



RESEARCH PAPER

The Role of Fake News, Deceptive Propaganda on Social Media in Shaping Public Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

The study has been designed to analyze the impact of fake news on social media shaping public perceptions. Fake news on social media gained popularity in Pakistan during Imran Khan regime election, prompting individuals to question scientific facts, authentic news, propaganda, perceptions of the public and society standards. The study implied quantitative research data from 356 participants from all districts of Karachi. The data was quantified by using SPSS to validate the results and to present inferences by implying descriptive analysis. This study results indicate that people are highly influenced by fake news and extensive use of social media has been used for changing the perceptions of the public and spreading the propaganda in all spheres of life. The significant influence of fake news and deceptive propaganda on social media is shaping public perceptions. It is recommended there must be fact checking news platforms for the audience and media awareness sessions should available online to stop deceptive propaganda.

KEYWORDS Fake News, Social Media, News, Perception, Propaganda

Introduction

The core principles in cascading news and sensitive information are rooted in the notions of truth and the theories of communication accuracy (Brennen, 2017; Orso et al., 2020). In the past five years, social media has redefined the structure, dimensions, and complexity of news. The influence of social media, particularly on political matters, has garnered increasing attention, since social media platforms, especially Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp channels, Tik Tok and Instagram to facilitate extensive dissemination of information and news (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Besides disseminating information, the primary function of social media is to facilitate social contact, communication, and amusement (Kuem et al., 2017). Many social media posts seek support, with reposting intended to disseminate messages through a multiplicative effect (Abbasi et al., 2019). Therefore, the objective of this study is to address the research problem and gap indicating that social media platform providers are inadequately addressing the proliferation and dissemination of false narratives on social media.

Unlimited access to extensive knowledge enables individuals to exchange diverse opinions and values (Rubin, 2019). Nonetheless, the hazards and ramifications of this novel resource remain ambiguous to much of the populace. A notable risk is misinformation (FN). Fake News, despite lacking verification, possesses a credible and professional demeanour, making it difficult for individuals to differentiate it from true news (TN) (Kumar et al., 2018). The effects of FN permeate society; for instance, the dissemination of FN on social media (SM) influences the reactions of governments, organisations, and individuals to societal events. The majority of FN is directed towards a specific demographic to advance a particular ideology by fostering intense convictions and polarising society (Chen & Sharma, 2015). Kumar et al. (2018) asserted that a regular

evaluation of Fake News on social media is necessary to mitigate discontent and violence among societal groups or individuals.

Fake News has emerged as a significant component of Social Media, casting skepticism on the trustworthiness, quality, and verification of information. Research examining the influence of fake news on social media has emerged across diverse domains, including digital media, journalism, and politics; yet comprehensive evaluations of its societal impact are limited. Moreover, despite the expanding corpus of research on fake news (FN) and social media (SM)—a crucial element in combating FN (Tandoc et al., 2018)—a comprehensive evaluation of the societal impact of FN inside SM remains insufficient. The rapid expansion of social media in the last two decades has posed a considerable challenge for government, NGOs and other business companies. Social media users can propagate detrimental information with potentially negative repercussions (Miller & Skinner, 2015). Notable instances include allegations of racist and sexist treatment of employees at Walmart, hazardous working conditions at Amazon, inequitable pay practices at Chipotle, and environmental infractions at Nestlé (Carman & Heil 2021;). Social psychologist Takuya Sawaoka observes, “The internet now allows hundreds or thousands of people to participate in collective shaming, in a way that wasn’t possible before” (Meinch 2021). These cases indicate a significant yet underexplored function of social media in overseeing corporate misconduct. This study seeks to investigate whether and to what degree social media activity mitigates corporate misconduct.

FN is designed to imitate true news (TN) by emulating its attributes (i.e. accuracy, verifiability, brevity, balance, and truthfulness) to deceive the audience (Han et al., 2017; Kim & Dennis, 2019; Kim et al., 2019). According to Burkhardt (2017), fake news is not a contemporary phenomenon; it can be traced back to Roman times when the first Roman Emperor disseminated false information to persuade Octavian to dismantle the republican government. In the Roman era, there was no method to authenticate news, as questioning authority was deemed treasonous. The 20th century initiated a new epoch characterised by various one-to-many communication mediums, including newspapers, radio, and television, which signified the onset of misinformation in news (Aggarwal et al., 2012; Kim & Dennis, 2019; Kim et al., 2019).

