



# Insights into social media users' motives for sharing unverified news

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## ABSTRACT

"Fake news" is a fairly recent term. However, literature demonstrates that the dissemination of fake news on social media has increased over recent years. While existing studies have mostly looked at fake news detection, research on the motives behind why people share fake news has been limited especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Applying a thematic analysis on data collected from face-to-face and online interviews, the purpose of this qualitative study is to gain an understanding of how social media users gather and share fake news through the lived experiences of 15 social media users in Selangor, Malaysia. All social media users involved had experienced receiving and sharing fake news with their circle of friends and family. We found that the users share unverified news mainly via WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook. We conclude that news is shared with the intention to be the "first messenger", to educate others, to gain more followers, and to create chaos and panic. This research, identifying a few knowledge gaps, proposes more future research on the spread of fake news during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: **COVID-19, fake news, disinformation, social media**

## INTRODUCTION

Fake news or “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers” is not a new phenomenon (Allcot & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 213). In fact, Geltzer (2017) claimed that fake news has been used as a political tool in 1782. This phenomenon, however, became prominent in the aftermath of the 2016 United States presidential election in November (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Kalsnes, 2018; Quandt, Frischlich, Boberg, & Schatto-Eckrodt, 2019). During the election, many fake websites that mimicked traditional mainstream media started to emerge (Aldwari & Alwahedi, 2018; Johnson & Kelling, 2017). The news reports brought by these websites were widely shared on Facebook due to users being naïve of their news content (Johnson & Kelling, 2017). Also, in 2017, President Trump had labelled mainstream news media such as the *New York Times* as “fake news” (Schapals, 2018) and accused journalists of spreading fake news about him (Pengelly, 2016). Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) also reported that Americans had consumed an average of one to three pieces of fake news in the months before the presidential election. After he was elected as President of the United States, *Washington Post* discovered that Donald Trump had made 10,796 false or misleading claims in the first 869 days of his presidency (Kessler, Rizzo, & Kelly, 2019).

In the context of Malaysia, Neo (2021) indicated that fake news first emerged prominently within the country’s political discourse in 2017; however, bloggers had long posted unsubstantiated rumours since the 2008 12th General Election. Beginning 2020, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic led to the increasing proliferation of misinformation and disinformation on social media, particularly on the diagnosis, treatment, prevention, and spread of the virus (Loomba, De Figueiredo, Piatek, De Graaf, & Larson, 2021; Naeem, Bhatti, & Khan, 2020). Malaysia’s former Health Minister Dr Dzulkefly Ahmad even warned that misinformation about the virus is a “more critical” issue than the disease itself (Sukumaran, 2020) and should be urgently addressed (Asyraf, 2020). In this respect, Habibu (2020) reported that within four weeks in April 2020, a total of 205 fake news items were effectively “shot down” by the Malaysian government’s rapid response communication team. Undoubtedly, fake news on COVID-19 can harm the social stability, economic growth, and national security of the country (Ngadiron, Abd Aziz, & Mohamed, 2021).

With the dramatic widespread of fake news, it came as no surprise that in 2016, Oxford Dictionary selected the word “post-truth” as its Word of the Year 2016. The dictionary defined it as, “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Greifeneder, Jaffé, Newman, & Schwarz, 2021; Steinmetz, 2016). The following year, Collins Dictionary chose “fake news” as its Word of the Year in response to a 365% increase in usage in the Collins corpus of the English language (Greifeneder et al., 2021).

Unlike traditional media, fake news can be easily disseminated online due to its appealing nature through various methods such as shares, reposts, likes or retweets by social media users (Apuke & Omar, 2020). This is largely attributable to the users not being able to recognise fabricated news thus responding to that news (Zellers et al., 2019). In 2018, Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral (2018) discovered that users rapidly shared more false information on Twitter compared to true information. They further highlighted that the false information was mainly on politics. A year later, Zellers and his colleagues (2019) claimed that the spread of fake news has now reached alarming levels, to the extent that true news is more difficult to spot. The situation has now become worse due to the sudden onset of the pandemic which has been accompanied by an explosion of misinformation about the disease (Loomba et al., 2021; Naeem et al., 2020).

