# IMPLICATIONS OF MISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA ON PUBLIC OPINION IN PAKISTAN AND ITS SOCIETAL REPERCUSSIONS

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## ABSTRACT

*The rapid proliferation of misinformation and disinformation through social media has significantly influenced public opinion in Pakistan, leading to profound societal repercussions. This study examines the mechanisms through which false narratives spread, their impact on political discourse, social cohesion, and public trust, as well as the role of digital literacy and regulatory measures in mitigating these effects. By analyzing case studies and existing literature, the paper highlights how manipulated information exacerbates polarization, fuels violence, and undermines democratic processes. The findings underscore the urgent need for media literacy programs, responsible platform governance, and policy interventions to counteract the harmful effects of misinformation and disinformation in Pakistan.*

***Keywords:*** *Misinformation, Disinformation, Social Media, Public Opinion, Pakistan, Societal Impact, Polarization, Digital Literacy, Media Regulation, Fake News.*

## Introduction

The present essay is set to embark on a comprehensive and in-depth investigation into the various pervasive implications associated with both misinformation and disinformation that are rampant on numerous social media platforms (Fard and

Verma2022). These platforms have increasingly become an integral and irreplaceable part of modern communication and social interaction. Over recent years, these digital avenues have remarkably transformed the entire landscape of information sharing, making it significantly easier for misleading narratives and harmful messages to take root, proliferate, and gain traction among the public. The scope of this intensive investigation is firmly rooted in the complex socio-cultural and political context of Pakistan, a country where oral traditions, social norms, community expectations, and mutual rights are valued and respected deeply in all spheres of day-to-day life. (Bakht et al.2023) In such a rich and intricate environment, digital communication transcends the mere function of connectivity; it assumes a crucial role in shaping, influencing, and directing the collective consciousness and overall identity of society.

The alarming spread of misinformation and disinformation, particularly regarding critical socio-economic, religious, and political issues, cannot be left untreated or simply ignored, as it has the potential to directly or indirectly influence and shape public opinion, which should ideally be based on ground realities and factual information. (Elahi et al.2023) This is especially pertinent in Pakistan, where existing narratives and dominant discourses can dramatically and profoundly impact the societal fabric. What becomes manifest at various junctures of the public domain, encompassing social media feeds, online forums, and traditional news outlets, not only manipulates the current voting behavior but also alters existing societal norms and collective practices in ways that are often subtle yet remarkably powerful. The influence exerted by misinformation is indeed profound and far-reaching, affecting the manner in which individuals perceive significant issues, engage in discussions, and ultimately participate in the essential democratic processes that govern their lives and communities.

It is crucial to understand and recognize that the consequences associated with these phenomena extend well beyond mere individual misunderstandings; they have the capacity to alter the very course of civic engagement and can significantly impact governance and policy-making, thereby affecting lives on a broader and more extensive scale (Neo, 2021) In light of this, society must

actively develop critical thinking skills and enhance media literacy to effectively counteract these mounting threats. Engaging in educational initiatives focused on these areas will empower individuals to discern between credible sources and misleading information, fostering a more informed and resilient populace that can navigate the complexities of the modern information landscape.

The prime questions that are being addressed in the present paper include, first of all, how certain groups and their supporters legitimize such ignorance, prejudice, and hate speech spread through social media platforms. Secondly, what would be the aftermath of such fake or propaganda-based pre-election campaigns on social media that are presently contested in some developed democracies and established societies? Would society tolerate and endorse the elected governments for their failure to act and crack down on such fake news, propaganda, and conspiracies in the present information era? Before the introduction of the researchers' work on implications in various dimensions of misinformation provided by some individuals and their effects on society, a brief background of how social media plays a vital role in changing attitudes on these platforms follows. Increased numbers of fake news and disinformation that have made headlines in recent years have caused a renewed interest in questioning the extent to which misinformation changes general attitudes and political opinions. Thus, the following are the possible public implications of misinformation or disinformation for Pakistan and the path it follows regarding the subject.

## Understanding Misinformation and Disinformation in the Context of Social Media

This paper aims to thoroughly explore the existence of diverse public opinions in Pakistan that have been significantly shaped by a variety of misinformation and disinformation campaigns. These campaigns have been strategically designed and effectively delivered by various actors who are primarily associated with the expansive and influential realm of social media (Imran et al., 2024). Given the complex and deeply interconnected nature of social media platforms, coupled with their largely organic content generation, the role they play in the genesis of various types of content is remarkably minimally invasive. Therefore, the

relationship between a message that is disseminated and whether it is genuinely believed by the intended audience remains indirect, often obscured by numerous factors. The triangular manner in which users interact with, engage with, view, and ultimately understand social media content has profound implications for the intricate dynamics of the creation, transmission, and effective reception of messages that pertain to information. Such dynamics are crucial to grasp in today's digital landscape.

