



RESEARCH PAPER

Manipulating Public Perception: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Political Headlines on Pakistani Social Media

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ABSTRACT

This study examines political headlines on Pakistani social media manipulate public perception. A critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework, combining Fairclough's three-dimensional model with van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach was used to analyze four randomly selected headlines from Facebook. The categories contain political, economic, and sports news where the research explores the strategic use of rhetorical devices, linguistic choices, and visual elements to disseminate power and ideology. Through textual, discursive practice, and socio-political practice analyses, the study reveals the prevalence of interrogative and exclamatory sentences, hyperbole, and selective information omission to create sensationalism and emotional engagement. The findings demonstrate how social media editors exploit these techniques to portray specific narratives, such as government weakness and opposition strength, and to politicize various news categories. The analysis further highlights the impact of visual cues, including images of prominent figures and strategic color schemes, in shaping audience interpretation. This research underscores the importance of critical media literacy in understanding the manipulative potential of social media headlines and emphasizes the need for ethical journalism practices, including transparency and fact-checking. It recommends future research to explore the long-term impact of these headlines on public opinion and the role of social media algorithms in news dissemination, while also advocating for stricter platform accountability and transparency in image manipulation.

KEYWORDS Critical Discourse Analysis, Manipulation, Public Perception, Social Media Headlines

Introduction

Social media offers an opportunity to earn through creating digital content for websites. For this purpose, content creators change the structure of the original content, which causes a change in meaning, especially when those headlines are based on political statements. Content creators do this to make the content clickable, and they unintentionally help political parties disseminate their agenda by exaggerating bits of information. Critical Discourse Analysis helps in exploring such use of language. In a political context, political parties run their own social media platforms to target their specific audience. On the other hand, looking at the political interest of people, social media journalists pick up similar content and make further modifications to make it more attractive and clickable. This study uses a combination of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and elements of van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, with a strong emphasis on rhetorical analysis. The study explores how power and ideology are disseminated through the use of language. The analysis is presented at three levels: i) textual analysis, ii) discursive practice, and iii) socio-political practice (Muzaffar, Yaseen & Safdar, 2020; Muzaffar, Chohdhry, & Afzal, 2019). The prime focus is how the text is used to manipulate the audience. This study draws on van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, utilizing the concepts of mental models and social cognition. Rhetorical analysis evidenced the use of interrogative styles, exclamatory sentences, and specific word choices. The data, encompassing political, entertainment, and economic news headlines, was randomly selected from Facebook by searching relevant keywords. From this pool, four headlines were selected using simple random sampling. The publisher's identity

has been anonymized, as the focus of this study is on the content and discursive strategies within the headlines themselves. The limited sample size allows for an in-depth analysis of the headlines, which exhibit complex discursive features and visual elements created using graphic design tools. This study demonstrates how the strategic use of rhetorical devices within Pakistani social media headlines, such as interrogative statements and exclamatory phrases, is used to manipulate public perception and influence political discourse.

Literature Review

Political communication in the digital era has influenced CDA experts to analyze the depth of discourse used to manipulate public perception (Nazeer, Yousaf & Anwar, 2023). Frameworks such as van Dijk's socio-cognitive model (Van Dijk, 2014) and Fairclough's three-dimensional model (Bezar, Iqbal, Noreen, Asif, Azhar, 2023) have been in common practice among researchers who intend to critically analyze discourse. CDA helps researchers uncover the hidden ideology behind text and context. Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model is significant to understand the impact of content found on social media on people's minds. This means the reader interprets content and develops an attitude or behavior towards that content. Rhetorical devices such as the omission of sentences and hyperbole play an important role in evoking the emotions of readers (McQuarrie & Mick, 1999). Pakistan is a country where the majority of newspapers and social media news channels interact with people in Urdu (Awan, Kajla, Firdous, Husnain & Missen, 2021). The Pakistani nation takes a serious interest in politics, where the media shows a tug-of-war between the government and the opposition, and the public enjoys it (Khuhro, Memon, Gill & Khan, 2018). Online journalism may have an extra edge because of adding certain, and sometimes unnecessary, visuals to content that immediately attracts the audience (Lankow, Ritchie & Crooks, 2012).

