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The Impact of Social Media Disinformation Regarding Political Upheaval and Its Implication on Mental Health: The Need for Digital Literacy

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Abstract

Social media has transformed communication and political engagement, yet it also fosters disinformation that significantly impacts mental health, particularly in politically sensitive environments like Pakistan. This study explores the intersection of social media disinformation during the General Election 2024 in Pakistan, its effects on users' mental health and the mitigating role of digital literacy. Leveraging cognitive load theory, framing theory and the critical media literacy framework, the research identifies how disinformation overwhelms cognitive processes, fosters emotional distress and deepens societal polarization.

Participants reported heightened anxiety, mistrust and emotional exhaustion due to exposure to misleading narratives crafted through emotionally charged and culturally resonant language. The findings highlight the role of digital literacy in empowering individuals to critically evaluate content, reducing stress and promoting resilience. However, gaps in digital literacy skills and the persuasive appeal of disinformation underscore the need for targeted interventions.

The study advocates integrating digital literacy into educational curricula and community programs to equip individuals with critical thinking and fact-checking skills. By addressing the cognitive, emotional and social dimensions of disinformation, this research aims to foster informed engagement and mitigate the mental health impacts of political misinformation.

Keywords: Political Engagements, Social Media, Polarization, Elections

Introduction

Social media has changed the way people interact with each other, the way they get information and even the way they address issues concerning politics. Facebook, Twitter or even WhatsApp have given people the best chances for connection and sharing information, hence enabling people to express their views and engage in the processes of democracy. Nevertheless, this digital revolution has its own disadvantages too, especially the problem of disinformation and misinformation. In the case of developing countries such as Pakistan where political issues are a subject of high sensitivity, inaccurate or exaggerated information can be rapidly spread with the aid of social media which poses a serious threat. Such consequences elicit a sense of distrust towards the established institutions, increase polarization and affect mental health of individuals. This study examines the three-way relationship of social media disinformation, political conflict and psychical health where the focus is placed on the role of digital literacy in addressing the complex interrelationships.

The term disinformation refers to falsified or misleading information created with the intention to mislead has spread rapidly in today's information-oriented world. It is during times when there is a general disturbance in the country like general elections, political protests or transition of power that disinformation is effectively used to reshape people's perspectives. In Pakistan, a country where a large number of its population actively

uses social media, there is a prevalence of such politically motivated fake news. They combine emotionally charged words, sensation and identity politics in these narratives which evoke the audience reaction and hence control the actions taken by users. This is quite alarming since those who consume such content may get confused or upset and even develop lasting emotional impairment or anxiety, stress or, in other words depression.

The psychological consequences coming from fake news about 2024 elections via social media become worse because users do not have the skills to differentiate between the real and fake news. This is usually due to poor digital literacy skills which is the ability of an individual to assess, analyze and apply information as well as being able to identify biases and sources. Therefore, these users are most easily influenced which can lead to a greater sense of hopelessness or paranoia during political instability. In addition to this is the fact that disinformation toxifies environment weather online or offline contributing to polarization and decreases the likelihood of constructive engagement.

In Pakistan the language manipulation is elevated to whole new playing field with the intention to misinform the native people of Pakistan. The entire nation is multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-cultural which provides a fertile ground for spreading fake news making it an advanced case for Pakistan. The sources of disinformation use fake languages as well as develop culturally appropriate content to increase the scope and appeal of the message. For example, the language and content meant for Pashto speakers may have little to nothing in common with the language content meant for Punjabi audiences. Knowing the language used in these campaigns makes it possible to come up with strategies aimed at countering the campaign.

The case of the 2024 general election demonstrates the ambiguous function of social media most effectively. It has its benefits by helping promote underserved communities and encourage activism, and its drawbacks which include the potential for aggravating the societal rifts. This ambivalence has revealed the need to also study the impacts of disinformation through the mental and sociocultural lenses. The purpose of this research is to enhance the understanding of the problem which includes investigating the impact of disinformation concerning the general election 2024 on the mental health of citizens as well as how users can be empowered through digital literacy and provide effective recommendations to help cope with the challenges.

Research Questions

The present research pays attention to three critical questions:

1. How do politically charged fake news and social media narratives regarding results of General Election 2024, in Pakistan impact the mental health of social media users?
2. What role does language play in spreading social media disinformation regarding the results of General Election 2024, in Pakistan?
3. How can digital literacy skills help users discern factual information from disinformation during political upheaval?

As such, the study aims to contribute to the current body of research that has examined the psychological, pedagogical and linguistic aspects of disinformation in politically contested situations. The two areas that are particularly targeted include the need to address the negative health impact of the exposure to disinformation and the need to develop the abilities to navigate effectively today's information age.

Theoretical Framework

This study seeks to assess how disinformation prevalent on social media throughout the general election 2024 impacts mental health and how experience with digital media can alleviate its effects. This study includes three key theories: cognitive load theory, framing theory and the critical media literacy framework. These theories are crucial in understanding the psychological, linguistic and educational aspects of disinformation in societies plagued with political conflicts like Pakistan.

Cognitive Load Theory
Cognitive Load Theory of Sweller (1988) is how vividly people can retrieve and use information. It argues that excessive information especially contradictory or irrelevant information will exceed cognitive capacity and result in strain, confusion and poor decision-making. In this perspective of social media misinformation, the politically oriented false news filled its consumers with excessive emotional and controversial messages losing their ability to find trustworthy material. This seems to be most prominent in the case of General election 2024 in Pakistan where users have to manage and navigate through the excess of contested messages in Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp. Cognitive Load Theory further assists in clarifying the processes that may be involved in the psychological effects of disinformation about the general election 2024.The experience of such a large quantity of false information which aim is to inflict cognitive information overload leads to further mental fatigue and anxiety and adds to the strain of mental health during political turmoil.

