

THE MISINFORMATION BUSINESS

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Academic Writing

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# Introduction

Ever since the influenza pandemic in 1918, the Covid-19 pandemic has been considered by many people as the first pandemic that necessitated an immediate global healthcare response. Since December 2019, the pandemic has lasted nearly three years, but the virus has yet to be eradicated. With the current rampant situation of the Covid-19 pandemic, people are forced to stay indoors. As more and more people spend time inside, the need for constant sources of entertainment is increasing. Consequently, individuals use social media more frequently than usual. For instance, a survey found that in 2020, internet use increased by 50-70%, with half of that time spent on social media (Beech, 2020). Moreover, people who use social media can encounter a substantial amount of information about the Covid-19 situation. According to research by Mitchell and Liedke (2021), nearly 30% of Americans have received "a lot" and 43% have received "some" information about Covid-19 vaccines via social media.

A significant amount of that information is not credible and contains misleading messages about Covid-19 and vaccines. Furthermore, the World Health Organization (2020) classified Covid-19 as an “infodemic”, which means that the Covid-19 pandemic occurred during a period when an excessive amount of unreliable information quickly spread. This type of untrustworthy information is called misinformation, which is defined as false information spread regardless of intent of misleading people (Dictionary.com, 2021). Misinformation often contains conspiracy theories, which are believed by many people around the world. Moreover, another concerning issue is that many conspiracists can profit from their considerable number of followers on social media. Purposefully spreading misinformation on online platforms during the Covid-19 pandemic has earned some companies in the U.S. substantial profits. The situation may deteriorate unless social media platforms take a firmer stance on the issue.

This report will briefly explain why people believe in conspiracy theories and explain some tactics used by those who spread these theories to manipulate people. This will be followed by a more detailed analysis of the conspiracists’ methods for personal gains. Furthermore, this paper will examine the responsibility of social media platforms and suggest these platforms take more active measures to address the problem. Finally, the report will conclude with the discussion regarding this misinformation issue.

# Belief in Conspiracy Theories

This section will explain why people are vulnerable to misinformation on social media. Some of these causes are related to the negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on individuals' mental health, and the way misinformation is formed.

First and foremost, since the beginning of the pandemic, people's lives have been revolving around social media. In particular, people use social media platforms to seek information, connect with friends and family, and communicate with their colleagues. Wong et al. (2021) claim that the Covid-19 pandemic is the first pandemic that people have relied so heavily on social media. This elevated level of exposure to social media during a health crisis can lead to negative feelings and increased anxiety for some people. Consequently, these worried individuals are likely to believe information they see on social media, regardless of whether it is accurate or not (Freiling et al., 2021). In addition, misinformation spreads quickly on social media (Acemoglu et al., 2021), increasing the likelihood of these individuals encountering and believing misinformation.

Second, due to the current health crisis uncertainty, people are unsure about many elements of their lives, including their employment, families, and health (Peluso & Pichierri, 2021). They are uncertain if their companies have enough resources to maintain their jobs, if they infected by the virus, and if the health of their families is at risk. Due to the increasing level of uncertainty, people may develop an intolerance to it. Intolerance of uncertainty was defined by Dugas and Robichaud (2007) as "a dispositional characteristic that results from a set of negative beliefs about uncertainty and its implications." As conspiracy theories can offer explanations for some of that uncertainty, people who have intolerance of uncertainty may use them as a coping mechanism. Moulding et al. (2016) discovered, for example, that belief in conspiracy theories is associated with a high level of uncertainty intolerance.

Third, people can feel alienated while maintaining social distancing, a requirement in many parts of the world during the pandemic. Alienation is defined as a loss of connection with oneself and others and the accompanying negative emotions, which are often manifested as feelings of loneliness, uncontrollability, and pessimism (DePrine et al., 2011). This feeling of alienation can have a negative impact on one's well-being. According to Seeman (1959), the formation of alienation includes elements such as meaninglessness, powerlessness, social isolation, and self-alienation. In addition, Cacioppo and Patrick (2008) claim that humans are social creatures by nature, and when they are forced to isolate themselves, a sense of alienation develops. As a result, some individuals experience a sense of alienation during social distancing. In addition, Grohol (2020) explains that any alienations appear to be linked to a higher level of belief in conspiracy theories. Consequently, individuals who endure alienation can have a stronger belief in conspiracy theories.

