Teens Being Tricked: What Are Chinese Teenagers' Perceptions of Disinformation & Why Do They Believe In It?

Tingwen Zheng

Del Norte High School, San Diego CA 92127, United States of America
allyzheng0928@gmail.com

Abstract: Nowadays, have seen any teenagers without any social media accounts and sources of information? The answer would probably be a "no" or "barely." Especially for teenagers, the problem of disinformation may be amplified. This work uses surveys and research to find out about how Chinese teenagers, age 13-18 view disinformation. The results show that Chinese teenagers are too confident about their ability to being able to identify the disinformation hidden in the facts. Furthermore, this is because of the general trend that people are using less and less time to process, or even receive, the information so that they wouldn't be able to think about the information thoroughly before deciding whether it's true or not. This work explores the specific ethnicity, providing context that authors can use for their own research.

Keywords: Social media, disinformation, teenagers

1. Introduction

Social media is playing a huge role in people's daily routines. The current world population is 7.9 billion, and by July 2021, the total number of social media users worldwide have reached 4.48 billion. This is more than half, 56.8%, of people living on this planet, and 99% of them access the social media platforms through a mobile device, which means that they are in close contact with information every day. Furthermore, "the average number of social media accounts is 8.4 per person" [1]. Having access to various social media platforms means having access to tremendous amounts of various information.

In this time of history that information is spreading faster than ever, it is worth noting that the information is not always true, and it leads to the idea of what if the information being spread is misleading the audiences, especially the younger generation. Preconceived notions built during childhood/teenage years can greatly affect a person's life and attitude towards others. The purpose of this study is to look at whether teenagers active on social media platforms are aware of the incorrect information online, especially disinformation. What are the perceptions that Chinese teenagers, age ranges from 13 to 18 have of disinformation? Why do they believe in disinformation? The next section of the paper reviews the related literature, followed by the methodology, findings, and conclusion, which will include the limitation of this work.

2.   Literature Review

For decades, scholars have been discussing the newly emerged hot topic caused by technological advancements--information. First of all, what is information? As early as 2006, Stahl stated that as we adjust to the quickly evolving world, "information is a name for the content of what is exchanged with the outer world" [2]. This also indirectly emphasizes that a significant part of information involves the process of sharing.

Since the early 2000s, the growth of online news has prompted new concerns: the users will be easily trapped in an "echo chamber" or "filter bubble" while they are receiving information [3]. A fundamental difference between social media and other traditional media is the fact that users are not having the choice to decide the information they receive, and the algorithms is the one making that decision [4]. Users would be insulated from their opposite perspectives, as the social media platforms want to keep their consumers attracted by giving users the information they prefer based on what the algorithm knows.

In a study with participants within the age range of 18-34, only 17% of the participants can detect the fake news better than chance, and only one out of the 83 participants can detect it more than 60% of the time [4]. It is already hard for adults to distinguish the reliable information, so it is even more difficult for children. Identifying whether the information is reliable can be a challenging process since it is easily mixed up when distinguishing the intended purpose of deceiving and a genuine discussion of a controversial topic [5].

Incorrect information can modify behaviors [5], so it becomes a significant concept related to disinformation. It is a potential risk to the vulnerable younger generation while navigating the media platforms because "their cognitive capacities are still in development" [6]. As a result of their inability to identify reliable sources, incorrect information can be identified as correct and then passed onto their peers, creating more misconceptions.

Focusing specifically on teens, Herrero-Diz, Conde-Jiménz, and Reyes de Coźar [7] explored that teenagers' motivations to spread fake news on WhatsApp are their interests, trust in that content, and "appearance of newsworthy information." However, in that paper, they repeatedly garbled the use of "misinformation" and "disinformation." According to UNESCO, United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization [8], disinformation is information that is false and intentionally created and disseminated to harm a person, social group, organization, or country. However, misinformation is only "information that is false but not created with the intention of causing harm."

Lastly, regarding the reasons why people believe in disinformation, there is a common misconception. People tend to think that it's completely because of the bias, just like how Gordon Pennycook and David G. Rand stated in their research that reasons why people believe in disinformation include political motivations and heuristics [9]. Further research will be conducted in this study to show the actual role of bias in people's thoughts when processing disinformation.

3.   Methodology

The survey consists of 11 multiple choice questions, 2 questions with a 5-point Likert scale response, 1 question with a 10-point Likert scale response, and a short answer question. The goal was to survey Chinese teenagers between the age of 13 and 18 residing in or have resided in China--regardless of where they currently reside--in September 2021. The survey is anonymous, and participants will have as much time as they want to complete the survey. Participants are encouraged to pass on the survey link to other people to avoid the low response rate as much as possible.

