

Investigating the Design of Social Networking Sites to Examine the Spread of Political Misinformation Using the Uses and Gratifications Theory

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ABSTRACT

The shift from mass media to personalized content has gained popularity. Activity on social networking sites (SNS) showed that these platforms are designed to encourage social interaction and do not endorse critical thinking. This sentiment aligns with the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), which correlates the motivation to share misinformation on social media to fulfill their needs or gratification, like their desire for social validation or affirmation of their beliefs. Thus, this paper examines the general design of social networking sites and how they transpired during the 2022 Philippine presidential elections. This study proposed hypotheses on how each design element corresponds with the motivational factors influencing the spread of political misinformation. Using Structural Equations Modeling (SEM), the study aims to test these constructs empirically. Results indicated that altruism, socialization, and entertainment, and status-seeking equally correlate as predictors of misinformation because they are embedded with the existing design of SNS. Therefore, addressing the issue would require redesigning these SNS to counteract the spread of fake news.

Keywords: social media, political misinformation, Philippine elections, fake news, Uses and Gratifications Theory

INTRODUCTION

Statistics show that the Philippines remains the world's social media capital. Reuters Institute surveyed in 2023 and revealed that 86% of Filipinos' top medium of receiving news is via their smartphones [1]. However, this often creates consequences since SNS use algorithms to tailor content [2].

Brian Amerige, a former Facebook engineer, stated that SNS "are not designed to help your thinking. They're not designed to answer questions about complex and controversial issues in your life." Rationalizing this, SNS does not cause misinformation, but its current architecture assists in the spread of true or false information [3].

Drake and Mehta [4] argued that the term "social" in social media denotes that these platforms' main goal is to promote social interaction. SNS's central design is really to propagate information and enable content sharing. However, this presents a design flaw wherein it prioritizes sensational content that garners attention over factual accuracy [5]. Posts that evoke strong emotional responses can make anyone susceptible to false claims [6], [7]. Likewise, it is imperative to understand how the behavior of social media users and whether the design of SNS promulgates the spread of misinformation.

Today, social media has become an enabler of the spread of misinformation, and what is more alarming is that SNS cultivates a rapid but anonymous spread of misinformation [8], [9]. Zhou et al. [10] emphasize that

it is becoming problematic to distinguish fake from factual news. Therefore, it is necessary to probe how people share fake news [11].

The devastating impact of misinformation can be seen from different aspects like public health, politics, environment, and economic issues [17]. Thus, further studies are necessary to expand the existing literature in this domain. Additionally, the prominence of studies in this research area is highly concentrated in Europe and North America. However, this limits the findings' applicability to other cultural and social contexts. This geographical bias creates a gap in understanding how misinformation operates in diverse environments [12]. Hence, this paper is framed on localizing the research in the Philippine political environment. Framing the approach in this will contribute to the existing literature in the ASEAN region.

The role of SNS in moderating misinformation is also a critical area of inquiry. Related literature supported the idea that motivational factors (*e.g. social interaction, sharing information, seeking status, and looking for information*) became triggers for news-sharing behavior on SNS [13][14]. However, the sheer amount of information shared on SNS undermines fact checking. Therefore, hypothesizing why the design of SNS exacerbates the spread of misinformation is a vital objective of this paper.

Aside from this, a person's intrinsic motivation is also an angle to look at. Users have their own needs and wants like getting entertained, staying informed, or staying a part of a social circle [15][16]. By examining the online behavior of Filipinos in a politically charged environment will shed some light on this phenomenon.

Lastly, to guide these objectives, this research is framed on this central question:

RQ1: Does the design of SNS contribute to the prevalence of political misinformation?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Misinformation and the 2022 Philippine elections

As seen in academic literature, misinformation is examined depending on the author's intention to mislead their audience [19]. Misinformation refers to deceitful, distorted, or misleading information that does not represent the true state of facts. In retrospect, fake news refers to deliberately fabricated or misleading information designed to appear as legitimate news [20].

