possible to strengthen your immune system. Currently, the virus does not contain a vaccine or specific treatment Unfortunately, due to the genetic mutation that made it very dangerous. This disease appears to be caused by the fusion of the gene between a snake and a bat, and has acquired the ability to infect mammals, including humans. It is important to have greater knowledge of the disease: Professor Chen Horin, CEO of Beijing Military Hospital, said: "Sliced lemon in a glass of warm water can save your life". So whatever you*

*are doing, take a look at this message and pass it on to other people! Hot lemon can kill cancer cells! Cut the lemon into three parts and put it in a glass, then pour hot water and transform it into (alkaline water), drink it every day, it will definitely benefit everyone. Treatment with this extract destroys only malignant cells and does not affect healthy cells. Second, the carboxylic acid in lemon juice can regulate high blood pressure, protect narrow arteries, regulate blood circulation and reduce blood clotting. After reading the message, transfer it to the person you love and take care of your personal health. Advice: Professor Chen Horin notes that whoever receives this message is at least guaranteed to save someone's life ... I did my job and I hope you can help me develop it too. God bless us.*

We then robustly sampled 100 unique mis-dis-mal information circulated across 10 families and professional WhatsApp groups with minimum twenty people or more as members and selected ten most important fake news based on the risk factor they generated in public health. Systematically each news was explained for thematic categories, sources and origins of claims, and their trust factor leading to responses from the receivers of the information (Table 1). These ten groups were constantly monitored for new notifications related to the ten fake news and a matrix was prepared to assess how they were shared on popular online platforms categorizing them for COVID related public health information.

**Table 1:** *Details of the fake news used in this study*

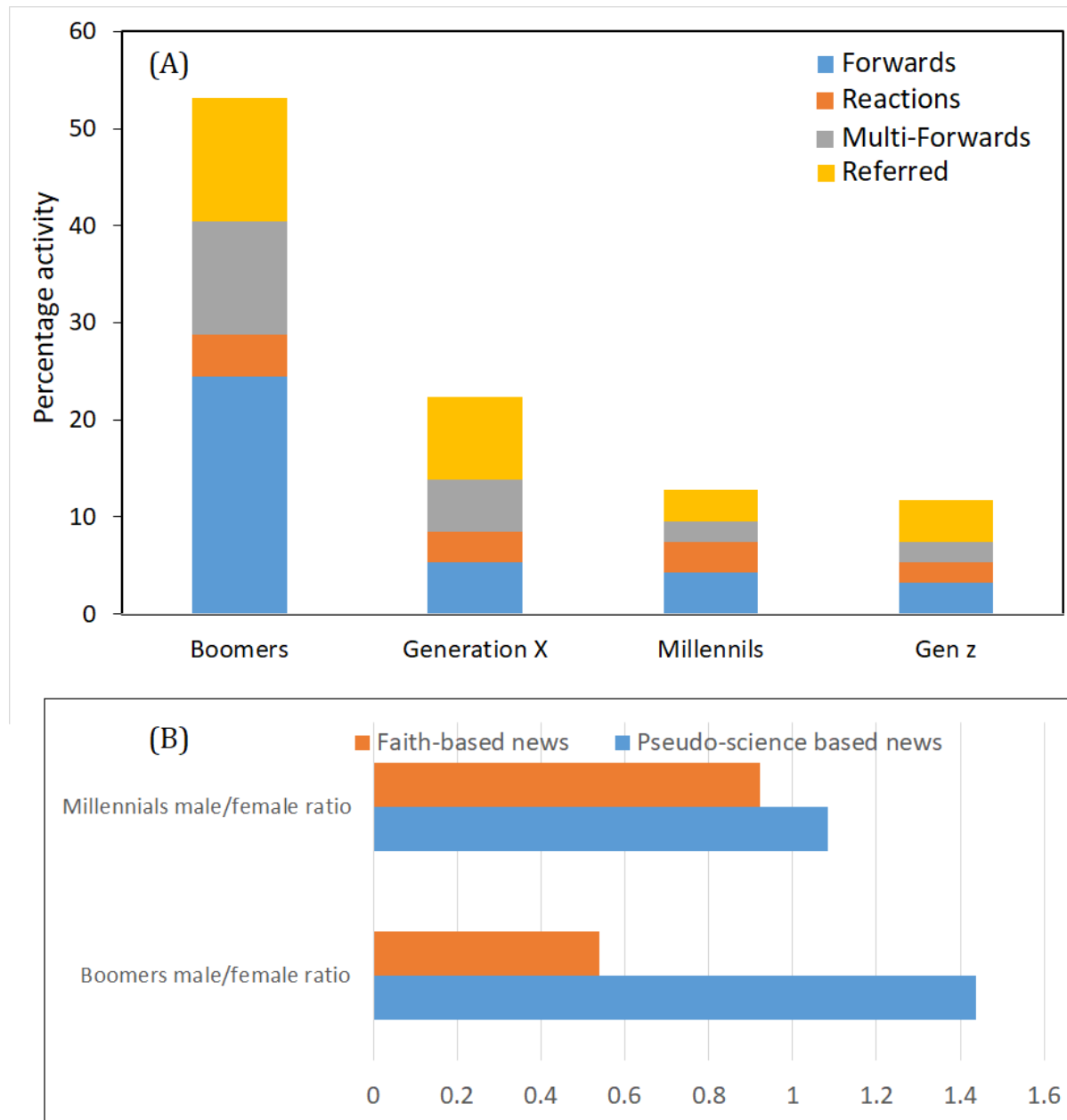
SN	Fake News	Type	Time (weeks)	Ref.
1.	Hydroxy chloroquine can cure COVID	Dis-info	6	1
2.	Garlic and hot water are effective protector	Mis-info	2	2
3.	Drinking cow urine can cure COVID	Dis-info	2	3
4.	Pneumonia vaccines/antibiotics help mitigate COVID	Dis-info	2	4
5.	Indians have stronger immunity	Mal info	4	5
6.	Anti-tuberculosis BCG-vaccine protected people against corona virus	Dis-info	2	6
7.	Corona Virus did not spread in warm climates	Mal info	2	7
8.	Consumption of non-vegetarian food cause the infection	Dis-info	4	8
9.	Yoga, Homeopathy and Ayurvedic medicine could prevent the virus	Mis-info	3	9
10.	Ganges water have Corona fighting properties	Mis-info	1	10

