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Truth Under Siege: The Influence of Politically Engineered Fake News on Public Consciousness in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of politically engineered fake news on public consciousness in Pakistan. It explores how disinformation shapes political reality, changes people's opinions, and undermines their trust in institutions. The study is guided by Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony, Berger and Luckman's theory of the social construction of reality, and Foucault's framework of power and knowledge, which explain the social and discursive mechanisms underlying fake news.

A qualitative research design was employed, using in-depth interviews with key informants and focus group discussions with politically aware citizens and social media users. Thematic analysis revealed twelve major themes, including the construction of political reality, hegemonic narrative domination, emotional engineering and affective politics, social validation, discursive production of enemies and heroes, the fragmentation of shared understanding, the decline of institutional trust, normalization of political falsehood, silencing, intimidation, and self-censorship, identity-based filtering, moralization of political narratives, and the everyday reproduction of fake news.

The findings indicate that fake news actively shapes perceptions, increases societal polarization, and erodes trust in democratic institutions. The study recommends enhancing media literacy, increasing transparency, promoting responsible social media engagement, facilitating dialogue, and establishing fact-checking mechanisms to mitigate its influence.

Keywords: Fake News, Public Consciousness, Political Narratives, Social Media Politics, Pakistan

Introduction

The phenomenon of politically engineered fake news and its impact on public awareness represent a vital intersection of digital media, political tactics, and cognitive influence. The information ecosystem has been significantly altered in recent years as a result of the rapid expansion of social media platforms. This has resulted in unprecedented access to news and has also created a fertile environment for disinformation campaigns. Pakistan, with more than 80 million internet users and a deeply divided political environment, has emerged as a significant case study in how artificial intelligence (AI), algorithmic amplification, and networked propaganda intersect to influence public opinion (Abro et al., 2025; Moroojo et al., 2025).

The term "fake news" refers not only to inaccurate reporting but also to intentionally fabricated material created to imitate authentic journalism, frequently distributed via



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coordinated networks to achieve particular sociopolitical objectives (Dennis et al., 2021). Within the Pakistani context, such content often emerges during electoral periods, constitutional crises, or periods of high military-civilian tension, in which narratives are used tactically to undermine opposition leaders, influence voter behavior, or destabilize democratic institutions (Shah, 2025; Rehman et al., 2020).

The integration of AI-driven tools, particularly generative AI and deepfake technologies, is a defining feature of this disinformation landscape. These tools have lowered the barrier to producing high-fidelity fraudulent content. These tools allow actors, regardless of their affiliation with the state, to produce original audio, video, and text that can be disseminated on platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) (Imran et al., 2025). Numerous instances were documented during the 2023–2025 period in which digital media inaccurately depicted political leaders making controversial statements, thereby inciting public anger and even violence (Rehman Uddin et al., 2025). Studies have shown that exposure to AI-generated disinformation has a profound cognitive impact, including the erosion of trust in mainstream media, the weakening of institutional legitimacy, and the increased susceptibility to conspiracy theories, particularly among youth who consume news primarily through algorithmically created feeds (Dennis et al., 2021; Kamran et al., 2023).

Additionally, the dissemination of politically charged misinformation is further exacerbated by the structural dynamics of social media algorithms. Research indicates that engagement-based ranking systems prioritize emotionally engaging content, thereby amplifying sensationalist and polarizing narratives over factual reporting (Haroon et al., 2021). This results in the formation of echo chambers and filter bubbles, in which users are repeatedly exposed to falsehoods that are ideologically congruent, thereby reinforcing preexisting beliefs and reducing the scope for critical evaluation of sources. These algorithmic biases significantly undermine the public's ability to distinguish between fact and fiction in Pakistan, where digital literacy remains uneven and regulatory frameworks are underdeveloped (Mazhar et al., 2024; Rehman et al., 2025). Elahi et al. (2023) conducted surveys indicating that the majority of social media users experience challenges distinguishing between credible journalism and fabricated content, particularly when it aligns with their political or religious beliefs.