At present, what is known about fake news is largely derived from studies conducted in Western settings and these fake news as suggested earlier, are often political (Duffy, Tandoc, & Ling, 2020). Nevertheless, this topic has been considerably explored in non-Western settings such as Malaysia (Duffy et al., 2020; Hamzah et al., 2020; Neo, 2021; Ngadiron et al., 2021). However, the studies done have been mostly quantitative in nature (Balakrishnan, Ng, & Abdul Rahim, 2021; Yatid, 2019). Furthermore, very few have attempted to understand the motives behind social media users spreading fake news on social media (Balakrishnan et al., 2021; Ngadiron et al., 2021). Some, however, have explored the response of Malaysian authorities in containing the spread of fake news in the country (Daud & Zulhuda, 2020; Mohd Yusof, Muuti, Ariffin, & Min Tan, 2021).

Research on motives that drive Malaysian users to share fake news on social media are sparse and this gap needs to be bridged. The motives may be influenced by culture where Jayasingam, Teng, and Mohd Zin (2021) have categorised Malaysians as high in collectivism (high importance on families and groups). Similarly, in an article written by Mitra (2020), Hofstede indicated that in a collectivist culture, there is temptation to forward messages if it appears true and comes from a trusted sender. However, this study does not seek to compare the difference of responses in terms of gender, age, and culture. Instead, it attempts to address the identified gap in the literature by examining the perception of selected social media users towards sharing fake news. Based on the discussion above, we proposed the following research questions:

*RQ1: Which social media platforms do users often use to spread “fake news”?*

*RQ2: How do social media users decide what “fake news” to spread on their social media?*

*RQ3: Why are social media users motivated to share “fake news”?*

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Social media and fake news*

In 2020, an estimated 2.95 billion people worldwide were social media users of sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (Bourne, Boland, Arnold, & Coane, 2020; Clement, 2020). The majority of the users were young adults (Bourne et al., 2020) and their daily usage of social media was an average of 144 minutes per day (Clement, 2020; Tankovska, 2021). Social media can be a double-edged sword for its users. The growth of social media has changed the way people interact with one another by allowing users to communicate through written, verbal, and visual forms on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017; Rampersad & Althiyabi, 2020). Also, users can easily access breaking news with the touch of a finger (Anderson & Caumont, 2014; Levy & Radcliffe, 2016). For instance, in a recent survey conducted by Statista, it found that 88% of the respondents indicated that they get their news online (Hirschmann, 2021).

Despite these benefits, social media platforms such as these have allowed the creation and circulation of fake news to a large population easier. With smartphones, internet connectivity, and social media accounts, every user can now be a broadcaster (Rampersad & Althiyabi, 2020). Scholars in the past have attempted to define fake news to help improve their understanding of this phenomenon (Allcot & Gentzkow, 2017; Lazer et al., 2018; Marchi, 2012; Tandoc et al., 2017). For instance, Lazer et al. (2018) defined fake news as “fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in

organisational process or intent” (p. 2). Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), on the other hand, defined it as news articles that are intentionally false and that could mislead its readers. Fake news is also described as inaccurate, incomplete, or misleading information that is passed on, transmitted, or reported to a target person, audience, and country (Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2019). The term has also been operationalised by past studies as satire, parody, fabrication, manipulation, propaganda, and advertising (Tandoc, Lim, & Ling, 2017).

While the majority of scholars have provided a broader definition of fake news, a few scholars have attempted to narrow the definition by associating fake news with politics (e.g., Geltzer, 2017; Greifeneder et al., 2021; Vosoughi et al., 2018). For instance, Vosoughi et al. (2018) suggested that fake news should include any information that is shared by sources that do not support their partisan positions. Recent reports suggest that fake news has grown since the 2016 United States presidential election (Bovet & Makse, 2019; Gelfert, 2018; Schapals, 2018; Shugerman, 2018). Further, mainstream media such as *CNN* has been blamed for spreading fake news (Berthon & Pitt, 2018). In the days leading up to President Donald Trump’s State of the Union Address, researchers discovered that Trump supporters had shared unreliable news on social media more than any other groups (Shugerman, 2018). The fake news was a combination of incorrect information that mimicked real news on politics, economics, or culture (Shugerman, 2018).

### *Motives of the fake news sharer*

Studies have shown that pictures and videos that accompany fake news play an important role in convincing people that the news is legitimate (Weidner, Beuk, & Bal, 2020). Pictures and videos can increase the credibility of a piece of news (Lin, Lu, & Wu, 2012). Furthermore, people become vulnerable to believing news that is shared by their social connections leading them to spread the fake news further. Not to mention, the release of the Deepfake software has allowed people to rapidly create fake videos (Weidner et al., 2020).