Fourth, misinformation could involve specialized techniques intended to manipulate others, exploiting the vulnerable for personal interest. With this notion in mind, Scannell and his colleagues (2021) have designed a study to investigate malicious Covid-19 Twitter posts. Utilizing other theoretical frameworks about persuasion techniques, the researchers set out to examine the content of anti-vaccine posts on Twitter. Their analysis found that these posts contain sophisticated persuasion strategies intended to exploit the public's anxiety surrounding Covid-19's severity and uncertainty. As noted by the researchers, the people behind these conspiracies might employ anecdotal stories to increase the reliability of their online posts to hide their true malicious intentions. Consequently, the victims fail to consider fact-checking the information provided by these people. Another finding from this study is that conspiracists utilize famous people to rationalize their perspectives, making an unreasonable statement more sensible.

In addition to the methods mentioned previously, this report will look at one specific example of a person who can make a significant amount of money by spreading false rumors.

# Conspiracies Driven by Profits

One of the reasons for some individuals to deliberately spread misinformation on social media is personal financial gain. It has been discovered that such businesses can earn hundreds of millions of U.S. dollars in profits.

The Center for Countering Digital Hate (2021) has identified the “Disinformation Dozen,” 12 people responsible for spreading up to 65% of anti-vaccine content online in the U.S. These 12 individuals collectively had 59 million followers on their social media pages. This suggests that most of the misinformation about coronavirus vaccines online can be traced back to a small group of individuals.

Joseph Mercola, an osteopathic physician from Florida, was identified as the most prominent conspiracist by online reach (Center for Countering Digital Hate, 2021). He has run the website Mercola.com since 1997, where he shares treatments, cures, and advice about natural health medicine. He has set up two companies in the U.S. and Philippines which publish blog posts and videos to a network of websites and social media platforms in different languages (Frenkel, 2021). Mercola sells various products via his online store, including vitamins, probiotics, protein bars, and raw dog food (www.mercolamarket.com). Additionally, he has written several books, which have been published almost yearly since 2003 (Frenkel, 2021). Mercola (2017) cited in Satija and Sun (2019) reported over $100 million in net worth derived primarily from his network of companies.

Since the beginning of the outbreak, Mercola has published over 600 posts on Facebook questioning the safety of Covid-19 vaccines. His audience is 3.4 million followers across his official social media pages. Reportedly, Mercola does A/B testing, wherein many versions of the same content are shared to see which one spreads faster online (Frenkel, 2021). While the number of followers may seem large, it might be just a fraction of the total audience he reaches because people repost his content.

Mercola makes claims on social media which represent unproven and unapproved products as cures or treatments against the coronavirus disease. For example, he asserts that vitamin D and high doses of vitamin C could prevent and treat coronavirus. Mercola also directed customers to purchase those products from his online store (U.S. Food & Drug Administration, 2021).

As medical misinformation continues to spread online, some people will keep profiting from it. The example of Mercola shows how it became possible to utilize social media as a channel to cast doubt about Covid-19 vaccines and sell vitamins as an alternative. A possible solution to decrease the amount of medical misinformation online would be to limit the access for such individuals to social media platforms. However, if the social media companies will not act with more determination, the amount of misinformation about Covid-19 and vaccines on their platforms will continue to grow.

# The Role of Social Media

Due to the fact that some individuals gain substantial profits by deliberately spreading misinformation on online platforms, social media companies need to take firmer actions to combat the spread of misinformation about the Covid-19 pandemic.

## 4.1. Negative Impact

The popularity of false information could pose a threat to public health. Health-related misinformation has also been investigated in the past. For instance, there was significant evidence that misleading information about Ebola was widely disseminated via social media in 2014. Tens of thousands of Ebola-related tweets and internet searches were inspired by news about that disease (Towers et al., 2015). Inaccurate information about the Covid-19 pandemic shows a similar pattern – it is also widespread. After examining samples of misleading content about Covid-19 from different sources, Dr. Brennen et al. (2020) noticed that social media platforms were the source of the majority of the false content (88%), followed by television with only 8%. Therefore, the false information about the Covid-19 pandemic could reach a considerable number of users on social media platforms.

Furthermore, some users are susceptible to conspiracy theories. Hence, the misinformation they are exposed to must have a vast impact on them. For example, misinformation might be the cause for the decline in intent to be vaccinated (Loomba et al., 2021). This is a threat to American public health, since a considerable number of vaccinated people can lead to the herd immunity, which impedes the spread of infections.

## 4.2. Responsibility of Social Media

Since the impact of misinformation which is on social media is the cause for problematic issues, such as the reduction in vaccination intent, it is reasonable for the public to expect the solutions from those platforms. Although false information comes from the users rather than the companies themselves, they need to be responsible for the information that is posted and shared on their news feed, particularly when that information could mislead people.

