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Singapore

## 6 in 10 people in Singapore have received fake COVID-19 news, likely on social media: Survey

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SINGAPORE: While trust in official media sources remains high in Singapore, six in 10 of the participants in a local study have received fake news about COVID-19 on social media.

Social media was cited as the preferred source of information on the outbreak for the public, and the most prevalent channels used to share COVID-19 information are messaging platforms, which include WhatsApp, Telegram and Facebook Messenger.

These were some of the findings released on Thursday (May 21) as part of an ongoing study by the National Centre of Infectious Diseases (NCID) on the Singapore population's knowledge, risk perception and behaviour during the COVID-19 outbreak.

The study found that 78 per cent of the respondents who recirculated news and information about the coronavirus did so on messaging platforms. About 35 per cent shared the information on social media and about 42 per cent did so by word of mouth.

NCID head of research Mark Chen said that they noticed there was a link between people who shared information frequently and behaviour like panic buying.

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"The people who say that they will recirculate information all the time, they may be the ones most susceptible to also adopt some of these behaviours like panic buying," he said. "That's one of the reasons why it's important to look at some of these narratives that are going around and then to find practical ways to counter-message some of these things, if needed."

Despite the prevalence of social media, the vast majority or more than 90 per cent in the NCID surveys trusted communications and information from official government sources, and this was linked to a readiness to adopt recommended behaviour to safeguard against COVID-19.

"These observations validate the idea that the perceived credibility of health authorities is important to reduce the spread of infection and control outbreaks," said researchers.

The findings were from a series of surveys involving 700 participants that were conducted fortnightly since the end of January. NCID aims to expand the study cohort size to 2,000, and members of the public can [sign up for it on the NCID website](#).

This is one of four studies on the social and behavioural aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic shared by researchers.

A study by the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information from the Nanyang Technological University also found that there has been an unprecedented amount of information received by the public since January across all social media platforms, much of which is inaccurate or false.

Researchers have use the term "infodemic" to describe this tsunami of information surrounding COVID-19. It refers not only to a deluge of information, but to the fact that the information could not be verified and much of it is probably not accurate, said NTU's Professor May O Lwin.

"Our own finding was recognising that more than half of the information that's being circulated on different platforms are coming from non-traditional sources," she said.

She noted that in the past three or four years, there has been a greater use of social media platforms, especially WhatsApp.

"So on WhatsApp, people feel like they have some kind of anonymity, some kind of privacy because it's your own group, and within an in-group setting, people are more likely to share information," she said.

From that setting, where it could involve family members or good friends, it may then spread to other platforms.

She added that while there have been cases of fabricated content or misleading information being spread, much of it can be due to the unintended spreading of misinformation.

"There are actually more malicious types of fake news dissemination that's going on ... from our experience, it doesn't seem like Singapore has as much of that going on as some of the other countries," she said.

One other study by NCID aims to find out the disease experience of COVID-19 patients through in-depth interviews. It has found that many participants who had mild symptoms found it hard at first to decide whether to seek medical care.

"The triangulation of information and guidelines from various sources such as workplaces, media, the Ministry of Health's contact tracing team – prompted them to seek care which could prevent further transmission of the illness," said a press release on the studies.

A fourth study by NUS' Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, NCID and the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information will look at the perceptions of efforts taken to mitigate community transmission of COVID-19.

Given how the outbreak in Singapore has disproportionately affected migrant workers, the research team is already working to establish a series of e-platforms to study migrant workers' experiences of life under COVID-19 restrictions. A wider community study will also be conducted over the next year or so.

"Understanding how the public perceives and behaves during an outbreak and afterwards is a critical component of designing effective prevention strategies, allowing for better community

engagement, and building greater resilience,” said Professor Leo Yee Sin, executive director of NCID.