First, three questions ask about age group, nationality, and the number of times logging onto social media platforms every day to target the intended audience. Then, in the first section, two multiple-choice questions are asked to see if the participants already have some background knowledge

regarding disinformation. Section 2 was made with a multiple-choice question and two 5-point Likert scale questions intended to see if the participants trust social media and are confident in identifying the unreliable sources. Then, Section 3 was made up of three multiple choices--yes or no--questions. Each question has two screenshots surrounding the same issue, but one is real and the other is fake for a campaign. Lastly, Section 4 asks if the participants got all the answers right for the last section and if this survey helps call them to be cautious while reading online sources later on in their life.

22 people completed the complete survey. Excluding two people not within the targeted age range of 13-18 and two people whose nationality is not Chinese, there are 18 final effective responses.

4. Findings

First, to define the targeted audience, 82% of the respondents are Chinese teenagers within the age range of 13-18. While all of them log onto social media platforms at least once a day, 55.6% of them log in ten or more times per day.

Then, the first few questions test the participants' amount of knowledge of disinformation before giving out the definitions.
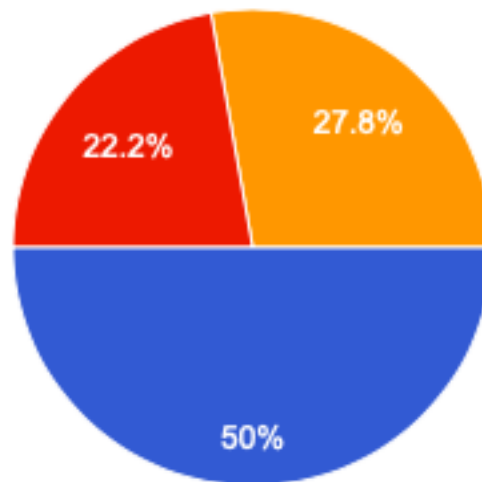

Figure 1: Answers to question #1 in section #1

Figure 1 represents to answers to the question "Do you know what disinformation is?" The red area indicates the participants that responded a "no," the orange area indicates "maybe," and the blue area indicates "Yes."
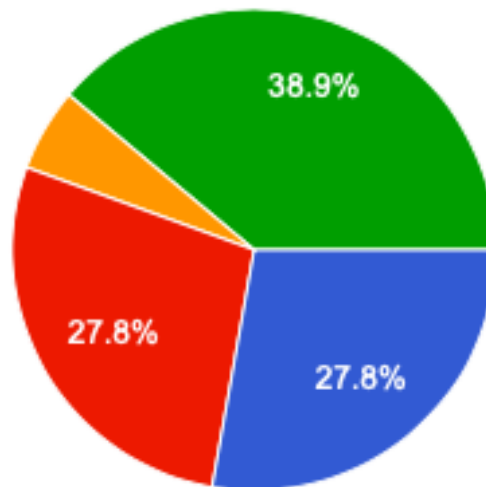
Figure 2: Answers to question #2 in section #1

Figure 2 represent the answers to the question "Which of these possible definitions do you think it is?" The answers were: any incorrect information but not created for harming someone (orange), any incorrect information unintentionally disseminated by someone (red), any incorrect information (blue), and an incorrect information intentionally created by someone to harm another party (green), which is the correct answer.

As you can see 50% of the respondents think they know what disinformation is, but the truth is that only 38.9% chose the correct answer, not including the chance that some might guessed it right. The gap between these two numbers represents how many teenagers are lacking fundamental knowledge that is important in protecting themselves against the incorrect information they're receiving while being unaware of the situation.
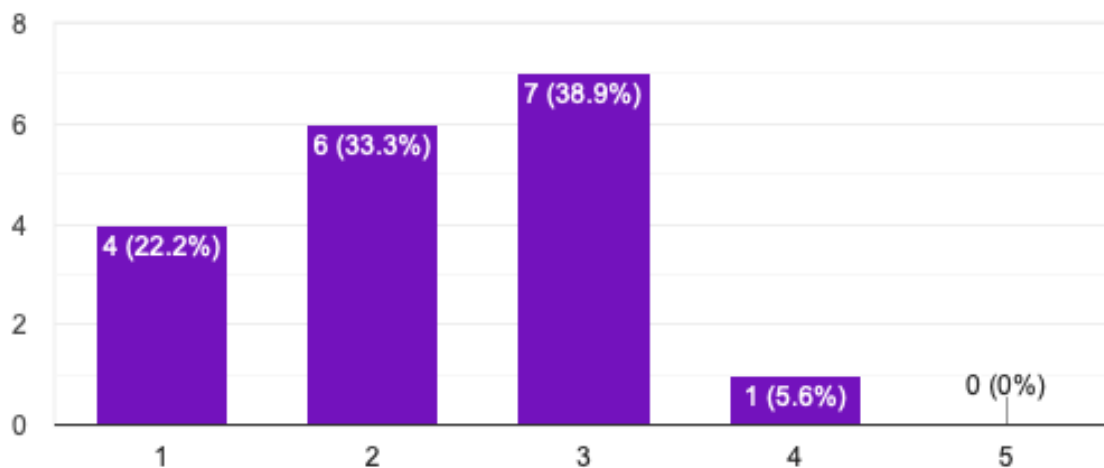

Figure 3: Responses for question #2 of section #2

Figure 3 represents the answers to the question "Do you believe in everything you see on social media?" This is a 5-point Likert scale response, and none of the participants completely believes information disseminated on social media platforms; most of the respondents, 38.9%, chose "3," indicating their neutral position towards the credibility of the information.

