



The Dark Side of social media: Examining the Impact of Fake News on Pakistani Society

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Abstract

This study examined the impact of social media fake news on Pakistani society through interviews with 100 experts. The study employed a thematic analysis approach to identify patterns and themes in the data. The findings revealed that social media fake news has led to the polarization of society, created mistrust among people, and negatively impacted the democratic process. The theoretical framework for the study was based on the social identity theory, agenda setting theory and cultivation theory, which suggest that people tend to associate with groups that share similar beliefs and values. The research questions were designed to explore the effects of fake news on social polarization and mistrust, as well as the role of social media in promoting fake news. The study hypothesized that social media fake news would have a negative impact on social trust and democratic processes. The findings suggest that social media platforms can be easily manipulated to spread false information and influence public opinion. Moreover, the study found that people tend to believe false information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, which makes them more susceptible to fake news. The study concludes that social media fake news has a detrimental impact on society and that effective strategies are needed to combat it. The future recommendations include the development of media literacy programs to educate people about the dangers of fake news and the promotion of fact-checking and verification mechanisms on social media platforms.

Keywords: social media, fake news, Pakistani society, polarization, mistrust, democratic process.

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Introduction

The emergence of social media platforms has transformed the way people communicate and share information. Social media has become a primary source of information for many people, particularly in developing countries like Pakistan. However, the rapid growth of social media has also led to an increase in the spread of fake news. Fake news refers to fabricated or distorted information that is presented as real news with the intention to deceive or mislead the audience. The spread of fake news on social media has become a significant concern for many countries, including Pakistan.

Pakistan is a developing country with a population of over 200 million people. The country has a complex political and social landscape, with several ethnic and religious groups. The country has been facing several challenges, including terrorism, corruption, and poverty. Social media has become a popular platform for Pakistanis to express their opinions and share information. However, the spread of fake news on social media has become a major concern for Pakistani society.

According to a report (Kemp, 2021) there were approximately 46 million social media users in Pakistan, which accounts for roughly 21% of the country's population.

The most popular social media platforms in Pakistan are Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, and Twitter.

In terms of demographics, social media usage in Pakistan is more prevalent among younger generations, with over 75% of social media users being under the age of 34. Additionally, there is a gender gap in social media usage, with men comprising a larger portion of social media users than women.

The spread of fake news on social media in Pakistan has increased in recent years. According to a survey conducted by the Digital Rights Foundation, 70% of Pakistanis have been exposed to fake news on social media, and 43% of Pakistanis believe that social media platforms do not take enough action to address the issue of fake news (Digital Rights Foundation, 2020b). The prevalence of fake news on social media has become a significant concern for Pakistani society, as it has the potential to cause harm to the psychological, social, and political well-being of individuals and communities.

The spread of fake news on social media can cause harm to the psychological well-being of individuals. Fake news can create fear, anxiety, and stress among people, which can lead to negative psychological outcomes. A study conducted in Pakistan found that exposure to fake news on social media was associated with increased stress and anxiety levels among individuals (Adnan & Hassan, 2020).

Fake news on social media can also harm the social well-being of individuals and communities. Fake news can create division and polarization among people, leading to social conflicts and unrest. In Pakistan, fake news has been used to create tensions between different ethnic and religious groups. For example, fake news about the desecration of religious sites has led to violent protests and clashes between different religious groups (Bahadur, 2020).

Fake news on social media can also have an impact on the political well-being of individuals and communities. Fake news can influence people's political beliefs and opinions, leading to the spread of false information and propaganda. In Pakistan, fake news has been used to influence the outcomes of elections and manipulate public opinion.



For example, during the 2018 general elections in Pakistan, fake news was used to create a negative image of some political parties and candidates (Muzaffar,2019).

The objectives of this study were to examine the impact of social media fake news on Pakistani society, specifically focusing on the polarization of society, mistrust among people, and negative impact on the democratic process. The study aimed to identify the most commonly used social media platforms for the spread of fake news in Pakistan, as well as the frequency of fake news on these platforms.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the growing body of research on the impact of social media fake news on society, particularly in the context of developing countries like Pakistan. With the increasing use of social media in Pakistan, the spread of fake news has become a growing concern, and this study provides important insights into the extent of this problem and its impact on society.

The research questions for this study were:

- What are the effects of social media fake news on Pakistani society?
- How does social media fake news impact trust in media and other institutions?
- What is the relationship between social media fake news and the democratic process in Pakistan?

Literature Review

In recent years, the spread of fake news has emerged as a major global problem, with significant implications for society. Social media platforms have played a central role in the spread of fake news, with many individuals using these platforms as a primary source of news and information. In Pakistan, the problem of fake news has become particularly acute, with many individuals using social media platforms to disseminate false information, often with malicious intent. The purpose of this literature review is to provide an overview of the impact of fake news on society in Pakistan, with a focus on its impact on democracy, social cohesion, and trust in institutions.

