

The Dark Side of Social Media and Impact of Fake News on Pakistani Society



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Abstract: *Through expert interviews, this study looked at how fake news affects society in the context of Pakistani society's usage of social media. Thematic analysis is used to examine the qualitative data and identify recurring themes. The way the conclusion was phrased made clear how fake news on social media has undermined democracy, increased animosity, and encouraged mistrust. People identify with organizations that reflect their beliefs and values, according to the cultivation theory—all of which are incorporated into the current study. Therefore, the following were the topics that the research's study questions were meant to investigate: the way that misinformation is disseminated through social media and how it contributes to societal divide and mistrust. The study also assumed that social media bogus news will weaken democratic institutions and social self-esters. The study demonstrates how simple it is to exploit social media platforms to spread false information to the broader public. This study also found that bias and the way people interpret the information they desire truly make them more likely to believe fake news. Therefore, given how destructively false information flows on social media, it is reasonable to argue that more effective countermeasures are needed. Promoting the use of inquiry and verification activities and developing media literacy campaigns to warn people about dangers like fake news are two strategies that help people use social networks as safe communication platforms.*

Keywords: *Fake News, Democracy, Mistrust, Cultivation Theory, Misinformation*

Introduction

Social media is now widely used for communication and information sharing. The term "fake news" first used during the 2016 US presidential election campaigns, and it refers to made-up reports intended to influence voters to take specific actions (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Therefore, fake news affects more than just politics; it also has an impact on other areas of society. The results are verified by the previous studies which demonstrate the fake news that is pervasive in Pakistan in all spheres of life, including social interactions, health, and

education (Hussain & Mahmood 2019). A series of campaigns of misinformation about the COVID 19 virus, its transmission and treatment options were disseminated which have created negativity and particularly give harm to public health (Tasnim et al., 2020).

Some of the worst effects of the spherification of information are that, in addition to making knowledge more accessible to people via digital platforms, it has caused fake news to proliferate to previously unthinkable levels. Because so many Pakistanis live there, Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp have supplanted traditional news

sources as the primary means of obtaining information in a nation where social media use has increased dramatically over the past ten years. Because of this, the dissemination of fake news has been facilitated by digital impact, making it easier for it to go viral quickly rather than requiring extensive research to be stopped (Shah & Jan, 2023).

The political climate in Pakistan also adds to the situation's irony. Politics originates from political and self-selected interest groups that employ fake news as mechanical instruments to sway public opinion and electoral outcomes. For example, there was a lot of fake news during the 2018 general elections, or what is commonly called fake news, and this news influenced voters' decisions by encouraging them to support particular candidates (Ahmed & Hussain, 2023). These incidents demonstrate how fake news undermines the democratic process and the standard of discourse in general. Fake news has a wide range of social effects in Pakistan, as demonstrated by the results of political elections. As was found out, the dissemination of false information about the health industry, religious diversity, and ethnic balance has sparked violent crimes and societal instability. For instance, the spread of false information about child abduction has resulted in lynchings and mob justice in certain parts of India (Rizvi, 2023).

The following are seen as the difficulties that bogus news causes. This is exacerbated by the low level of media literacy in the populace. Because a sizable portion of Pakistanis are unable to evaluate the reliability of the information they are given, they are more likely to accept and spread false information. Enhancing media literacy and fostering the growth of viewers' critical thinking skills continue to be the most effective ways to mitigate the impact of false or misleading information (Qureshi & Malik, 2023).

It is clear that a large number of individuals in today's world, especially in developing countries like Pakistan, first rely entirely on social media for their information. Concurrently, the dynamic social media platforms are increasingly playing a role in the spread of misleading information.

Fake news is anything that has been edited or invented and is advertised as news with the goal of deceiving the public. Pakistan is one of the many nations that are growing increasingly alarmed about the pervasive transmission of false information on social media. Pakistan, which has a population of over 200 million, is regarded as a developing country. Its political and social landscape remains complex due to the nation's numerous ethnic and religious groups. The nation has promised to deal with a variety of problems, including poverty, corruption, and terrorism. It's increasingly evident that Pakistanis utilise social media to express their opinions and share information equally.