Framing Theory
Goffman (1974) describes framing theory as a concept which integrates the content of communication, and its organization and layout, including its impact on audience perception and interpretation. In the context of disinformation, the linguistic, pictorial and narrative means employed determine how the events and issues are interpreted by the users. During political turmoil in Pakistan, emotionally loaded themes of framing and violation, betrayal, and injustice have become equally disinformation tools typical of conflicts in many countries. Additionally, language practices that are specific to dialects and cultures enhance the effectiveness of false informational messages. This study examines language framing used in disinformation to arouse emotions of the masses and proposes language as one of the major determinants of the spread and impact of false narratives. For example, the use of Punjabi or Urdu in particular contexts add an element of culture to the disinformation making it more relevant and believable to specific groups hence widening the gap in the society.

Critical Media Literacy Framework
According to Kellner and Share (2007), 'the critical media literacy framework' refers particularly as an extension to its purpose as equipping people with the ability to critically assess and interpret media messages, sources, and close-mindedness. This framework also focuses on how, through some forms of education, the users can learn how to act in cyberspace and not be fooled by fake news. Disinformation literate individuals are also needed in countries with no or less confidence in media establishments like Pakistan. By promoting CT (critical thinking) and fact-checking (CT), the users of digital literacy tools can know where to look for credible sources and ignore biased stories. For example, practices in trainings which empower users to use multiple reliable fact-checking sources while considering information from the web can eventually minimize the negative influence of the fake news phenomenon and its psychological effects.
In fact, theories of disinformation, such as the cognitive load theory, which ascribes mental fatigue to excessive amounts of contradictory content and the framing theory which researches the creation of specific narratives to manipulate users' perception and behavior intersect in psychological and linguistic strategies. Potential push back for this impact is provided through the critical media literacy framework that focuses on education and skill acquisition. These theories together offer an integrated explanation of the problem of research consideration inferentially from the psychological approach, linguistic, and the strategies to fight disinformation.

Literature Review
The dementias of social media disinformation include discrimination and loss of identity particularly in circumstances of political sensitivity. This review is concerned with literature on psychological consequences of disinformation about language's contribution to people's perception and importance of digital literacy. The

review calls upon cognitive load theory, framing theory, and the critical media literacy framework argues the challenge of disinformation in Pakistan's political landscape with recommendations for future work.

Psychological Impacts of Social Media Disinformation

The adverse effects of disinformation on the citizens have been acknowledged and cited in past studies. It has been suggested that fake news leads to negative emotions such as anxiety, disorientation, and distrust as people are torn between polarized or emotively loaded positions. Roozenbeek et al, (2020) point out that a repeated narration of false contexts gives rise to "belief echoes" that see individuals cling to some aspects of misinformation even after it has been retracted. Cognitive load theory provides an insight into these lingering effects that excessive or contradictory information taxes cognition by giving rise to anxiety, emotional fatigue and poor decision making.

The spring and spread of these fakes are more pronounced in times of political unrest. Vosoughi et al. (2018) observed that fake narratives spread far and away quicker than true stories due to the fact that the former tends to create more engagement. In Pakistan, fake narratives during the election season as well as numerous new stories across social media exacerbates the already polarized nature of the political discourse in the country. A good number of users may lose a sense of belonging and even confidence when there is the political fake news concerning elections or protests (Ahmad, 2021).

Likewise, studies emphasize the contribution of the digital echo chamber effect towards the spread of disinformation. Cinelli et al. (2021) argue that algorithmic curation facilitates the strengthening of already existing biases on sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Hence there are content barrows that exacerbate managerial psychological impacts of misinformation. Such conditions can lead to feelings of unease and distrust especially in such times when political tensions are more pronounced than in normal times.

The Role of Language in Disinformation

As per the Framing Theory logs on the battle for disinformation, language is an essential tool in the dissemination of disinformation. People in public tend to be influenced by narratives that are both emotionally and culturally appealing. As Lakoff (2010) asserts, the overarching message given by the nuances brought about by metaphors, chanting and strong language assists in the way a person understands and comprehends the information given to them. In Pakistan, these tactics are further stratified by region and ethnicity in its multipolitical and multilingual environment.

Asghar and Rehman, (2022) explored cases of disinformation directed at Pakistani ethnic groups and concluded that the use of local tongues like Pashto or Sindhi in political discourse greatly improves the reliability of the arguments. With regards to political disinformation against Punjabi speakers, sources emphasize issues that focus around national affiliations and group identities. In contrast, disinformation strategies targeting marginalized groups invoke past injustices in order to stir emotions of resentment. The use of language, however, is not limited to words. Nonverbal communication such as edited images and videos adds up to the power of fake news. A study conducted by Tandoc et al. (2018) states that the inclusion of visual components and culture-related strategies boosts the exposure and the effectiveness of falsehood.

Digital Literacy as a Countermeasure

The Critical Media Literacy Framework points out the role of media in contemporary society and explains that individuals need to be trained with the skills to analyze texts critically. Studies have found that people who are educated are far less likely to fall prey to disinformation. Guess et al. (2020) determined that digital literacy helped shield people even from the tendency to share fake content when provoked emotionally. Likewise, as already pointed out, Pennycook and Rand (2019) also found that short interventions aimed at users enhanced their ability to evaluate the credibility of sources quite considerably. In Pakistan though, the story of digital literacy is negative. A report by the Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) dated 2021, suggested

that users seem to be unable to assess the credibility of sources or arguments due to a lack of analytical skills. There have been a few efforts to counter the disinformation through fact check initiatives like Soch Fact-Check and Pakistani Fact Watch. However, their scale is small and no studies have been carried out to assess their effectiveness.