The role of political leaders and partisan media sources exacerbates the challenge by legitimizing disinformation. Populist leaders frequently use rhetoric labeling independent journalists as purveyors of "fake news" to undermine unfavorable reporting, a strategy that has been shown to diminish public confidence in the media while not significantly affecting trust in the accusers (Haider et al., 2024). The strategic use of disinformation allegations erodes accountability systems and creates an environment where emotional appeals and identity politics replace facts. Moreover, empirical evidence indicates that individuals with a higher conspiracy mentality, lower media literacy, and strong patriotic or religious affiliations are more likely to accept and disseminate political misinformation, highlighting psychological vulnerabilities that propagandists deliberately exploit (Bapista & Gradim, 2022).

Initiatives to mitigate these trends include technological interventions like AI-driven fact-checking systems and bilingual models for detecting misinformation in Urdu and English, which have demonstrated effectiveness in laboratory settings (Munir & Naeem). Nonetheless, practical implementation faces considerable obstacles, including platform opacity, inadequate regulatory coordination, and insufficient public awareness initiatives (Butt et al., 2023). Educational activities designed to enhance digital literacy have shown inconsistent outcomes. However, specialized training programs show some effectiveness



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in strengthening reasoning abilities, but broad-based educational videos display minimal measurable influence on belief correction (Ali & Qazi, 2023). The battle against politically constructed disinformation in Pakistan requires a multifaceted strategy that includes policy reform, media regulation, technical advancement, and civic education to protect democratic dialogue and public awareness.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its ability to explain how politically engineered fake news influences public consciousness in Pakistan, rather than merely documenting its dissemination. It fills a significant gap in the existing literature by demonstrating how fake political narratives are assimilated into truth, how they shape political identity, and how they affect trust in institutions.

The study is theoretically significant because it combines Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, Berger and Luckmann's social construction of reality, and Foucault's power-knowledge to explain how disinformation functions as a form of political power. This contributes to the sociological understanding of how digital media is used to control meaning, normalize political narratives, and generate consent.

Empirically, the study offers comprehensive qualitative evidence on how Pakistani citizens interpret political information, form beliefs, and respond emotionally and socially to misinformation. These insights are essential in a politically divided and media-dense society. The findings are beneficial for policymakers, media regulators, journalists, and civil society in formulating media literacy initiatives, counter-disinformation strategies, and democratic protections.

The study promotes the protection of democratic culture, public trust, and informed citizenship in Pakistan by analyzing the influence of fake news on political perception and behavior.

Objectives of the Study

To examine how politically engineered fake news constructs and normalizes political “truth” in the everyday lives of Pakistani citizens.

To analyze how fake news mobilizes emotions, identities, and social networks to shape public consciousness and political loyalty.

To investigate how the circulation of political fake news affects collective trust, democratic attitudes, and shared political reality in Pakistan.

Research Questions

Q1. How do Pakistani citizens encounter, interpret, and internalize politically motivated fake news in their daily media use?

Q 2. How do fake news narratives use emotion, identity, and social validation to influence what people accept as political truth?

Q 3. How does the spread of politically engineered fake news reshape public trust, political polarization, and democratic consciousness in Pakistan?

Literature Review

The emergence of politically engineered fake news and its impact on public consciousness in Pakistan has become a significant challenge to societal cohesion, media credibility, and democratic integrity. In a time characterized by algorithmic content curation and digital transformation, the manipulation of information for political gain has evolved from isolated incidents to systematic campaigns that capitalize on structural vulnerabilities, technological affordances, and cognitive biases within the media



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ecosystem. The rapid dissemination of disinformation, which often outpaces factual corrections and undermines public confidence in institutions, has been facilitated by the interaction among political actors, social media platforms, and artificial intelligence (AI). This literature review synthesizes the current scholarly understanding of the impact of politically motivated misinformation on the perception, behavior, and democratic engagement of Pakistani citizens. It specifically examines the role of AI-driven tools, platform algorithms, psychological susceptibility, and educational countermeasures.

The integration of cutting-edge technologies such as generative AI and deepfake systems, which enable the production of incredibly realistic yet completely fake audiovisual content, is a defining feature of contemporary disinformation in Pakistan. According to Imran et al. (2025), the availability of these technologies has dramatically reduced the technological obstacles to creating convincing lies, enabling both state-affiliated and non-state actors to spread false narratives on a large scale. Since emotionally charged content can spread quickly and exacerbate polarization, these manipulations are especially effective during high-stakes political events such as elections or constitutional crises. Through a thorough analysis of the literature, Shah (2025) demonstrates that misleading narratives about the 2018 and 2024 general elections significantly influenced voter attitudes, distorted political discourse, and undermined trust in the democratic process. The purposeful timing and thematic focus of these efforts point to a calculated attempt to influence public opinion rather than disseminate sporadic false information.