Literature Review

FN content, encompassing various viewpoints and scientific consensus on contemporary subjects such as COVID-19, evolution, and climate change, has been established for an extended period (Knight & Tsoukas, 2019). Nonetheless, persistent alterations in political techniques have profoundly influenced the definition, perception, and interpretation of information across all communication levels (Massari, 2010). Aggarwal and colleagues contended that erroneous scientific, political, and belief-based information has substantial effects and repercussions on those who are politically motivated and those seeking to disseminate their ideas to a broader audience (Aggarwal et al., 2012). Consequently, people actively seeking information are unified in their quest for knowledge and political engagement (Aggarwal & Singh, 2013; Lashari et al., 2023). Altering their values is unfeasible and convictions, relinquish outdated practices, and embrace verified news, as well as innovative approaches to enlighten individuals or groups with analogous ideas to adopt new standards of news verification and validation (Cao et al., 2015; Centeno et al., 2015; Kim & Lyon, 2014). Given that Fake News is inherently based on unverified and deceptive occurrences, specialists and scholars have observed an increasing interest in the creation of fact-checking instruments to identify the proliferation of FN content within society (Berkowitz & Schwartz, 2016). Nonetheless, despite substantial investment in innovative tools for identifying, differentiating, and mitigating factual discrepancies (e.g., Adobe's 'Content Authentication' for detecting alterations to original content), the challenges related to the proliferation of false narratives remain unaddressed, as society persists in engaging with, debating, and

endorsing such content (Kwon et al., 2017; Pierri et al., 2020). The disparity between fact-checking and the core values and beliefs of the public deters individuals from advocating for fact-checking, opting instead to acknowledge the perils of misinformation (Kim & Lyon, 2014; Lukyanenko et al., 2014). Consequently, these measures minimally mitigate the dissemination of FN in practice.

Social media facilitates an atmosphere for individuals to share personal, collective, or popular interests, fostering interactions with those who possess similar or differing opinions and values. Individuals within a specific age cohort often exhibit analogous interests due to their shared experiences of growing up in the same historical period (Gomez-Miranda et al., 2015; Zehra, Lashari & Naz, 2023; Muzaffar, Chohdhry, & Afzal, 2019). Individuals' traits are frequently derived from educational institutions, communities, and familial lives (Matook et al., 2015). Moreover, specific age demographics persist in adhering to particular values and views, as seen by the public's reactions to the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential elections and the 2019 UK general election (Prosser et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2016; Muzaffar, Yaseen & Safdar, 2020). Venkatraman et al. (2018) contended that values and beliefs are transmitted over family generations, enabling a societal group to persist in adhering to particular philosophies. Freedom of expression is recognised as a fundamental tenet of liberalism. It is essential for human autonomy, safeguarding the articulation of contentious ideas and information, and is fundamentally necessary to a well-functioning democracy as it enables individuals to critique and hold those in power accountable (Lashari et al., 2023). John Stuart Mill contended that unrestricted speech ultimately facilitates the discovery of truth. However, free expression is typically not regarded as an unlimited right, nor does it inherently take precedence over competing ideals. Mill famously contended that legal constraints are essential for attaining individual liberty, therefore supporting the limitation of expression to avert injury to others.

The expansion of multiple access points for information and news sharing on SM platforms contributes more to the spread of falsity than reducing its impact. Nevertheless, societal acceptance is considered to be a game-changer for controlling the spread of FN by SM (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019). Some empirical studies have analyzed the spread and flow of FN online (Garg et al., 2011; Gray et al., 2011), but little research examines how human judgment can differentiate truth from falsity. To reduce the spread of FN in society, it is important to understand the triangle of FN, the relationships between the constructs from each circle, and the associations that bind the circles, and then analyze the strength of the relationship (Chang et al., 2015; Chen & Sharma, 2015; Matook et al., 2015).