According to Sajid, Anwar and Ashraf (2019), several types of discursive techniques are used to target a particular desired audience. And sometimes, the same event is manipulated by different media groups with the help of these discursive techniques. According to Mencher (1997), there are some important values in news, such as timeliness: news should be time-bound, meaning the audience prefers fresh content. Impact: news has a positive or negative impact on the audience; for example, people's feelings change after reading or listening to news. Prominence: news about famous personalities has more worth in the public. Proximity: people have affiliations with their hometowns, so any news directly or indirectly linked with their hometown will be worth hearing. Conflict: news based on conflict, such as war, gets more viral. The unusual: people like strange happenings, so anything that happens strangely gets more likes or shares. Currency: issues or topics are chosen that are currently popular in public opinion. Moreover, the author of this book has also pointed out some components of a news story: it should be accurate in structure, complete, brief, and focused, and it should be objective, which means the writer should not inject their own feelings. Furthermore, a news story answers the 5Ws and 1H: what happened, who did the action and who was affected, where, when, how, and why did it happen?

Previous research shows that the layout and design of social media thumbnails are sometimes so attractive that people share them even without clicking and knowing what is inside them (Pentina & Tarafdar, 2014). Other research highlighted that content having appeals, e.g., fear, anger, surprise, attracts more user engagement (Dolan, Conduit, Frethey-Bentham, Fahy & Goodman, 2019). In order to create such appeals, content creators show a biased attitude while playing with the text (Bigley & Leonhardt, 2018).

Integrating CDA, socio-cognitive approaches, and rhetorical analysis, this research highlights how a combination of multiple approaches could help in having an in-depth analysis of the content.

Material and Methods

The current study is qualitative and utilizes Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine how digital content creators manipulate the public perception through social media news headlines. The study has used a hybrid framework, combining Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model with elements of van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, specially focusing on mental models and social cognition. Using a combined approach will allow to examine how language is used to construct and disseminate power and ideology within the Pakistani political context. In addition, rhetorical analysis helps to examine the persuasive strategies used in the selected headlines.

The data was collected by searching relevant keywords on Facebook, i.e., 'news headlines' and the four news items were selected using simple random sampling technique. In the selected sample, prominent news items were from the categories: political, entertainment, and economic. The snapshots of the news items were taken and pasted to word file where the identity of publishers was kept hidden as it is not significant to mention the identity.

The analysis follows three levels:

Textual Analysis

This level focuses on the specific words, phrases, and grammatical structures used in the headlines. It examines linguistic features like rhetorical devices (e.g., questions, exclamations), word choice, and visual elements (e.g., font, images) to understand how they contribute to the headline's meaning and impact.

Discursive Practice Analysis

This area focuses on how content creators use specific linguistic choices to achieve their communication goals. For instance, using question-like headlines to create curiosity and adding exclamation mark to evoke emotions. This depth has been revealed through the lens of van Dijk's socio-cognitive model.

Socio-political Practice Analysis

This level examines the broader social and political implications of the headlines. It analyzes how the headlines contribute to the construction and dissemination of power and ideology, and how they influence public opinion and political discourse. It considers the relationship between the headlines and the political context, cultural sensitivities, and power dynamics within Pakistani society.

Results and Discussion

Headline 1:

پاکستان کو 12 ارب ڈالر ملنے کا امکان! اتنی بڑی رقم کہاں سے آنے والی ہے؟ حکومت نے امیدیں باندھ لیں۔

Translation: Pakistan is likely to receive \$12 billion! Where will such a huge amount come from? The government has pinned its hopes.



Fig. 1 Debt News

The headline contains multiple rhetorical, linguistic, and visual strategies to shape public perception. Textually, it uses an interrogative style to attract clicks and engage readers. The phrase "اتنی بڑی رقم" (such a huge amount) serves as hyperbole, exaggerating the significance of the news. The omission of the word "debt" is a deliberate tactic to create curiosity. Lexically, the use of "امکان" (likelihood) introduces modality, framing the financial aid as a possibility rather than a confirmed fact. The phrase "امیدیں باندھ لیں" (pinned hopes) subtly conveys the government's dependence on external assistance. At the discursive practice level, the context suggests that the aid may be from the U.S., as the image features American currency, shaping audience perception. The inclusion of Imran Khan's image plays a key role in influencing interpretation—viewers may associate the financial assistance directly with him, assuming either that he requested it or that it is linked to his tenure. Moving to the socio-political practice level, the headline reflects underlying power dynamics, subtly undermining the current government by highlighting its reliance on external funds, despite its past criticism of taking loans. It shapes mental models, reinforcing the idea that Pakistan's economy is struggling and the government is weak. The ideological dimension adds irony, as the same government that previously opposed foreign loans is now resorting to them. The visual analysis further enhances the impact—bold double-stroke typography and a color combination make the headline stand out, while the merged images of currency and Imran Khan reinforce themes of economic uncertainty. His facial expression, juxtaposed with the dollar image, may evoke a sense of financial vulnerability. Altogether, these discursive elements demonstrate how digital content creators manipulate narratives to construct power and ideology within Pakistan's political landscape. In addition, the readers may have an everlasting impact on their minds regarding the weak economy of the country thinking them as a beggar. Moreover, they may think the government associated with the debt is not eligible enough to manage the economy. This is the way content creators use specific text and visuals to create meanings.