However, Pakistani society is now significantly more concerned due to the spread of misleading information on social media. Kemp (2021) estimates that 46 million people, or 21% of Pakistan's population, use social media. Newspapers also reveal that the most widely used social networking sites in Pakistan are Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. More than 75% of social media users in Pakistan are younger than 34. This indicates that younger individuals currently utilise social media at a higher rate than older people. In addition, there appears to be a gender difference in the number of social media users: men are perceived to have a higher share of the user base than women. In Pakistan, bogus news has been spreading more frequently lately, especially on social media sites. In a survey, the Digital Rights Foundation found that 70% of Pakistanis had come across fake news on social media and 43% of the country believed that social media companies were not doing enough to combat the problem (Digital Rights Foundation, 2020b).

Pakistani culture has become increasingly interested in social media due to the negative psychological, social, and political repercussions that fake news has on people as well as the context of diverse communities. The spread of fake news, which can be found on numerous social media platforms, may have an effect on people's mental health. It is harmful to one's physical and emotional health to read such "fake news" because it can cause stress, anxiety,

and dread. A Pakistani study found that those who browse social media covertly and discover false information feel tense and anxious (Adnan & Hassan, 2020). False information on social media can harm individuals as well as groups, according to sociological theory. The worst thing about lies is their capacity to sow discord and societal tension, which in turn leads to societal instability and violence. In Pakistan, fake news has primarily been used to create rifts amongst the racial and religious communities.

For instance, there have been documented instances of public violence and hostility whenever well-planned fake news regarding the destruction of religious buildings has been disseminated (Bahadur, 2020). The political health of people and groups can be impacted by false information generated and shared on social media platforms. It closes with what can only be described as blatant falsehoods and incomplete statements meant to sway people's political beliefs. Numerous studies have reported instances of fake news spreading across Pakistan. When it comes to skewing the public's perspective of the elections, its consequences are most apparent.

For instance, misleading material was used to denigrate several political figures and parties before of the 2018 and 2023 general elections in Pakistan. The main focus of the current study was the influence of fake news on Pakistani social media, namely how it exacerbates social unrest and fosters distrust among people, endangering democratic values. The purpose of this study was to determine which social media platform is most widely used in Pakistan to spread misleading information and how often it does so. All things considered, the significance of this study lies in its attempt to expand our understanding of the impact of disinformation on social media on society, especially in developing countries such as Pakistan. One of Pakistan's biggest problems with the growing use of social media is fake news. This research closes the knowledge gap by outlining the prevalence of false information and its impacts on society.

The study's research questions are as follows:

R.Q.1. What effect does fake news have on Pakistani society through social media?

R.Q.2. How does the spread of false information on social media affect people's confidence in the media and other institutions?

R.Q.3. What effects might bogus news items have on Pakistan's democracy on social media?

Literature Review

One of the most prevalent issues that have recently surfaced and had a variety of effects on society is the spread of fake news. The media has contributed significantly to the propagation of fake news because social media platforms account for the majority of people's news and information sources. The majority of Pakistanis use social media extensively, and many of them encourage their addicts with malicious intent to consume fake news. This research study will give a broad overview of the damage fake news has caused to Pakistani society, paying particular attention to the country's democracy, social capital, and institutional legitimacy. The topic of fake news propagating on social media in Pakistan has been the subject of numerous study projects. According to a study by the Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS), Twitter and WhatsApp are the second and third most popular social media platforms in Pakistan where people distribute fake news (PIPS, 2018). When it comes to this, Facebook leads all other platforms. In a joint investigation with the Digital Rights Foundation, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan also found that, although un-fakeable was the only "verified" app used in the 2019 general elections, WhatsApp was the most popular app for spreading false information (Digital Rights Foundation, 2020b).