It is also suggested that students' knowledge about digital literacy can protect them when they grow up against any disinformation campaigns. In Finland, systematic exposure to media literacy training within the school educational system decreases the penetration and impact of disinformation on people's psyche and social life (Koltay, 2011). There is every reason to expect that, with appropriate modification in relation to the language and culture of the country, similar measures in Pakistan would achieve positive results.

Whereas previous researchers have made significant progress in this field but there are still notable gaps. For example, most of the literature is based on the psychological aspects of disinformation in western countries, whereas little research has looked at its impact in concentrated politically explosive multilingual countries such as Pakistan. Majority accept the impact of digital literacy as a factor but there is no physical proof as to which tactics would be most applicable for such ecosystems. These gaps are addressed in this study which looks into the mental health, linguistic, and digital literacy conjunctures through the Pakistani lens. Through integrating theoretical frameworks and context specific data, the study intends to play a role in expanding knowledge of the problem and suggest practical solutions to the dilemma.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the psychological, linguistic, and educational dimensions of social media disinformation during political tussle in the country Pakistan. Since qualitative approaches are more suitable to address issues of this nature, which are complicated and interact with various components such as psychosocial shocks associated with disinformation, and digital literacy, it is appropriate for this particular study.

Research Design and Sampling

The qualitative design approach was adopted to understand the behaviors and experiences of human beings and social groups. While quantitative methods focus on collecting numerical data, qualitative research is suited for more interpretative and holistic emanations of the psychological and sociocultural dimensions of post-truth societies. The open-ended format of the data collection enables the sampled respondents to narrate their experiences without limitations, addressing the aim of the study which is to expose the multi-faceted nature of the impact of disinformation. A qualitative design is ideally useful for studying human phenomena whose foundational concepts require situational relevance such as the impact of disinformation on the mental health of social media users in Pakistan's politically volatile context.

The study used purposive sampling by actively looking for social media users who have active engagement during Pakistan's General Election 2024. The sample consisted of 50 social media active users who had also been election content consumers on Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp. Purposive sampling is applicable to qualitative research since its concern is with purpose of study than with the representation of the sample. By concentrating on those people who have faced the issue being researched.

Data Collection Tools and Process

The primary data collection tool is an open-ended questionnaire conducted through Google Form. This questionnaire includes the questions that necessitate elaboration about the experiences of the participants in the General Election 2024 politically relevant disinformation, the effects of such disinformation on their psychology and their knowledge of the concept of digital literacy. Open-ended questionnaires allow the participants to respond as completely and as freely as they wish, and such responses try to show the 'texture' of the experience. The use of Google forms provides accessibility allowing different participants the

opportunity to express their opinions quickly and secretly credit the convenience of Google forms.

Hence, data was collected by using the Google forms questionnaire that was sent through Email and WhatsApp. They were given practical guides about the study and assured of their privacy to seek resolution or depth in their answers without any fear. Google forms were expected that most social media users would readily respond. In addition, the online format complies with the objective of research which targets the virtual space.

Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to assess the data collected because it is a qualitative approach that seeks to systematically identify, interpret and report patterns (themes) within qualitative data. The following stages were involved:

1. Repeated exposure of the respondents' responses through reading their responses.

2. Starting to highlight the very relevant and substantial points by drawing codes.

3. Identifying and locating repeating structures used in regard to the psychological aspects, language used, and the realm of digital practices.

4. Performing the revision for the themes to enhance the consistency and importance of the themes under study.

5. Including central ideas or concepts and giving them appropriate labels that best describe them.

Researchers intentionally pursue particular areas of the study and thematic analysis is a highly adaptable form of analysis. Thematic analysis is referred to as a method for examining qualitative data that allows the researcher to examine the data to reveal underlying ideas, constructs, and orientations that transcended teacher responses to the research question. This methodology is particularly practical in understanding and addressing the research objectives in a structured manner while providing the necessary depth and breadth to the overall aim of the research.

In order to deepen the analysis and address further consequences of social media disinformation concerning the General Elections in regard to psychological well-being including emotional and behavioral dimensions can be incorporated. Below is the table with categories and codes to examine the impact of fake news and social media narratives impact the mental health.

The evidence illustrates how the disinformation conducted about the General Election results performs multiple devastating effects on mental health of individuals. By creating categories and codes based on the participant responses, we are able to identify reoccurring themes that depict the effects of misinformation on emotional, behavioral, cognitive and physical health.

The presence of disinformation ignites a range of negative emotions, including stress, anxiety, distrust, frustration, and despair. Several participants voiced their concerns when it came to the fear of political violence and efficacy of democracy. For instance, one of them said: "*I feared that the disinformation was creating unrest and worsening the situation.*" In a similar tone, another remarked: *"It made me feel like the system is broken beyond repair, and I lost hope in democracy."* Nonetheless, some cases also recorded persistence with few participants claiming that they were immune to the misinformation. Nonetheless, the vast majority of them claimed that social media disinformation distorted their belief in democracies and increased their stress levels.