Headline 2:

آپ کو بختاور کی شادی پر مدعو نہیں کیا گیا؟ صحافی کا مریم نواز سے سوال: نائب صدر مسلم لیگ کے جواب نے ہر کسی کو پریشان کر دیا

Translation: "Were you not invited to Bakhtawar's wedding?" A journalist asked Maryam Nawaz. The Vice President of the Muslim League's response left everyone surprised.



Fig. 2 Wedding Invitation News

The headline consists of various rhetorical, linguistic, and visual techniques to shape public perception. It uses an interrogative style in the present perfect tense that creates suspense and promotes curiosity. The lexical choice positions Maryam Nawaz as the key actor, ensuring the audience focuses on her reaction. The discursive practice reflects a political context, where the question of whether she was invited to Bakhtawar's wedding carries symbolic weight, hinting at the nature of political alliances. Social media impact is heightened by the choice of a sad image of Maryam Nawaz, which may politically twist the event, implying strained relations between PPP and PMLN. At the socio-political practice level, the headline hints at deeper political implications, as the recent collaboration between PPP and PMLN in a long march against PTI raises speculation about whether their alliance extends beyond politics into personal and social relationships. The headline constructs mental models that reinforce the idea of strained ties between the two parties, subtly influencing how readers interpret their political cooperation. Ideologically, it directs public attention toward the strength of inter-party relations and their influence on national politics. The rhetorical analysis highlights the impact of questioning style and image selection, where Maryam Nawaz's facial expression plays a significant role in shaping audience perception. The visual analysis further strengthens the message through a strategic color scheme and image placement, ensuring that the reader's focus remains on her reaction. Together, these elements demonstrate how digital content creators manipulate narratives to stir curiosity, shape political discourse, and influence public perception. People of Pakistan are sometimes interested to observe the ceremonies of celebrities such as in showbiz. The editor of this headline has tried to target the readers in

that sense as they could feel the political event as a celebrity-oriented event where a politician is not willing to attend. The editor might be trying to show the attitude and worth of a political figure where it is refused to attend the ceremony. On the other hand, the other party is shown as raising hands for close ties after inviting them on the ceremony. Overall, creating such scenario impacts the psychology of the readers and they intentionally create curiosity to know what will happen next.

Headline 3:

حکومت کو بڑا جھٹکا! یوسف رضا گیلانی جیت گئے

Translation: A major setback for the government! Yousaf Raza Gillani has won.



Fig. 3 Yousaf's Victory News

The headline employs multiple rhetorical, linguistic, and visual strategies to influence public perception. Textually, it uses an exclamatory sentence and places "breaking news" in the corner to create excitement and urgency. The lexical choices are strong, with the phrase "بڑا جھٹکا" (a major setback) implying that the government has suffered a significant loss, while "جیت گئے" (has won) frames the event as a clear victory for Yousaf Raza Gillani. The omission and twisting of facts are evident, as the headline selectively presents information to attract clicks, even claiming that PTI members "cheated." At the discursive practice level, the headline reflects the political rivalry between the government and the opposition, with different media outlets portraying the event in various ways, indicating media bias. In the socio-political practice analysis, the framing reinforces power dynamics, depicting the government as weak and the opposition as victorious. The audience impact is significant—opposition supporters will likely celebrate this news, while PTI supporters may perceive it as negative or misleading. The rhetorical analysis further highlights the use of

sensational language, where the phrase "بڑا جھٹکا" suggests a crisis for the government, and the word "win" frames the event as a direct battle. The visual analysis complements the textual strategies by featuring a parliamentary setting, reinforcing the legitimacy of the victory, while Yousaf Raza Gillani's image strengthens the association with success. Overall, the headline is carefully crafted to shape public perception, emphasizing opposition strength and government weakness through selective wording, visual cues, and sensational framing. Use of such adjectives and other linguistic choices directly impacts the perception of the readers. The headlines without such a use of language may be interpreted differently but the above one creates a different impact.