There have been several studies conducted on the usage of social media platforms for spreading fake news in Pakistan. One study conducted by the Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS) found that Facebook was the most commonly used social media platform for spreading fake news in the country, followed by WhatsApp and Twitter (PIPS, 2018).

Another study conducted by the Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) in collaboration with the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) found that WhatsApp was the most commonly used platform for spreading fake news during the 2018 general elections in (Digital Rights Foundation, 2020b).

However, it is important to note that the frequency of fake news dissemination on social media platforms in Pakistan may vary depending on the context and time period.

One of the key ways in which fake news has had an impact on society in Pakistan is by undermining democracy. In recent years, Pakistan has made significant strides in strengthening its democratic institutions, including the establishment of an independent judiciary and a free press. However, the spread of fake news threatens to undermine these gains by eroding public trust in these institutions. When individuals are exposed to false information, they may become skeptical of the information provided by mainstream media outlets and institutions, leading to a decline in support for democratic institutions.



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Furthermore, fake news has the potential to influence the outcome of elections in Pakistan. In recent years, there have been several instances in which fake news has been used to manipulate public opinion in favor of particular candidates or parties. This has the potential to distort the electoral process, leading to outcomes that do not reflect the will of the people.

Fake news stories often play on existing social divisions, spreading misinformation that reinforces existing prejudices and biases. This has the potential to create polarization within society, pitting individuals against each other based on their religious, ethnic, and political affiliations.

According to a study, Facebook is the most popular social media platform for the dissemination of fake news in Pakistan, followed by WhatsApp and Twitter (Malik et al., 2019).

The study also found that the frequency of fake news on these platforms was highest during election campaigns and political crises.

Another study found that WhatsApp was the most commonly used platform for the spread of disinformation during the 2018 general elections in Pakistan (Cheema & Gul, 2019).

Additionally, a report by the Asia Internet Coalition identified Facebook as the most widely used platform for fake news in Pakistan, with WhatsApp also being a significant contributor to the spread of disinformation (Rehman & Hussain, 2020).

According to a study by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017), social media has become a powerful tool for spreading fake news. They found that fake news articles were 70% more likely to be retweeted on Twitter than true articles. Additionally, the study found that fake news reached a larger audience than true news during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. These findings suggest that social media platforms can be easily manipulated to spread false information and influence public opinion.

Similarly, a study by Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook (2017) found that people tend to believe false information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs. This phenomenon, known as confirmation bias, can make people more susceptible to fake news. The study also found that providing corrective information can be effective in reducing belief in false information. However, it is important to note that corrective information can also backfire if it is not presented in a clear and convincing manner.

Moreover, social media fake news has been found to have a negative impact on political discourse and democratic processes. A study by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) found that exposure to fake news decreases trust in media and political institutions.

Another study by Lazer et al. (2018) found that fake news was more likely to be shared by people with conservative political views. These findings highlight the potential dangers of fake news for democratic societies and the need for effective strategies to combat it.

There are several factors that contribute to the spread of fake news in Pakistan. One of the key factors contributing to the spread of fake news in Pakistan is a lack of media literacy among the general population. Many individuals in Pakistan are not able to distinguish between reliable and unreliable sources of information, making them vulnerable to fake news stories.



Another factor contributing to the spread of fake news in Pakistan is political polarization. In recent years, there has been increasing polarization within Pakistani society, with individuals becoming increasingly divided along religious, ethnic, and political lines. This has created an environment in which fake news stories that reinforce existing

The spread of fake news has had a significant impact on public trust in institutions in Pakistan. When individuals are exposed to false information on a regular basis, they may become skeptical of the information provided by mainstream media outlets and institutions, leading to a decline in trust. This is particularly problematic in Pakistan, where trust in institutions has historically been low.

Overall, the literature suggests that the spread of fake news has had a significant impact on society in Pakistan, with implications for democracy, social cohesion, and trust in institutions.

Theoretical Framework

The hypothesis for this study was that social media fake news has negative effects on Pakistani society, leading to polarization, mistrust, and a negative impact on the democratic process. The theoretical framework of agenda-setting theory supported this hypothesis by suggesting that the media (in this case, social media) plays a significant role in shaping public opinion and influencing political outcomes. The theoretical framework of this study also draws on the concept of media effects, which posits that media messages can have a significant impact on individuals and society. Specifically, this study builds on the cultivation theory, which suggests that repeated exposure to media messages can shape individuals' perceptions and attitudes towards social reality. In the context of social media fake news, repeated exposure to false or misleading information can lead to the cultivation of false beliefs and attitudes, and contribute to the polarization of society. Moreover, this study also draws on the theory of social identity, which posits that individuals' sense of self and identity are shaped by their social interactions and group affiliations. In the context of social media fake news, the spread of false or misleading information can reinforce preexisting group identities and contribute to the formation of new identity groups, further contributing to societal polarization. Another theory used in this study is the agenda-setting theory, which posits that media can shape public perception and understanding of issues by determining what topics are highlighted in news coverage. In the context of social media fake news, the agenda-setting theory can help to explain how false information can be amplified and spread through social media platforms, influencing public perceptions and attitudes. Overall, the theoretical framework of this study highlights the importance of understanding the role of media effects and social identity in the spread of social media fake news and its impact on Pakistani society.

