Exploring the Causes of Fake News Consumption among Baby Boomers

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ABSTRACT: Baby boomers refer to a generational cohort of individuals who were born between 1946-1964. With the emergence of social media, fake news was also introduced as a phenomenon, which is intentionally and verifiably false information. Thus, it is alarming as a report presented that 77% of Baby Boomers were going online. However, there is a general lack of attention paid to the oldest generations, suggesting more research is needed to understand better and contextualize the interaction of age and online content. In light of this, the study explores the causes of fake news consumption among baby boomers in Tuguegarao City, Cagayan. It utilized a qualitative type of research employing a basic qualitative method of research where thirty-seven (37) informants who meet the required criteria took part in the study. The study revealed that the causes of fake news consumption among baby boomers are trusting in personal experience, the influence of trusted sources, reliance on social media, alignment with personal beliefs, lack of critical evaluation, need for confirmation from others, personal investigations, and lack of digital literacy. This research study concludes that fake news consumption is prevalent among baby boomers due to the identified causes that are sometimes taken into consideration unintentionally. It gives insight into how they consume news on social media platforms. Likewise, it offers a project proposed which aims to provide essential knowledge and pertinent information regarding the use of online platforms, prevent the susceptibility of baby boomers to fake news, and raise awareness of the value of news media literacy to online users of their age. Hence, this study offers recommendations to the guardian and companions of the baby boomers, the administration, social media platforms, and future researchers.

I. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of social media introduced an overwhelming phenomenon that influences individuals, subsequently undermining their endeavors. Fundamentally, social media is a new information technology that eradicated communication barriers and thus empowered individuals with an unrestricted flow of information, bringing people to connect and exchange ideas (Amedie, 2015). Unfortunately, albeit the advantages it confers to society, it enabled the spread of a new phenomenon called "fake news, " defined as mediocre news that intentionally contains false information to deceive and persuade consumers to accept biased and distorted beliefs (Shu et al., 2017).

Fake news, being prevalent in the online world, causes the weakening of the defense against misinformation, wherein the ability of people to distinguish between accurate and false information is diminished. It has become a global concern, yet there's still limited knowledge regarding the reasons why people believe fake news is shared over various social media platforms (Bryanov & Vziatysheva, 2021; Waszak et al., 2018). Nevertheless, social media platforms are one of the most effective channels of communication for the propagation of distorted information, which may have an unfavorable impact on the audience (Han & Mehta, 2019). Moreover, whether in print or digital materials, the accuracy of disseminated information has been a problem for people considering that information in social media sites where the online community is massive, moves faster and can be very powerful, particularly if it is fraudulent or wholly

false (Figueira & Oliveira, 2017). Over the past years, the remarkable increase in online content consumption and the easy accessibility drove many people and groups with different ideologies to utilize fake news dissemination on social media for their purposes (Alkawaz et al., 2019).

In the Philippine context, fake news is used to steer public opinion and manipulate media attention. Thus, the 60 million active social media users of the 103 million Filipinos suggest an active user base that is vulnerable to "troll armies" or "keyboard warriors" who spread false information to stifle contrary views and numerous fake accounts that are used to weaponize the Internet (Balod & Hameleers, 2019). In addition, The Philippines ranked first in the world in using social media, with an average of 257 minutes per day, indicating that Filipinos are more likely to be exposed to fake news (Besmano et al., 2017). Besides, Facebook is the most popular social media platform, with users of all ages as well as small and large businesses using it. Many users regard Facebook as their primary news source, despite the fact that the news on Facebook is not authenticated. Likewise, it has an algorithm that accommodates the information suitable to the user's liking and conceals the information that does not fit their preferences. This reinforces the user's perception of the world, leaving them confident that their views are correct. Subsequently, the filtering mechanism with the tendency of people to associate with similar others may create a strong homogenous network where the information that fits the individual's beliefs which can be an isolated voice, holds a higher chance of being transmitted.

II. METHODS

The study utilized a qualitative type of research employing a basic qualitative method of research. Basic qualitative research by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) was used to explore the causes of fake news consumption among baby boomers. The informants of this study were the 37 baby boomers which were coded with BB for anonymity and confidentiality purposes. Purposive sampling was utilized to determine the informants of the study, following the set of criteria:
1. An individual who was born between 1946-1964
2. A social media user

Accordingly, the growing social media trend furthers the propagation of fake news, which gives rise to negative effects in society. Particularly, the democratic princip es of transparency, accountability, and electoral integrity are now at risk caused by fake news.