Headline 4:

پی ایس ایل ملتوی۔ جس ہوٹل میں کرکٹرز کو ٹھہرایا گیا وہاں کونسی تقریبات ہوتی رہیں؟ نجی ٹی وی کا تہلکہ خیز دعویٰ

Translation: PSL postponed! What events were taking place at the hotel where the cricketers were staying? Private TV makes a shocking claim.



Fig. 4 PSL News

The headline employs various rhetorical, linguistic, and visual strategies to engage readers and create curiosity. Textually, it uses an interrogative style by posing a question about events at the hotel, encouraging readers to click the link. The choice of "postponed" instead of "delayed" creates a stronger sense of disruption, while words like "ceremonies" and "shocking claim" add an element of excitement and intrigue. At the discursive practice level, the headline amplifies the news by focusing not only on the PSL's postponement but also on events at the hotel, making the situation appear more dramatic. The mention of a private TV channel as the source serves as an attribution strategy, allowing the editor to

present sensational claims without direct responsibility. In the socio-political practice analysis, the headline is set against the backdrop of Covid-19's impact on PSL, a highly sensitive issue for Pakistani cricket fans. It influences audience perception by creating a sense of mystery and speculation around the hotel events, encouraging readers to assume something controversial occurred. The rhetorical analysis highlights the sensationalism in the phrase "shocking claim," designed to make the news seem extraordinary. The fear appeal is also evident, as mainstream media phrases like "Covid ate PSL up" dramatize the impact of the pandemic. Visually, the headline uses a set color scheme of blue and red for branding, while the accompanying image strategically features cricket players, officials, and logos of famous brands, subtly blending news with commercial interests. The trophy in the image symbolizes reward and achievement, reinforcing PSL's importance. Despite minor imperfections, such as some individuals being unprepared for the shot, the image remains effective in drawing attention. Collectively, these elements illustrate how digital content creators manipulate narratives through sensationalism, visual appeal, and strategic wording to maximize engagement.

Conclusion

The study has revealed how strategically social media editors use text and images in news elements to manipulate public perception. The analysis of four headlines explored several patterns: i) the excessive use of interrogative and exclamatory sentences that creates curiosity and emotional appeal, ii) the manipulation of lexical choices such as omission of key information and use of hyperbole to create sensationalism and disseminating specific narratives. The editors tried to show government's weakness and opposition's strength, iii) the use of images of famous public figures in order to attract the attention of the social media users who are scrolling the content.

The analysis shows that in political headlines, the focus was on portraying power dynamics and ideological struggles. Even economic and sports related headlines were politicized, using sensationalism and mystery to draw in viewers. The study further highlights the role of social media editors how they can generate content to exaggerate the information. A combination of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis and van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach helps in understanding the strategic use of language found in social media headlines selected for this study. A variety of categories, i.e., political, economic, and sports-related news was sampled for this research in order to present comprehensive results. The application of rhetorical devices, such as interrogative styles, exclamatory sentences, and hyperbole was found in the content that is used to generate emotional engagement and curiosity. The research also explored the importance of contextual factors, such as the political climate and cultural sensitivities, in shaping the reception and impact of these headlines. Ultimately, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the power of social media headlines in constructing and disseminating ideologies within the Pakistani context. It underscores the need for critical media literacy and the importance of scrutinizing the rhetorical and visual strategies employed in online news dissemination.

Recommendations

The current study may be helpful for media students guiding them how to analyze political discourse and create public awareness. In addition, the linguistic students may also get some idea about applying CDA models in analyzing discourse. Such analysis could guide the journalists how playing with language impacts the perception of public that may help them creating content with accuracy, fairness, and transparency. That will lead to promoting ethical journalism. The general public may get an idea about the current usage of social media and use fact-checking and other verifying tools to match the information before believing in it. Apart from that, it is recommended that future research should explore the long-term impact of social media headlines on public opinion and political behaviour in Pakistan. Studies could also examine the role of user engagement and social media

algorithms in shaping the dissemination of online news. It is further recommended that social media editors should be transparent about the use and manipulation of images in headlines. Clear labelling or disclaimers should be used to indicate when images have been altered or used out of context. Furthermore, social media platforms should be held accountable for the content disseminated on their platforms. They should implement stricter policies to prevent the spread of misinformation and hate speech, particularly during politically sensitive periods.

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