People's behavior changed drastically as they dealt with disinformation. People largely exhibited avoidance behaviors where they shied away from any form of discussion or social interaction to reduce their exposure. One of the participants noted this in the following way: *"I avoided discussions with friends because I couldn't trust their sources."* On the other hand, others pinned their hopes on compulsive information seeking

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Theme	Category	Code	Quotation
Emotional and Psychological Effects	**Emotional Response**	Stress and anxiety	"I experienced a severe condition of anxiety and left watching news."
		Mistrust and skepticism	"The whole range of news made me skeptical of the election process in Pakistan."
		Resilience	"No, I didn't feel any such things."
		Fear of instability	"I feared that the disinformation was creating unrest and worsening the situation."
		Hopelessness	"It made me feel like the system is broken beyond repair, and I lost hope in democracy."
		Anger and frustration	"Every post made me furious, and I ended up venting online."
Impact on Mental Health	**Behavioral Changes**	Avoidance behavior	"I avoided discussions with friends because I couldn't trust their sources."
		Compulsive checking	"I became obsessed with checking every claim, which made me feel even more drained."
		Emotional exhaustion	"I felt mentally drained from constantly trying to verify what's true or false."
	Cognitive Effects	Overthinking	"I kept overanalyzing the news, wondering what would happen to the country."
		Reduced focus	"I couldn't concentrate on my studies because the news kept distracting me."
		Distrust in media	"I feel like I can't believe anything anymore—truth and lies are blurred."
Social Impacts of Disinformation	**Effect on Relationships**	Strained offline relationships	"Disinformation caused hated debates both online and offline, affecting relationships."
		Polarization	"It contributed to social rivalries and divided people into two halves."
		Isolation	"I stopped attending social gatherings to avoid political arguments."
	Community Impact	Collective anxiety	"It felt like the whole society was anxious and on edge."
		Distrust in authorities	"I began to distrust electoral bodies and the entire government structure."
Physical Manifestations	**Health Symptoms**	Sleep disturbances	"I couldn't sleep after seeing so much chaos online."
		Headaches	"The constant exposure to fake news and debates gave me frequent headaches."
		Appetite changes	"I lost my appetite from the stress caused by election misinformation."

behave to cope with research anxiety, a rather unrealistic goal. A frenzied pace began to dominate the accounts of most participants as they saw their stress levels rising due to their attempts to fact check the information.

Disinformation had a negative impact on the cognitive functioning of the participants. Their imaginations were particularly concerned, with one of them having the following ascribed to frustration" I kept overanalyzing the news, wondering what would happen to the country." Consequently, they began to lose concentration and productivity. Participants felt that any task, studies or work, would be difficult to carry out. Quite a number of them also began to have issues with the media which made it even more difficult for them to know truth from falsehood.

Social relations were indeed disrupted with most participants witnessing relationship breakdowns and or increased divisions. Argumentative posts on social media sites led to cracks between members of various social strata. Some of the participants reported withdrawing from centers where such debates took place saying, *"I stopped attending social gatherings to avoid political arguments."* On a wider scale, social anxiety amplified by disinformation eroded community trust in the state and the elective institution.

There are psychosomatic symptoms that disinformation has caused that must be addressed. Sleep difficulties, interfering with everyday activities, and appetite alterations were normal symptoms reported by the participants. One of the participants said, *"The constant exposure to fake news and debates gave me frequent headaches."* These symptoms are an indication of the implications of stress and anxiety that is acute and has permeated over a long time.

The results highlight the negative effect of election-related misinformation on mental well-being. Social media networks misinformation into create stress, anxiety, and mistrust, and many other processes including emotional, cognitive, behavioral, social as well as physical. Eliminating such impacts calls for reforms in systems themselves, increasing the level of digital resilience and combatting disinformation. Future studies may seek to examine the approaches that can help in reducing these impacts and increasing the resilience of individuals grappling with these challenges.

Below is the table of thematic analysis of the responses regarding the language role in spreading social media disinformation. The table outlines themes, categories, codes, and representative quotations:

Theme	Category	Code	Quotations
Role of Language in Disinformation Spread	**Emotive and Sensational Language**	Emotional triggers such as fear, anger, or patriotism	"Words like 'traitor,' 'hero,' or 'enemy' create an 'us vs. them' dynamic, deepening divisions."
		Dramatic and attention-grabbing words	"Posts using emotional, dramatic, or inflammatory language are more likely to grab attention."
	Manipulative Language and Visuals	Use of emotive and manipulative language to create urgency	"Misleading and false information is presented in convincing and persuasive language."
		Manipulated visuals paired with misleading language	"The language often accompanies manipulated visuals or misleading graphs."
	Simplification and Bias	Use of relatable, simplified language to ensure wide	"The language was common so that everyone could understand and believe it."

			understanding
		Biased framing to manipulate perception	"They use language in a biased way."
	Structural and Stylistic Features	Use of all caps, exclamation marks, and sensational headlines	"BREAKING NEWS!!! IMRAN KHAN WINS 2024 ELECTIONS BY LANDSLIDE!"
		Repetition of key phrases or terms to reinforce disinformation	"Repetition of the same line quite often increases the credibility of fake news."
Impact of Linguistic Features on Credibility	**Use of Official or Statistical Language**	Reference to official-sounding terms and institutions	"Fake news often mentions renowned organizations or respected individuals to give a sense of legitimacy."
		Use of percentages or technical jargon to increase credibility	"Including numbers, percentages, or technical terms can make fabricated claims appear more factual."
	Sensational and Emotional Appeal	Language that resonates with readers' feelings	"If the language and the choice of words resonate with what users are feeling, these posts will spread."
	Ambiguity and Vagueness	Emotional appeals such as fear, anger, or excitement	"Language used in social media fake news can cause anger, fear, and chaos."
		Ambiguous, unclear language to mislead	"Ambiguous, harsh, and unclear language has greatly influenced the spread of disinformation."
Linguistic Strategies in Election-Related Disinformation	**Emotionally Charged Statements**	Evoking anger, fear, or patriotism through charged language	"Linguistic strategies that trigger fear or patriotism are easy to spread and mostly believed."
		Amplifying stakes to create urgency	"Statements like 'This election will destroy our future' amplify stakes, making the message seem dire."
	Persuasive and Manipulative Techniques	Use of rhetorical strategies (e.g., ethos, pathos, logos)	"Every sort of rhetorical device was used to disseminate fake news."
		Emphasizing authority or urgency	"Phrases like 'government sources confirm' often made fake news appear more credible."