Available studies suggest that a person’s motive to share fake news can vary (Cooke, 2017; Weidner et al., 2020). In a study conducted by Cooke (2017), she found that one of the motives to fabricate news is to earn money from other users’ clicks and views. Another motive is hoping that the shared news is the truth (Maheshwari, 2017; Weidner et al., 2020). Also, fake news is created and spread to distract others from getting factual information about someone especially in the political sphere (Weidner et al., 2020). Another study suggested that people have sinister intentions when sharing fake news (Talwar, Dhir, Kaur, Zafar, & Alrasheedy, 2019). In a study conducted by Chadwick and Vaccari (2019), they found that those who were likely to share fake news are males, young and are interested in politics. Furthermore, they found that some of the reasons why people share news on their social media are to express their feelings (65.5%), to inform others (65.5%) and to find out other people’s opinions on a particular topic (Chadwick & Vaccari, 2019).

### *Fake news in Malaysia*

In Malaysia, a recent survey carried out in 2020 by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) suggested that 88.7% of Malaysia’s population are internet users. MCMC also reported that 91.7% of Malaysians use Facebook, 63.1% use Instagram, and 37.1% use Twitter (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission [MCMC], 2020). Statistics published by Statista revealed that the number of social media users in Malaysia was estimated at 30.41 million in 2020. This is predicted to increase to 33.46 million in 2025 (Nurhayati-Wolff, 2020). Also, an international market research agency YouGov Asia Pacific (YouGov Apac) found that Malaysians typically

spend an average of 5 hours and 47 minutes a day on social media. In terms of gender, women are reported to be more likely to spend more time checking their social media accounts than men (Ariff, 2019).

With the rise of internet users, it comes as no surprise that Malaysia is no stranger to fake news. Malaysians are now easily exposed to fake news than ever before (MCMC, 2019). This is especially worrisome as in 2018, Edelman Trust Barometer found that close to 50% of Malaysians admitted to being disengaged with major news organisations as their preferred source of information and opted to rely on social media feeds instead (Zin, 2018). Furthermore, the report also claimed that 63% of Malaysians were unable to distinguish between true and fake news. Although it is reported that Malaysians are concerned about the spread of fake news, their reliance on social media to obtain information makes them increasingly vulnerable to fraud and fake news (Zin, 2018). In an article published by *The Star*, the top five most prevalent fake news in Malaysia were reported as governance, crime, health, consumerism, and security (Lai, 2020). A total of 37% of fake news was on government administrations while crime-related news accounted for 14% of false news. Another 14% was health-related, 13% was on consumer issues and the remaining 9% of fake news was security-related (Lai, 2020). Indeed, social media has become the major source of information for Malaysians and thus allowing them to become victims of online fake news and disinformation.

Citing national security concerns, Malaysia hastily and briefly enacted the Anti-Fake News Act in April 2018 (Danielle, 2020). A Danish national was the first to be sentenced under the Act in the same year over a YouTube video posted under the name Salah Salem Saleh Sulaiman regarding the killing of a Palestinian university lecturer. Salah had accused the police of arriving 50 minutes late at the scene and the ambulance of arriving one hour later. However, the police denied the claims and asserted that they took only eight minutes instead to arrive at the scene. Salah was fined RM10,000 but he opted to spend a month in jail (Karim, 2018; Tariq, 2018). The Act was abolished the following year after the change of government in the 14th General Election. The Act was initially enacted to punish those who maliciously create, publish, or disseminate fake news online or on social media and those found guilty either face imprisonment for up to six years or fines up to RM500,000 (Danielle, 2020).

MCMC also initiated an awareness campaign called *Klik Dengan Bijak* in 2012 to educate and raise public awareness about internet safety and security among Malaysians of all ages (*Klik Dengan Bijak*, 2020). Further, in 2017, MCMC launched a web portal called “Sebenarnya.my” to ensure that genuine news and information reaches the public. The portal gathers online and printed news and confirms their authenticity (“Sebenarnya.com”, 2017). When a state of emergency was declared in Malaysia on January 12, 2021, the Malaysian government introduced a new anti-fake news ordinance to further curb the spread of misinformation on COVID-19. Under this law, those found guilty of publishing fake news face a fine of RM100,000 and/or a three-year prison term, with a daily fine of RM1,000 for repeat offenders (“Malaysia cites COVID-19 misinformation”, 2021).