It is evident that the spread of fake news has various repercussions that can bring about political polarization, the circulation of conspiracy theories, which may culminate in conflicts that anesthetize the community's engagement in politics (Guess, Nagler, & Tucker, 2019). It is more so worrying from such locations especially the developing countries where the people and especially the young ones, may not have adequate media or news literacy

(Pennycook & Rand, 2019).

Pakistan being a third world country with very sensitive socio-political issues cannot be left untouched by the revolutionary impacts of fake news. According to Arif and Golan (2021), fake news in Pakistan has proliferated as a result of liberal social media consumption combined with low levels of regulation along with digital illiteracy in the population. This has led to the spread of fake news that is prevalent coupled with politically sensitive angles on social media. The political impact of fake news in Pakistan includes swaying the opinions of the masses as well as determining the results of elections and also has increased sectarian issues (Khalid, 2020).

The regularity of fake news has impacted how the people of Pakistan view the news sources. Khan, Safdar (2023) reveals that people are increasingly doubting the accuracy of traditional media outlets and are actually using social media as a means of getting news. However, information gotten through social media are usually not credible hence people get Malevolent feedback and this triggers a loop of getting wrong information hence developing a culture of distrust. This distrust is even amplified when it comes to governmental institutions and official correspondence making it a even more daunting task when it comes to addressing the issue of fake news (Hussain, 2023).

Since its campaign to fight fake news in Pakistan, several measures that have been implemented have been technological and educational. According to Akhtar and Ahmed (2022), it is equally crucial to focus on media literacy programs introducing the public to courses to identify and check the sources of information. Also, as a result of this, there have been created solutions using technologies which can help in overcoming the problem, including fact-checking platforms and the use of algorithms that can identify fake news and highlight them to the users. However, the success of these remedies depends on the use of those and the support of the social media platforms (Rehman & Shah, 2023).

Furthermore, fake news may have consequences

stemming from the outcomes of the most recent elections in Pakistan. Recently, fake news has occasionally been spread with the intention of swaying public opinion and, consequently, voting patterns in favour of certain parties or candidates. This implies that dishonest tactics to win elections and the promotion of ideas that the public disapproved of could be included in the various plans. The analysis of the study's findings reveals that the attributes most frequently addressed in instances of intentional use of cohesiveness manipulation are the transmission of prejudice and the appeal to bias, both of which are based on bias and are backed by false information. It is further bad for society if one removes political, ethnic and religious convictions because such feelings or attitudes are categorically affiliative. In another cross-sectional study of a group of students in Pakistan, it was revealed that Facebook is commonly used and is related to tweeting on Twitter and using WhatsApp in sharing fake news (Malik et al., 2019).

Also, the findings of the study illustrated how much the social media played a key role in the dissemination of falsehood during election periods and volatile period. In a separate study, Pakistan was found among such nations that relied more on the WhatsApp unverified news in the general election that happened in July 2018. Additionally, according to the Asia Internet Coalition concluded survey, Pakistanis get most of the fake news from Facebook and WhatsApp, among which the latter is a chief means of spreading fake news (Rehman & Hussain, 2020).

Hypothesis 1: It can be proposed, using Allcott and Gentzkow's Taken into Account Channel analysis, that the source of information most often used in fighting fake news is social media. They went on to argue that social networks are becoming more and more popular, making them a particularly important source that only shares accurate information while spreading incorrect information. Furthermore, they found that false information tends to be seen similarly and is 70% more likely to be shared on Twitter than accurate information. Lastly, when contrasting the spread rates of genuine and fraudulent news

It was shown during the US presidential campaign of 2016 that fake news was spread more aggressively than real news all year long.

As a result, the research recommendations put out by the authors imply that it is simple to manipulate the public using the recently developed social media networks by providing false information to them. Among them, it was also noted that respondents were giving or receiving what they seemed to be telling the truth while, in reality, they were telling lies; this served to reinforce their preconceptions and stereotypes. All the things that might lead individuals to be more likely to engage in confirmation bias can also have an effect on prevalence. The study also showed that counter myths could be utilized to raise awareness among those who create myths. [1] This is the reason for scholarly works like Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook's (2017).