Oh et al. [21] state that misinformation happens when people face a scarcity of information they need. Psychology tells us that anxiety is the primary culprit for the spread of why misinformation happens. Supported by Ahmed & Rasul [22], the sheer volume of information shared on social media can overwhelm users. Many users lack the skills or motivation to conduct thorough fact-checking, allowing misinformation to proliferate. Thus, misinformation becomes a norm during an emergency that helps the community understand an unknown situation [23].

With the rising use of social media and journalism, Rappler is a Filipino online news organization created in 2012 whose value proposition is truth-telling and factual reporting [24]. Together with the Google News initiative, Rappler launched the FactsFirstPH project in 2022. This project fact-checked political-related articles published from October 2021 to March 2022. Out of 256 articles they validated, 207 were reported to be false, and 39 were missing context and showed nuances in their claims. These findings indicated how political misinformation became a winning catalyst for candidates with a solid social media presence [25]. Recommendation algorithms heavily influenced the seemingly popularity contest amongst candidates. The significant attempt to use social media for aggressive campaigning amplified the growth of troll farms, fake news, and internet propaganda [26]. The Philippines is a democratic country. Thus, the majority rule applies when Filipinos elect their next leaders. Nevertheless, Rappler's case study illustrated how social media activity boosted a candidate's survey performance. Thus, this current study seeks to empirically explore

whether a user's motivational factor and SNS design prompt political misinformation sharing among voters in the Philippines.

Social media design and misinformation

Studies have been published on the design of social networking sites. These authors dissected the general elements found in these SNS and how they can exacerbate the problem of misinformation.

1. Recommendation algorithms

Algorithms are automated tools SNS utilize to suggest content to users, such as organizing content in a feed or encouraging users to explore additional material. SNS algorithms greatly influence users' experiences, whether online or offline. As a design element, it can do quite a lot of things like (a) introduce individuals to new people and perspectives [27], (b) help users learn about subjects that interest and keep them updated [5], or (c) even raise awareness about social movements [28]. As a drawback, the growing number of items shared on SNS caused an information overload for users [29]. Cognitive overload can lead to confirmation bias which exhibits an echo chamber effect where users are primarily exposed to information that only resonates with their pre-existing beliefs [6]. Consequently, this makes sharing false information much easier [11].

2. Like button

SNS use this button to mark favorite items, rate satisfaction, or establish a sense of approval. In retrospect, the Like button encourages faster engagement of posts that appeal to the viewer. People post frequently when their posts receive positive feedback. The dopamine-induced effect encourages them to do so [30]. Thus, it creates a cycle in which the poster will publish more similar items regardless of whether they are genuine or fake [4].

3. Share button

SNS allow technologies for sharing photos, videos, and web links. The study conducted by Ham et al. revealed reasons for sharing information [31]. His findings found that motivation to establish a social presence, engage in social conversation, and find easy connections were the causes that can be correlated to why people wanted to share on social media. Thus, these results uncover that the share button enables status-seeking behavior more than truth-seeking behavior [4].

Theoretical paradigm and formulation of hypothesis

This study was formulated using the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT). Developed in the late 1950s, UGT emphasized the rationale behind why people purposely choose a certain media and how they utilize its features to satisfy their needs and wants [32].

UGT asserts that media use is affected by both social and psychological factors. Social factors include peer pressure, family dynamics, and cultural norms. Meanwhile, psychological factors encompass individual traits, attitudes, and motivations [33].

The early formulation of the UGT theory focused on traditional media; however, its relevance has recently expanded to include research on the internet, particularly in the realm of social media [13].

Similarly, some studies published dissected the gratification motives behind sharing fake news on social networking sites (SNSs). Wei et al. [34] presented that people are not passive receivers of information but instead actively involved in choosing media that fulfills their needs and goals. Thus, with the help of UGT, correlating the effect of SNS design to rationalize individual gratifications is well-fitted.

