



Emotional Impact of Disinformation on Social Media Users: A Phenomenological Exploration

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ABSTRACT

The rapid spread of disinformation on social media has raised significant concern regarding its impact on individuals' perceptions and mental health. While existing studies largely focus on the spread and correction of disinformation, little attention has been given to the emotional and psychological effects experienced by users exposed to such content. This study aims to address the gap by exploring the lived experiences of social media users encountering disinformation. Using a phenomenological approach, we investigate how individuals perceive, react to, and cope with disinformation, focusing on the emotional and cognitive dimensions of these experiences. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 12 social media users, and thematic analysis revealed three key themes: the erosion of trust in social media, increased anxiety, and the development of coping strategies. The findings suggest that disinformation not only affects trust in media but also induces significant emotional distress, while users actively develop methods to navigate this challenge. These results offer valuable insights into the personal, subjective consequences of disinformation and highlight the need for interventions that address both the psychological impact and media literacy. Future research could further explore the long-term effects of disinformation and the role of different demographic factors in shaping these experiences.



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INTRODUCTION

The advent of digital technologies and the widespread use of social media platforms have dramatically transformed the way individuals engage with information. Social media, once hailed as a tool for communication and connection, has increasingly become a space where misinformation and disinformation spread rapidly (Deal dkk., 2024). Disinformation, defined as deliberately false or misleading information, is particularly concerning as it can influence public opinion, shape political discourse, and even affect personal well-being. The global reach of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram amplifies the impact of such disinformation, making it a phenomenon that extends beyond isolated incidents to a broader societal issue. This digital landscape has created new challenges for individuals attempting to navigate an overwhelming flow of information, where distinguishing truth from falsehood is increasingly difficult.

The relevance of this phenomenon lies in its direct impact on individuals' perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors. In a world where much of one's understanding of reality is shaped by online interactions, the experience of encountering disinformation becomes not just a cognitive challenge but a deeply emotional one. Social media users often experience feelings of confusion, mistrust, and anxiety as they struggle to discern the credibility of information (Criado & Guevara-Gómez, 2021). This phenomenon is particularly significant in the context of health-related disinformation, where false narratives can influence individuals' decisions about their health, such as adherence to medical advice or vaccine uptake. Given the importance of accurate information in shaping individual and collective decision-making, the social implications of disinformation cannot be underestimated.

There is a clear need for a deeper exploration of how individuals experience and interpret disinformation. Phenomenology, with its emphasis on understanding lived experiences from the perspectives of those directly affected, provides an ideal framework for investigating how social media users perceive, react to, and navigate disinformation in their daily lives. This approach allows for a nuanced exploration of the psychological and emotional impact that such encounters can have, offering insight into the subjective realities of users in a world saturated with digital content. By focusing on the personal experiences of individuals, this research seeks to uncover the meanings they attribute to their encounters with disinformation, thereby shedding light on the broader societal consequences of this growing issue.

Research into the lived experiences of individuals encountering disinformation has emerged as a crucial area within the broader study of media and communication. The subjective nature of this phenomenon, especially as it pertains to social media, requires a nuanced understanding of how individuals make sense of and react to false information in their daily lives (Wong dkk., 2024). Phenomenological research, which prioritizes the exploration of individuals' personal experiences, is particularly well-suited to address this need. The value of this approach lies in its ability to delve into the emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions of individuals' encounters with disinformation, revealing the deeper meanings and impacts that quantitative methods alone cannot capture.

However, exploring the subjective experiences of individuals presents several methodological challenges. Traditional approaches, such as quantitative surveys or experimental designs, are often inadequate in addressing the complexity of these experiences. These methods typically focus on measurable variables, such as the frequency of exposure to disinformation or the extent of belief in false information, but fail to account for the emotional and psychological nuances that shape individuals' perceptions and reactions. Additionally, quantitative research often overlooks the context in which disinformation is encountered, failing to capture the rich, qualitative aspects of users' lived experiences. This limitation underscores the necessity of a phenomenological approach, which allows for a more holistic exploration of the phenomenon by centering on the meaning-making process of individuals.

The limitations of previous research, particularly in capturing the full essence of users' encounters with disinformation, highlight the need for deeper, qualitative investigation. Most studies on disinformation have focused on its spread, its impact on public opinion, or the effectiveness of fact-checking, but few have explored the personal, lived experiences of social media users dealing with this issue (Cado, 2020). By applying phenomenology, this study aims to fill this gap, offering a deeper understanding of how disinformation affects individuals on a personal level, both emotionally and cognitively. Through this approach, it becomes possible to gain insights into the underlying psychological and social factors that drive individuals' engagement with and responses to disinformation.

