

Research on Attitudes and Behaviors of Elderly Users on TikTok Short Video Platform towards User-Generated Content Fake News

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Abstract:

Currently, sharing fake news on social media platforms is a globally recognized issue, as the nature of social media and the unique ways in which users interact with it impact various industries. Despite the increasing global trend of aging populations, many companies, especially in the new media industry, still perceive older adults as being affected by the “digital divide.” Moreover, existing research has relatively overlooked the thoughts and opinions of elderly users, particularly in China. In this study, the author investigates the relationship between the aging population and UGC fake news, examining the current situation, trends, and impacts through interviews and case analysis. The study also proposes recommendations to promote better integration of older adults into the online community and address the influence of fake news. The results indicate a significant increase in the number of elderly users, but the research on their intentions regarding sharing fake news remains unclear. New strategies are proposed to address the current issues.

Keywords:

Social Media, Elderly People, Fake News , User -Generate Content, TikTok

1. Introduction

Considering the current scenario, where social media has taken a dominant position in mass media, it appears that we are in a new paradigm of communication. [1] In the past decade, short video platforms on Chinese social media have experienced rapid development. As of March 2020, the user base of mobile short video platforms in China reached nearly 800 million, accounting for 86% of the total internet users. It has become a new trend in mobile internet and is now the third-largest mobile application after comprehensive video platforms.[2,3] Meanwhile, the wave of aging population in China has become an undeniable social factor. According to the 51st Statistical Report on Internet Development in China, as of June 2022, research indicates a rapid growth in elderly users who spend 40% of their leisure time on mass media, reaching a network video usage rate of 84.8% [4]. Through research, it has

been found that over 60% of elderly individuals use TikTok daily, with a high frequency and an average duration of 1-2 hours per session. This represents a significantly large user base, with the number of elderly social media users in China reaching one hundred million.

Furthermore, due to TikTok's wide audience, entertainment value, and user-friendly features, it provides a more convenient platform for elderly users to overcome the inherent impression of the “digital divide”. Older adults can embrace new things more easily through TikTok.[4] Through analysis, it has been found that performance expectation is a crucial factor influencing the willingness of elderly users to use. Short videos are more effective in delivering information to older adults in a timely and efficient manner compared to text or images.[5] His research shows that retired elderly individuals have a strong interest in media information and interaction. These pieces of information are filled with the desire of the elderly population to immerse themselves in the “ocean currents” of the Internet. However, the Internet also harbors risks, like hidden reefs lurking in dark currents, which pose potential dangers.

The emergence of participatory forms within social media has transformed journalists from being the sole disseminators of content in news media. User comments have become a widespread supplement to news production. [6] In summary, social media has democratized information sharing, allowing everyone to express their opinions. User-generated content and the proliferation of news channels have made it challenging for publishers to verify news authenticity. The anonymous nature of content dissemination and viral spread complicates the identification of news sources. Motivations for sharing misinformation on social media platforms are not well understood.[7,8] Currently, the various forms of engagement in online news, particularly user comments, provide more options to reach a broader audience. However, this also enables the spread of false information. Differentiating between facts and fiction has never been an easy task, but in the era of social media, the speed at which falsehoods spread surpasses that of truth. [9] Therefore, the viral spread of fake news has become a serious issue in the era of social media. Anonymity, user-generated content, and geographical distance may encourage the sharing of fake news.

Previous studies have indicated that while fake news targets readers of all age groups, older adults tend to share misinformation the most. Furthermore, the ability to differentiate between real and fake photos decreases with age.[10] Compared to the truth, the elderly often show more interest in the arrival of false information.

Most communication studies focus on young users, but this study examines the perspectives and sharing behavior of older adults regarding fake news. Some users tend to believe false information after repeated exposure, while others share exaggerated information for attention. It is crucial to help older adults effectively detect and recognize fake news to reduce its impact. The research findings not only contribute to reducing the spread of fake news among older users but also help internet companies understand and cater to the needs of older adults. This understanding can promote their active participation and create better experiences in terms of information authenticity.