Meanwhile, it is significant to note that apart from the news source, an individual's characteristics have an impact on his likelihood of spreading false information on social networks (Guess et al., 2019). During the 2016 presidential elections in North America, baby boomers were reported to share seven times more fake news articles than younger users on Facebook noting that Facebook has the most fake news presence (Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018). As the earlier age groups began to consume the new information technologies, various pieces of research were mostly undertaken to scrutinize the younger generations. Hence, there is limited literature on how baby boomers conduct themselves in the face of fake news, particularly their ability to identify fake news, especially among developing countries such as the Philippines (Loos & Nijenhuis, 2020). Likewise, research that has analyzed the dissemination of fake news and news media literacy has not included age as one of the mediating factors (Pecho- Ninapaytan, 2021). Civil society can play a significant role in monitoring and eradicating misinformation. Conducting a study that focuses on curtailing fake news consumption by identifying its causes is very important. Hence, the study was conducted to explore the causes of fake news consumption among baby boomers.

3. An individual who scored 4 & below as well as those and above but had incorrect reasoning on the pre-survey questionnaire.

This study used an open-ended questionnaire to interview the informants about the causes of their fake news consumption. It has also undergone content validation from three experts in research, assessment and evaluation, and political science. Thematic analysis by Clarck & Braun (2006) was utilized to identify the themes about the causes behind fake news consumption among the baby boomers.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Causes of Fake News Consumption Among Baby Boomers

1. Trust in Personal Experience
Several baby boomers rely on their own observations and personal experiences to determine the veracity of the news. They believe that encountering something firsthand makes it more credible, and they are less likely to trust information that does not align with their personal experiences. Some of the verbalizations are as follows:

BB18: *It happened to me before when there was a spread of news about having no classes in Tuguegarao City, I contacted the Mayor directly.*

BB36: *I will believe what I see and what already happened. It is fake news if it tries to put damage on people like the opposition of the administration.*

The result disclosed that informants grasp their personal experiences by interpreting the past to procure judgment and insights to decide whether they will believe a piece of information shared online or not. They rely on the weight of the experience, which seems reliable but misguides them due to the subjective filters which can distort their interpretations of the past. Yet, they will persist in believing the insights they have drawn from such personal experiences because they have witnessed the incidents themselves. The undue use of personal experience rather than a sound argument or compelling evidence as proof to support a position or argument is termed anecdotal fallacy, leading to a subjective, deceptive, and biased judgment or decision rather than an objective, honest, and unbiased one. Hence, this result is tantamount to a study finding that direct experiences exert a causal influence on individuals' preferences and attitudes toward information being presented to them. The impact of these personal experiences is saturated among low-informed individuals who might not be attuned to the overall context of such matters, which causes them to depend on their exposure (Lerman & McCabe, 2017).

2. Influence of Trusted Sources
Baby boomers often place a high level of trust in specific sources of information, such as traditional media outlets or specific radio stations. They rely on these sources for accurate and reliable news and may be skeptical of information that does not come from these trusted sources. Some of the verbalizations are as follows:

BB03: *The source I really trust is Bombo Radyo. If I do not hear it from them, I am more likely to not believe it.*

BB04: *If the sharer is well known when he/she is the one that recurring appears on my phone.*

The informants' responses exposed that trusted sources have great importance in evaluating unfamiliar information circulating onscreen where they instantly accept most of the time, if not always, information published by the source which they find trustworthy and credible. However, apart from the traditional media outlets, informants also revealed that they depend on famous sources, which are not necessarily the same as credible references. Research has proved that individuals hardly incorporate the whole spectrum of information to which they are exposed when running into a flow of information that is so divided. Alternatively, they would preferably count on the sources they trust most, adopting pieces of information from sources they deem dependable. Otherwise, they tend to discard data from sources they regard as unreliable (Krosnick et al., 2009).