While much of the current research on disinformation has focused on practical solutions, such as fact-checking mechanisms, media literacy campaigns, and quantitative analyses of information spread, these approaches often fail to capture the deeper, subjective experiences of individuals who encounter disinformation. These traditional solutions tend to rely on empirical data and observable behaviors, such as measuring the frequency of exposure to false information or the effectiveness of misinformation correction. While useful in certain contexts, such approaches often overlook the emotional, cognitive, and psychological dimensions of how individuals interpret and respond to disinformation in their daily lives. This limitation results in an understanding of the phenomenon that is fragmented and lacks richness, missing the underlying experiences that shape people's perceptions of truth and trust in media.

An alternative and more holistic approach lies in adopting a phenomenological method, which focuses on exploring the lived experiences of individuals from their own perspectives. Phenomenology allows for a deep, qualitative investigation of how individuals make meaning of their encounters with disinformation (Saragih dkk., 2024). It offers the potential to uncover the essence of these experiences, shedding light on how disinformation influences individuals' beliefs, emotions, and behaviors in ways that are not captured by more quantitative or traditional methods. By delving into

the subjective experiences of social media users, phenomenology can provide a nuanced understanding of the personal impact of disinformation and the coping mechanisms that users employ. This approach is critical for gaining insights into the complex emotional and psychological dimensions of the phenomenon, which remain largely unexplored in the existing literature.

Numerous studies have examined disinformation and its impact on individuals, with much of the existing literature focusing on the spread of false information, its effects on public trust, and the role of media literacy in combating its influence. However, fewer studies have explored the subjective experiences of individuals who engage with disinformation on social media. Research by authors such as Garard dkk (2022) has highlighted the consequences of disinformation on public perceptions and behaviors but has not delved deeply into the emotional and cognitive responses of individuals exposed to such content. This gap in the literature emphasizes the need for a more focused exploration of the personal, lived experiences of social media users and the ways in which they make sense of and cope with disinformation.

To address this gap, the phenomenological approach is employed in this study. Phenomenology offers a powerful framework for investigating the lived experiences of individuals, allowing for a deep understanding of how they perceive and respond to disinformation in their daily lives. This approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the meanings that individuals attach to their encounters with disinformation, something that traditional, quantitative research methods are often unable to capture. By focusing on the participants' subjective experiences, phenomenology provides a rich and nuanced perspective on the phenomenon, revealing not only how disinformation impacts individuals but also how they make meaning of it within their broader social and emotional contexts.

The article is structured to provide a comprehensive overview of the research. The introduction outlines the general background of the phenomenon and highlights the knowledge gap that this study aims to address (Temiz & Salelkar, 2020). The methodology section explains the phenomenological approach in detail, followed by a description of data collection and analysis processes. The results section presents the findings from the study, emphasizing the themes that emerged from the participants' experiences. Finally, the discussion explores the implications of these findings, followed by conclusions that summarize the study's contributions to the understanding of disinformation's impact on social media users.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This research employed a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of social media users in relation to disinformation. Phenomenology was selected due to its focus on understanding how individuals perceive and make sense of their lived experiences in the context of a specific phenomenon. This method allows for a deep exploration of the subjective meanings that participants attach to their encounters with disinformation on social media, which is central to answering the research question (Gu dkk., 2023). The design prioritizes the participants' perspectives, providing an in-depth look at their personal experiences, and thus aligns well with the aim of understanding the psychological and emotional impact of disinformation. In this study, a descriptive phenomenological approach was utilized, which seeks to describe, rather than interpret, the essence of the participants' lived experiences without preconceived theories or frameworks influencing the findings.

Participants

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling method to ensure that individuals with direct and relevant experiences related to the phenomenon of disinformation on social media were included. The inclusion criteria required participants to be active users of social media platforms for at least one year, as the study aimed to explore experiences shaped by ongoing engagement with these platforms. Exclusion criteria included individuals under the age of 18, as well as those who did not

regularly use social media. A total of 12 participants (6 males, 6 females) were recruited for the study, with an average age of 29 years (ranging from 22 to 38 years). This sample size was chosen to ensure rich, in-depth data while allowing for a manageable analysis process (Zhang, 2024). Participants' demographic characteristics, such as their educational background, social media usage patterns, and geographic location, were also recorded to provide contextual insight into their experiences.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, which provided flexibility for participants to share their experiences in their own words. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted in a quiet, comfortable setting to ensure a relaxed environment conducive to open dialogue. The interviews were guided by a set of open-ended questions designed to explore participants' experiences with encountering disinformation, their emotional responses, and the strategies they employed to manage these experiences. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis. The interview protocol was developed based on existing literature on media literacy and disinformation, with minor adaptations to suit the phenomenological focus of this study.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis within a phenomenological framework. The process involved multiple stages, beginning with the transcription of the interview recordings. The transcriptions were then read repeatedly to immerse in the data and gain a thorough understanding of the participants' experiences. Key phrases and statements that reflected significant elements of the phenomenon were identified and coded. These codes were grouped into categories, which were subsequently refined into overarching themes that encapsulated the essential meanings of participants' experiences (Biney & Azaglo, 2024). This approach ensured that the data analysis remained grounded in the participants' perspectives, with themes emerging directly from the data rather than being imposed by the researcher. While NVivo software was utilized to assist with organizing and coding the data, the analysis remained primarily a manual, interpretive process to maintain alignment with the phenomenological approach.