This research focuses on older adults' psychology and behavior, using in-depth interviews to analyze their attitudes and behaviors towards UGC fake news on TikTok. It explores the individual perspective by examining social, environmental, and psychological factors, aiming to ensure information security and older adults' safety online.

2. Research Method

This study examines the relationship between older adults and UGC fake news, focusing on the 60 to 79 age group. The research utilizes social media platforms, with TikTok as the representative platform. Qualitative methods, specifically in-depth interviews, are employed to address the research questions. The interviews are conducted in a semi-structured manner, using an interview outline and follow-up questions for richer data. Online and face-to-face interviews are conducted to ensure continuity and effectiveness, providing authentic and sensory accounts. The study aims to fill the research gap in fake news among older adults and provide updated data for reference, addressing specific research questions.

- (1) How do older adults learn and use TikTok?
- (2) How does the dissemination of news through platforms like TikTok affect older adults, both positively and negatively?
- (3) Why and how do older adults participate in sharing UGC fake news?
- (4) How to identify and address the spread of fake news among older adults?
- (5) How can the genuine needs of older adults be identified, and how should new media platforms prioritize meeting those needs?

3. Research Results

Interviews were conducted using purposive and snowball sampling methods to select elderly individuals who use the TikTok app and have shared fake news. A total of 6 elderly participants were chosen, including 3 aged between 60 and 65 and 3 above 65, with a gender ratio of 4:2.

Interviews yielded ample data for analysis. Participants shared examples of encountered fake news and discussed how they identified it. Their actions and motivations for verifying content were also explored. Transcribed interviews provided textual data from over 120 minutes of conversation.

The author found that older adults are now having a significant impact on TikTok. Firstly, older adults frequently use TikTok to obtain news or information. For example, "I think it's like news, the pictures are big, the sound is loud, so it's easy to know what's happening. I also like to see what's going on in the world now, feel like I can learn a lot of things, and share them with my family." (Interviewee No. 3); Additionally, the research revealed that older adults have a high dependency on TikTok. For instance, "I wake up early every day, but I basically open TikTok and watch videos right after breakfast until my nap." (Interviewee No.1); "Usually, my family doesn't allow me to spend so much time on my phone, but I really want to watch short videos." (Interviewee No. 4).

On one hand, TikTok has done an excellent job in improving the living conditions of older adults, reducing their disconnection from the modern era and new media. On the other hand, some UGC containing false information has negatively affected older adults' ability to assess the accuracy of information, leading to negative consequences in its dissemination.

According to the study, elderly participants had varying attitudes towards encountering false information. Two individuals stated that they would simply ignore the information. For example, "I usually don't overthink it; if I don't understand a

video, I skip it directly” (Interviewee No. 2). However, other interviewees, despite information overload, still engaged in sharing UGC fake news. For instance, “If I find the information interesting, I directly share it with all my friends with just one click. It's very convenient” (Interviewee No. 6). Therefore, although social media platforms have features to combat fake news, most elderly participants tend to share such content when they come across it. Interestingly, not all participants acknowledged having encountered this phenomenon. In fact, one participant expressed that dealing with fake news may not be her concern because she doesn't believe she has been exposed to false information.

4. Discussion

This article explores the current situation, motivations, and impacts of elderly individuals facing TikTok UGC fake news through in-depth interviews. It aims to clarify the relationship between UGC fake news and the elderly primarily by focusing on motivations, providing a deeper understanding of how elderly individuals encounter UGC fake news. In the context of active aging, it is important for older adults to effectively navigate the impact of the multimedia era.

4.1. *The current situation of older adults facing TikTok UGC fake news.*

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TikTok is now a new social platform for the elderly, They willingly forward news they come across to those they feel should read it. Survey results indicate that older adults generally believe negative media messages, which are socially undesirable, have a greater impact on others than on themselves. This perspective is supported by Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory, explaining why individuals instantly share news to raise awareness among others. They suggest this behavior enhances personal self-esteem, provides social identity to a group, and fosters a sense of belonging in the social world. However, the risk of instant news sharing lies in inadvertently spreading fake news. For example, “I enjoy sharing interesting videos I come across with people around me” (Interviewee No. 3),” Whenever I open TikTok in the afternoon, I receive about 30 unread messages” (Interviewee No. 5).