The impact of false news over Indians during the pandemic was studied by randomly selecting participants, using feedback surveys and attitude scaling (Croasmun, 2011). Focused group discussions (FGDs) were made amongst cross-sectoral socio-economic groups and as well age ranges. Altogether, the study consisted of 1398 participants and among them a statistically significant sample size was randomly selected for interview and focus group discussion through an online platform (n = 302; 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error).

### **Multi-variables Dependency in Fake News Propagation**

The participants were grouped into four according to their age, i.e. Generation Z (<22 years), Millennials (22 – 38 years), Generation X (39 – 54 years), Boomers (55 – 73 years). The result clearly indicates the older generation (Boomers) directly forward/react/multi-forward/referred the fake news promptly compared to any other groups. More than 50% (53.2%) of the fake news circulation activity is done through the boomers followed by Generation X (22.3%), Millennials (12.8%) and Generation Z (11.7%) (Fig 1A, below). It can be clearly inferring that the younger generation does not participate much in circulating fake news as compared to the older generation. The one-to-one interview with the group member reveals 32% receivers of the fake messages forwarded it to their newer contacts. 54% either used it effectively in times of daily conversation to share the newly acquired knowledge. Rest, who did not show reactions online still did not debunk the information and remained passive spreaders. 27% among the receivers though did not provide online responses attributed the piece of information during direct discussions with their other counterparts. During personal interview and discussion, it was revealed that they weren't bothered about the authenticity of the information nor its origin. 75% of those, who were tracked, believed that the information had aspects of truth, so they relied on them and had lasting impressions. 78% respondents agreed that they received the information from reliable sources such as friends and family, so they believed in them. 35% respondents said they did not rely completely but since everyone else believed the information, they thought it could be true. Seventy percent of respondents did not feel there was anything unethical in it. 84% respondents said that such information generated extreme feelings such as anger, hate, fear, uncertainty, de-motivation or even at times confidence, happiness, hope in them. To evaluate the effect of gender on fake news propagation, the 10 selected fake news has been classified into two broad categories; faith-based news (S.N – 2, 3, 8, 9, 10) and pseudoscience/mis-science based news (S.N – 1, 4, 5, 6, 7). The result for male/female ratio millennials and boomers has been represented in Fig 1B, below. The faith-based information

is majorly shared by females and the pseudo-science information is predominantly circulated through male population of the group. The trend has been observed for both millennials and the boomer population. Although the elderly female population shared more faith-based fake news compared to younger females. Similar trend was found in male population where elderly male have shared more pseudoscience-based information compared to younger male.