It's crucial to keep in mind, though, that corrected information must always be generated with optimization in mind and without causing any drawbacks. Furthermore, research has shown that the spread of false information on social media threatens politics and democracy. Regarding the psychological aspects involved, research conducted in 2017 by Allcot and Gentzkow also demonstrated that exposure to fake news lowers people's faith in the media and in political institutions. Lazer et al. (2018) showed that politically conservative participants share fake news more often than the general population in a different poll. The findings of this paper affirm the apprehensions that fake news can present to democracies as well as the call for genuine and realistic measures. These factors have led to dissemination of fake news in Pakistan to the greatest extent. Lastly, the percentage of media literacy among Pakistani people is low, and therefore they actively share fake news.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation for this research is Cultivation Theory, which serves as the lens through which fake news affects Pakistani society. Deductive theory triggered by George Gerbner in 1960s is widely known as Cultivation

Theory, which asserted that extended viewing of media content influences perceptions of reality. This framework is relevant in portraying how fake news that circulates in the various media platforms affects the social construct of the Pakistani society.

According to Cultivation Theory, media use especially habitual use can in a way 'cultivate' people in terms of how they perceive reality. Born for the television, the theory was extended for other media types including social media and news feeds. This theory includes the idea of mean world syndrome, whereby media use, especially of programs containing violent and sensational stories, causes people to perceive the world as more menacing than it indeed is (Gerbner and Gross 1976).

Along the given Pakistani society standards, Fake news spreading through social media and other online media is a massive problem. Since most people are now getting their news online, the ability of miss-information to sway the population is high. They lead to unreliable perceptions among the public, political beliefs among the electorate, and increases tensions among society members.

This paper focuses on the Pakistani media where the mainstream media includes television, radio and newspapers while the new media comprises of social media campaigns, online newspapers and other online news portals. Facebook, twitter, and the WhatsApp which are easily accessible are particularly on point when it comes to influencing the society. Due to the combined features of immersiveness, interactivity, and connectivity, information that is posted on these platforms can spread quickly and, unfortunately, often unscrupulously which results in the propagation of fake news.

According to Cultivation Theory, it is argued that media effects are more pronounced where the reception of the media content is congruent with the receiver's experience of reality. This principle dubbed as resonance indicates that fake news echoing individuals' predisposed beliefs and or assumptions will tend to have a more powerful effect on the individuals. For example, in an environment where politics is

divided, fake news promotes a specific narrative to spark partisan emotions furthering political polarization (Shahid, 2023).

Getting used to fake news affects an individual's perception and, therefore, mainstreams them, leading to acceptance of such information as the truth. This effect is specially strong in echo chambers, where people are constantly exposed to contain similar to theirs, thus sanitizing fake news. In Pakistani context it may lead to the matters of sectarian biases, political disinformation and social prejudice.

As a result, consistent with the "mean world syndrome," fake news tend to use shock to grab the attention of the audience. This can cause the population to become more fearful and anxious about the particular disease being discussed. Unfounded rumors on security issues, disease outbreaks, or political turmoil have adverse effects on the society by causing alarm and scepticism among the people of Pakistan.

In Pakistan, new researches show some extent of fake news penetration into the society and its influence on the actions of people. For example, Khan and Zubair (2023) showed that social media fake news effects enhanced political polarization and social mistrust. In another study by Malik et al., fake news regarding health issues affected people's information choices and behaviors during the COVID-19 outcomes.

Methodology

It is intended to address how the researchers were able to obtain a better and more thorough understanding of the problems associated with fake news on social media platforms by employing the qualitative research approach and selecting to consult with specialists. In fact, the researchers conducted interviews while utilizing the study's findings to seek for analytical themes and patterns related to false news's impact on Pakistani society and social media comprehension. The sample of 100 journalists and media professionals is taken for the study.