UGT's primary assumption is that users pick the best one that gratifies their current needs, whether keeping informed, connecting with others, or feeling entertained. Thus, the present study formulates an empirical model that links each design element with the corresponding gratification factors people experience when using SNS.

The table below summarizes previous research on the gratification factors that were used as a basis for the hypothesis formulated in this study

TABLE I. Summary of gratification factors used in previous studies

| Factor | Description | Citation |
|-----------------------------------|---|--------------------------|
| Information Sharing Gratification | There is a satisfaction from gaining a sense of purpose through helping others. | Crist, S. (2024) |
| Information Seeking Gratification | There is satisfaction from seeking new knowledge or staying informed | Lee et al. (2018) |
| Socialization Gratification | There is satisfaction gained from interacting with others | Apuke & Omar (2020) |
| Entertainment Gratification | There is a feeling of pleasure from consuming or sharing content | Mäntymäki & Islam (2016) |
| Self-Promotion Gratification | There is a need to show that they are capable, intelligent, or talented | Thompson et al. (2019) |

Altruism and share button

Altruism denotes the behavior of offering something to others with no anticipation of receiving anything in exchange. In terms of this study, altruism can be understood as disseminating information and news without considering any personal gain. A Filipino's core value is being helpful to others regardless of circumstance [35]. Consequently, the relationship between altruism and sharing fake news is expected since a share button exists on almost any SNS. Thus, it can be hypothesized that:

H1. Altruistic behavior will be positively associated with the spread of political misinformation due to the presence of a share button.

Socialization and recommendation algorithm

The drive for socialization pertains to the desire for an individual to be connected to his community [36]. In the context of this paper, socializing entails the need to form and nurture existing relationships and engage with others on social media. As part of a social network, Wasserman and Madrid-Morales [37] posit that people tend to trust information shared by family members or friends more than strangers. Moreover, it is also a typical Filipino value to be family-oriented. Thus, in the lens of misinformation, Chang et al. [38] discovered a strong correlation between misinformation sharing and socialization gratification. Hence, given that recommendation algorithms suggest similar content from a user's feed and virtual friends, it is empirical to propose that:

H2. Socialization motivation will be positively associated with the spread of political misinformation because of recommendation algorithms.

Entertainment and like button

Aside from getting informed of current events, social media is used to satisfy the desire for entertainment [39]. Although those who aim to inform and help others are concerned about the credibility and reliability of the information they disseminate [40], those looking for enjoyment may not experience the same sense of duty. This scenario can be seen when a trending post receives many likes. Some have suggested that

although humor is generally beneficial, focusing on entertainment as an objective overlooks the authenticity of the shared information [41]. Drawing from this idea, it can be hypothesized that:

H3. *Seeking entertainment will be positively associated with the spread of political misinformation with the help of a like button.*

Status-seeking and share button

As social beings, people may want to establish an online presence through their social media. Similarly, this could be applied to news sharing online, where people attempt to share news to demonstrate that they are competent, socially aware, or intelligent [42]. When personal reputation is on the line, people tend to be more cautious about what they share. This leads individuals to verify the information they share more thoroughly [43]. Based on this argument, it can be hypothesized that:

H4. *Desiring to have a good status image on social media is negatively associated with spreading political misinformation.*