3. Reliance on Social Media
While some baby boomers trust traditional media, others place significant trust in social media platforms like Facebook. They believe that information shared on these platforms is more likely to be true because it is posted by people they know. However, they may also be aware of the presence of fake news on social media and rely on other cues, such as the number of comments or positive ratings, to determine the credibility of the information. Some of the verbalizations are as follows:

BB06: *I just usually believe posts shared on Facebook. It is impossible that it is not true if it is posted on Facebook. But most of the time, my husband would mostly tell me not to believe whatever I see on Facebook. He often watches the news on TV that is why he knows what the truth is.*

BB10: *I read the comments of people in the post because you can usually spot there if the news if it is fake news or not based on what they say. You must also read other posts and see to it that align with the post.*

The result revealed that the informants tend to

believe information when such a post attracts engagement from other people, provided that the latter verifies the information the post contains. However, various social media platforms allow users to express their opinion and disseminate information that sparks conversations among communities in the virtual world. Individuals behind these statements hold different backgrounds wherein one can be an expert in a specific field, and others can also be quacks. They engaged for their purposes, whether to inform and enlighten others, delude people into believing false claims, or even merely be motivated by their passions. Hence, the comments are not necessarily plausible, which one can depend on to decide whether information shared online is real or fake. This was sustained by a study wherein it discovered that people are inclined to have confidence in information when they notice a higher level of interaction among users in a social media platform which subsequently activates a degree of rapport with other users who perceive such (Li & Suh, (2015). However, a finding of a study suggests that users' engagement with online news is largely driven by emotions and uneasiness triggered by a high number of "likes" encouraging comments on fake news (DiRussco et al., 2022). This actively illustrates that relying upon such information with high engagement is not actually a trustworthy and credible reference and merely increases the susceptibility of one to fake news consumption. Likewise, Facebook has an algorithm that contains the information that meets the user's preference and conceals the information that does not. This emphasizes the user's perception of the world, allowing them to be certain that their views are accurate. Subsequently, the filtering mechanism with the tendency of people to associate with similar others may create a strong homogenous network where the information that fits the individual's beliefs which can be an isolated voice, holds a higher chance of being transmitted (Moore & Hancock, 2022). Accordingly, false information could actually be considered true when people are repeatedly exposed, which induces them to accept it as reality. This is anchored to the principle of the illusory truth effect, which holds that when people are recurrently exposed to false information, there is a tendency to believe it. However, they know that it is false in the beginning.

4. Alignment with Personal Beliefs and Emotions

Baby boomers tend to believe information that aligns with their existing beliefs or values. They may be more skeptical of news contradicting their worldview while readily accepting information reinforcing their preconceived notions, specifically their political or religious beliefs. More so, baby boomers' emotional leanings can influence their consumption of news. They may be more inclined to believe the news that resonates with their emotions. Conversely, they may dismiss news that contradicts their feelings as fake. Some of the verbalizations are as follows:

BB02: *It depends on my beliefs. Based on what I know, some posts were impossible to happen. If that is the case, I don't believe such but if it aligns with my beliefs, of course, I believe it.*

BB16: *There will be a moral lesson. The truth will always come out. It's in your interest.*

Belief is a guiding principle that they bear in mind before believing information shared online. This, which is not necessarily built upon logical reasoning, primes their perceptions, subsequently affecting whether they accept or reject the posts online. As revealed by the informants, if what they see online is congruent with what they believe in, they will undoubtedly accept it. Otherwise, they will reject the information as it is contrary to their belief which they consider impossible. A study supported this finding argued that people tend to favor bits of information online that verify or support one's pre-existing beliefs, termed confirmation bias (Duffy, et al., 2019; Dennis, et al., 2019).

5. Lack of Critical Evaluation

Some baby boomers do not actively evaluate the credibility of the information they come across. They may not consider the source, fact-check the information, or seek alternative perspectives. Instead, they rely on others, such as family members or friends, to provide guidance or validate the information. A verbalization of an informant is as follows:

BB27*: When it is shared by my friends or my Facebook friends, I will immediately believe it.*

This result indicates that some informants are not skeptical of the news shared online, whereby they do not ensure the information's accuracy. In addition, they do not execute activities like searching for the story's details to prevent amplifying fabricated news. This is similar to the finding of a study where students are less likely to verify whether what they are consuming on their social media platforms is real compared to if they are reading for an assignment. This is likely because

they know that they are not being evaluated in this endeavor, which can sometimes encourage them to comment and share articles they have not checked that are factual, which can give rise to the spread of fake news (Kiernan, 2017).