Despite these punitive measures, MCMC admits that legal action cannot be taken against the culprits of fake news unless someone reports it. At present, sharing fake content is an offence under Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 and carries a maximum fine of RM50,000 or a jail term not exceeding one year or both (Bernama, 2021). In Malaysia’s neighbouring country Singapore, a survey conducted by the Singaporean government’s feedback unit Reach, found that the majority of the residents have come across fake news on Facebook and WhatsApp. Furthermore, 7 in 10 could not recognise that the news they received was fake at the time they read it (Sin, 2018).

## METHODOLOGY

The present study was conducted from late November 2020 to early January 2021, during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic and employed a qualitative approach. During the pandemic, the spread of fake news was at its peak and had hindered the fight against the outbreak (“Fight against COVID-19”, 2021). Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured face-to-face or online interviews with 15 social media users living in Selangor, Malaysia. Of these, 5 respondents were male, and 10 were female. The sample size selected was in agreement with Creswell (2013) who had recommended that the ideal sample size should be between 5 and 25.

The researchers used a purposive sampling method by relying on their personal networks and the snowball (referral) process. Also, the strategy was used to limit to a small number of potential respondents (Palinkas et al., 2015). According to Englander (2012), when selecting a sample size, the researcher must ensure that the respondents have the experience or knowledge needed to answer the research questions. Therefore, to be eligible, respondents were required to satisfy the following criteria: (1) aged 18 years and above; (2) social media user; and (3) have read and shared fake news on their social media platforms. This sample included university students, housewives, and workers from various public and private organisations.

A total of 10 interviews were conducted online (e.g., Skype or Google Meet) while 5 were conducted face-to-face. The researchers approached all interviewees personally. Recruitment occurred online via electronic mail, phone, or in person. Before the interviews were conducted, each respondent was given a consent form that indicated the purpose of the study and informed them that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point. The longest interview lasted for 2 hours whilst the shortest was 40 minutes, with an average of 1 hour. The interviews were recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim. To guarantee anonymity, all personal information that could identify the respondents were deleted and each transcript was assigned a number (e.g., Respondent 1, Respondent 2).

All interviews were conducted in an informal, conversational manner that encouraged the respondents to share any thoughts that came to mind on fake news. Interview topics included: a) background questions (e.g., how long have you been a social media user?), b) the platforms used to read and share fake news (e.g., where do you often get your news?) and c) motivation to share fake news (e.g., what drives you to share unverified news?). Probe questions were used to explore the respondents' responses in detail, and the semi-structured nature of the interview format allowed for flexibility to explore other topics that emerged as important (Edwards & Holland, 2013). A pilot study to check the suitability of the questions was conducted with two social media users and a number of changes were made. It was made clear to the respondents that when accepting to be interviewed, they were providing informed consent and permission for their interviews to be used anonymously by the researchers. Moreover, ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee before the interviews were conducted.

Upon the completion of the data collection, the researchers thematically analysed the transcripts. Thematic analysis is used to derive codes from unstructured datasets to build meaningful categories (Terry, Hayfield, Clarke, & Braun, 2017). The researchers used an open coding process that focused on building larger themes and descriptions emerging from the raw data (Terry et al., 2017). The open coding process was carried out using NVivo 12 and by creating codes representing the respondents' statements. That is, the data were chunked into small units. Table 1 presents examples of the coding made by the researchers.

**Table 1.** Examples of open coding

	Quotation	Code	Respondent No
Example 1	<i>I normally share news very quickly with my family's WhatsApp group whenever I read something.</i> (Partial statement of the respondent)	Respondent showing a sense of urgency	Respondent 8
Example 2	<i>I normally read all this fake news from WhatsApp or Facebook.</i> (Partial statement of the respondent)	Preferred social media platform for news	Respondent 12
Example 3	<i>Most of the fake news that has been shared by many are on politics, celebrity, and religion.</i>	Popular types of fake news shared online	Respondent 1