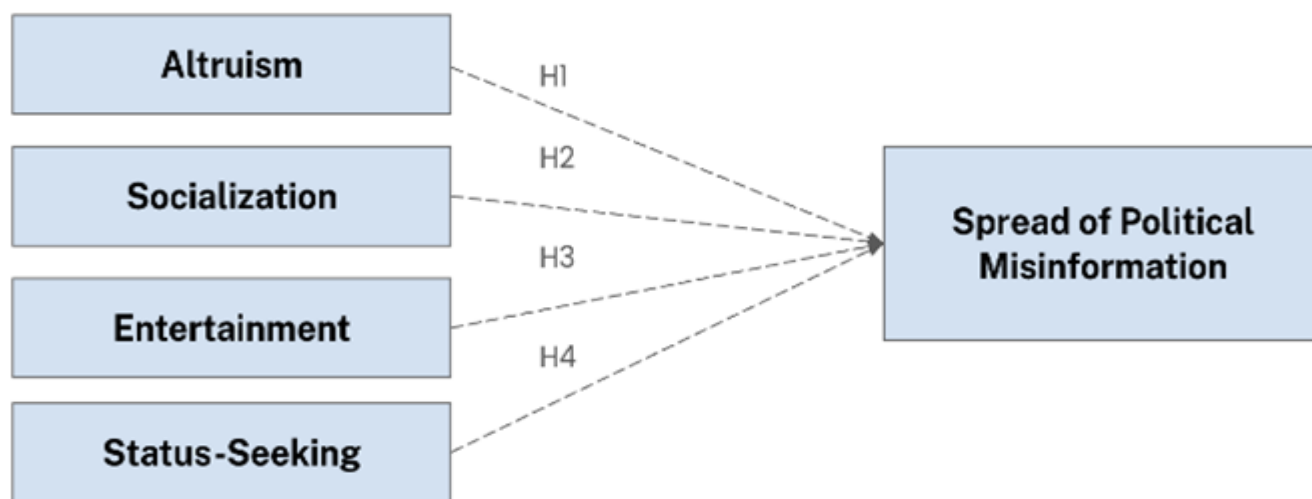


Fig. 1. Proposed Hypotheses

METHODOLOGY

Research design, data collection, and participants of the study

This study adopted a quantitative research approach. According to Creswell and Cresswell [44], this type of research involves an examination of the relationships among variables, which are measured through instruments and later analyzed using statistical procedures.

As a research instrument, an online survey (using Google Forms) was cascaded to test the hypotheses that had been developed. The study sample was Filipino voters who participated in the recently concluded 2022 election and are active users of Facebook or X. These are Filipinos' leading SNS [1]. Thus, a snowball sampling through Facebook was performed to recruit participants. The survey link was posted on Facebook, and participants were instructed to complete the survey and share the link within their social circle. Given that this is research in progress, the survey was piloted to only 30 respondents.

Nonetheless, ethical research was also observed. Respondents must first accept the consent form that outlines that they fully understand and agree to the needs of the study. Participation was voluntary, and the

respondent's confidentiality was protected by anonymizing their identity. Table 1 summarizes the demographic profile of the respondents.

TABLE I. Demographic Profile of Respondents

| Category | Distribution (%) |
|---------------------------------|------------------|
| Age | |
| 18-24 | 26.30% |
| 25-34 | 27.30% |
| 35-44 | 23.20% |
| 45-54 | 15.40% |
| 55-64 | 5.30% |
| 65+ | 2.50% |
| Profession | |
| Employed Full-time | 46.00% |
| Employed Part-time | 10.00% |
| Student | 31.00% |
| Retired | 0.00% |
| Unemployed | 13.00% |
| Education | |
| High school | 38.90% |
| Bachelor's Degree | 45.80% |
| Master's Degree | 15.30% |
| PhD | 0.00% |
| Social media mostly used | |
| Facebook | 43.33% |
| X (formerly Twitter) | 10.00% |
| Tiktok | 16.67% |
| Instagram | 23.33% |
| Others | 6.67% |

The instrument was a close-ended questionnaire that included demographic variables, the medium of receiving news, and social media usage. Participants also answered a five-point Likert-scale survey and displayed to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statements provided. Reliability describes whether the variables used in the study are consistent. A common standard to evaluate this is through Cronbach's Alpha. The reliability of 0.764 using Cronbach's alpha value exceeded the 0.7 threshold [45]. Therefore, this exhibited that the constructs used in this study are acceptable.

