Study shows vulnerable populations with less education more likely to believe, share misinformation

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As the COVID-19 pandemic threatens public health around the world, misinformation regarding its treatment, causes and cures has abounded.

A University of Kansas study has found that vulnerable populations, often those most severely affected by such crises, are also at a high risk of consuming and sharing such misinformation online, while also struggling to assess information's credibility.

What's more, when misinformation is related to a topic people are personally involved in, they are more likely to believe and share it. KU journalism and mass communications researchers conducted a study in which they presented low-income, older African Americans a dubious health-related story, then conducted surveys and in-person interviews to learn more about how they assessed it. They found that formal education, combined with recent participation in non-degree continuing education education on digital and information literacy, predicted how well people would assess faulty information. The researchers also found topic involvement increased the likelihood of sharing misinformation and that participants were better at assessing the credibility of a source than the content of information.

"One of the reasons I think this study is important is that it shows the importance of continuing education, especially for older adults," said Hyunjin Seo, associate professor of journalism & mass communications at KU. "We know income, education level and other factors are vital in how people assess information. Our study tried to capture the intersection of those factors."

The study, forthcoming in the journal New Media & Society, was written by Seo, Matthew Blomberg and Darcey Altschwager, graduate students, and Hong Tien Vu, assistant professor of journalism and mass communications, all at KU. The researchers presented an article on vaccinations containing misinformation to a group of low-income, older African American residents, an especially vulnerable population with lower levels of digital access and use, then conducted surveys and interviews on how they analyzed the information. The majority of

respondents' highest level of education was high school, but that alone didn't predict who among them best analyzed the information.

"We found those with higher levels of education and who attended computer class sessions, both formal and informal forms of education, were more likely to accurately assess source credibility," Seo said. "However, it was not associated with their ability to evaluate content credibility, including argument quality. For our respondents, assessments of content credibility, as opposed to source credibility, were far more challenging."

Those who had higher levels of educational attainment but hadn't attended computer literacy classes didn't necessarily fare as well. The informal classes were a series of computer and information literacy sessions a KU research center presented at a senior center that serves low-income, older black Americans. Attendance at the classes was the highest statistical indicator of how a respondent analyzed the information. Many respondents said the story was credible, as it claimed it was associated with a Harvard study claiming vaccines were dangerous.

Researchers also found the more closely a person was connected to the topic, the more likely they were to say they would share it via social media. Several respondents reported talking with family about vaccinations for grandchildren and those who had heard skepticism about vaccines were more likely to say they would share. That is significant, not only because health is a major concern for older adults, but because a bulk of misinformation about the novel coronavirus and COVID-19 are currently circulating. Older adults and minority populations are being hit especially hard by the pandemic, increasing their involvement with the topic, in turn increasing their likelihood to take in misinformation and share it with others.

"This is an important moment, from a topic involvement standpoint. We're seeing that certain populations are more affected by COVID-19, and the population we looked at in this study are among the most affected," Seo said. "Our study found when people have low knowledge of a topic but feel highly involved with it, they are more likely to assess a false story on the topic as credible."

Respondents did fare better in assessing source credibility, but the lower likelihood of adequately analyzing content credibility shows research should continue to examine how both play a role in consuming and sharing misinformation. The study was also novel in that it examined both formal and informal education, where previous studies had focused solely on formal education. For society, the findings illustrate the importance of developing and delivering non-degree continuing education in information and technology literacy for vulnerable and underserved populations instead of standardized approaches, especially as methods of spreading misinformation continue to evolve.

"As a society, we need to think of ways to offer continuing education, especially for those who are vulnerable," Seo said. "We heard over and over how the digital and information literacy program we offered was tailored to their interests. That tells us we need to be more intentional in developing education for specific groups of people."

Provided by University of Kansas

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