Misinformation and disinformation are two related and yet very different effects in the context of digital spaces. Misinformation is a system error. This can be a consequence of an active process or more correctly or inadvertently spread by entities as a message of mistaken origin. (Khan et al.2022) Misinformation refers to the entry into the information system of false messages or information that were inadvertently created or deliberately designed to deceive the information system. The purposefully structured messages seek to warp the associative structure of the receivers, injecting associations that lead in the direction the disinformation is seeking, to directly and exclusively communicate a tainted message.

False information is much more frequently an artifact or an inadvertent outcome stemming from user interactions with social media platforms than it is a consequence of any conscious and deliberate design choices made by the actors behind those platforms (Khan et al.2022). Algorithmic biases play a significant role in facilitating the sharing of presence information, which ultimately relegates the least popular voices and pieces of content to the back of the line, resulting in a downward spiral of disconnection that renders the non-viral content almost completely inaccessible to users. This reality highlights a deep-seated echo effect that has developed across various channels of information, where user-generated content is propagated into the ether, creating pernicious effects in the ongoing war on truth and credibility. Moreover, digital echo chambers actively attempt to maintain a sense of homogeneity by systematically ejecting dissenters from the conversation; this filtering process results in nonequivalent signals—those providing essential and often critical information being kept out of the wider system through established channels of communication. Silos that diverge from the prevailing orthodoxy consequently drive dissenting voices away, and as a result, open

forums are frequently made uncivil. This phenomenon operates on an economic principle that posits that voicing an opinion or presenting a counter-narrative becomes a costly affair, bearing implications that stifle healthy discourse and further entrench misinformation in the digital landscape.

## The Role of Social Media in Shaping Public Opinion in Pakistan

The increasingly prominent role of social media as a significant communication tool has brought about a profound and transformative impact on society at large in Pakistan, especially evident in the formation, evolution, and shaping of public opinion. Social media platforms have continued to influence a wide range of sectors and rhythms of everyday life, affecting everything from entertainment and recreational activities to political engagement, electoral campaigns, law enforcement, governance, journalism, and scholarly endeavors. (Khan et al., 2021).In Pakistan, social media provides its vast user base of approximately 60 million internet users with essential tools for sharing information and facilitating communication. This platform enables the rapid and easy dissemination of information and firsthand intelligence, making news travel at incredible speeds, thanks to its intrinsic characteristics of rapid proliferation, an unlimited space for argumentation, user engagement, multimedia capabilities, and its hypertext-driven                                                nature.

Different demographic groups, particularly the youth and individuals from various professional backgrounds, utilize social media for diverse purposes. In doing so, they often create their own "echo chambers," which foster their unique understandings and conceptualizations of the world. This phenomenon leads to a prevalent situation where many users may not be informed and educated in an objective manner (Hada et al., 2023). Rather, they may unconsciously nurture environments that polarize narratives, elevate sentiments, and exacerbate divisions in public opinions.

Social media boasts a substantial following comprising a significant number of young people, slum dwellers living in inner-city areas, as well as operators of small and medium-sized businesses that rely heavily on messaging platforms for both work-related conversations and personal interactions. The trendy discussions and frequent social media topics often pertain to

prominent religious figures, influential political leaders, and various national and international events that are currently making headlines (Olsson and Bernhard2021). Furthermore, social media platforms play a crucial role in mobilizing fundraising efforts aimed at alleviating the suffering caused by natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, and various accidents that have occurred in Pakistan. Numerous community-based organizations have harnessed the power of social media to effectively spread their developmental messages on a global scale by sharing compelling stories, engaging remarks, impactful images, stirring sounds, and texts filled with relevant information. Consequently, each tweet can garner a following of at least 12 million, with many of those followers being small-scale Pakistani expatriates who remain deeply concerned about the wellbeing of their homeland.