Data Analysis

The research used Jamovi, an open-source statistical tool, to conduct descriptive statistics. On the other hand, the construct validity of an instrument assesses how well it captures the desired outcomes of a study. It means that the construct's validity will be jeopardized if any constructs are missing or if unnecessary components are present. Furthermore, one way to establish construct validity is to establish convergence.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed to quantify the convergence of the questionnaire used in the study. Each predictor of the spread of misinformation was used as a construct. Afterwards, the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) validated relationships with these constructs.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

CFA is a statistical procedure utilized to validate the factor organization of a group of observed variables. Its goal is to confirm whether the data collected fits a hypothesized measurement based on an existing theory or

previous research [46]. Each predictor of the spread of misinformation was used as a construct using CFA. Afterwards, the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) validated relationships with these constructs.

From the research instrument, multiple constructs were considered. Afterward, each factor from the questionnaire was assigned by corresponding factor loading and Composite Reliability (CR) computation. Lastly, the model's validity is assessed by evaluating the model fit thresholds. Criteria like factor loadings (should be at least 0.7 or higher) and fit indices such as Chi-square, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Comparative Fit Index (CFI) should at least be 0.90.

TABLE II. Model Fit Indices

| Fit indices | | | | 95% Confidence Intervals | |
|----------------|-----|------|-------|--------------------------|-------|
| X ² | df | CFI | RMSEA | Lower | Upper |
| 648 | 146 | 99.2 | 0.356 | 0.33 | 0.384 |