Furthermore, when asking for their confidence level in identifying disinformation among facts, 72.2% of the respondents responded with a 3 or more (Figure 4). This further reinforces the claim made before with the responses for previous questions that teens are being way too confident in their ability than their actual ability in identifying disinformation.
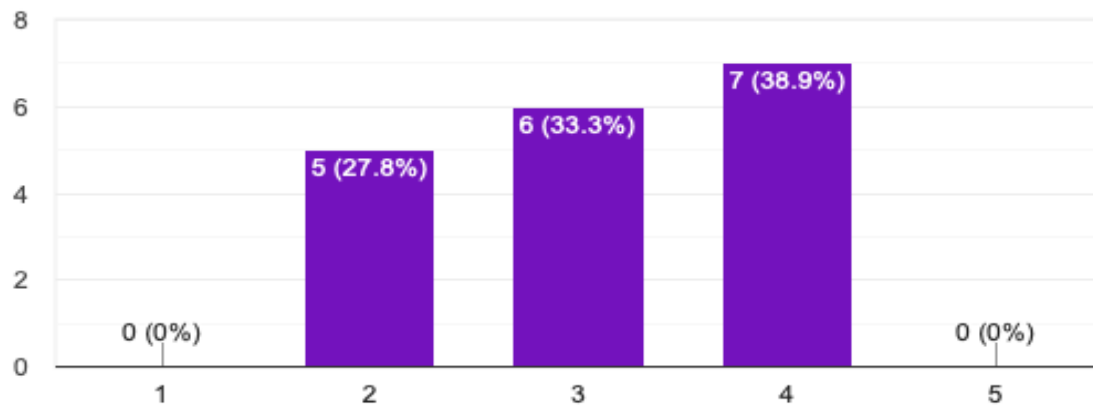

Figure 4: Responses for question #3 in section #2

Next, there was a mini-quiz. For each of the questions, the accuracy rate was between 61.1% and 83.3%. In total, it turns out that only 27.8% of the respondents were 100% accurate with their choices, which contradicts the high level of confidence reflected in the preceding questions.

Nonetheless, the survey had a positive impact on the participants, and 15 out of 18 participants that gave an effective response agreed that they will be more cautious when reading sources online later on in their life after completing this survey. The most useful and main takeaway was the proof of existence for the phenomenon that teenagers are being over-confidence in their ability to distinguish the disinformation.

Furthermore, recalling the point about why people trust disinformation, three of the many reasons are people's lazy thinking, desire for truth, and bias. People are less likely to become prey when they are lazy to think and just accept information that protects their political identity, regardless of the accuracy of the information [10]. This era provides us with information everywhere, and because of this huge amount of information that needs to be received by people, the time for each individual piece of information has been reduced. For instance, the 60-second TV ads are now becoming 15-second Tik-Tok ads. On one hand, someone might say since people are scrolling through so fast, they are less susceptible to the information because they didn't even have time to read it [11]. On the other hand, when people are quickly scrolling through, they might have a glance at something, and it would just have a big impact on them for a while.

People's desires for truth are innate, meaning it's our nature. When there is uncertainty and people need proof that they are right, they tend to be attracted by easy, simple messages that guarantee them certainty [12]. This is also one of the ways in how disinformation is structured so that it would be more impactful. Strictly speaking, this is not exactly the definition of desire for truth, it is more of a desire that people think whatever they're saying is the truth.

Lastly, as you can see from the above, it would not be appropriate to call "bias" a single reason for why there is trust for disinformation. However, it is part of every reason: people are too lazy to think so they believe in things that align with their preferences, people need the information to support what they think is right so they are, etc.

5.   Conclusion

In summary, the work has found that a small group of Chinese teenagers in the age range of 13-18 are overconfident about their perception of disinformation. However, the scale of the participants of this work is really small. Concerning the few reasons why people believe in disinformation include lazy thinking and desire for truth with the perpetual presence of bias, the Chinese teenagers' overconfidence is not as severe, for those are all general trends in the society that even adults might be experiencing too. The findings of this work could be used as foundations in further research about Chinese teenagers, or teenagers in general's, behavior on social media platforms and their interaction with information.

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