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Effects of Law Enforcement and Risk Perception on COVID-19 Fake News Sharing Behavior among Malaysian Social Media Users

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia faces many delicate issues concerning race and religion, as well as political disputes that fuel fake news proliferation on social media. The government resorts to laws and regulations, namely the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 (Act 588) and the Penal Code (Act 574), to fight fake news in Malaysia. Nevertheless, there is limited knowledge of the effectiveness of law enforcement in combating the spread of fake news in the country. This study investigates the effects of the perceived effectiveness of law enforcement and the perceived risk of fake news on fake news sharing of COVID-19 issues to fill this void. This study tested the relationships using multiple regression analysis using survey data from 394 social media users. The findings revealed a significant effect of perceived risk on fake news-sharing behaviour, and younger and less educated people tended to share fake news on social media. Effects of law enforcement effectiveness, however, were found insignificant. The findings underscore the importance of educating the public on the risks of fake news as a sustainable measure to curtail the spread in the Malaysian context.

Keywords: Fake news, information literacy, law enforcement, Malaysia, perceived risks

INTRODUCTION

With the rise of fake news on social media, researchers quickly recognized the serious threat it poses. Hou et al. (2020) found that the more people rely on social media for COVID-19 information, the higher their perception of risk regarding the virus. Pennycook et al. (2020) observed that fake news about COVID-19 has spread widely online, often suggesting dubious preventive measures and coping tips. Similarly, Lampos

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et al. (2020) discovered that a flood of false information led many to believe in ineffective remedies like using salty water, drinking bleach, and eating oregano. The spread of such misleading health news can endanger people's safety, as it might prompt them to take harmful actions (Pulido et al., 2020). The spread of fake news during a health crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, at the age of social media poses a significant challenge for society and policymakers.

Malaysia has been ascribed to resort to laws and enforcement in fighting fake news. The government has implemented existing laws, such as the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 (Act 588) and the Penal Code (Act 574), to deter people from sharing fake news. While these measures have been used to curb the spread of COVID-19-related fake news to some extent, there is still limited understanding of their effectiveness. There are limited studies on local contexts, too. A few studies appeared sparingly in the literature focus on patterns of unethical information sharing on social media among Malaysians (Yusof et al., 2020) and factors affecting fake news sharing in the Malaysian context (Balakrishnan et al., 2021: Omar et al., 2024). Studies focusing on predictors of fake news sharing found that Malaysians shared COVID-19-related fake news out of ignorance, for entertainment, and sometimes with altruistic intentions (Balakrishnan et al., 2021) and that environmental factors have greater effects on fake news sharing than individual factors (Omar et al., 2024). These studies, however, ignored the factors that can deter people from sharing fake news, such as law enforcement effectiveness and perceived risks. It is important to note that people refrained from sharing unverified information due to fears of legal repercussions (Kumar, 2023), social backlash (Altay et al., 2020), or personal harm (Waszak et al., 2018). Understanding these perceptions is essential for developing strategies to enhance the effectiveness of law enforcement efforts and future interventions for fake news intervention.

This study aims to determine if a strong belief in law enforcement's ability to counter misinformation and heightened fear of potential consequences could discourage Malaysians from sharing fake news on social media. It also investigates the influence of demographic factors, such as age, gender, and education, in determining fake news sharing of COVID-19 news in the Malaysian context.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed an online survey to collect data from 394 respondents using purposive sampling. The survey was administered in English and Malay and distributed via social media, targeting Malaysian social media users aged above 18. Five-point Likert scales were used to measure key variables of the study: perceived law enforcement effectiveness and perceived risk and fake news sharing on social media.

Perceived law enforcement effectiveness is the degree to which individuals believe that authorities can effectively manage and curb fake news. An example item is "I feel

confident that law enforcement is effective in dealing with fake news spread." Perceived risk in fake news sharing measures the extent to which individuals perceive sharing fake news on social media as a risky behaviour that could have negative consequences for them. The questions to assess Perceived Risk include: "I fear that something unpleasant can happen to me if I am caught sharing fake news."

Fake news sharing is the dependent variable that measures the degree to which individuals have shared fake news on social media. An example item is "I have shared information related to COVID-19 that seems accurate at a time, and I later found was made up." Meanwhile, demographic variables included in this study are gender, age, and education. They are categorical variables depicting male and female for gender, young and old for age, and high and low levels for education. Table 1 provides a detailed demographic breakdown of the respondents.

Table 1
Demographic information of the respondents

Variables	Frequency	Percentages (%)
Gender		
Male	118	29.9
Female	276	70.1
Age		
18–24	65	16.5
25–34	134	34.0
35–44	115	29.2
45–54	50	12.2
55–64	20	5.1
65 and above	10	2.5
Education Level		
High School	33	8.4
Diploma	64	16.2
Bachelor's Degree	187	47.5
Master's Degree	72	18.3
PhD	23	5.8
Others	17	4.3

Note. N = 394

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study used multiple regression analysis to test the hypotheses of this study, which aims to identify the effects of the perceived effectiveness of law enforcement, the perceived risk of sharing fake news, and demographic variables on fake news sharing. The results show that age (young), education level (low level), and perceived risks have significant

effects on fake news sharing among Malaysian social media users; meanwhile, the effects of gender and perceived law enforcement effectiveness were insignificant. Perceived risk has a negative relationship with fake news sharing (β = -.141, p = .027), suggesting that when people perceive higher risks in sharing fake news, they are less likely to share fake news on social media. As for demographic factors, education and age were negatively associated with fake news sharing. The negative results suggest low education and younger age predicted fake news sharing.

The regression model shows that the perceived risk, age and education explained 39.1% of the variance in the dependent variable. It suggests that while these factors play a significant role, the remaining 60.9% is attributable to other variables not accounted for in this study. Further details are provided in Table 2 below.

Table 2
Predictors of fake news sharing

Variables	**β (*p*)**
Gender	-.015 (.771)
Age	-.138 (.006)
Education Level	-.106 (.036)
Perceived Effectiveness of Law Enforcement	0.32 (.613)
Perceived Risks	-.141 (.027)
R^2	.050
Adjusted R^2	.037
F	4.061
Sig	.001

Note. N = 394

This study reveals that many Malaysians perceive law enforcement as an effective measure to combat disseminating fake news. The descriptive results suggest that most Malaysian social media users believe imposing high fines, removing content from social media, and court injunctions can deter them from sharing false information online. This belief, however, was found to be insignificant in predicting fake news sharing. What seems to be statistically significant in deterring fake news sharing is the high perception of risks associated with the behaviour. Simply put, the perception of risks associated with fake news sharing can deter Malaysian social media users from disseminating fake news on social media. Interestingly, their high perception of the effectiveness of laws could not lead to the deterrent of fake news spread.

The findings are paradoxical, yet they provide significant insights into the best intervention strategies to curb fake news in the Malaysian context. This study suggests the importance of increasing public awareness about the danger of fake news. Encouraging

social media users to control their Internet use in a day could immediately reduce fake news exposure. Yet, education is key to a sustainable preventive measure in addressing the threats of fake news. This study recommends introducing information literacy courses at primary schools to expose the young generation to the risks of fake news and preventive measures at an early age.

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