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OLDER ADULTS' RESPONSE STRATEGIES TO MISINFORMATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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Older adults, typically defined as age 60+ (United Nations, 2017), have increasingly joined online platforms such as Facebook and Instagram (Auxier & Anderson, 2021; Cotten et al., 2021). As such users navigate social media, they are confronted with the challenge of discerning credible content, particularly exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Butcher, 2021; Pehlivanoglu et al., 2022; Pennycook et al., 2020).

While some studies suggest that older adults may contribute to the spread of misinformation online (Brashier & Schacter, 2020; Guess et al., 2019), how this population responds to false information and what role sociodemographic factors and digital skills play in this process has been underresearched. Existing scholarship on the sharing of misinformation among older adults presents a complex picture, with findings that are mixed. For instance, Guess and colleagues (2019) challenge the notion that sharing misinformation is as prevalent among older adults as popular accounts suggest. However, insights from another study note an age-related pattern in the sharing of false news on social media (Moretto et al., 2022).

Building on this prior work, this study explores how this demographic responds to misinformation on social media through the following research questions:

RQ1: How popular are various response strategies to misinformation on social media among adults aged 60+?
RQ2: What is the relationship between older adults' internet experiences and skills, and their response strategies to misinformation on social media?
RQ3: What sociodemographic factors relate to which and how many types of response strategies older adults employ when encountering misinformation on social media?

Methods

In Fall 2023, we surveyed 2,000 adults aged 60+ about their internet uses including their response strategies to misinformation on social media. Since our research

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questions concern experiences on social media, we restrict the analyses to social media users. Three percent of respondents indicated that they never use social media, and were therefore excluded from the analyses, resulting in a final sample of 1,941 social media users. All respondents in our sample passed an attention-check question (Berinsky et al., 2014). To be representative of the national population, we apply weights based on age, gender, race, and education.

Dependent Variable

*Response strategies to misinformation encountered on social media***.** We developed a list of misinformation response strategies based on existing literature (Munyaka et al., 2022; Wasike, 2023; Zhou et al., 2023). The survey asked the following question: "Have you ever done any of the following in response to content you saw on social media that you thought was false? Check all that apply." with these options:

- Explicitly challenged, corrected, or questioned the content
- Checked the source of the content to verify its credibility
- Used a fact checker website to verify the content
- Searched for other sources to verify the content
- Read the comments to see if other users shared your perspective
- Used your intuition or "gut feeling" to know if the content was true or false
- Defriended or unfollowed someone because they shared the content
- Reported or flagged the content
- None of the above

We created two recodes of the measure: a) a continuous variable ranging from 0-8 indicating how many of the misinformation strategies respondents reported using; and b) a variable for whether the respondent used any of the misinformation strategies.

Independent Variables

Sociodemographics. [Full paper includes details of how we measured age, gender, education, socioeconomic resources, disability.]

Internet Experiences and Skills. We included three measures related to respondents' internet experiences given that digital inequality scholarship has shown these to be important for how people incorporate information and communication technologies into their lives: autonomy of use, frequency of use, and social media skills. [The full paper includes measurement details.]

Analytical procedure

To address the first research question, we report on the prevalence of using various misinformation response strategies. Next, we examine the relationship of internet experiences and skills with the use of misinformation response strategies (RQ2), using bivariate and then regression analyses. To address the third research question, we look at how use of misinformation strategies relates to sociodemographic factors using both logit (any such use) and OLS (number of response strategies used) regressions. [Tables and figures are provided for each RQ in the full paper.]

The use of misinformation response strategies (RQ1)

Many respondents (65.6%) employ at least one strategy when encountering false information on social media. The most popular approach is to read the comments to see if other users shared the respondent's perspective (35.0%), followed by checking the source of the content to verify its credibility (34.7%). Defriending or unfollowing someone because they shared the content was the least used misinformation response strategy (15.3%) of the ones listed on the survey, perhaps not surprisingly as it is a much more drastic and permanent action. On average, respondents used two strategies to deal with misinformation.

Use of misinformation strategies by internet experiences and skills (RQ2)

The second research question delves into the relationship between digital experiences (autonomy of use, social media skills, frequency of use) and the utilization of misinformation response strategies. Digital experiences are closely linked to the use of response strategies. Specifically, frequency of internet use is related to misinformation response strategies, whereby (68.5%) of regular users utilize response strategies compared to 40.1% of less frequent users, the former averaging 2.2, the latter 0.9 response strategies. The most highly skilled users are much more likely (85.0%) to take advantage of response strategies than the least skilled (45.4%) and they also use more such response strategies (3.2 vs 1.1, respectively).

Use of misinformation response strategies by sociodemographic background (RQ3)

Our final research question asked what sociodemographic factors relate to whether and how many types of response strategies older adults employ when encountering misinformation on social media. Those with higher educational attainment (bachelor's degree or higher) and disabled people are more likely to use any misinformation response strategy. Additionally, as age increases, individuals are less likely to use any misinformation strategy. These findings generally also hold for number of response strategies used. Higher education levels and being disabled are associated with an increase in the number of misinformation response strategies. Higher age is also associated with a decrease in the number of misinformation response strategies used.

Discussion

Our investigation into misinformation response strategies among older adults on social media shows that while many such users approach online content critically, there is room for improvement as about a third do not rely on any of the eight strategies we inquired about. The study offers insights into how using response strategies relates to digital experiences and sociodemographic factors. The findings underscore the importance of considering both social media skills and sociodemographic factors in comprehending people's engagement with misinformation. Data on nationally representative samples about coping with misinformation are rare, which is an important unique contribution of this paper. The study contributes to the evolving discourse on misinformation in the digital age, offering insights that can inform educational initiatives and intervention strategies tailored to the particular needs of older adults.

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