6. Need for Confirmation from Others

Baby boomers often look for validation from others before believing information. They consider the opinions and reactions of other people as indicators of truthfulness. If a significant number of people support or react to a piece of news, they are more likely to believe it. Some of the verbalizations are as follows:

BB08*: I must hear it from other people.*
BB22: *It depends. I am not investigating. So, I have to base it on what people say, whether it's true or not.*

The informants' responses revealed that they are inclined to follow or conform to what others believe in, which merely suggests that the informants believe that others know how to properly maneuver the various social media platforms where the latter can accurately identify the real news and fake news online. This causes them to blindly stick with the knowledge of others, even if such can actually be refuted. The theory of social validation supports this. When people, particularly the passive ones, are doubtful or unfamiliar with something, they will look for other people's guidance to decide and chart a course of action. Doing so makes them more likely to feel satisfied as their decision felt verified. Whereas when people find irregularity with those surrounding them to be a bad experience, it pressures people's innate desire to fit in. The risk of degraded social inclusion suggests undesirable sensations, and thus, people are prompted to stay away from inconsistency with the rest and to attenuate such undesirable sensations that are generated when it inevitably does arise. Thus, a result of a study corroborated this finding in such a way that it explicated that social validation reaffirms the credibility of information in which the more validation acquired by the respective information, the more credible the information was deemed to be (Jucks & Thon, (2017).

7. Personal Investigations

Some baby boomers take proactive measures to verify the information by conducting research. They may search online, consult experts, or directly reach out to relevant individuals or organizations to confirm the accuracy of news. Some of the verbalizations are as follows:

BB17: *I always seek advice from my IT professional son and ask him to do the fact checking before I believe any of it because he teaches me how to as well.*
BB13: *I see to it that the source is real; investigate the whole story or ask yourself first, is it legitimate?*

The responses of the informants imply that they use the technique of verifying the facts to ascertain the credibility of certain information online, where their companions aid and teach them how fact-checking is done, as disclosed by the informant. This indicates that while others immediately follow the rest, some informants do not blindly accept a piece of certain information online as credible. However, the problem lies in whether the activities they carry out are sufficient to determine whether one is fake. Nevertheless, this is consistent with fact-checking, where one only claims information after exhausting rigorous efforts to ascertain that such information is accurate, unbiased, concise, and clear. Thus, a study substantiated this finding where it discovered that fact-checking is actually effective in preventing individuals from falling for false and often harmful news propagated online, where awareness of fake news and active practices to identify correct information increases the effectiveness of fact-checking on different social media platforms (Schuetz, Sykes, & Venkatesh, 2021).

8. Lack of Digital Literacy

Some baby boomers may struggle with identifying and discerning fake news online. They may find it challenging to navigate the digital landscape and distinguish between reliable and unreliable sources of information.

BB28: *I'm doing nothing.*
B33: *I do not know because sometimes it is difficult for me to identify on FB if it is true or not. You will know it if you're going to search for it.*

The responses of the informants may explain the heightened susceptibility to fake news consumption. As disclosed by the respondents, they know nothing about factors they should consider before believing a piece of information online. A study identified factors that likely contribute to this circumstance. One of which is that older adults are not "digital natives" and may have less understanding and practice of consuming modern media technologies and platforms as their professional and personal lives are not centered on these technologies, unlike

the younger age cohorts who maneuver the various social media platform effortlessly in which such form a huge part of their daily lives. Further, technologies are frequently presented in a way that is more complex for older adults to navigate, such as the small text sizes and reliance on touchscreen inputs (Moore & Hancock, 2022). This affirms the lack of digital literacy among baby boomers. Subsequently, it was found that older individuals were substantially greater consumers of fake news than younger people (Allen et al., 2020).

IV. CONCLUSION

The upsurge of a phenomenon called fake news on numerous social media platforms is getting out of hand. From this perspective, this research study concludes that fake news consumption is prevalent among baby boomers which is attributable to several causes, such as trust in personal experience, the influence of trusted sources, reliance on social media, alignment with personal beliefs, lack of critical evaluation, need for confirmation from others, personal investigations, and lack of digital literacy. These grounds are unintentionally being taken into account before processing a piece of information. This bears an influence in charting courses of their actions where they absorb flawed information, unaware of the materiality of the matter.

Future researchers may use this study as a foundation for future research about fake news consumption. They may also improve the means of gathering data by resorting to other data collection methods and expanding the scope and locale of the study. They may also increase the number of informants to provide more in-depth studies regarding the causes of fake news consumption among baby boomers. Finally, they may also conduct a study regarding the impact of the causes of fake news consumption on public opinion, which the current researchers failed to tackle.

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