How Pandemic-related Misinformation Affect China after "Zero-Covid"

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Abstract: Since China abandoned its long-held "zero-Covid" policy and eased its Covid-19 restrictions in December 2022, much misinformation about Covid-19 treatment methods and precautions has been widely spread and fermented on various social media, seriously misleading the public and causing specific effects on society. Based on this, this study interviewed several people of different ages and occupations who experienced this period, learning about their personal experiences and feelings about pandemic-related misinformation. To explore how news audiences perceive and respond to misinformation in the specific context of the pandemic outbreak, some potential economic and social impacts brought by it, as well as attempt to provide some insights into the fight against misinformation in China and the world.

Keywords: misinformation, Covid-19, China, social media

1. Introduction

In December 2022, China abandoned its long-held hyper-restrictive "zero-Covid" policy and eased its Covid-19 restrictions, including removing Covid testing booths, health code scanning signs, and lockdown barriers across the country.

But also in December, an exponential increase in infections was accompanied by increased misinformation on dealing with the virus. To further investigate the impact of the prevalence of misinformation on the lives of the audience during this particular period, this study conducted interviews with 10 Chinese participants who had witnessed the entire course of the pandemic in China. Through an analysis based on the interview content, this study found that much misinformation appeared on social media after "zero-Covid" in China had more or less affected people's lives, including psychological panic and some inconvenience in their real life. Based on these findings, this study discusses the reasons, modes, and influences of the spread of misinformation in a particular period. Experts in related fields and several journalists are interviewed to analyze the phenomena and suggest some suggestions. Meanwhile, it explains the measures China has taken to combat misinformation and the direction of possible standards in the future.

2. Background

Canned yellow peaches can help prevent one from being infected with the novel coronavirus, and drinking a glass of water-infused garlic and ginger can treat Covid-19 symptoms. These are just two of the many so-called Covid facts that have circulated recently on China's social media. While online postings tout their health benefits, there is no scientific data to back it up.

Alcohol could disinfect the body and kill the virus, a popular myth shared among friends and family in China, even though such unreliable information could damage people's health. Some information suggests that people can recover more quickly from infection by taking more medicines. Residents have rushed to stock up on over-the-counter medication, such as ibuprofen and paracetamol, as well as the traditional Chinese medicine Lianhua Qingwen, leading to shortages at pharmacies and online shopping sites.
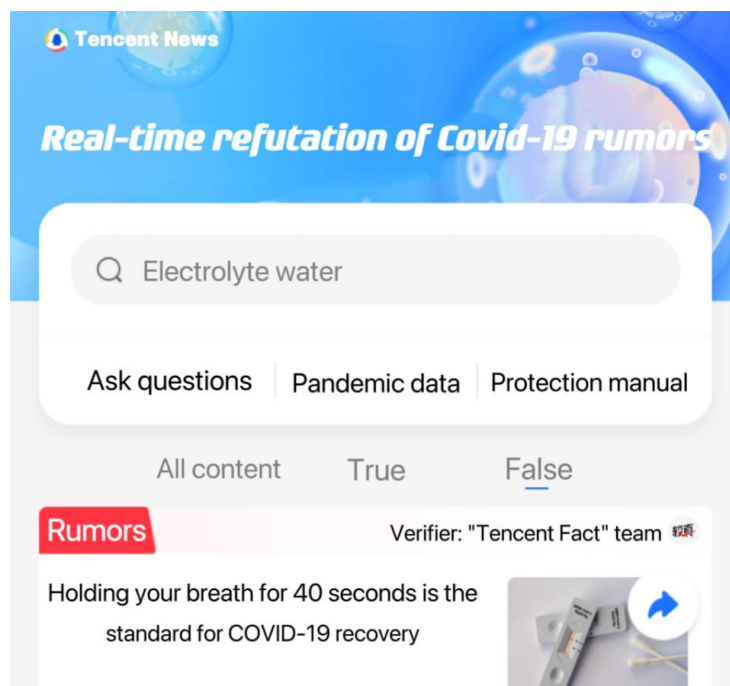

Figure 1: A screenshot of the "Tencent Fact" platform.

Figure 1 shows a screenshot of "Tencent Fact," - an official database in China that tracks misinformation about the pandemic. It has reported 795 pieces of misinformation from 2020 until now, including 29 since December [1].

In February 2020, the World Health Organization dubbed the new coronavirus "a massive 'infodemic,'" referring to "an overabundance of information - some accurate and some not - that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it [2]." The spread of misinformation poses a considerable threat to public health and the successful management of a global pandemic [3].