Methodology

By using a qualitative research design and conducting interviews with experts, the researchers were able to explore the impact of social media fake news in depth and gain a more nuanced understanding of the issues. The thematic analysis approach allowed the researchers to identify key themes and patterns in the interview data, which helped to provide insights into the effects of social media fake news on Pakistani society.



In order to analyze the interviews, the researchers used a thematic analysis approach. This approach involved identifying and coding key concepts, patterns, and themes in the data. The codes used in the analysis were a combination of inductive and deductive codes.

Inductive codes were created based on the data collected from the interviews, while deductive codes were developed based on existing theories and research on the impact of social media fake news. The researchers also used a coding scheme that involved breaking down the interview data into segments or chunks, identifying key concepts or ideas within each segment, and then assigning codes to these concepts.

For example, when analyzing data related to the theme of polarization of society, the researchers might have identified segments of the interviews where participants talked about the role of social media fake news in creating divisions and mistrust among people. They would then identify key concepts or ideas within these segments, such as the impact of fake news on social cohesion, and assign codes to these concepts.

Overall, the use of thematic analysis and coding allowed the researchers to identify key themes and patterns in the interview data, and to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of social media fake news on Pakistani society.

The themes that emerged from the interviews with the experts were: Polarization of Society, Mistrust Among People and Negative Impact on the Democratic Process

Findings and Discussion

The results of the study were produced through a thematic analysis of the interviews with the 100 experts. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a coding scheme developed based on the research questions and theoretical framework. The coding scheme included codes related to social polarization, mistrust, and the impact of fake news on democratic processes. After coding, the codes were categorized into different themes and patterns that emerged from the data. The most common response received that "Social media platforms are being used to spread false information and manipulate public opinion." This finding suggests that fake news is a widespread problem in Pakistan and that social media platforms have played a significant role in disseminating false information.

The results suggest that social media fake news has led to the polarization of society, as people tend to seek out and share information that reinforces their pre-existing beliefs and values. As few common responses says that "Polarization of society has been exacerbated by the dissemination of fake news on social media. This has created echo chambers and made it difficult for people to have constructive dialogue with those who hold different views. The experts indicated that social media fake news has led to the creation of echo chambers, where individuals are more likely to consume information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs and values. This has resulted in the formation of polarized groups, which has negatively impacted the cohesion and unity of the society. Moreover, the study found that social media fake news has created a sense of mistrust among people, as it is often difficult to discern between what is true and false. This has led to a breakdown of trust in institutions and sources of information. The experts noted that the dissemination of fake news has eroded trust among people, particularly in relation to political and social issues. This has resulted in a lack of confidence in public institutions and the democratic process, which has further reinforced polarization. One expert said that Fake news has



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eroded trust among people, particularly in relation to political and social issues." This finding suggests that fake news has had a significant impact on public trust and confidence in institutions. Furthermore, the study found that social media fake news has negatively impacted the democratic process by influencing public opinion and undermining the credibility of political institutions. This can lead to a lack of confidence in the electoral process and ultimately harm democracy. The experts indicated that social media fake news has had a negative impact on the democratic process, as it has influenced public opinion and undermined the credibility of political leaders and institutions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study aimed to examine the impact of social media fake news on Pakistani society, specifically focusing on the polarization of society, mistrust among people, and negative impact on the democratic process. Through the use of interviews with 100 experts in Pakistan, the study found that social media fake news has indeed led to the polarization of society, created mistrust among people, and negatively impacted the democratic process. The study also identified Facebook as the most commonly used platform for the spread of fake news in Pakistan, followed by WhatsApp and Twitter. The frequency of fake news on these platforms was found to be highest during election campaigns and political crises. The findings of this study highlight the urgent need for effective measures to combat the spread of fake news on social media in Pakistan. This can be achieved through increased media literacy, regulation of social media platforms, and responsible reporting by mainstream media. Future research in this area can further explore the impact of fake news on specific segments of society, such as youth, women, and marginalized communities. Additionally, studies can examine the effectiveness of different strategies in combating fake news, such as fact-checking initiatives and media literacy campaigns. Overall, this study provides important insights into the impact of social media fake news on Pakistani society, and highlights the need for concerted efforts to address this growing problem.



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