The findings illustrate that language serves as one of the major instruments used to discredit Pakistan's General election scheduled for 2024, largely due to the voters emotional and sensational language used. There are emotional triggers such as fear, anger, and love for one's country that set up for creating greater levels of divisiveness in political narratives. Hate speech such as "traitor," "hero," and "enemy" also continues the narrative of 'us' and 'them' with emotion and divisions further contributing to the cause. Emotionally charged inflammatory language is particularly effective in how disinformation is disseminated where more attention is given to the headline owing to its shocking nature. In addition to emotionally charged text, misleading visuals further sway the reader's comprehension of the message. In much of that wording, pictures, and sometimes even a combination of both, graphic distortions misused by the creators increase the effectiveness of the message. It is also dined in and made sure that the language is basic, so that everyone will be understood and believed in. There is an audience that does not know any other language other than the vernacular, which makes it easier for them to comprehend the misinformation. This is often used together with slanted language that misrepresents the communicative intent and shapes the audience's perception.

Like any propaganda, disinformation has its own structural and stylistic language characteristics that ensure effectiveness. There are capital letters, exclamation marks and all sorts of headlines to ensure the viewer's attention and create urgency. Such posts also employ reiteration of certain phrases or terms in order to enhance the picture and make it more believable. Such repetition creates bloom about the information which makes it appear accurate even when it is false and fabricated.

In recent studies, the vocabulary that seems to legitimize their arguments and narratives is often employed in disinformation campaigns. Fake news is frequently accompanied by legitimate-sounding quotes from other relevant authorities and professional organizations. It is also common for unfounded allegations to include figures and statistics or complicated terms that many view as 'real' content. Effective communication goes hand in hand with emotional provocative elements like fear, anger or excitement, whereby the information opinion managers wish to convey tends to alter public perception on a given issue. In such cases, if the audience's emotional state is engaged then it is more probable that disinformation will propagate. Emotions in the form of appeal to fear and chaos render a significant disinformation effect making its endorsement and belief more likely to occur.

Ambiguity and vagueness of language is another election-related disinformation strategy that is common. Such vagueness enables the message to have a chance of various interpretations creating suspicion and perplexity that can lead to deception of the audience. Controversial, obscured, and fuzzy wordings can quickly further twist the communication and get the audience to believe a controlled version of the facts. Since these posts tend to exaggerate things, they come off as more persuasive to the audience because the gaps are left for the audience to assume or interpret.

Disinformation about Pakistan's General Election 2024 attempts to persuade the populace through the employment of other rhetorical strategies. For instance, emotionally appealing messages that tend to inspire fear, outrage and passion for one's country have proved to be quite the attention grabber and one that leaves people willing to believe. Framing devices such as 'This election will destroy our future' create tensions that amplify the stakes of the message, drawing in the audience to act or react as inertia towards action would no longer be an option. Techniques that are persuasive and manipulative in nature including the use of rhetorical devices such as ethos, pathos and logos enhance the likelihood of the fake news. For instance, coded authoritative language: "government sources confirm", has the effect of portraying the fabricated story as reliable. The effect of these strategies is that disinformation acquires an authoritative and an urgent tone, making it more attractive to potential consumers and increasing the chances of the disinformation being spread.

Below is the table which highlights the digital literacy skills that help social media users to distinguish factual information from disinformation during.

Theme	Category	Code	Quotation
Verification Strategies	Fact-checking	Use of reliable sources	"Fact-checking from a reliable news source is a common method in this regard."
		Cross-referencing platforms	"I cross-match different results with multiple websites and social media platforms."
	Source credibility	Trust in official announcements	"Verify the information through reputable news outlets or official election commission announcements."
	Analytical thinking	Comment analysis	"To know the reliability of results, I will rush into the comment section of that social media post."
	Comparing sources	Multi-platform evaluation	"I compare and used to search that information and see multiple accounts."
Confidence in Distinguishing Information	Confidence level	Fairly confident	"I feel fairly confident in distinguishing information from disinformation using these strategies."
	Skepticism	Use of critical evaluation	"I still see it with a pinch of salt."
Impact of Digital Literacy	Skills development	Fact-checking	"Digital literacy skills, such as fact-checking and identifying credible sources, are crucial."
	Misinformation reduction	Critical evaluation	"These skills enable individuals to critically evaluate online information, making them less susceptible to misinformation."
Barriers to Effective Use	Lack of skills	Inadequate knowledge	"Being a common citizen, I don't know how to distinguish between such things."
	Persuasive disinformation	Easy belief	"A lot of things on social media are so persuading that we believe them."
Benefits of Digital Literacy	Mental well-being	Reduced stress	"They have helped me to stay stress and anxiety-free in my social circles."
	Knowledge accuracy	Spotting disinformation	"Knowing how to fact-check via credible sources has helped me quite well."
Challenges in Implementation	Difficulties in discerning	Complex process	"Anybody with keen eyes on the whole scenarios would be able to predict what is going to happen."
Proposed Interventions	Educational integration	Curriculum design	"Digital literacy should be embedded across all grade levels, starting from primary education."
	Community programs	Awareness campaigns	"Digital literacy education should be integrated into workplaces and community programs."
Expected Outcomes	Critical thinking	Enhanced skepticism	"Critical thinking is important. Educational systems should make people able to think critically."
	Social harmony	Increased tolerance	"Discussions should also be done with teachers, and every student should learn to respect others' perspectives."

