



## A Grounded Theoretical Account of Spreading and Accepting Rumors among the Youth in Yazd

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### ABSTRACT

Today, living in the age of media and information, human beings are exposed to all kinds of seemingly real news and information, the rumored nature of which is hidden from the view. In the face of such unreliable news, people often republish it in virtual and real spaces, which can lead to a significant security, economic and social damage. Therefore, the present study is conducted with the aim of more deeply identifying users' strategies in the face of news and especially rumors in the virtual space and the process of reducing rumor-making and rumor-mongering with a qualitative approach and Strauss and Corbin's field theory method. Based on theoretical and purposive sampling, 24 young Yazdians active in cyberspace, including 12 men and 12 women, participated in the research and their narratives were analyzed. The data collection process was performed simultaneously with their analysis in three stages of open, axial and selective coding. Findings show the central phenomenon of dualism of trust in news sources, whether national, non-national or virtual. News were tracked from credible sources whereas credible and rumor contents were measured accordingly. Eventually, due to the timeliness of rumors and media literacy training, there was high probability of discrediting. The mentioned strategies, such as the temporary reduction of rumor mongers' visits were found to silence rumors.

*Keywords:* rumor reduction, cyberspace, users, qualitative approach, public opinion

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## INTRODUCTION

Today, with the growth and development of information and communication technologies, the life of humanity has undergone significant changes in cultural and social domains. These changes have accelerated with the widespread influence of new media such as Telegram, WhatsApp, Instagram, which have illuminated the temporal and spatial boundaries of communication and interaction, and today's people have benefited from these capabilities. But the intensity and quality of people's use of virtual space is an issue if that is neglected, can pose threats to various cultural, social, economic and even political and security domains (Tolai, 2013). One of the areas where such avoidance could incur damage is the exposure of people to a large volume of news and information with different themes lacking reality and being far from the truth. This study intends to highlight how people perceive such information in cyberspace, whether they act hastily to spread discredited information or media literacy simply force them to avoid republishing those rumors (Khatibi, 2015).

## PURPOSE

The research is conducted with the aim of deeper identification of users' strategies in dealing with news and especially rumors in the virtual space and the process of reducing rumor-making and rumor-mongering.

## METHODOLOGY

To achieve the research goal, an interpretive approach and qualitative method have been used. In terms of qualitative one, Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory was chosen that helped extract the findings through semi-structured interviews. In the course, a purposive sampling of 24 young Yazdians active in cyberspace, including 12 men and 12 women, participated in the research and their narratives were analyzed. The data collection process was through interviews that continued until theoretical saturation. Moreover, the process was done simultaneously with data analysis in three stages of open, central and selective coding. It should be noted that the process of extracting concepts and categories is mentioned in a table and then the story line governing the research is narrated. At the end, a research paradigm model including causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, central phenomenon, strategies and consequences was drawn.

## FINDINGS

After spending a long time and carefully analyzing propositions, 36 concepts, 21 sub-categories, 15 main categories and one core category entitled "Rumor Frustration" was constructed. This category indicated the conditions and strategies that represent the silence of rumors and their suppression. It was to show how rumor-making and rumor-spreading decrease and what factors and conditions play

a role in reducing or increasing this phenomenon. In other words, although news and information and even rumors are transmitted more quickly and to a wider population due to the virtual space, but with the measured actions of activists, increasing media literacy and the timely intervention, rumors could be gradually removed from the orbit of special attention. The society in the context of virtual and real space is dimmed and even forgotten. In addition, the central phenomenon represents the "dualism of trust in news sources" those users often engage in deliberately republishing content and spreading rumors in the virtual space, which incur different consequences for them as well as the society a whole.

In fact, unfavorable activities of news sources as causal conditions of the current research indicate the deprivation of activists from reliable and active media or news sources, especially official and national type. Those activities mostly refer to the lack of timely clarification, conservatism and extreme censorship and actions against sources and media actively covering news and events. The strong possibility of discredit, cautious-skeptic relativism of the audience and the concern of the audience to seek information are the background of the current research that play a role in the formation of the dualism of trust in news sources. In this way, the possibility of discredit as a result of the publication of unreliable news is one of the conditions that activists, having experienced it, rethink their unquestioning trust in the targeted media and news sources. In other words, their trust is threatened. Moreover, the relativistic thinking of the audience and beliefs based on the deceptiveness of news and news networks weakens the unquestionable trust in the news media and provides the ground for weak or moderate trust in the same. But in contrast to the audience's concern for information, it provides the basis for unquestioning trust in different media. On the other hand, the timeliness of rumors, media literacy training, and clarifying actions of news sources are considered to be interventionist conditions that play a role in weakening or intensifying the central phenomenon. In this way, the passage of time along with some conditions such as media literacy training can play a role in weakening rumors or weakening and intensifying trust in news media.

### CONCLUSION

Briefly, the central phenomenon of dualism of trust in news sources, including national, non-national and virtual, shows that users, based on their strong, weak or lack of trust and other background and interfering conditions, when dealing with news and rumors, use strategies such as news from other sources. They use reliable, measured and republished authentic materials. Finally, it is necessary to mention that researches based on interpretive paradigm don't try to create a change and they are looking for description and interpretation of the problem and the phenomenon in question. However, based on the results of the research, suggestions have been



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made in the direction of social reform, which can help not only officials in implementing socio-cultural policies but citizens too will not be forced to accept and republish invalid information and hence, will be able to make decisions based on it.

### **NOVELTY**

Rumors play an effective role in spreading and influencing news and information, especially in cyberspace, but this phenomenon has rarely been addressed in various researches. Exploring the rumor phenomenon from the point of view of virtual space activists is an important point that this research has paid attention to.



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