**Figure 1:** Activities of different age-groups in WhatsApp group (A) and male/female ratio for sharing of different types of fake news (B).

### Belief and Dis-belief of Information

The online focus group discussion in small groups reveals several interesting facts. The oldest generation were the most vulnerable, they were the easy prey. But none were apologetic or convinced about the vulnerability and the threat they posed with the messages. No one

apologized except two in the entire period of the study. This trait was attributed to their limited exposure to technology and contemporary social media tools. However, the fact that most participants have lived with pre-conceived half-truths all their lives were reasons enough to forward as endorsements to their belief. Most participants of that generation tend to depend on pass over contents to remain relevant and active on social media. There were generational echo chambers that made most of the social media communities even in family, friends and social circles. Similar kinds of fake news circulated in the echo chambers and kept making rounds in family circles, social circles and community circles. They amplified the worst of pre-existent biases and unquestionable information that existed from pre COVID period. People with low income and low educational level relied more on messages shared by their own than mainstream channels and newspapers. Their dependence on social media was much higher than mainstream media platforms. There was a big class divide in India between the middle-income group and low-income group who did not have access to TV. Most low-income people yet depended on social media posts more than real time TV for their information. Though people accepted to rely more on scientists and doctors, and most fake news were in fact attributed to doctors and scientists without their knowledge rather than those who were passing on the information. But it was assessed that the reason was to create a false trust factor by naming the trustworthy and authentic sources rather than the piece of information. In several cases the scientists themselves had to debunk the false information circulating in their name. In most cases people had not even watched or read the full piece of information before passing it on. The reason was less time, little empathy and little personal interest. Many times, since the introduction matched with preconceived notions or key words in the person's mind motivated people to spread the word. In some of the cases it was revealed that innocent people who think they are helping friends and family by sharing what they think is legitimate medical advice. The brief research here in this portrays that no one knew the messenger and didn't bother about digging more on the message. The Indian Scientists Collective COVID-19 suggested that usually all fakes begin with portions of true content, so its influence is never totally discredited. The spurt of social media in the last decade amplified its impact beyond imagination. There have been evidences of war conspiracies, terrorist attacks, communal tensions, health disasters, accidents, stampedes, violence, gender-based crimes, human trafficking etc. through the rapid spread of fake news in the country of 1.3 billion people. Although there are strict cyber and criminal laws that forbid creating, sharing, forwarding and editing of real information that can have adverse impact on social harmony, most Indians have had little understanding towards the "Infodemic" thus bringing little regard for law and for being misguided by the anonymous. The reasons for such behaviors have been attributed to simpler traits, such as sheer entitlement,



titillating joy, little knowledge, inherent biases, societal inequality, innocent behavior or little means to verify. Particularly during times of COVID-19, several remedial measures did the rounds based on hearsay, old beliefs, dependence on quacks and mistrust in governments posing greater threat towards the spread and effect of the disease.

## **CONCLUSION**

The present study clearly suggests that both gender and age played a major part in fake news propagation. Older generation are more likely to fall in the trap of fake news. The one-to-one conversation and Focus Group Discussion suggest that the older population often sends it out without reading or deeply thinking about. Limited exposure to social media tools and blind faith on anything published create an inhibition against checking the credibility. The trend of remaining active and creating a self-identity in social media are becoming a new edge thing for the boomer generation. It was observed that in the groups with diverse socio-economic profiles and low degrees of closeness tends to propagate fake news less likely whereas groups belonging to close members and lower socio-economic variability are more vulnerable in redistributing fake news. Females are more vulnerable towards faith-based doctored information whereas male are more likely to be manipulated by pseudo-science based fake news.

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