Students’ Motivations for Not Sharing Rumours during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Singapore

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ABSTRACT
The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of curbing harmful misinformation and prompted legislation against fake news. Based on the case of the COVID-19 pandemic in Singapore, this study investigated motivations behind college students’ decisions not to share rumours on WhatsApp. Responses from 75 participants were collected through an anonymous online survey in July 2020. The findings suggest that during an infectious disease outbreak, students’ decisions not to share rumours were motivated by concerns related to information quality rather than the fear of regulatory punishment.

KEYWORDS
rumours; misinformation; social media; fake news regulation; infectious diseases.

INTRODUCTION
Understanding social media users’ motivations to share or not share rumours could inform efforts to curb the harmful spread of misinformation. Meanwhile, recent anti-misinformation laws provide a new frontier for research. One such law is Singapore’s Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), enacted in May 2019, which is one of the most comprehensive anti-fake news laws in the world (Funke & Flamini, n.d.).

Using the case of the COVID-19 outbreak in Singapore where exposure to COVID-19 misinformation has been widespread (Long et al., 2021), a study was done by the authors to investigate the motivations behind college students’ decisions to share or not share COVID-19-related rumours on WhatsApp, and how the motivations varied by rumour type (dread or wish). Dread rumours refer to those that spell doom and gloom while wish rumours invoke desirable consequences. Results showed that more than 90% did not share or hardly shared either type of rumour. Thus, this paper adds to extant literature by examining the research question: During an infectious disease outbreak, what motivates college students not to share rumours on WhatsApp?

METHODOLOGY
This study used an anonymous online survey distributed in July 2020 via WhatsApp and email to the authors’ personal contacts and on Telegram groups for college students. The participants were shown two sets of sample WhatsApp rumours related to COVID-19, one set each of dread rumours and wish rumours, with four rumours in each set. With each set described as representing a type of message (the word “rumour” was avoided) participants were asked about their frequency of sharing and motivations for not sharing each type of rumour. The rumours were drawn from news articles, fact-checking organisations (e.g. AFP Hong Kong, 2020) and the authors’ collection of WhatsApp rumours received from contacts. To reduce social desirability bias, rumours that had been specifically debunked by the Singapore government were not used. Five types of motivation behind not sharing rumours were measured. Four motivation types were based on Uses & Gratification and rumour literature: (i) entertainment, (ii) socialisation, (iii) information-seeking and (iv) self-expression and status-seeking (Bordia & DiFonzo, 2013; Chen et al., 2015; Lee & Ma, 2012). In addition, the survey measured a fifth motivation type related to anti-misinformation regulation, namely, fear of punishment. The five motivation types were operationalized as 15 items on a 5-point Likert scale. To reduce biases arising from the ordering of items, randomised ordering was used to present the sets of rumours (i.e. whether the dread or wish rumours were shown first was randomised) as well as individual motivation items.

FINDINGS
Data was collected from 75 college student participants, who were mostly Singaporean. Sixty percent of participants were female and most participants were aged 21-25. Most participants indicated awareness of POFMA during the COVID-19 outbreak. (As the relevant question was optional, lack of response does not necessarily mean lack of awareness of POFMA.) An almost-equal number of participants indicated some level of not sharing dread (n = 62) or wish (n = 61) rumours. For both rumour types, the vast majority of recipients tended not to share the rumours:

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93.6% of the dread-rumour recipients and 90.2% wish-rumour recipients reported that they did not share or hardly shared rumours of that type. Thus, the subsequent analyses focus on motivations for not sharing rumours.

**Motivations for not sharing rumours**

Tables 1 and 2 present the top three and bottom three motivation items, ranked by mean values, for each rumour type. For both types, the highest ranked motivations included “The information in the message(s) was not useful” and the motivation “I did not need to get attention by sharing”. On the other hand, the fear of punishment by the law ranked at or near the bottom for both rumour types. Twenty-two free-text responses were received for an optional question asking whether participants had other reasons for not sharing rumours. Most responses simply cited the questionable veracity of the rumours, using terms such as “fake news” and “dubious” to describe the messages. A few responses also suggested why sharing would be undesirable, e.g. “can cause significant harm”, “might spread fear and anxiety”.

| Rumour Type | Rank | Item                                                                 | Mean ± SD   |
|-------------|------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| Dread       | 1    | The information in the message(s) was not useful.                    | 4.32 ± 0.78 |
|             | 2    | I did not need to get attention by sharing.                          | 4.08 ± 1.18 |
|             | 3    | Not sharing would be more considerate to my friends and family.      | 3.94 ± 1.16 |
| Wish        | 1    | The information in the message(s) was not useful.                    | 4.46 ± 0.79 |
|             | 2    | Sharing would not have helped me get more information.               | 4.16 ± 0.88 |
|             | 3    | I did not need to get attention by sharing.                          | 4.07 ± 1.09 |

Table 1. Top 3 motivations for not sharing rumours

| Rumour Type | Rank | Item                                                                 | Mean ± SD   |
|-------------|------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| Dread       | 13   | Sharing would have made me look bad to my friends or family.         | 3.02 ± 1.49 |
|             | 14   | I did not need to interact with people.                              | 2.84 ± 1.31 |
|             | 15   | I was afraid of being punished by the authorities.                   | 2.76 ± 1.48 |
| Wish        | 13   | The anti-misinformation law prohibited me from sharing.              | 3.02 ± 1.32 |
|             | 14   | I did not need to interact with people.                              | 2.89 ± 1.33 |
|             | 15   | I was afraid of being punished by the authorities.                   | 2.69 ± 1.40 |

Table 2. Bottom 3 motivations for not sharing rumours

**DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION**

The study found that the top motivations not to share rumours were (i) finding the information not useful, likely due to information quality as indicated in the free-text responses, and (ii) motivations related to consideration for others. That consideration for others was also a major motivation may reflect a belief that spreading untrustworthy information is harmful, as expressed by some free-text responses. Fear of punishment by anti-misinformation regulation was found to be ranked lower as a motivation. On the whole, the findings suggest that compared with the motivation to avoid punishment, students are more motivated not to share rumours based on the principle that sharing unverified information during an outbreak is harmful. Also, given the similar ranking of motivations and high rates of not-sharing across rumour types, rumour type may not make a notable difference to students’ decisions not to share rumours and corresponding motivations.

Limitations of this study include restricted generalisability due to convenience sampling, and the lack of control of confounding variables, such as the perceived trustworthiness of the sample rumours. With those caveats in mind, this study offers tentative implications for information literacy programmes. With the right training, students may be able to serve as sources of positive influence for family members (Haigh et al., 2019). Also, since consideration towards others seems to be a major motivation not to share, this concern could be tested in future research as a frame for anti-misinformation messages.

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