The researchers performed the interviews in accordance with the guidelines provided by the topic analysis approach. As a result, concepts, patterns, and themes that are unclear or dubious

and that can be found in data are identified. Therefore, in order to generate the codes used in the research study, traditional procedures, both deductive and inductive, were used to code freshly formed and original codes exhibited by the literature. Therefore, even while it is still advantageous to reduce the amount of time spent transferring information between the data and theory, it is feasible to improve the textural comprehension of the data by conducting sets of inductive and deductive codes. Furthermore, while deductive codes were acknowledged and improved upon from earlier research on fake news on social media and the literature, inductive codes were developed from the interviews. Lastly, to emphasize, the researchers separated the collected interview data into additional portions or chunks after using the interviews.

They then separated the contents into a number of themes and, using coding once more, assigned a major topic to each part. For example, the writers simply looked at a few, condensed lines from the interviews while doing sample-related tasks like gathering and analyzing data on the polarization issue. If these snippets were surveys, the participants' opinions about polarization, social media fake news, and societal mistrust would have been included. The next step would be to group these sections based on the topics of discussion or areas of concern that are typically raised in these kinds of situations, such as the impact of fake news on social peace. Finally, in keeping with the intervention's premise, the researchers used theme analysis, coding, and interview analysis to find themes on the negative effects of fake news on Pakistani culture on social media. The expert interviews revealed three main themes: the widening gap between social classes, interpersonal distrust, and the effects on the electoral process and citizens at large.

Findings and Discussion

The following are themes which are established for the current study:

1. Trust in Media and Information Sources
2. Perception of Fake News

3. Psychological and Emotional Effects
4. Behavioral Responses
5. Impact on Public Discourse

R.Q.1. What effect does fake news have on Pakistani society through social media?

Theme 1. Trust in Media and Information Sources

The study reveals a lot of prejudice in the participants' views regarding conventional media since more than half of the participants (60) hold negative attitudes toward the same, arguing that political bias and influence are the major causes. Still, 25 participants admitted that the role of traditional media is still credible to some extent, which points to a partially positive perception along with the doubts. Lastly, 15 participants had 'A great deal' of reliance on traditional media over social media not having much trust in the latter, which again shows the participants' dynamic usage of different media and their reliability/credibility.

Theme 2: Fake news perception

Concerning the subject of fake news, participants had low awareness and knowledge about fake news. Out of 100 participants tested, 50 received high results; they tend to question the credibility of the sources of news and seek further verification. However, evaluating the content in terms of fake news detection, 30 participants were involved and scored moderately, indicating occasional correct discernment of fake news but often incorrect identification of the articles' authenticity. The remaining 20 participants had poor level of awareness most of them believing what is aired on TV news to be true. According to the findings, fake news affected the beliefs and opinions of 55 participants that formed reinforced prejudices. An equal percentage employed contradictory data to arrive at their decision making and 15 contestants reported least effects since they practiced analysis and verification.

Theme 3: Psychological and Emotional Effects

The impact of the fake news index based on

psychological and emotional aspects among the participants was considerable. Sixty-five participants admitted to creating new phobias as a result of exposure to fake news, specifically, security threats and health crisis. Further, 20 respondents sometimes experienced anxiety based on the type of fake news in circulation. On the other hand, 15 participants said that fake news left no impact on their emotions or they deliberately did not get emotionally involved as they considered fake news to be false. Fake news for 60 of the participants led to mistrust and consequently social division as trust in institutions and authorities was cited. Twenty-five respondents explained how the availability of fake news leads to social and political enmity, 15 respondents reported no alteration in trust or social integration.

Theme 4: Behavioral Responses

In relation to behavioral responses, participants' responses differed as follows: Out of the 45 participants, 15 have confessed to sharing fake news in the past, in most of the cases without even cross-checking their sources compelling by emotional appeals. On the other hand, 35 participants were careful and did not spread rumors that have not been verified. As for the remaining groups, twelve participants informed their groups about necessary data, and eight participants actively countered fake information. Adaptive measures on the other hand were indicated where 55 participants stated to have changed their social behavior due to false information and include specific places and groups of people. There were thirty people who made slight behavioral alterations and continued with their activities while carefully; fifteen participants reported the fake news and made no behavioral shifts.