Second, axial coding was employed to link the codes into related conceptual bins. This was done by each of the researchers. Finally, in the third and final stage, selective coding was used as a process of integrating and refining the data. The researchers developed one or more themes that had expressed the content of each of the groups (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). During data analysis, the transcripts were read and re-read for the researchers to familiarise themselves with the data set. Keywords and phrases were coded, and the researchers then developed a list of codes. Any overlapping and redundant codes were reduced and from the collapsed codes, larger themes emerged. An analysis was carried out among team members to give more credibility to the identified themes and codes. Finally, to augment the understanding of the data collected, findings were further explored in relation to the literature. To be able to work with the information, the data were organised into three thematic blocks: “platforms”, “decisions”, and “motives”. To reduce the risk of biased results and enhance the validity of the qualitative study, respondents were asked to review the meaningful quotes and interpretations by the researchers immediately after the sessions.

## FINDINGS

The findings are divided into three main themes. First, the platform which the respondents often use to spread fake news is explored. Second, the decisions made by social media users when spreading fake news is investigated. Third, the motives that drive the respondents to share fake news are examined.

### *Theme 1: Social media platforms used by social media users to spread fake news*

To answer the first research question, the researchers asked several questions on the social media platforms that the respondents often use to read and forward fake news. They were also asked why they were interested in sharing these types of news and whether they were aware of the content before posting them. When asked where they normally read fake news, findings revealed that all of the respondents consume news on a daily basis via their social media platforms compared to traditional media (e.g. newspapers, television, radio) and that at some point, they came across fake news that they initially believed to be true. The social media platforms that the respondents mostly relied on for news were Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp. For instance, Respondent 4 indicated that she often comes across fake news on Facebook. She explained:

*“Recently I read the news on Facebook about someone’s death but I cannot remember who it was. It was someone famous. A celebrity. But the next day the person who posted it deleted it as it was not true. But most of these types of news are on Facebook.”*

Another respondent (Respondent 6) replied in length:

*“I get my news on Twitter most of the time. And on Twitter gosh, there are a lot of fake news. Many times, I retweeted the tweets mainly cause I didn’t know that they were not true until someone replied my tweet that it is fake. Whenever I realise that it isn’t true, of course I will quickly delete the tweet or undo my retweet”.*

Respondent 12 who also consumed news on Facebook and WhatsApp shared:

*“I normally read all these fake news from WhatsApp or Facebook. At the time I got it, I didn’t know that it was fake cause normally the people who send it to me or post it on Facebook are of course those who I know.”*

Respondents 14 and 15, on the other hand, both revealed that they rely on Facebook and Twitter to get latest news but more often than not, people share various information via WhatsApp.

## ***Theme 2: Decisions made by social media users to share “fake news”***

Further analysis showed that the respondents’ initial decision to share fake news are based on the type of news (e.g., on politics, celebrities), and the number of sharing (e.g., 100 retweets). The respondents unanimously agreed that the basic elements of the news (e.g., catchy headlines, legitimate-looking pictures that accompany the news) increased the likelihood of them sharing unverified news. According to Respondent 1:

*“Most of the fake news that has been shared by many is on politics, celebrity, and religion. Now, we see a lot of fake news on COVID-19 pandemic especially on how we could cure the disease.”*

She also admitted that she hardly pays attention to the content of the news that people share, thus leading her to “blindly” share all sorts of news including misinformation on her social media. The respondent was further asked, “How did the news grab your attention?” She replied, “Normally the pictures that accompany the news often catch my attention. When pictures are appealing, it grabs my attention.”

She further justified:

*“Ok. It’s not just me but I think people like to share fake news due to the picture that comes with the news. News that is often spread is those with pictures that are similar to TV headlines. Like ‘Breaking news’. It somehow attracts people like me to believe it as real news that is coming from mainstream newspapers.”*

Respondents 2 and 12 also indicated that people are often attracted to pictures. Both felt that realistic-looking pictures could lure them and other social media users to spread the news. For instance, Respondent 12 explained:

*“When you see pictures that seems legit, you tend to quickly believe that the information that comes with the news is real. It’s not only me. I know many who fall for this too and I’ve been receiving this sort of message on WhatsApp for several years. You can consider me as a victim, and I guess you can consider me as one of the culprits for spreading the news even further. I didn’t know that it was fake. Like I said, it looked legit.”*

Findings also suggest that fake news has increased tremendously due to the common misconception that news that has been shared multiple times is legitimate. Respondent 3, for example, indicated that she is more susceptible to fake news when she comes across news that is considered “popular” among social media users. When asked what she meant by “popular”, Respondent 3 replied:

*“Oh popular. Those with lots of shares, likes, and retweets. When there are at least one hundred-ish retweets, I’ll then share it.”*

Another respondent (Respondent 14) admitted:

*“I normally share news that is shared by many people. Cause you know, if many people are sharing it, it must be true, right?”*

Respondent 14 proceeded by indicating that the type of fake news that she often receives is on celebrities and health. She claimed that this type of news has increased especially during the pandemic.