Ethics

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant research ethics committee, ensuring that all aspects of the study adhered to ethical guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with each participant being provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks. Participants were assured of their right to confidentiality and anonymity throughout the study, with all data being stored securely and accessible only to the research team. Participants were also informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without consequence (Chatpibal dkk., 2024). All interviews were conducted in compliance with international ethical standards for research, including the protection of participants' rights and privacy.

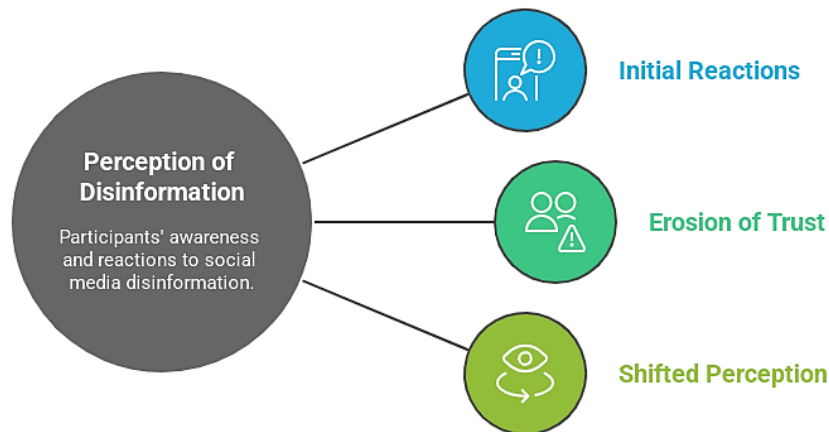
RESULTS

Perception of Disinformation on Social Media

The participants consistently shared that they were highly aware of the prevalence of disinformation on social media platforms. Many described their initial reactions to encountering false information as a mix of disbelief and frustration. For instance, one participant mentioned, "At first, I thought it was just a misunderstanding, but over time, I began to see how widespread it was, and it made me question everything I read online." This sentiment was echoed by several others who indicated that encountering disinformation triggered a deep sense of unease about the accuracy of online content. The overwhelming majority of participants reported that their trust in social media was eroded, with one respondent commenting, "I feel like I can't trust anything I read anymore. It's all so mixed up, I'm not sure what to believe." This highlighted how disinformation significantly impacted

their perception of social media, shifting from a place of connection to a source of uncertainty and distrust.

Unraveling the Impact of Disinformation on Social Media



Impact on Mental Health and Anxiety

As participants discussed their responses to disinformation, it became apparent that the exposure to false narratives and misleading information had a tangible impact on their mental health. Many indicated an increase in feelings of anxiety and stress, particularly when they found themselves overwhelmed by conflicting news. One participant stated, "I'm constantly anxious now. I don't know if what I see online is true, and it feels like everyone is arguing about what's real." Another respondent shared, "I can't stop thinking about all the false information, it just stays with me throughout the day, and it makes me feel uneasy." This theme revealed that disinformation did not only affect participants' trust in media but also had a profound effect on their emotional well-being. For some, the constant exposure to conflicting and false information became a source of persistent worry, reflecting how deeply social media has embedded itself into daily life and mental health.

Strategies for Identifying and Combating Disinformation

Despite the negative impact of disinformation, several participants described developing strategies to mitigate its effects. A number of them mentioned becoming more cautious and critical when consuming online content. One participant explained, "Now, I always check the source of information before I believe it, and if it sounds too extreme, I just ignore it." Another participant shared their approach: "I started following credible organizations and fact-checking websites to make sure I'm not being misled." These self-regulatory behaviors were common across the group, illustrating that participants had developed more discerning habits in response to their experiences with disinformation. Interestingly, the majority of participants emphasized the importance of digital literacy and information verification, which they believed were essential in combating the pervasive spread of false information. This theme indicated that, while the participants felt overwhelmed by disinformation, they also recognized the need to take control of their online consumption to protect themselves from further negative consequences.