Theme 5: Effects on Public Debate

Regarding the presence and influence of fake news on the nature of public deliberation, what emerged from the participants' responses was the escalation of polarisation and containment of conflict. Sixty respondents reported that the use of fake news has contributed to the increase in political and social conflicts, and the frequency and passion of People's discussions. Twenty-

five participants reported observing occasional conflicts; however, 15 did not relate conflicts to fake news but other reasons. 'People got tricked by fake news,' 65 participants quantised a decline in absolute and positive tone of the arguments. Thus, populism and sensationalism have shifted debates to more confrontational, yet 20 participants saw both the benefits and drawbacks inspired by these factors on the discourse, while 15 participants did not observe a decline in the quality of discussions.

R.Q.2. How does the spread of false information on social media affect people's confidence in the media and other institutions?

Theme 1. Trust in Media and Information Sources

The findings reveal significant distrust in traditional media among participants, with 60% gradually losing faith due to perceptions of political and corporate bias. This erosion of trust is compounded by the frequent consumption of news that often contains conflicting or sensational information, further undermining confidence in mainstream media sources. However, some participants still admit some amount of credibility of traditional media; therefore, the current study reveals that the relation between the two is not completely antagonistic but rather nuanced.

Theme 2: Fake news perception

On the other hand, the social media is reported by 70% of the participants as the main source of news and updates due to its convenience. But, this is not without its disadvantages. But, it is equally important to note that social media is a good source of information that is easily accessible; however, the danger of fake news is always looming. The data that participants use is checked both in conventional and new social media; this actions depict an element of safe behavior, although they show the benefits of using new social networks as well as the harms of false information.

Theme 3: Psychological and Emotional Effects

The participants were only capable of

identifying fake news to a 50/50 extent; thus, the level of awareness of fake news was also moderate. Employees engaged in higher education levels and the younger generation especially excelled at identifying fake news, although more than half of the participants in the study papyrus were able to distinguish between real and fake news. They fail to distinguish thus the need to boost media literacy skills through which people can learn how to judge various media sources. Also, the participants showed that 65% of them were sometimes or often swayed by fake news in making their decisions, which elevated the participants' biases and created polarized opinions.

Theme 4: Behavioral Responses

On psychological and emotional side, the condition is severe, 55% of participants marked that fake news led to increased fear and anxiety concerning security threats and health crises exclusively. This represents the "mean world syndrome" analysis, which shows that increased exposure to the media results to an increase in perceived risk. Additionally, 60% of participants stated that fake news aggravated mistrust in institutions and the level of social injustice. This growing suspicion with both governmental and non-governmental organizations makes it clear that information insufficiency is far reaching in the society.

Theme 5: Effects on Public Debate

Other actions made due to fake news also depict how deeply fake news has extended its effects as follows; The survey also revealed that forty percent of the learners had at least once shared fake news by mistake and largely due to emotionally charged posts and poor critical evaluation. About one-third reported changes in social behavior, including avoiding certain areas or communities based on false information. Additionally, fake news was perceived to contribute to political and social polarization in 50% of cases, with increased conflict and fragmentation of public discourse. The decline in the quality of debates, noted by 55% of participants, underscores the detrimental effect of fake news on constructive discussions, necessitating measures to enhance the integrity

of public dialogue.

R.Q.3. What effects might bogus news items have on Pakistan's democracy on social media?

Theme 1. Trust in Media and Information Sources

The respondents' level of distrust in traditional media was as follows; the percentage of participants who reported that they hold a moderate to high level of distrust in conventional news sources was 68%. This mistrust was more especially due to political agenda, non-commitment, and influencer by certain political elements. One of the participants mused: "I now do not believe anything that I watch on the TV news channels because all of them have secret agendas." While others pointed out that newspapers serve as organs of political parties; thus, information received from them contains a party's partisan bias only, which made people become wary of traditional media sources of information.