*“I’ve been getting fake news on celebrities getting infected or dying from COVID-19. I remember growing up I used to fall for this kind of news all the time like Avril Lavigne and Rowan Atkinson dying, but back then we didn’t have as many social media platforms as now and we couldn’t quickly Google to verify the news. I must admit I still fall for this especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Now not only have I shared about people getting COVID-19 but I’ve also accidentally shared fake news on how to prevent from getting COVID-19. That was during the start of the pandemic of course when we didn’t know much about it.”*

Other respondents also felt that the basic elements of the news could psychologically trigger them to share fake news. For example, Respondents 6 and 11 had indicated during their interviews that attractive headlines that come with the news will grab their attention and trigger them and other users to share fake news. Respondent 6 explained:

*“When there are both interesting pictures and headlines, it can make people share the news without reading the content.”*

She added that she is also a victim of fake news. When the content and picture look trustworthy, and fascinating, she will share the news. She further admitted, *“Because of the pictures and headlines, I post the news without reading the content.”*

### ***Theme 3: Motives that drive social media users to share fake news***

During the data analysis, we identified four motives as to why the respondents were eager to share unverified or fake news: 1) the users wanted to be the first 'messenger' to share the news; 2) the users lacked of knowledge; 3) to gain followers, and 4) to destroy the image of others.

#### ***a. First messenger***

A majority of the respondents admitted that one of the main reasons why they share news without prior verification is because they felt that it was their duty to be the first to inform their friends and family members of breaking or important news. For example, Respondent 7 admitted that he often feels the need to share any information quickly because he felt that it was his "duty" to ensure that the people around him are informed. He added:

*"Normally when I read the news, I'll swiftly make the decision whether to send it or not to my friends and family based on the danger of the information. Meaning if the news is trying to inform something important like the side effects of certain things or the impact of the pandemic and so on, I'll then share it with others. Most of the time, yes, I share it within the minute I get the news so that they get the news from me first. But if it's not something major, I don't share it."*

Similarly, Respondent 8 commented:

*"I normally share news very quickly with my family's WhatsApp group whenever I read something. Sometimes I do check whether the news is legit or not but most of the time I don't, especially when the news comes from someone I know."*

Respondent 8 added that news is quickly shared to educate the people around him. Another respondent (Respondent 9) also felt the same and believed that whenever he does not share a certain news, he will get worried. He described in length:

*"I get so many news that I at times don't even know if it's fake or not. Sometimes when I don't forward it to my family's WhatsApp group, I feel like what if this is something true? They should know what's happening right now whether it's something to do with Malaysia or other countries. I do feel like I have the duty to be their informer, especially I have older aunts and cousins in the group. Sometimes they may not be alert to what is being posted on social media, so I share it with them."*

Respondent 9 had paused and then added:

*"Whether it's true or not is a whole different story. I don't share about traditional medicines cause I'm afraid that it might harm my family's health. And of course, nothing racist or that can incite hate. But we're talking about other things. Like COVID-19, sometimes a bit of politics and other disasters that are happening in the world."*

Respondent 11 also innocently explained, "I just wanted to be the first person sharing the message. I didn't know that it was fake." Respondent 6, on the other hand, claimed that

the COVID-19 pandemic has caused people to increasingly believe everything they see and read thus sharing them without prior verification. She explained:

*“[...] in this situation, they will believe everything they see and read because they want their family to be safe. That’s why a lot of articles are shared by many people because they are actually scared that it might be true.”*

**b. Lack of knowledge**

Despite many claiming that they wanted to be the first to share a certain news, a majority (11 of the 15 respondents) admitted that they did not realise that the news that they had shared were fake and they blamed themselves for not checking the reliability of the news before sharing due to lack of knowledge. For instance, Respondent 1 admitted that she had shared the news on the closure of her university during the first lockdown in Malaysia due to COVID-19. She explained, *“I literally shared it on my WhatsApp status, on my Facebook and then when I realised it was fake news, I had to apologise to everyone and admitted it was fake news.”* Respondent 3, on the other hand, felt bad that she had posted a piece of fake news on a political issue. She stated:

*“Normally I receive fake political news and I share it with others on my social media. There was this one time I posted about a political issue and then someone replied to my post and said that what I posted is fake and that I had to delete it. After that I deleted it. It is my fault because I did not do any research on that issue.”*

Respondent 3 added, *“I normally don’t realise that what I share is fake until someone points it out.”* Respondent 8 elaborated in length:

*“Nowadays fake news can be easily shared. You need to think before you share news cause it can be quite dangerous if what you share is fake. Sometimes people are easily persuaded by fake news and they can simply share the news without doing any research. Like right now, you can see a lot of false news on COVID-19 such as the government will declare an emergency and the military will govern the country. Therefore, those who are not alert, will believe the fake news that appear on their page. This can give a negative impact on society, for instance, people go into panic buying and people condemning the government and other stuff.”*

Although Respondent 9 admitted his mistake for sharing fake news due to his lack of knowledge in spotting fake versus real news, he did attempt to justify that he is not always at fault as sometimes, the news comes from prominent figures. He felt that he did not need to verify the authenticity of the news if it came from such figures. Respondent 9 explained:

*“I don’t want to name names but yes, there were times I read news that were written and even shared by public figures. Sometimes they apologise if people become angry at him or her but there are times, they leave it on their social media and the Tweet or Facebook post is shared by many. You might be surprised that fake news comes from these types of people but sadly, it’s true.”*

Two respondents who were part of the minority had instead retorted on how others who share fake news as either lacking of knowledge or are lazy. For instance, Respondent 7 chided:

*“The spreading of the news is because they didn’t do any research about the authenticity of the article. That’s why I consider them as those who lack of knowledge.”*

The other (Respondent 10) commented:

*“I believe those who share fake news are those who do not understand the impact it has on the society. They are also lazy to check the validity of the news.”*

In sharp contrast, two remaining respondents claimed that those who share fake news are aware of the content shared and do it on purpose. Respondent 4 clarified:

*“People who always share fake news is usually someone who is really knowledgeable and that they are actually doing so to try to manipulate a situation.”*

Meanwhile, Respondent 15 recalled:

*“I remember speaking to a friend of mine about fake news and that I keep seeing him sharing all sorts of fake news on his Facebook. I asked him why he keeps on sharing them and he replied, ‘Just for fun.’”*

### c. Gain followers

Apart from the two reasons discussed earlier, analysis also shows that another motive behind the sharing of fake news is to gain more followers. Not all respondents felt that they were doing something helpful and positive whenever they share unverified news with their friends and family. For instance, one of the respondents (Respondent 2) believed that people share fake news to gain more followers and to boost the popularity of their business. She explained that whenever a fake news goes viral, the original poster will gain more followers and this will thus boost the person’s business. In her own words:

*“Sometimes people expect the fake news to go viral and then they can get more followers. It is of course not the best way of marketing but to them, it can improve their business.”* (Respondent 2)

Respondent 3 had a similar answer. She explained:

*“They crave for attention, viewers, popularity and so on. Sometimes they don’t realise the news that they spread is actually fake news but they just spread it. Normally they share it because a lot of people share it too so they think that the news is not fake.”*

### d. Destroy others

The analysis also revealed a rather sinister finding in that some share fake news with the intention of destroying an individual or a business, as admitted by three respondents. While

none of them admitted that they had shared the fake news with this intention however, they believed that others may do so. For instance, Respondent 1 explained:

*“From my point of view. Firstly, they want to create chaos and panic among citizens. Secondly, they purposely do that for fun as there probably have plenty of time right now. I guess the COVID-19 lockdowns are giving more time to irresponsible people to create fake news. Also, others might be bored and spread the news. Thirdly, they want to manipulate people’s minds especially in bringing down the new government. Yeah, often it is all about politics.”*

Respondent 12 concurred that often people share fake news with bad intentions. He claims to have seen fake news that has gone viral and caused certain businesses to close and tarnish people’s reputation. He recalled:

*“Not too long ago, I saw fake news spreading about a celebrity. Claiming that she stole another person’s husband. This then made her embarrassed and she decided to delete all her social media accounts. Until now I haven’t heard about her anymore.”*

Respondent 13 also felt the same and added that sharing fake news can cause harm to others.