The findings from this study illustrate the profound and multifaceted impact of disinformation on social media users' perceptions, mental health, and coping strategies. Participants expressed a deep sense of distrust toward online content and described heightened anxiety as a result of encountering disinformation. However, they also demonstrated resilience by developing strategies to identify and counteract misleading information. These results underline the necessity for increased media literacy and critical thinking in the digital age, particularly as social media continues to play a central role in shaping public perceptions and personal well-being.

DISCUSSION

The study reveals the significant impact of disinformation on social media users' perceptions and mental health. Participants expressed heightened distrust and anxiety in response to the pervasive presence of false information on social media platforms, which led to emotional distress and altered social interactions. These findings directly address the research question, providing insight into how users experience and make sense of disinformation in their daily lives.

The findings of this research contribute to a deeper understanding of the personal, subjective consequences of disinformation. While previous studies have focused on the spread or general impact of disinformation on public opinion, this study delves into the emotional and cognitive responses of social media users. The experiences shared by participants demonstrate that disinformation does not only challenge their trust in media but also induces anxiety, frustration, and uncertainty. The coping mechanisms employed by participants, such as fact-checking and selective media consumption, provide a nuanced understanding of how individuals manage the cognitive dissonance created by false information. This highlights the need for more than just technological solutions to combat disinformation, emphasizing the importance of fostering critical thinking and media literacy skills in the digital age.

When comparing these findings to existing literature, the study supports earlier research on the detrimental effects of disinformation, such as the work Medina Uzcátegui dkk. (2024), which highlights the widespread influence of false information on public trust. However, this study adds a crucial layer by emphasizing the emotional and psychological impacts, which are often overlooked in previous research. For example, studies by Bijlsma dkk.(2022) primarily focus on the spread and correction of disinformation but do not explore the subjective experience of users. This research complements these findings by offering a detailed exploration of how users engage with disinformation on a personal level, contributing to the broader understanding of its effects on individual well-being. Moreover, the study's emphasis on coping strategies aligns with research by Wang & Liu,(2023), which suggests that individuals actively navigate the disinformation landscape, albeit with varying levels of success and emotional toll.

Implications of the Findings

The findings of this study have significant implications both theoretically and practically. On a theoretical level, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on disinformation by highlighting the emotional and psychological effects that disinformation has on individuals. Unlike previous studies, which have largely focused on the spread and correction of false information, this study underscores the importance of understanding how individuals experience and make sense of disinformation on a personal level. Practically, the findings suggest the need for more targeted interventions, not only focusing on technological solutions such as fact-checking but also addressing the emotional and cognitive aspects of disinformation. Media literacy programs, for instance, could incorporate strategies to help individuals navigate the psychological impact of false information and promote healthier ways of engaging with media. Moreover, the study highlights the importance of fostering critical thinking skills that help individuals question and contextualize the information they encounter, which could reduce the emotional toll of disinformation.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the subjective experiences of social media users dealing with disinformation, it is not without its limitations. One such limitation is the relatively small sample size of 12 participants, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The experiences shared by these participants may not fully reflect the experiences of all social media users, particularly those from different demographic groups or geographical regions. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data from interviews, which may be subject to biases such as social desirability or memory recall (Niewiadomski, 2020). The study's focus on a specific social media environment also limits the scope of the findings, as different platforms may offer distinct user experiences. Future research could expand the sample size, include participants from diverse

backgrounds, and explore other social media platforms to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

The findings of this study open several avenues for future research. One potential direction is to explore the long-term effects of disinformation on individuals' mental health and social relationships. While this study focused on the immediate emotional responses to encountering disinformation, it would be valuable to examine how these experiences affect individuals over time. Another area for future research could involve investigating how different demographic groups (e.g., age, education, political affiliation) perceive and respond to disinformation. Additionally, future studies could explore the role of online communities and social networks in shaping individuals' beliefs about disinformation and their coping strategies. By extending this research, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of the broader societal impact of disinformation and develop more effective strategies to address its consequences.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the subjective experiences of social media users in dealing with disinformation, addressing the emotional and psychological impacts that have been underexplored in previous research. The findings revealed that disinformation significantly affects users' trust in social media and induces anxiety, frustration, and confusion, while users actively develop coping mechanisms such as fact-checking and selective media consumption. These results contribute to the existing literature by emphasizing the importance of considering emotional and cognitive responses when studying the effects of disinformation. Furthermore, the study highlights the limitations of traditional approaches, which often fail to capture the complexity of individuals' experiences. Future research could expand this work by exploring the long-term effects of disinformation or examining diverse demographic groups and social media platforms to gain a broader understanding of its impact. Overall, this study provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of users, offering practical implications for enhancing media literacy and developing strategies to combat the negative consequences of disinformation.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All research activities were conducted in accordance with ethical standards, and no financial or personal relationships influenced the findings or interpretation of the data.

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