The role of digital literacy is effectively highlighted in the above mentioned data, and how it helps to distinguish factual information from misinformation regarding election, 2024.

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Different tactics to endorse information were narrated by the participants of the study. One of the common strategies was the referencing of certain trustworthy sources such as reliable news agencies. One participant asserted "Fact-checking from a reliable news source is a common method in this regard." Another popular method is verifying facts from several other platforms where people seek out multiple other sites and social networks to verify facts. It was noted "I cross-match different results with multiple websites and social media platforms." This indicates that users appreciate the need to go beyond one central point in order to get the truth of the matter. Also, the credibility of a source was a crucial factor with users relying on other authoritative sources such as newspapers and election commission announcements. It was remarked by a participant that "Verify the information through reputable news outlets or official election commission announcements." Such other users did use critical faculties when evaluating information by observing the comments on a post to know whether it was reliable. A respondent observed that "To know the reliability of results, I will rush into the comment section of that social media post." In the same way, analyzing different accounts and using multiple sources was also observed where the users checked different accounts on different social media to check for inconsistencies.

There are indeed divergent opinions in the use of information and disinformation among the participants and this trend seems universal in the focus group. Most of the focus group members asserted that they tended to be quite assured about their decisions where one of them said: "I feel fairly confident in distinguishing information from disinformation using these strategies." Still, in many answers a degree of skepticism was present when the participants stated that they 'and "I feel fairly confident in distinguishing information from disinformation using these strategies." or, as one of them responded: "I still see it with a pinch of salt.".

The replies also featured recognition of some interventions such as digital literacy in fighting disinformation. The respondents stressed the need for capacity building, which included a focus on fact-checking tools and verifying if the sources were reliable. One participant stated: " These skills were seen as integral to misinformation reduction, as they enable individuals to critically assess online information and avoid being misled." Such abilities were regarded as critical towards taming misinformation as they empower people to be evaluative of the information they find on the web. One respondent warned, "These skills enable individuals to critically evaluate online information, making them less susceptible to misinformation."

However, there were marked limitations to the effective utilization of those same digital literacy practices. Another critical factor was the lack of skills and knowledge, one participant "Being a common citizen, I don't know how to distinguish between such things." The convincing features of disinformation were also mentioned as obstacles. Responding to this, one participant said, "A lot of things on social media are so persuading that we believe them," There are also the positive aspects of being digitally literate in as far as mental health and the degree of correctness in information are concerned. Many participants talked about stress control and social interactions in the digital arena. They said, , "They have helped me to stay stress and anxiety-free in my social circles." Another benefit that was singled out was the ability to detect the excesses of fake news, one respondent "Knowing how to fact-check via credible sources has helped me quite well."

The greatest difficulty faced in the implementation of sound digital literacy components was the need to disentangle valid information from false or misrepresented ones. Of the few speakers who cleared their irritation and said in relief," Such sentiments were offered by one participant who stated: "Anybody with keen eyes on the whole scenarios would be able to predict what is going to happen," which implies that the right skills are essential to interpret political dynamics accurately. In attempts to overcome the said challenges, multiple solutions were suggested. Educational integration was the key strategy, with emphasis that digital literacy be included in curriculum design at different levels of education. For example, one participant claimed, "Digital literacy should be embedded across all grade levels, starting from primary education." Also, community programs and awareness campaigns were suggested as ways to reach the intended audience with more on what the target is. One of the respondents said, "Digital literacy education should be integrated into workplaces and community programs."

Discussion

The research under this question seeks to examine how the mentally disturbed social media users are from surfing the political social media pages that propagate fake news and narratives about the General Election 2024 in Pakistan. Based on the theoretical understanding of cognitive load theory (CLT) and the data that was gathered. This piece of writing discusses disinformation and its psychological, cognitive, and social aspects in relation to the current period which is politically unstable and filled with discontent and acts of violence.

Cognitive Load Theory has been defined by Sweller (1988), stating that the human brain has an information processing limitation in terms of the amount of information that can be handled and how much can be decoded meaningfully. Thus, in circumstances where there is an overload of information or contradictory information, something more or less political, a cognitive flood takes place. This flood makes it difficult to take decisions in an appropriate manner because there are always uncertainty and stress together with dynamic changes taking place in the mind. Such theoretical frame of reference is confirmed by sample data of participants because they testify the fact that the continuous flow of lies during the General Election 2024 makes them unreliable social media users.

The bombardment of information, which is false and of the election leads to a state of confusion where people are unable to distinguish between what is true and false. One participant pointed out, "I feel like I can't believe anything anymore—truth and lies are blurred." This corresponds to CLT, where one's mental health is adversely affected by excessive stress and anxiety brought about by falsehoods' cognitive overload.

The emotional and psychological dimensions discussed in the findings are some of the effects of over-cognition. Likewise, the exposure to contrasting narratives through social media brings anxiety, stress and distrust to those who use it. For instance, participant responded by saying, "The whole range of news made me skeptical of the election process in Pakistan." However, this sense of disorder is not only limited to anxiety, but also includes rage, irritability and despair especially if individuals are increasingly exposed to divisive narratives.