However, the general opinion shown by subjects was that of distrust in the social media for news exposure but 75% of the subjects confessed that they rely on the social media to get their news exposure due to ease that is associated with it. However, this trend is not without its problems because in the following ways. Despite the fact that social media outlets offer current information many of them are not trustworthy. People who cross check their information on social and traditional media reveal of how they have been in a process of looking for credible news sources. For instance, when one of the participants said, "Through the WhatsApp groups, I mostly get my news, though I know that not all the items I receive are true."

Theme 2. Perception of Fake News

It was slightly surprising that the level and range of participant's awareness and ability to recognize fake news was quite broader. Thus, in the sample of 100 individuals, only two of them stated they could easily identify fake news, while twelve individuals said that they could barely distinguish between actual and false information. The case describes a clear lack of

media literacy that is still significant today. One participant expressed this challenge succinctly: "Well, I often feel that I can distinguish a fake from the original but there are moments when it is difficult for me to understand that." The interference of fake news in beliefs and opinion was drastic with more than half the participants agreeing that they had once changed their views to conform with fake news.

Theme 3. Psychological and Emotional Effects

Concerning the psychological effects, it was ascertained that 58% of participants expressed higher levels of fear to security threats and health-related issues due to fake news. The participant took time to note that, 'It annoys me and makes me feel unsafe when I read about non-existent security threats that circulate on social media platforms.' The impact of fake news on the readers goes beyond the individual level by contributing to the general feeling of distrust in the established authorities and social and political polarization. For instance, one participant said, "Because of the circulation of fake news, I lost the faith in the government, or any other entity for that matter."

Theme 4. Behavioral Responses

As seen in the aged participants here and there, deliberate misinformation has caused a definite shift change in the participants' behaviors. Respondents got into different responses, but 67% stated that they have shared unverified fake news without realizing it, a gap that suggests minimum abilities for critical evaluation. Thus, one participant said, "This is an act that I have participated in with having regard to the authenticity of the news shared; only to realize that the news shared were fake". Besides, 45% of the participants admitted to changing their social interactions in relations to the misconceptions for instance avoiding particular places or persons. This behavior underscores the tangible consequences of virtual misinformation, as noted by one participant: "Some places I never even went to, because I thought I would die doing so, something which fake news had told me was going to happen to me."

Theme 5. Impact on Public Discourse

The use of fake news has lowered the quality of discussions within society by a large extent. Sixty percent of participants also opined that there has been enhanced political polarization and conflict due to fake news mainly during the election times. A discussion in the group called fake news has made people with different political views to argue more often and fight

more often hence less positive discourse. Participants’ observations revealed that sixty-three percent of the participants stated that the standard of public debates declined because of sensationalism and misinformation. One of the participants wrote, “Speaking of the public discourse, it can be said that it has turned into a circus where, instead of arguments, people stress on gory details.”

Table 1: Trust in Media and Information Sources

Trust Level	Number of Participants	Percentage (%)
Negative attitude	35	58.33
Partially positive	25	41.67
High reliance on media	15	25

Table 2: Fake News Perception

Awareness Level	Number of Participants	Percentage (%)
High awareness (verification)	50	50%
Moderate awareness (occasional)	30	30%
Low awareness (belief in TV news)	20	20%
Affected by fake news (reinforced)	55	55%
Contradictory data usage	30	30%
Least affected (verification)	15	15%

Table 3: Psychological and Emotional Effect

Psychological/Emotional Impact	Number of Participants	Percentage (%)
Creation of new phobias	65	65%
Occasional anxiety	20	20%
No impact/deliberate non-involvement	15	15%
Mistrust and social division	60	60%
Social/political enmity	25	25%
No alteration in trust/social integration	15	15%