## Case Studies of Misinformation and Disinformation Impacting Public Opinion in Pakistan

In this section, we aim to elaborate on a selection of cases that clearly illustrate the significant implications of both misinformation and disinformation on the formation of public opinion within Pakistan. (Yousaf et al.2024) These carefully chosen case studies have been selected for their profound impact, as these particular incidents have remarkably influenced the perspectives and opinions of a substantial segment of society. It is important to note that the incidents we will examine are not necessarily connected to any specific political affiliations. Instead, these cases will offer an insightful glimpse into the wide array of subjects and themes related to misinformation that permeate public discourse. Through this exploration, we hope to shed light on the broader effects of misleading information on societal beliefs and how they shape collective understanding.

The first and most prominent example is the video of a flight attendant being beaten and molested. A viral video of a flight attendant being beaten and molested was actually a mock drill conducted by the Federal Investigation Agency at Bacha Khan Airport Peshawar to check the response timing of the ASF staff (Brands and Elam2021). The video was shared thousands of times on social media, while a notorious Pakistani actor also uploaded the clip on his official accounts. Others with similarly large followings, including politicians, took to social media and played

the clip. The news caused outrage across the country, and the behavior of the security staff was widely denounced. Civil aviation authorities informed that no such incident had occurred. The second example involves what is recounted as a "massive lie" by a political leader, who claimed at a workers' convention in Sindh that the president had resigned. A story published by newspapers narrated the consequences of this misinformation (Faiz, 2022). The president was forced to issue a statement that he had no intentions of resigning, and the president's office issued a denial about any such intentions. This piece of misinformation made its way into the courtrooms, and law students at a number of universities claimed that the president had indeed resigned.

The third instance which we discuss here once again presents a claim that inevitably led to drastic and far-reaching social outcomes. These outcomes are significantly more substantial than what the original premise appears to imply at first glance. A prominent political leader, with unwavering confidence, boldly stated on national television, making some rather sensational and controversial allegations that both public and private medical colleges are operationally functioning with what he described as entirely fake degrees. (Gehrke et al., 2025) He proceeded to allege, with a heightened sense of urgency in his tone, that when meaningful investigations were conducted, they shockingly discovered that "not a single theatre operative, pathologist, medical superintendent, and principal was genuine." This critical assertion sent intense shockwaves rippling across the entire nation and led to widespread panic and heightened concern regarding the authenticity of medical education being provided to aspiring medical professionals. Furthermore, the TV personality who made these bold declarations also claimed that the principal of the medical college located in Sargodha had tragically committed suicide due to the overwhelming stress and inability to substantiate his educational qualifications and degrees. Interestingly, in a dramatic twist of events, it was later reported by multiple credible sources that no newspaper or reputable organization was able to corroborate this alarming statement made on television. In fact, it was confirmed that the principal in question had merely been "sent on long leave," thereby turning this narrative into a stark example of misinformation propagation. This enlightening situation

highlights the serious and potentially deleterious consequences that can arise from the media's irresponsible reporting and the subsequent fallout that inevitably follows.

Building on our earlier discussions and observations, a compelling theoretical framework that comes to mind is the concept known as "nudge theory." For the theorists behind this intriguing concept, the crux of the problem lies not only in the glaring lack of accurate information available to the public but also in the rampant and unchecked spread of misinformation that can significantly distort perceived reality (Modi and Mishra2023). They describe these influential figures as "choice architects," arguing that these choice architects strategically frame information in such a way that it inadvertently encourages individuals to act according to interests that align with those of the architects, rather than actively pursuing their own best interests and welfare. Our carefully crafted case study centered around the pervasive theme of misinformation compellingly illustrates the troubling implications of irresponsible choice architects operating within the delicate context of Pakistan. In these troubling scenarios, certain actors have knowingly provided information that they were well aware was false to the public, all with the ulterior motive of reinforcing their own ideologies and narratives a deeply concerning behavior. The significant and vital duty of the state to ensure its citizens' well-being and to act responsibly in a rapidly globalizing world was regrettably and sadly neglected in this instance. This oversight sheds light on the crucial and pressing need for integrity in both politics and media, particularly in an age where misinformation can spread like wildfire, leading to societal harm.

## Societal Repercussions of Misinformation and Disinformation in Pakistan

The most immediate effect of misinformation is the tearing of the fabric of society, particularly in traditionally conflict-ridden societies such as Pakistan. Disinformation and misinformation have the potential to set people against each other, creating domestic enemies. Even if this does not happen, which would be the best-case scenario, the news would be disbelieved (West and Bergstrom2021). This could lead to, for example, a resurgence in polio cases. Both of these lead to an erosion of trust in an institution or process, an erosion of faith in the media to report

accurate and neutral stories, and an erosion of the position as an independent observer of facts. Trust between actors in the public sphere is an important prerequisite for the successful functioning of democratic processes. Lack of trust (both in general and in elections) is linked to the notion of electoral fraud leading to civil unrest (Norris, 2022). Although multiple different outcomes are possible, the one that seems most relevant is the negative one – civil unrest. Whether it is a necessary precursor to regime change or a sign of social collapse, civil unrest is extremely harmful. The nature of it is important too. The psychological literature examining hate and prejudice in societies would also be of particular relevance here.