Material and Methods

Using stratified sampling, an online cross-sectional survey was conducted to classify participants based on their demographics, social media platform competency, and inclination towards online news and current affairs. With a response rate of 28.38%, this study sent a questionnaire to 1,224 actively involved individuals and got 356 responses—both partial and complete entries. These rates match results from earlier studies (Arshad et al., 2014; Klashanov, 2018; Malik et al., 2020). Participants for this study come from every district in Karachi, so the sample size is rather large.

Results and Discussion

Table 1
Demographic Information

Item	NO	Percentage	Frequency SM Usage	NO	
Male	137	38.5	Once a week	5	1.3
Female	219	51.5	2-4 times a week	9	2.9
			5-6 times a week	21	6.1

			Once a Day	59	17.9
			Age		
18-24	75	21.2	2-3 times a day	64	17.9
25-34	113	32.3	4-5 times a day	65	18.25
35-44	75	21.2		71	19.94
45-54	78	21.1	More than 5 times a day	62	17.4
55-64	7	2.4			
65 or above	8	1.8	Less than a year		
			SM Experience		
Karachi-South	78	21.68	Less than a year	26	7.3
Karachi-East	72	20.2	1-2 year(s)	47	13.2
Karachi-North	68	19.4	3-4 years	49	13.7
Karachi-Central	66	18.5	5-6 years	55	15.4
			7-8 years	60	16.8
			9-10 years	62	17.4
			More than 10 years	57	16.2

The results show that fresh undergraduates participants' based on the those use social media comprises of age distribution, and expertise with social media comes from the demographic analysis of the study sample. There were 356 people in the sample; female (61.5%) outnumbered male (38.5%). The age distribution of the participants shows that most fell in the 25-34 age range (32.3%), followed by equal representation from the 18-24 (21.2%) and 35-44 (21.2%) age groups. While a rather small fraction (4.2%) were aged 55 and beyond, a sizable section of the respondents—21.1%—belonged to the 45-54 age range.

Geographically, the sample was somewhat evenly distributed among Karachi's several districts. Karachi-South (21.68%), followed closely by Karachi-East (20.2%), Karachi-North (19.4%), and Karachi-Central (18.5%), among respondents. This geographical representation guarantees a varied viewpoint on social media participation in several urban environments.

Participants' frequency of social media use varied; some showed a noteworthy percentage interacting with it many times daily. While another notable amount (18.25%) accessed social media four to five times daily, the largest group of respondents—19.94%—said they used social media more than five times a day. Daily social media usage was also rather common; 17.9% of respondents used it once a day and another 17.9% interacted with it two to three times daily. Less common were moderate use patterns included two to four times a week (2.9%), or five to six times a week (6.1%). Just 1.3% of respondents said they used social media once a week, underscoring how important the medium is in regular digital contacts. With regard to social media experience, most participants had been active users for a significant length of time. While 16.8% had been involved for 7-8 years, the biggest proportion—17.4% had utilised social media for 9-10 years. Furthermore demonstrating a well-experienced user base, 16.2% of users had been using social media for more than ten years. While younger users with less than a year (7.3%) or 1-2 years (13.2%), a sizable section of the sample consisted on those with 5-6 years (15.4%), and 3-4 years (13.7%). of experience. With regular participation and long-term usage patterns, the results show generally that social media is firmly ingrained in the daily life of participants. This emphasises how social media channels could shape public opinions, especially in connection to the spread of knowledge including false news and misleading propaganda.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics

Item No.	Survey Statement	(M)	(SD)
1	I frequently encounter fake news on social media.	4.21	0.85
2	Social media platforms are the primary source of my news.	3.98	0.92
3	I have shared news on social media without verifying its authenticity.	3.75	1.01