The practical significance of the theory is demonstrated in this context of cognitive overload produced by contradictory information in politics aggravates emotional reaction. People felt a level of apprehension with regards to the political climate, as one individual stating, "I feared that the disinformation was creating unrest and worsening the situation." These feelings of fear and stress can be understood as the effects of the information overload, which exposes individuals to confounding news that is both interpretatively and affectively disturbing.

Behavioral Changes Such alterations, for example the avoidance of a discussion and the constant need to check for updates, are additional consequences of the emotional and cognitive load described by CLT. The loss of necessary information becomes an expansive need that one cannot help but indulge in, which invariably leads to frustration. One such participant simply stated the following: "I became obsessed with checking every claim, which made me feel even more drained." This type of disorder is referred to as compulsive disorder because it can be understood in terms of control loaded thinking where individuals try to seek confirmation which only adds to their load. On the other hand, avoidance behaviors may also represent an intentional attempt to cope with cognitive overload. Participants saw quite a few friends to avoid extreme dissatisfaction that brought about anxiety caused by political disagreements. This has been captured by one respondent who said: "I avoided discussions with friends because I couldn't trust their sources."

The cognitive media effects like excessive concentration, poor concentration or media fatigue, and media distrust are great examples of which principles can be found in CLT. In this case, too much inconsistent information negatively impacts their ability to focus due to excessive thinking a participant expressed: "I couldn't concentrate on my studies because the news kept distracting me." Confusion over the selection of trustworthy sources encourages participants in the study to develop a wider mistrust towards media because they become more and more distanced from the authoritative channel. What is worse, that sense of mistrust adds to cognitive load affecting one's ability to make educated choices, which renders more agony

On a social level, disinformation serves to deepen the divisions existing within communities and leads to strained relationships with a sense of alienation. When people become more extreme in their viewpoints, the presence of online arguments leading to disagreements in the real world is quite likely and will increase communication breakdowns and enhance social fragmentation. One of the participants observed that disinformation aggravated such divisions among society" It contributed to social rivalries and divided people into two halves." These social conflicts can be seen as a result of cognitive overload. When a person encounters contradictory information, it takes a significant emotional toll on their interpersonal relationships. The symptoms include inability to sleep, headaches, loss of appetite, and other stress-related conditions which further support the notion of the existing cognitive overload and its emotional implications on the users although in this case it's more related to their physical wellbeing. Confirming their experiences of trauma from social media, participants often referred to "heads that hurt" or lack of sleep due to "a lot of nonsense on the internet." These indications point towards the fact that mental and physical health is interrelated, and the cognitive and emotional strain from the exposure to misinformation is detrimental for general health.

The mentioned and relevant findings support the so-called cognitive load theory, which stipulates that higher levels of exposure to politically biased disinformation do create a vivid state of cognitive, emotional, and social overload even within non-participating subjects during and around the dates of the General Election 2024. Disinformation creates unnecessary tension in interpersonal communications, influences, and alters the mental model of people leading to irrational behavior. There is an increase in mental exhaustion, anxiety, and even a general feeling of distrust towards media or political institutions because of the excessive amount of information but of opposing nature. Social relations, and social exchanges, in particular, become more and more polarized. So, people retreat from social conversations both in order to avoid emotional burnout and in order to protect their internal world. Besides, the stress which is often placed in physical form serves to bolt down the theory's view that this excess of pressure in the brain can transcend into physical illness as well as psychological.

Now our discussion includes the study of role of language in spreading social media disinformation regarding the results of General Election 2024, in Pakistan. General Election 2024 in Pakistan context, the participants of the four focus groups located in Pakistan responded to the theme of the prevention of disinformation which was sought by new technologies. Language is recognized as one of the critical instruments for ensuring the discourse about the visual in the context of the sociology of mass communication. With this promo in view, this debate is looking into how language amplifies the spread of malignant narratives as envisaged in framing theory that language is integral in constructing false social realities.

The findings of the analysts imply the use of emotive and sensational language as one of the major strategies in this information war. Words like "traitor", "hero", or "enemy" arouse feelings of rage, fear, or patriotism in a person and this is consistent with Goffman's (1974) view that how things are framed affects their understanding. In the case of political disinformation, language becomes a two-edged sword and is used to segregate the population to two opposing sides creating an "us against them" environment. This process of framing is responsible for increasing the levels of the divide, and the degree of discord since emotional responses substitute for reasoned responses.

As regard the Pakistan General Election 2024, these politically charged frames are not simply rhetoric but a strategic way to heighten the urgency and relevance of the election. Great examples are how people use the term betrayals or injustice which makes the audience emotional and have a specific opinion even before looking at the fact. Likewise, the emotional subtexts that are defined in the data such as the appeal to national pride or the threats in the horizon show how language in itself is capable of creating narratives that are quite personal.

The research indicates that such disinformation is often expressed through the use of oversimplified phrases, in which such information is grasped by millions of people. This weakening of the narrative also ensures that severe political attempts lose their intricacy and participate in the easy propagation of untruths. While the

meaning appears to be oversimplified, it is sufficient to utilize easy language in disinformation messages in order to gain attention, a high likelihood of belief, and sharing.

This feature of language use clearly fits into the category of dealing with biased framing, where different angles are hoisted while other angles are normalized or distorted in nature. Evidence suggests that disinformation narratives are constructed in the most favorable ways that distort the perceptions of people as constructing political matters along the lines of conspiracy or betrayal of the nation. This is consonant with framing theory: it is about the ability of language to present things, but, rather, to define them in a particular perspective.