In Pakistan, while the scale or virulence of misinformation generated in the current landscape is perhaps considered somewhat less serious than in other global contexts, it nevertheless remains a pressing and paramount issue that undeniably demands immediate attention, as numerous individuals still feel that hate speech poses a significant and persistent concern that weighs heavily within the complex fabric of societal discourse (Saeed et al.2021). The deep scar of violent conflict, which is profoundly embedded in the national consciousness of the country, moves particularly slowly and stiffly through various intricate layers of the populace and the broader culture, and as such, this challenging and sensitive reality needs to be managed with extreme caution and heightened sensitivity to avoid any further escalation of tensions and conflict, which could lead to more severe consequences for the community.

The nature of society and its myriad complexities is also particularly pertinent in this ongoing discussion; Pakistan is home to a beautifully diverse array of beliefs, languages, and cultures that significantly contribute to its rich and vibrant tapestry, yet it has also been shaped by a painful and tumultuous history marked by internal conflict, deep discord, and societal rifts (Kousar and Brett2022).This intricate and multifaceted atmosphere of uncertainty can greatly exacerbate fears and anxieties regarding terrorism and social unrest, as individuals within the community may struggle to understand one another and bridge the divides that have formed over time. Furthermore, it is also a society in which a substantial portion of the population may not be well-educated or informed, which significantly contributes to the gravity and

importance of addressing the deleterious effects of misinformation and hate speech on individuals' fear and anxiety levels within the community.

This complex situation makes it all the more vital to engage in thoughtful, constructive dialogue that takes into account the diverse beliefs and perspectives present within the nation, encouraging mutual understanding and tolerance among the populace to foster a more inclusive, compassionate, and peaceful society that can work towards healing the wounds of its past while building a brighter future for all its citizens (Taiba et al., 2023).

## Strategies to Counter Misinformation and Disinformation in Pakistan

Strategies to Counter Misinformation and Disinformation in Pakistan. While this paper does not attempt to cover every possible recommendation that could help effectively address the formidable challenges posed by misinformation and disinformation in Pakistan, it does indeed put forward a wide-ranging collection of strategies that can be proactively employed to tackle and counter the pervasive presence of false media narratives within the country (Imran et al., 2024). Just as the deep-rooted and tangled branches of misinformation and disinformation intertwine with various aspects of society, any comprehensive response focused on addressing these enduring issues must be multifaceted, adaptable, and innovative in nature, reflecting the intricate dynamics at play within the social landscape. Since prevention is invariably recognized as being significantly more effective than remedy, educational strategies should unequivocally serve as the bedrock, the indispensable and foundational building blocks, of any extensive and robust response to the complex problems of misinformation and disinformation that infiltrate society. By seamlessly integrating critical thinking skills and media literacy within the educational curriculum, we can empower individuals, particularly the younger generation, to more effectively navigate the vast ocean of information available to them while discerning credible sources from dubious claims prevalent in today's digital age. This initiative is essential for equipping students with the necessary tools they need to engage responsibly with the media they consume and share while fostering a sound understanding of information literacy, thereby instilling a culture of skepticism that

encourages questioning and deeper investigation of the information presented to them.

The second essential component of any strategic approach emerges dramatically in the immediate aftermath of the dissemination of false media narratives. In this critical phase, timely and accurate interventions hold the potential to significantly alter and reshape public perceptions, effectively turning the tide against the pervasive spread of misinformation(Aghajari et al.2023)To this end, numerous societies have wisely established media-watching and comprehensive fact-checking organizations, which are dedicated to patiently and meticulously rebutting fake news while simultaneously replacing it with accurate and reliable information grounded in verifiable facts and evidence. Acknowledging this undeniable reality, Pakistan must also follow suit, necessitating a dedicated team of 'fact-checkers' and 'debunkers' who can actively engage in countering the concerted efforts of propagandists whose agendas are focused on disseminating misleading and false information to the public at large. This vital investigative work should ideally be undertaken by well-established think tanks and proactive civil society organizations that are passionately committed to the noble pursuit of truth, integrity, and transparency within public discourse and effective communication channels. By collaborating closely with various technology platforms, these organizations can effectively identify, flag, and counter false news stories, while simultaneously reporting them for removal from public visibility and attention. Furthermore, it is imperative that comprehensive processes for rigorously rechecking facts are initiated to ensure a consistently high standard of information integrity across a multitude of media channels, thereby safeguarding the public against the corrosive effects of misinformation.