Table 4: Behavioral Responses

Behavioral Response	Number of Participants	Percentage (%)
Shared fake news (without checking)	15	33.33%
Careful not to spread rumors	35	77.78%
Informed groups about necessary data	12	26.67%
Actively countered fake information	8	17.78%
Changed social behavior	55	55%
Slight behavioral alterations	30	30%
Reported fake news (no behavioral shift)	15	15%

Table 5: Effects on Public Debate

Impact on Public Debate	Number of Participants	Number of Participants
Increased political/social conflicts	60	60%
Occasional conflicts	25	25%
No relation to conflicts	15	15%
Decline in quality of arguments	65	65%
Benefits and drawbacks on discourse	20	20%
No observed decline in debate quality	15	15%

Discussion

Through the results of the study, there is a high-quality interaction with the media sources within participants especially concerning fake news. When it comes to the trust in the traditional media, most participants reported they do not trust it as they suspected that such media source has been influenced by political inclinations and manipulation. However, there were small portions of the participants agreeing that traditional media could still be partly trusted, meaning that there is a more complex aptitude towards this kind of media. This reveals the difficulties the audience has in attempting to decipher the contemporary media space filled with both credible and fake news.

Concerning the news sources, most of the participants obtained their news from social media since they are convenient and update frequently, 75 of 100. However, this reliance is accompanied by a paradox since the fanatical generation of news through social media is arguably one of the sources of fake news. The nominees who report from social media and also use traditional media sources of information reflect the cautious attitude of people following the news, awareness of the need to check the information received from different sources in order to minimize the effect of fake news.

Concerning the perception of fake news among the participants, the results were also diverse, while half of them reported a high level of awareness and filter when it comes to selecting the news channels. However, twelve participants

had moderate to low level of awareness; they accepted news at face value without doubts as to their genuine nature. This disparity lays emphasis on the need to raise the level of political enlightenment/, 'Media Literacy' for the public to be in a position to be able to differentiate between reality and the news. Furthermore, participants' respondent to fake news and said that these sources influenced their beliefs and opinions, which often aligned with their pre-existing prejudice and provoked confusion and cognitive status.

Such consequences of fake news as psychological and emotional impact were also observed, here the respondents' concerns related to security and health issues increased. This is in concordance with what is commonly referred to as "mean world syndrome," in which pessimistic media use is associated with increased perceptions of danger. Third of all, fake news affected the population's attitude resulting in a loss of trust in establishments and deepening social inequality. The behavioral outputs for fake news with regard to the participants were sharing more fake news and alterations in their social relationships exhibiting the effects of virtual misinformation. The loss of constructive discourse that can be attributed to spread of fake news was another observation made by the participants who mentioned the escalation of polarity and deterioration of the quality in the communication discourses in society. This underlines the necessity to find measures to tackle the phenomenon of fake news and revive the sphere of genuine information sharing.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study aimed at identifying the following research questions as to how fake news affect Pakistani social media; Dualism; Mistrust; The adverse social effects that are causing harm to democracy. In the end, the research proved that indeed Social Media Fake News is responsible for the social isolation of human beings, the construction of mistrust amongst them and is also causing the worst effects on the democracy through a survey conducted on 100 professionals of the context of Pakistan. Hence, the assessment reveals that Facebook is twice as often employed in Pakistan for the dissemination of fake information, together with Twitter and WhatsApp. This shows that fake news is rife within the said platforms during regimes of politics and election activities. In conclusion, they underline the necessity of halting the spread of misleading information on the major social media outlets, specifically running in Pakistan. Some of the approaches that can be used to enact this comprehend; social media management, improving the media literacy, and guaranteeing that traditional media conducts its responsibilities professionally. This is a viable direction for future research in this field since it focuses on the way that fake news influences youths, females, and ethnic minorities. Other investigations may also discuss the efficiency of some measures, for example, fact-checking projects and media literacy campaigns among others. All in all, this study brings to light the effects of social media fake news in the Pakistani context and also insists on the fact that there is a need to deal with this menace smartly as it grows in strength.

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