In this dynamic, algorithmic amplification is crucial, as social media platforms promote sensationalist, ideologically polarizing information by prioritizing engagement metrics over truthfulness. Moroojo et al. (2025) emphasize how recommendation engines on platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok create personalized feeds that reinforce users' preexisting beliefs, thereby forming echo chambers that protect individuals from corrective information. This selective exposure not only reinforces partisan identities but also reduces the ability to evaluate sources critically. Similarly, Sami Ullah et al. (2023) highlight how technical elements such as viral loops, automated re-sharing, and user behavior patterns work together to accelerate the dissemination of false information across networks. Because of these algorithmic systems' opacity, regulatory supervision and fact-checking initiatives are made much more difficult, allowing bad actors to operate with a degree of impunity.

Low levels of digital and media literacy make the public more vulnerable to misinformation, especially among young people who make up a sizable share of Pakistan's internet user population. Kamran et al. (2023) state that young social media users are psychologically more vulnerable to fake news because they cannot verify sources and are highly sensitive to politically charged content. This study demonstrates statistically significant relationships between regular exposure to false information and higher levels of anxiety, mistrust of mainstream institutions, and lower levels of civic engagement. These results are supported by Elahi et al. (2023), who demonstrate that many users base their judgment of the reliability of online content more on heuristic indicators such as the number of likes or shares than on analytical reasoning. This dependence on social validation processes renders the populace particularly vulnerable to organized inauthentic behavior that mimics grassroots support for misleading narratives.

The success of attempts to counteract politically manufactured misinformation has been inconsistent. Although technology solutions like AI-powered detection models show potential in controlled settings, linguistic complexity, contextual nuances, and platform constraints continue to limit their effectiveness in the real world. According to Abro et al.



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(2025), attempts to reach agreement on regulatory measures are complicated by the public's conflicting views of AI, which are seen as both a threat vector and a potential safety measure. Even though educational efforts are sound conceptually, they are challenging to implement. In a randomized study comparing two media literacy interventions, Ali and Qazi (2023) found that although focused training enhanced participants' reasoning skills, general educational videos had no statistically significant effect on their ability to recognize fake news. This implies that without more profound pedagogical approaches that foster long-term critical thinking abilities, surface-level awareness efforts are inadequate.

In summary, the literature shows that politically designed fake news operates through the integration of technology, algorithmic bias, psychological vulnerability, and weak institutions. To enhance democratic resilience and rebuild public trust, a comprehensive strategy is required that emphasizes policy development, digital literacy, technology, and civil society involvement to address this complex issue.

Theoretical Framework

This research adopts a comprehensive critical-interpretive theoretical framework based on Gramsci's Cultural Hegemony, Berger and Luckmann's Social Construction of Reality, and Foucault's Power-Knowledge theory. This approach demonstrates how politically constructed misinformation not only misleads but also actively shapes political reality, identities, and public consciousness.

Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony explains how political dominance is sustained through the regulation of ideas rather than by coercion. In Pakistan's digital landscape, misinformation serves as a hegemonic instrument that legitimizes specific political narratives while undermining others. Repeated exposure to false political content on social media and partisan networks embeds it into public "common sense," fostering acceptance for specific political actors and ideologies.

Berger and Luckmann's concept of the social construction of reality explains how political "truth" is produced through everyday communication. In Pakistan, people are increasingly exposed to political information through WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, and television, where repetition, social sharing, and emotional framing facilitate the acceptance of fake news as factual reality. This theory explains the mechanisms by which falsehoods are internalized and reproduced through regular social contact.

Foucault's power-knowledge framework allows the study to analyze fake news as a form of discursive power. Political misinformation defines who is patriotic, who is corrupt, and who is an enemy of the nation. By controlling political discourse, fake news shapes what can be believed, discussed, and contested in the public sphere. It therefore structures political subjectivity and loyalty.

Together, these theories allow the study to examine who controls political narratives, how they become socially real, and how they govern public consciousness in Pakistan.

Research Methodology

The study used a qualitative, interpretive research design to analyze how fake news that is spread for political reasons affects people's consciousness in Pakistan. Given the study's aim to understand how people use social media and digital communication to acquire political information, construct truths, and form beliefs, a qualitative approach was appropriate.