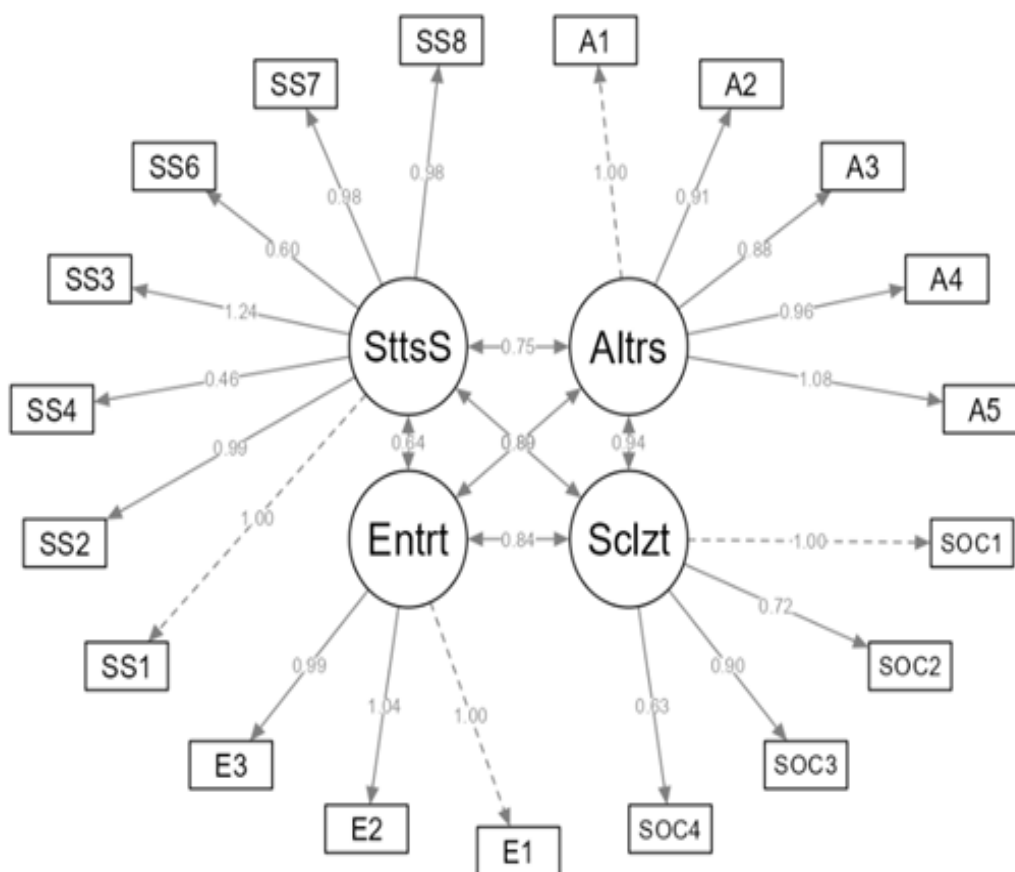


Fig. 2. Path Analysis

Structural Model

To test the hypothesis presented, the structural equation model (SEM) was used for the analysis. Specifically, Partial Least Squares was used to ascertain the significance of the paths. [45].

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Presentation of Findings

To test the hypotheses presented, the result of SEM is summarized below:

TABLE III. Structural Model

| Hypothesis | Path β | p-value | Decision |
|------------|--------------|---------|-----------|
| H1 | 0.042 | <0.001 | Supported |
| H2 | 0.559 | <0.001 | Supported |
| H3 | 0.315 | <0.001 | Supported |
| H4 | 0.023 | <0.001 | Supported |

Interpretation of Findings

The study revealed that altruism, socialization, and entertainment relate to the dependent variable of sharing political misinformation. Among these constructs, altruism had the most significant effect on fake news sharing compared to the other constructs. This finding echoes past studies on the factors of the spread of fake news [7]. Altruism is an act of assisting others through the sharing of information without expecting anything in return. As [47] investigated, altruism is the primary motivation for individuals to provide information voluntarily. In retrospect, the possible reason for this is that during the 2022 election, people are eager to disseminate information they believe could aid others in selecting the best candidate to serve the Philippines. It is easy and convenient for everyone with a single button click. However, this was done without considering the authenticity of the information.

The second significant construct is socialization. This result shows a positive connection between socialization and sharing of political misinformation. This finding illustrates that Filipinos often propagate unverified and misleading information on social media. Social media became a channel for users to keep updated, exchange advice, and express political views. Though this is common, recommendation algorithms on SNS govern content visibility. Consequently, these algorithms tailor-fit to the content the user wants to see. This limits the exposure of an individual to diverse perspectives. Similarly, it becomes a pitfall if the narrative on a user's feed is surrounded by fake news from his social network.

The third factor from the study is users seeking entertainment. Results showed a positive association between political misinformation and entertainment. Reflecting on this result will

draw on the idea that leading candidates during the 2022 election had multiple support pages bearing their names [26]. Reasoning this out, Filipinos have a creative sense of humor and often like or share news stories, photos, or memes that amplify the chance of winning their better candidate.

As the last factor, the status-seeking and spread of misinformation hypothesis was supported. This outcome backs the idea of a past study that asserts that people motivated to establish an online presence will likely want more likes, shares, and recognition on their posts [48]. This status-seeking behavior was also apparent during the win of the past Philippine president, Rodrigo Duterte, in 2016. Celebrity endorsers were also prominent in disseminating misinformation and propaganda during this time. Thus, this construct is not supported since the spread of political misinformation disregards the idea that avid supporters of a candidate seemingly lack the fear that their image will be destroyed in the event the news they share is fake.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

The limitation of this study is that it only presents preliminary results from a relatively small sample size. Thus, future work should increase the samples collected to gain a more robust statistical output. Furthermore, the gathered information through the online survey depends on the respondents' awareness and account. As a result, the respondents' answers may not accurately reflect the actual circumstances. To address this, a focus group discussion can be created to verify the information shared during the survey administration.

CONCLUSION

The spread of misinformation on social media is a multi-dimensional issue attributed to the design of SNS, psychological factors, and the inadequacies of current countermeasures. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach that enhances the accuracy of information shared on these SNS and encourages critical thinking among its users. Therefore, as social media continues to evolve and become part of society, many strategies to combat misinformation are also necessary.

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