4	Fake news spreads faster than factual news on social media.	4.35	0.79
5	I trust news shared by my friends or family on social media.	3.89	0.94
6	Social media algorithms promote sensational news over factual reporting.	4.18	0.88
7	I believe the news I see on social media is mostly true.	3.61	1.07
8	Fake news significantly influences my opinions on social issues.	3.95	0.96
9	I have difficulty distinguishing fake news from real news.	3.72	1.02
10	Fake news affects public perception and decision-making.	4.27	0.81
11	I verify news sources before sharing information on social media.	2.89	1.12
12	News with emotional appeal (fear, anger, excitement) is more believable.	4.12	0.87
13	I rely on official fact-checking websites to confirm news credibility.	2.76	1.18
14	Fake news contributes to misinformation in society.	4.38	0.76
15	Social media influencers and celebrities impact my trust in news.	3.81	0.99
16	Political propaganda is widely spread through social media.	4.29	0.83
17	I have changed my opinion based on news that was later proven false.	3.68	1.05
18	Governments and organizations should regulate fake news on social media.	4.41	0.74
19	Misinformation on social media affects elections and public policies.	4.36	0.77
20	I believe AI-based tools can help in detecting and preventing fake news.	4.02	0.91

According to the results of this research, public impressions are much influenced by false news, which is quite spread on social media. Participants said they regularly came across fake news on social media platforms ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.85$), most of which admitted that false information travels faster than accurate news ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 0.79$). With $M = 4.36$, $SD = 0.77$, many of the respondents also thought that false information on social media influences public policies and elections, therefore underscoring the broad consequences of misleading content. Furthermore, seen as more credible than factual reporting was emotive and sensational news ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.87$), suggesting that people might depend more on subjective reactions than objective validation when evaluating news authenticity. Concerns about political propaganda being extensively shared on social media ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 0.83$) were also voiced by participants, therefore supporting the case that false information shapes public opinion greatly.

Interestingly, although many participants agreed that fake news impacts public opinion ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 0.81$), fact-checking practices had a lower mean score—just a modest inclination to check news before sharing ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.12$). This points to a discrepancy between content verification proactive engagement in knowledge of false information. Furthermore, trust in news shared by friends and relatives was rather strong ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.94$), suggesting that personal networks help false information to proliferate. Participants agreed that governments and businesses should act to reduce false news, hence the results highlight even substantial support for legislative actions ($M = 4.41$, $SD = 0.74$). Furthermore, there was a favourable view of AI-based tools in spotting and stopping false information ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 0.91$), so implying receptivity to technological solutions in countering false content. These results highlight generally the effect of false news on public opinions and the urgent need of media literacy campaigns, fact-checking systems, and legislative frameworks to control false information on social media platforms.

Conclusion

The results of this study highlight how greatly false news and misleading propaganda shape public impressions on social media. The pervasive dissemination of false information, usually without confirmation, emphasizes the urgent necessity of more media literacy and critical thinking among users of social media. The fast dissemination of false news, particularly including strongly emotionally appealing content, points to people's great sensitivity to convincing but false knowledge. Furthermore, aggravating the issue is the way social media algorithms magnify spectacular content, therefore facilitating the spread of false information to big audiences. Unchecked dissemination of false narratives also results from trust in news provided by friends, family, and influencers,

therefore supporting current prejudices and influencing public opinion in possibly negative directions. Considering these difficulties, a multifarious strategy is required to reduce the influence of false news. Stronger fact-checking systems and AI-driven tools should be used on social media platforms to identify and flag false material; media literacy programs should be included into educational curriculum to enable people to evaluate the reliability of online content. Moreover, ethical rules and legal actions must be created to guarantee openness in political correspondence and stop public opinion manipulation. Social media firms owe it to their users' tools to more successfully verify news sources and improve their content control rules. The growing worry over false information emphasises the need of group effort by legislators, teachers, social media platforms, and consumers themselves to create a society more educated and critically involved. Future studies should investigate the psychological and behavioral consequences of extended exposure to false news as well as the efficiency of several intervention techniques in countering false information. By tackling these problems, one can build a digital environment in which people are more suited to distinguish between accurate and false knowledge, therefore enabling a more informed and responsible public conversation.

Recommendations

It is recommended that there must be a social media platform accessible to all to verify fact checking for any misinformation.

- The misinformation or information should be verified before posting on social media.
- Social media is overloaded with misinformation which influences the perceptions of the public, so it is recommended to use authentic sources of information.
- It is recommended that fact checking should be used for the verifying the sources because during political campaigns the social media is used to propagate the misinformation for the sake of popularity.

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