The study was conducted in urban and semi-urban areas where people actively use social media, messaging apps, and online news sites to consume political content. People who



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regularly read political news and use digital media were in the target population. Participants who were politically aware and well-informed were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring the diversity of political affiliations, ages, genders, and media use.

In-depth interviews (IDIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) were used to collect data. IDIs were conducted with key informants, including journalists, political communication experts, social media political influencers, media analysts, and political party media-cell members, to gain insight into the production and dissemination of fake news. FGDs were conducted with politically engaged citizens to investigate how fake news is interpreted, debated, and normalized within social groups.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, involving systematic coding and identification of patterns related to political identity, emotional influence, narrative dominance, social validation, and trust. These themes were interpreted through the lenses of cultural hegemony, social construction of reality, and power-knowledge to explain how fake news operates as a form of political power over public consciousness.

The study adhered to the qualitative requirements of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability through careful documentation, the use of multiple data sources, and transparent analysis. Given the political nature of the study, strict ethical standards were followed, including obtaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, and keeping participants' identities secret.

Results

Thematic analysis demonstrates that politically manipulated fake news has a significant impact on how people comprehend politics, trust information, and interact with others. The following themes explain how inaccurate and misleading political content influences public consciousness and becomes a part of everyday thought and action.

Theme 1: Construction of Political Reality

Participants described that repeated political messages on social media, WhatsApp, and television gradually become part of what they accept as real. When the same stories appear again and again from different sources, people begin to treat them as facts. In this way, fake news does not remain separate from reality; it slowly becomes the reality through which political events are understood.

Theme 2: Hegemonic Narrative Domination

Participants felt that only certain political stories dominate the digital space, while other voices are ignored or pushed aside. When one political version of events is everywhere, it starts to feel like the only truth. This makes people less willing to consider other explanations and strengthens the influence of powerful political groups.

Theme 3: Emotional Engineering and Affective Politics

Participants explained that fake news often works by creating strong feelings such as anger, fear, pride, or hatred. These emotions make people react quickly and emotionally rather than calmly and thoughtfully. When political news touches emotions, people are more likely to believe it and pass it on to others.

Theme 4: Social Validation and Peer Trust

People rely heavily on their social circles when deciding what to believe. If a message comes from a family member, friend, or political group, it is seen as more trustworthy. Fake news gains strength because it moves through these trusted networks, making it harder to doubt or challenge.



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Theme 5: Discursive Production of Enemies and Heroes

Fake news often presents politics as a fight between good and bad forces. Certain leaders or parties are shown as heroes, while others are painted as enemies or traitors. This way of telling political stories increases hostility and reduces understanding between different political groups.

Theme 6: Fragmentation of Shared Public Reality

Participants described that people now live in separate political worlds. Different groups believe different versions of the same events, depending on what they see and share online. This means that there is no longer one shared political reality; instead, society becomes divided into competing truths.

Theme 7: Decline of Institutional Trust

Fake news has made people suspicious of the media, government, courts, and even elections. Many participants felt that these institutions are biased or controlled, leading them to doubt official information. As trust declines, people rely more on informal sources, which often spread even more misinformation.

Theme 8: Normalization of Political Falsehood

Participants said that false or misleading political claims are now so common that they are no longer shocking. Many people expect politicians and media to lie, so they become less concerned about truth. This makes it easier for fake news to spread without being questioned.

Theme 9: Silencing, Intimidation, and Self-Censorship

The online political environment is often hostile. People who express different opinions face criticism, insults, or social pressure. As a result, many choose to stay silent or avoid political discussion, which limits open debate and strengthens dominant narratives.

Theme 10: Identity-Based Information Filtering

Participants explained that people judge information based on whether it supports their political side. News that agrees with their beliefs is accepted, while news that challenges them is quickly rejected. Political identity becomes more important than accuracy.

Theme 11: Moralization of Political Narratives

Politics is often described in moral terms, such as right versus wrong or loyal versus disloyal. This makes political disagreement feel like a personal or moral attack rather than a difference of opinion. Such thinking increases conflict and reduces dialogue.

Theme 12: Everyday Reproduction of Fake News

Ordinary people play a major role in spreading fake news. By forwarding messages, sharing posts, and commenting on political content, they help misinformation travel further. Over time, this daily sharing makes fake news part of normal political communication.