Organizations and politicians blame social media companies for not counteracting this spread. Stating that 73% of the misleading content from the “Disinformation Dozen” is on Facebook, the Center for Countering Digital Hate (2021) believes that this social media company needs to take action to reduce the amount of misinformation on its platform. Moreover, the White House recently announced both YouTube and Facebook as social media platforms responsible for the alarming spread of inaccurate information (Bose, 2021).

## 4.3. Effort of Social Media

Social media companies claim to implement solutions to prevent the spread. Bickert (2021), Facebook executive, asserts that the platform has banned over 3000 accounts, groups, pages and more than 20 million posts that violated Facebook’s coronavirus misinformation policy. Vynck and Lerman (2021) report that Twitter has a strike system to permanently remove accounts that repeatedly violate its policies. In addition, YouTube shows evidence on its blog of being proactive in counteracting misinformation by removing more than 130,000 videos that violated its policies against spreading misinformation.

Mantica (2021) interviewed two researchers to investigate the effectiveness of YouTube's Covid-19 policies. One of the interviewees, Gianluca Stringhini – a researcher at Boston University’s Rafik B. Hariri Institute – is optimistic about the impact of those policies if they lead to a significant reduction in health-related misinformation. Nonetheless, there is one questionable problem: the actual effectiveness of the policies that the social media companies have applied. Some companies usually wish to be in an advantageous situation by publishing a report with positive results. It is rational to be doubtful about the statistics proposed by those companies when nevertheless there are many people encountering misinformation every day on social media. Hence, it is necessary to conduct research to quantitatively assess the real impact of the executing policies about the Covid-19 misinformation of social media companies.

## 4.4. Verifying the Effectiveness

Although an effort has been made to counteract the spread of false information as social media companies have reported, studies reveal that misleading information on those platforms is still proliferating. In the “Disinformation Dozen”, nine of them remain active on all three leading social media platforms – Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (The Center for Countering Digital Hate, 2021). While these people spread the majority of the anti-vaccine content on those platforms, social media companies permanently ban only the accounts of a quarter of those people is insufficient.

Moreover, Piltch-Loeb et al. (2021) argue that individuals in the U.S who consider social media as their primary source of information tend to be hesitant to accept the vaccine. For this reason, social media has a role to play in orienting vaccine hesitancy. The result of this study seems to undermine the claims of social media companies, because the quality of information on those platforms shows almost no evidence of improvement – there is nonetheless anti-vaccine misinformation on the news feed that prompts people to be doubtful about the vaccine.

# Discussion

The pandemic can be a lucrative business for conspiracists. Social media give them an opportunity to disseminate noxious misinformation. The research about intolerance to uncertainty provides evidence that during pandemics people are more susceptible to conspiracy theories and medical misinformation. Those who understand this vulnerability can earn substantial profits by casting doubt about the Covid-19 vaccine and promoting their products as alternatives. The fact that only 12 people are responsible for up to 65% of misinformation about Covid-19 vaccines on social media shows how little the social media need to do – by, for example, removing accounts of these people – to diminish the amount of medical misinformation about Covid-19 vaccines.

This report focuses on the U.S. situation of Covid-19 medical misinformation, which has not been broadly examined due to the novelty of the issue. The research draws on concrete examples, while also considering pre-pandemic times. It also builds on the argument that social media should take a stronger stance on the issue, which provides a concrete action as a possible solution.

The weakness of this report is that it is focused on a limited range of issues regarding medical misinformation and conspiracy theories. The political and legal aspects of the problem have received limited attention. The fact that there were only a few examples to support our evidence indicates the need for further research. Additionally, the report only relied on secondary data which is not as recent as it could be.

This report intends to bring attention to the issue of the spread of misinformation about Covid-19 and vaccines. The problem exists not only in the U.S. but globally, and it should give the readers an understanding of the breadth of the issue. The strength of this report is its interdisciplinary approach, drawing from social and psychological research in addition to business studies.

Future research could focus on different countries to better understand how the situation varies in regions of different socioeconomic development.

# Conclusions

In conclusion, the insights into three principal research questions have been investigated. First, the report has shown evidence that people who are vulnerable due to the uncertainty of the Covid-19 pandemic tend to believe the misleading information that they are exposed to. Another factor that leads to the belief in misinformation is the societal alienation that some people experience while maintaining social distancing. This belief creates a fertile environment for the misinformation to spread and for some people to build lucrative businesses. Second, this report has also noticed that profit might be a driving force behind the spread of misinformation. The strategies of some organizations to capitalize from this spread are mainly through social media. Lastly, considerable evidence has been found to prove that the responsibility of counteracting the inaccurate information about Covid-19 mostly belongs to social media companies, where much misleading content is being shared.

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