

# What makes COVID-19 misinformation so tough to stop on social media

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A recent study highlights two of the reasons that misinformation about COVID-19 is so difficult to tackle on social media: most people think they're above average at spotting misinformation; and misinformation often triggers negative emotions that resonate with people. The findings may help communicators share accurate information more effectively.

"This study gives us more insight into how users respond to [misinformation](#) about the pandemic on [social media platforms](#)," says Yang Cheng, first author of the study and an assistant professor of communication at North Carolina State University. "It also gives us information we can use to share accurate information more effectively."

For this study, researchers conducted a survey of 1,793 U.S. adults. The survey asked a range of questions designed to address four issues: the extent to which study participants felt they and others were affected by COVID-19 misinformation online; the extent to which misinformation triggered negative emotions; their support for government restrictions on social media and misinformation; and their support for media literacy training and other corrective actions.

One of the most powerful findings was that study participants overwhelmingly thought that other people were more vulnerable to misinformation. This phenomenon is known as the "third-person effect," which predicts that people perceive [media messages](#) as having a greater effect on others than on themselves.

"This makes it harder to get people to participate in media literacy education or training efforts, because it suggests that most people think everyone else needs the training more than they do," Cheng says.

The researchers also found that content containing misinformation was likely to evoke negative emotions such as fear, worry and disgust. That's troubling for two reasons.

"First, people are likely to act on content that evokes negative emotions, and that includes sharing information on social media," Cheng says.

"Second, messages that are focused on emotions are more easily transmitted on [social media](#) than content that is neutral—such as abstract scientific information."

However, Cheng also notes that science communicators could make use of this information.

"Since fear, worry, or other negative emotions can facilitate information seeking, or encourage people to avoid specific behaviors during a crisis, communicators may want to consider using these emotional messages to convey [accurate information](#) about COVID-19 and public health."

The researchers also found that the better an individual thought he or she was at detecting misinformation in relation to everyone else, the more likely that individual was to support both government restrictions on misinformation and corrective actions, such as [media](#) literacy education. Participants who experienced [negative emotions](#) were also more likely to support government restrictions.

**More information:** Yang Cheng et al, The presumed influence of digital misinformation: examining US public's support for governmental restrictions versus corrective action in the COVID-19 pandemic, *Online Information Review* (2020). [DOI: 10.1108/OIR-08-2020-0386](https://doi.org/10.1108/OIR-08-2020-0386)

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