Discussion

The findings indicate that fake news in Pakistan is not merely a source of misinformation, but a systematic process that influences public consciousness. Upon examination through the theoretical framework, numerous patterns emerge.



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The theme of construction of political reality aligns with Berger and Luckmann's social construction of reality. Perception is transformed into "accepted truth" through the repetition and social validation of political messages. The study demonstrates that the reality citizens perceive is not independently discovered but is collectively produced through social and media interactions.

The dominance of specific narratives reflects Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony. Political actors maintain power through ideas rather than force by consistently presenting one version of political events and marginalizing others. Participants' experiences suggest that hegemonic narratives can control public perception and political discourse by rendering alternative perspectives illegitimate.

The construction of heroes and enemies, the moralization of narratives, and the suppression of dissent can be analyzed through Foucault's power-knowledge paradigm. Discourse influences the perception of truth and determines who is permitted to express their views. Disinformation organizes political loyalty, defines acceptable conduct, and regulates public thinking. Participants' experiences of self-censorship, societal pressure, and polarized interpretation demonstrate how discourse operates as a subtle yet effective form of power.

Emotions, social validation, and identity-based filtering further reinforce the influence of fake news. Participants reported that content shared within trusted networks or aligned with political identity is more readily accepted, showing how reality is not only constructed but also maintained through everyday social interactions.

Finally, the fragmentation of shared public reality and the decline of institutional trust demonstrate the societal consequences of fake news. Citizens are divided into separate "truth worlds," and formal institutions are increasingly distrusted, reducing opportunities for dialogue and undermining democratic processes. The everyday reproduction of fake news by ordinary citizens ensures that this system of influence continues to operate across social and digital networks.

In summary, the findings indicate that politically fabricated misinformation in Pakistan operates as a socially constructed, hegemonically supported, and discursively influential phenomenon. It significantly shapes political knowledge, emotions, identities, and trust, thereby influencing public consciousness and political conduct.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that politically engineered fake news in Pakistan profoundly shapes public consciousness. It goes beyond spreading disinformation to actively constructing political realities, influencing emotions, shaping identities, and controlling public discourse. The findings reveal that fake news reinforces dominant narratives, fragments shared understanding, erodes trust in institutions, and encourages self-censorship. Citizens often rely on information validated by social networks and filtered through political identity, further embedding disinformation into everyday political knowledge. Overall, fake news emerges as a powerful social phenomenon that systematically manipulates perception, behavior, and trust, threatening democratic processes and social cohesion.

Recommendations

This study's findings highlight the pressing need to address the impact of politically fabricated disinformation on public consciousness in Pakistan. Promoting media literacy among citizens is one of the most essential methods. Educational programs must emphasize the development of skills necessary for critically assessing political



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information, recognizing credible sources, and differentiating reality from falsehood. Such activities should be implemented not only at educational institutions but also via internet platforms and community outreach programs, ensuring that individuals of all ages may engage with political content responsibly.

Strengthening institutional transparency is equally important. Government agencies, media organizations, and other institutions must proactively communicate accurate information and maintain open channels for public inquiry. By providing timely and verifiable facts, institutions can rebuild trust and reduce the reliance of citizens on unverified sources, which are often channels for fake news.

The role of social media platforms must also be emphasized. Platforms should implement effective mechanisms to detect, flag, and reduce the spread of politically misleading content. Simultaneously, users should be encouraged to adopt responsible practices, such as verifying information before sharing it within their networks, thereby preventing the unintentional reproduction of fake news.

Creating spaces for open political dialogue is another essential step. Civil society organizations, political parties, and community forums should foster inclusive discussions that allow multiple perspectives to be heard. Encouraging respectful debate can help reduce polarization, prevent the formation of isolated “truth worlds,” and enhance shared understanding among diverse groups.

The establishment and promotion of independent fact-checking mechanisms is also recommended. Fact-checking organizations should collaborate with media and social platforms to verify political claims, provide accessible corrections, and educate the public about misinformation trends. These mechanisms can serve as reliable references for citizens seeking accurate information.

Finally, it is crucial to support further research and policy development. Longitudinal studies can examine the long-term effects of fake news on political behavior, and policymakers can use this evidence to design strategies that counter misinformation while protecting freedom of expression. By integrating research, education, and institutional reforms, Pakistan can reduce the impact of fake news and strengthen democratic processes.

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