4.2. *The motivation behind older adults sharing TikTok UGC fake news.*

Recent research suggests that people tend to share fake news without verifying it because they may perceive it as true ^[11]. Furthermore, scholars argue that fake news spreads rapidly through social bots, severely limiting the recipients' ability to fact-check.^[12] This means that social media users can immediately share news without even watching the entire video segment. Furthermore, some scholars believe that users share fake news not only due to a lack of discernment but also because they are unable to discern the accuracy of the information.

Social distance inference motivates sharing. People believe that those distant or socially inferior are more vulnerable to negative media influences, prompting them to verify media accuracy. Previous research shows social media users verify news

authenticity to protect the less privileged, gain trust and respect, and improve their image. Trust is crucial online, influencing interpersonal dynamics and group behavior [8].

4.3. The impact of TikTok UGC fake news on older adults.

UGC platforms like TikTok enable older adults to access and share content easily. However, the rapid spread of false information is a concern. TikTok's short video format limits information depth and fact-checking, making it susceptible to misinformation. Older adults may receive one-sided or inaccurate information, hindering their understanding of the truth.

TikTok, as a UGC-centric application, is faster, user-friendly, and offers diverse content. One of the main purposes for older adults being online is to browse news. Therefore, the intertwining of information that is difficult to distinguish between true and false poses a significant challenge for this user group. Some news articles, after being published, become a confusing quagmire, making it difficult for people to uncover the truth behind events. Older adults rely on reading news by examining the reported events or relying on their own knowledge to discern truth from falsehood. In other words, they judge the accuracy of news solely based on their own experiences. It is important to note that they do not rely on factors such as comments, shares, or views on video segments to verify the accuracy of the news.

4.4. Countermeasures and suggestions

As the internet evolves, older adults are increasingly active in the short video market. However, issues persist in their ability to identify fake news and sharing false information. This article proposes strategies to address these problems.

First, we can establish usage patterns for older adults. TikTok has a teenage mode in its software settings, where they filter out content that may be harmful to teenagers, thus serving as a filtering mechanism. Following this approach, a senior citizen usage mode can be created, where UGC news undergoes review in the TikTok backend daily. Only UGC news that has been verified and approved will be visible in the senior citizen mode. Although the latest news information may be slightly delayed due to the review process, LI and Zhang believe that older adults may not require immediate news updates. Instead, they are more concerned about the overall context of the situation. This approach helps prevent older adults from being influenced by false information when using social media platforms.

From policy and media literacy, promote offline education for older adults on digital technology, social media, and identifying false information. Offer tailored digital literacy training with practical examples and hands-on guidance to enhance their skills in verifying sources and distinguishing true from false news. And enhance the internet social media environment for older adults. Strengthen information filtering and screening to improve credibility and trust. Implement policies to accurately identify pop-ups, product promotions, and other information.

5. Conclusions

Through in-depth interviews and case analysis, this article discovered the following characteristics among elderly users in the sharing of UGC fake news on TikTok: (1) Elderly users do not discern or are unable to distinguish the accuracy of information.

(2) Older adults employ proactive and passive measures for error correction in relation to fake news. (3) Elderly users express their concerns regarding the consumption of fake news.

Based on respondents, explore motivations for elderly sharing fake news: stay connected, seek social recognition, protect vulnerable. Research finds concerns and future outlook on discerning fake news as TikTok becomes popular leisure for fragmented time. Article proposes solutions for addressing elderly influx into online society.

This study explores the relationship between elderly and UGC fake news, but has limitations. Firstly, due to limited time and resources, only 6 elderly individuals were interviewed, resulting in insufficient sample size for precise data. Secondly, analyzing elderly users on short video platforms unavoidably carries subjective biases and flaws. This study solely focuses on UGC fake news as a research variable to measure sharing behavior, but investigating topics like deceptive online shopping or elderly online dating would be interesting. Hopefully, this research sheds light on the vulnerable elderly population, helps them discern truth from overwhelming information, and addresses the issue of fake news sharing to prevent its dissemination.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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