## DISCUSSION

The respondents shared that they had received different types of fake news over the past few years. The fake news has been mostly on politics, celebrities, and health. All of the respondents claimed that the spread of fake news had increased since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. This differs from past research as it had suggested that fake news started to increase since the 2016 United States presidential election (Bakir & McStay, 2018; Kalsnes, 2018; Quandt et al., 2019). This difference can be attributed to the users’ different geographical locations and news exposure. We also found that all of the respondents consume news on a daily basis on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp and that at some point, they came across fake news that they initially believed to be true. This finding also reflects how social media users are shifting away from traditional media.

The researchers also found that social media users make decisions on whether to share a particular news in two steps. First, before interacting with any news, they make a preliminary decision. They judge a piece of news based on its appearance or basic elements that accompany it such as catchy headlines and attractive pictures. If the news is appealing or sounds convincing, they then share it based on their personal motives. The findings suggest that one of the motives people share fake news is to be the first person or “messenger” to inform and educate their friends and family members. One of the intentions include warning their family members to take necessary precautions. Although Chadwick and Vaccari (2019) indicated that 65.5% of people share news to inform others, the findings however, do not reflect the urgency of the sharer.

Findings also suggest that news is shared to gain publicity and popularity. This aligns to a certain extent with Weidner and colleagues’ findings (2020). The authors found that people share fake news to attract clicks and views and eventually, achieve monetary gains. Additionally, the current findings reveal that some people harbour sinister intentions when sharing fake news, for example, to destroy a person’s image; this is in stark contrast

with what Weidner and colleagues (2020) found. Their research suggests that fake news is created and spread to distract people from getting factual information about others, especially in the political sphere (Osmundsen, Bor, Vahlstrup, Bechmann, & Petersen, 2020; Weidner et al., 2020).

The present study also demonstrated that many social media users regardless of gender share fake news on their social media platforms without verifying its legitimacy and its impact on others. In contrast to Chadwick and Vaccari (2019) who found that those who normally share fake news are males, this study found both males and females sharing fake news. Typically, social media users are not aware that a piece of news is fake until someone points it out. The findings of the present study agree with the statistics highlighted earlier where 63% of Malaysians are unable to distinguish between true and fake news (Zin, 2018).

Although this study did not seek to compare the difference of response in terms of culture, findings do suggest that social media users will believe any news received or read if it is shared by someone they know. For instance, a prominent figure or their family members. This is in line with Mitra's (2020) focal point in his recent *Forbes* article. Also, as the study took place during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the respondents claimed that they had shared various COVID-19 news especially on treatments, which they later found out to be fake.

## CONCLUSION

Before addressing future research, the strengths of the present study, and limitations related to the methodology used in this research, must be addressed. Firstly, as a study involving social media users in a particular state and country – the findings are specific to this location. As with many qualitative research, due to the small sample size, this study cannot be generalised to a wider population. Thus, it is important to take note that the findings may differ in other countries, and cultures.

Despite these limitations, our study extends the literature on the spread of fake news in the social media especially on COVID-19. This study provides a strong qualitative foundation for understanding the reasons why social media users share fake news and factors that can trigger them in sharing news. Also, our findings provide a unique contribution to the literature and can be used to inform larger studies examining cause and effects, for example, the impact of sharing fake news on social media users' trust in mainstream media. Furthermore, most of the past studies that explored fake news were conducted in Western settings. The present study however, attempted to advance our understanding of fake news among samples in a non-Western society, specifically Malaysia. This in itself is a valuable contribution due to the lack of studies on fake news in Malaysia.

The study's findings can serve as a reference and encourage subsequent research on the spread of fake news in Malaysia and other Asian countries, yielding future research with diverse samples. Also, the study uncovered new motives that drive social media users to share unverified news. For instance, being the "first messenger" suggest that the sharing behaviour is driven by the individual's competitive nature of wanting to be the first person to share the latest news and keep their groups informed.

To further extend this study, the researchers hope to interview more respondents in the next study. More studies are also needed to explore the motives of social media users for sharing fake news. These findings could also lead to the development of a survey with a larger sample from the same state or other locations to further explore the underlying motives of why social media users share fake news.

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