3. Methodology

This study conducted semi-structured interviews with ten people who had witnessed the Covid-19 outbreak in China after "zero-Covid" to explore their personal experiences and feelings during this period. This study mainly used two methods to recruit participants: purposive direct contact and snowball sampling [4]. Firstly, I interviewed two familiar people in my social circle who often use social media and then invited them to introduce their acquaintances who also use social media.

Finally, ten participants were identified through snowball sampling. In the rest of this paper, P1, P2, etc., will be used to represent participants.

One-third of the interviews were in person, one-third were by phone or Wechat video call, and the rest were by email with written questions. Each participant was asked whether they received some pandemic-related information that turned out to be false later, where did they get the information, why they believed it was true or not, whether the spread of the misinformation has caused problems in their life, what specific impact this information has for them and so on.

4.   Findings

Each participant shared their personal and representative experiences and feelings during the interview process. Several journalists and expert shared their opinions about pandemic-related misinformation.

4.1. Being Scolded for Taking a Shower

"I was scolded severely by my parents because I took a bath," P1 said with a laugh. Not long ago, a post that claimed "People cannot take a shower after testing positive for Covid-19" swept China's social media platforms. That meant P1's parents nagged her for weeks after she insisted on taking a bath. Even now, whenever she coughs, her parents comment: "'You see, let you do not cherish your body and do not believe in science.'"

4.2. Canned Yellow Peaches Were out of Stock

P2 is a super fan of canned yellow peaches. During the pandemic, she had prepared to buy some of it to eat at ordinary times as a comfort. However, after placing the order online, the merchant informed her that they were out of stock and asked her to apply for a refund. When she tried to buy some canned loquat instead, she found the price was much higher than usual.

4.2.1. "Mysterious Oriental Power" Were Being Snapped up

Because the pronunciation of the word "peach" sounds like the word "escape" in Chinese, canned yellow peach was once regarded as a "mysterious Oriental power" to cure Covid-19. According to the JD e-commerce platform data, sales of canned yellow peaches at JD online supermarkets surged in December 2022, up 245% from the same period in 2021 [5]. As shown in Figure 2, the search popularity of canned yellow peaches jumped 1956% during December, according to a report by Baidu Index - an authoritative data analysis platform in China [6].
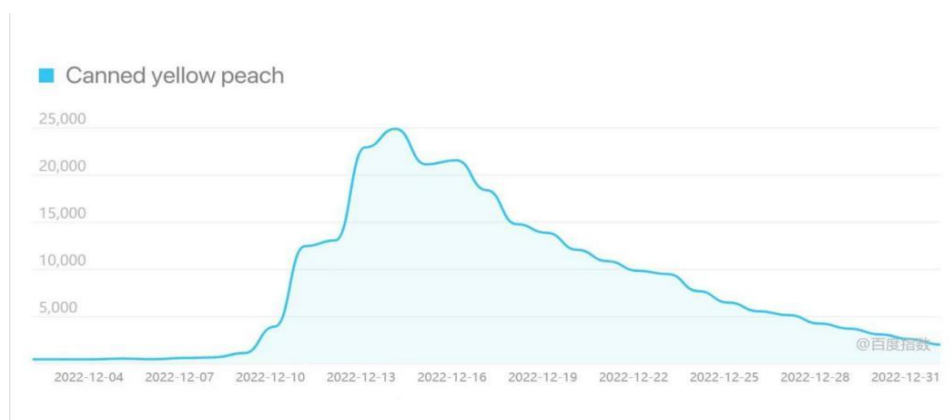

Figure 2: Baidu Index keyword search trend of canned yellow peach.

4.2.2. A Sweet "Placebo"

The buying enthusiasm persisted even after some merchants showed up to dispel the rumor that yellow peaches cannot cure disease.

"Of course, I know it cannot cure Covid-19," said P3, who immediately stocked up on a box of canned yellow peaches after reading the news. "But it is delicious."

"During this difficult time, acquiring information about what is going on outside our homes is something that many people want to rely on," said Drew Whitworth, a lecturer at the University of Manchester. "Because it makes them feel better, helps them believe that the world is still out there and people are working to fight the virus." Like people choose to buy some canned yellow peaches as a sweet "placebo", they need to rely on some information or practical products to release their pressure and negative emotions during a difficult time.

4.3. Misinformation Never Lacks Audiences and Markets

P4 mainly received pandemic-related misinformation from Sina Weibo, a Chinese Twitter-like platform. Much misinformation is under the cloak of science and guided by the premise of "experts say". Some even added pictures, data, and cases to back them up, which made P4 believe it because of its false persuasiveness.