In both the educational framework and the debunking processes, strategic collaboration with major technology firms is essential for yielding impactful results and fostering systemic change within communities and society at large (Aghajari et al.2023). Indeed, the third and final stage of procedural strategies involves direct engagement with, as well as the thoughtful regulation of, technology platforms that serve as critical conduits for information dissemination throughout society. The fourth strategic element

involves ensuring that both the state and society operate in harmonious synergy; this would entail the creation of new, easily accessible, and user-friendly repositories for information that showcase evidence-based research, trustworthy government materials, and a multitude of other helpful resources available for public consumption. This expansive process could be facilitated in collaboration with technology firms, which could assist in surfacing the correct links and materials to enhance web traffic toward reliable and accurate information sources. While this paper does not claim to offer exhaustive remedial measures, it aspires to make a meaningful contribution to the ongoing discourse by proposing multidisciplinary initiatives that integrate both state and societal efforts, which necessitate immediate action, inclusive stakeholder consultations, carefully scrutinized strategies, and continual re-evaluations of Pakistan's dynamic media landscape all of which are aimed at better protecting the public and informing society for the future.

However, it is also critically important to acknowledge that potential pitfalls might emerge from the strategies devised to counter misinformation and disinformation; most notably, there exists a tangible risk that these well-intentioned efforts, while aiming to safeguard truth and integrity, can sometimes inadvertently lead to censorship and the unwarranted curtailment of freedom of expression (Roozenbeek and Van2022). For effective collaboration in these debunking initiatives, it is vital to ensure that no suppression of diverse ideas occurs within the organization's framework, thus championing an open atmosphere of discourse while still remaining steadfast in maintaining factual accuracy and integrity throughout the process. Additionally, technology platforms must recognize the reality that some organizations are systematically established with the sole intent of deliberately spreading misleading or false news; therefore, these entities must be swiftly identified, consistently monitored, and removed to uphold the integrity and trustworthiness of information shared with the public (Aghajari et al.2023). This dual focus on accountability and active engagement is quintessential for cultivating an environment where accurate information can not only flourish but also sustainably maintain its presence, while simultaneously keeping a vigilant watch on the nuanced and

delicate boundaries of free expression within our ever-evolving public discourse, ensuring that discussions remain enriched by diverse perspectives while prioritizing truth and integrity above all else.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has thoroughly investigated the multifaceted concept of misinformation and its exponential capacity to spread rapidly through the channels of social media. Throughout the analysis, the paper delved into how falsehoods travel within the digital domain, proliferating in various ways and ultimately creating a distorted alternate reality in the minds of uninformed individuals. It has underscored the pressing need to understand misinformation uniquely and specifically within the complex context of social media platforms. The paper strongly advocated that Pakistan, like many other nations, was not immune to the profound impact and consequences of the ongoing infodemic. Furthermore, it emphasized that both infodemic and misinformation carry serious societal repercussions that can have a damaging effect on the very fabric of society itself and the effective functioning of democratic governance. As such, the paper drew a rather bleak picture of the societal repercussions stemming from the alternate reality being constructed by the rampant spread of misinformation. Some of these significant repercussions extend the traditional definition of misinformation to include disinformation, defined by the malicious intent to shape and manipulate public opinion for various purposes. The findings illustrate the urgent need to combat misinformation in order to promote a healthier information environment and preserve societal integrity.

In order to triangulate the alternate reality, government entities, civil society, and responsible organizations of the media and academia can play a substantial role. A variety of sections within the state, civil society, academia, and the media must play their part to ensure that public opinion at the grassroots level, which may be getting shaped due to misinformation, can be countered. The impact of such misinformation and misperceptions about formal institutions lends these studies a qualitative as well as a quantitative approach that is much needed. There is a need for serious study that could help in understanding the potential impact that misinformation has, as well as finding a way to

counterbalance it; this could only be possible when further research probes the impact misinformation has on the behavior of people in a Pakistani context. This needs serious attention, as public opinion can easily be swayed in favor of or against an official policy and may have repercussions on a much larger scale. Future research on this subject could be a significant tool in understanding and delivering this objective and deterring the negative effects of misinformation and disinformation.

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