P5 also mentioned that some organizations or individuals deliberately fabricate false information on the Internet to gain attention or clicks to achieve profits or other purposes. Meanwhile, P5 indicated that people can share information with others on social media with just a click, and therefore misinformation on social media can quickly reach many individuals, which can cause confusion and unnecessary anxiety among the public [7].

"This kind of fake news never lacks audiences and markets," said P6, a senior editor at a provincial media agency. "When people pay close attention to the pandemic, any related news would spread quickly, which provides opportunities for the wide spread of rumors and misinformation." Personal anxieties about the pandemic can amplify the spread of misinformation [8]. Under periods of such uncertainty and fear, the public is more susceptible to misinformation, which in turn self-perpetuates [9]. Especially during a public health emergency, misinformation propaganda endangers people by installing misleading risk perceptions and health behaviors and reinforcing social fear [10].

4.4. Strategies to Combat and Identify Pandemic-related Misinformation

4.4.1. Improve Journalistic Literacy and Ability to Check Facts

Social media platforms can skip traditional gatekeepers, such as professional editors or peer reviewers, and have contributed to the increased dissemination of misinformation [11].

"Our job requires every news we publish to be strictly vetted, so I cannot trust the information on social media that even have no sources," as a journalist for a city television station, P7 is familiar with the well-established censorship mechanism of the news agency. "It is necessary for news audiences consciously improve their journalistic literacy and ability to check facts." News literacy interventions can influence people's perceptions of the credibility of information on social media [12]. Learning more about the process of news production, and what constitutes high-quality and reliable news, can improve audiences' ability to identify the authenticity of the information.

4.4.2. Reliable Information Sources Are Important

For general news audiences lacking contact methods from traditional official channels to verify

information authenticity, Drew advised people should always be skeptical of received information and look at stories from different perspectives or on different sides of the divide.

He also suggested that people avoid using social media as one's news source. "Using it to stay in touch with friends, sure, but if you want news, look at reputable news websites and scientific reports or publications."

4.4.3. Official Actions Are Necessary

In September 2022, the Cyberspace Administration of China launched a unique campaign against online rumors and misinformation, requiring local cyberspace departments to pay the closest attention to removing fake posts online. Until now, more than 2,700 illegal accounts spread pandemic-related words on critical websites and online platforms were traced and shut down, according to the latest announcement published in January [13].

Though refuting misinformation is necessary, post-action is less effective than pre-action, such as publishing accurate, specific, and high-quality information [11]. Authorities could issue some measures to increase scrutiny of sources on online platforms, such as implementing an audit mechanism of published data and the use of a fact-checking system, and so on.

5. Discussion

Misinformation may have minor and innocuous effects on people, such as being scolded by family members who believe the rumor or cannot buy their favorite snacks because they were snapped up. But some misinformation may also affect people's physical health and reinforce social fears, such as encouraging people to drink alcohol or take medicine to prevent the virus.

Although the mix with many true and false information may cause trouble, people must seek information, especially in special times like Covid-19. Individuals need to rely on some external data to help them believe that the world is still out there and people are working to fight the virus. Sometimes they may know the information is not accurate. However, they still choose to take some actions to help themselves ease anxiety, such as buying canned yellow peaches as emotional sustenance.

When people pay close attention to the pandemic, any news related to it spreads quickly, which provides an opportunity for rumors and misinformation to spread widely. Some organizations or individuals take advantage of people's psychological characteristics to deliberately fabricate false information on the Internet to gain attention and clicks to achieve profit or other purposes. The nature of social media, which can share information with others with just a simple click, makes the spread of misinformation more widespread and rapid.

As for the strategies to combat pandemic-related misinformation, traditional news media agencies can take the initiative to help news audience improve their news literacy and fact-checking ability. For example, you are letting them further understand the news production process, the constituent elements of high-quality and reliable communication, and so on. News audiences should always be skeptical of the information they receive and avoid receiving information from just one channel. Instead, they are supposed to verify the authenticity of news facts from different channels and get information from reputable news media rather than taking social media as news sources. Meanwhile, official agencies should attach great importance to eliminating misinformation online. In addition to some post-actions such as tracking rumors and timely clarifying them and taking appropriate penalties, some regulations can also be issued to find ways to improve the quality and accuracy of published information and try to stop the spread of misinformation at the beginning.

6. Conclusion

During this pandemic, the widely spread misinformation on social media has impacted citizens' personal lives and the social economy. China's official agencies have taken steps to combat misinformation during the pandemic, but single efforts are insufficient. The influence of the rampant false news can be further contained by improving the level of traditional media's agenda setting, cultivating audiences' news literacy and independent thinking ability, and checking facts through multiple channels. Meanwhile, social media should be avoided using as an accurate and reliable source of news.

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