An additional salient linguistic approach that is noted is the application of stylistic elements of language such as the use of blocks letters and exclamation marks as well as the use of sensational heading and subheadings. These elements bring forth an aspect of significance and urgency. Hence, controlling the degree of urgency in which the information is captured. This is in concurrence with the views of Goffman. One can see that the framing theory encompasses more than just the content. Goffman regards the framing of the content as a 'framing' of the content. More so, together with the underlying images, it determines what the audience will do with the content. When such stylistic traits are employed and repeated, they enhance the perceived credibility of the disinformation, making it appear more credible, even when untrue.

The stylistic devices employed in creating emphasis and consistency as seen in the data have further contributed to stronger articulation of the information. Repetition also makes false claims more familiar and trusted, thus creating a reduction in cognitive dissonance while increasing acceptance of the freely presented ideas. The repeated use of the phrases like "victory", "betrayal", or "corruption" contains much more emotion than their immediate relevance to the audience, which gradually entrenches the narrative more into their heads.

In today's world where social media has become a focus of the majority, one of the effective strategies used by malicious groups to spread their disinformation beliefs is the tactic of using an authoritative voice. Keywords such as "official sources", "academic institutions" etc. are often used to project an illusion of authority. This is in coherence with the framing theory where it is postulated, information that is framed as expert opinion is more likely to be believed than not. The advancement of rhetorical devices such as jargons, percentages or statistics altogether assists in making false allegations look realistic and reliable, even if they are completely outrageous and have no basis whatsoever. Using percentages or jargon derive a false sense of exactitude and trust worthiness, which in reality takes advantage of the audience's faith in numbers. In the case of election disinformation, the most commonly deployed terms help confuse the average person regarding the difference between reality and lies, which in turn assists in propagating the falsehoods further.

Another intriguing feature of the language employed in disinformation constitutes its vagueness. As a rule, the application of ambiguous or rude speech leads to a distortion of the factual course of events, ushering in some interpretation. This kind of generalization, augmented by emotive engagements, tends to invite the audience to wade into the information with their sentiments which enhance the plausibility of the lies. Language being vague in one understanding causes confusion and uncertainty which also makes the gulf wider and drives the emotions and irrationality that are observed in the dissemination of disinformation. This strategy corresponds with framing theory, that is the way people interpret information depends on how it has been encoded. The ambiguity prevailing in these disinformation posts makes it easy to construct multiple angles and hence the chances of these messages crossing the cultural and linguistic barriers.

The results, along with the postulate of framing theory framework, lead to the conclusion that language is not only one of the channels to transmit disinformation but so as well as one of the instruments to construct the image. The emotional appeal, oversimplification, particular stylistic parameters and obeying the experts' opinion, all serve to make it possible for the disinformation to be acceptable and to be disseminated. The strength of these disinformation campaigns is in the fact that they evoke strong emotions, make linguistic and cultural twist of truth, and promote viewpoints through false propaganda and stress. On a wider angle, such observations suggest that there should be an effort to enhance the digital literacy of the populace and the

critical audience. Once they comprehend the goals and means of their language, it can be more difficult for the person to be led by disinformation. At the same time political actors and owners of social media should acknowledge the linguistic aspects in political disinformation and, accordingly, seek to prevent them in the first place.

Now the research question in point – How are skills of digital literacy able to aid users in distinguishing facts from fake news in the time of political instability? – corresponds well with the critical media literacy (CML) lens, which advances the view that people should be not only consumers of media but able to critically assess media content, look for sources and spot prejudice of the message. This is an essential framework in the politically charged context of Pakistan, where the level of media credibility is particularly low and the viral tendencies of the disinformation slander are high.

The evidence amassed endorses the argument presented by the CML framework, especially on the use of critical thinking to respond to the novel information environment created by sociopolitical turbulence. Practical dimensions and approaches of these skills include fact-checking, platform triangulation, and propaganda control through reliance on official media such as news announcements. These practices suggest that individuals do not acquire information passively rather they seek the information and try to ascertain its authenticity. As one of the respondents pointed out "I crossmatch different results with multiple websites and social media platforms," in that such processes are consistent with CML, which seeks to empower individuals to resist deception from dependents on other forms of media.

The employment of multiple verification approaches reflects the educational objectives of CML and broadens the scope of understanding and expectations of digital knowledge interventions. Also, practices such as scrolling through the comment section of the post in order to check the reliability of the post portray that people don't just consume information but are critical to the content which continues to encourage media literacy.

Nonetheless, while people seemed to have an adequate amount of faith in their discernment skills' ability to differentiate among information and disinformation in this case. As one of the respondents said, "I feel fairly confident in distinguishing information from disinformation" The statement 'I still see it with a pinch of salt' seems to imply such circumstances; people are understanding how difficult it is to deal with disinformation, even when verifying statements. This is applicable to what may also be referred to as the cognitive load theory, which asserts that people might get troubled by the amount of confusion occurring at the same time. Political crises usually come with a deluge of contradictory opinion which can lead to information overload, even for those trained in the art of separation of disinformation from information.

Also applicable here is the Framing Theory as it elaborates how specific stories are framed so as to affect the way people view things. The coverage of political issues on social media is not infrequently distorting, focusing on some problems, attributing faults or trying to consolidate some beliefs. As the data points out, the participants said the most difficult aspect of reaching consensus was due to the persuasive nature of disinformation. Yes, there are so many issues on social media that some are so persuading that we … believe them. The capacity to appreciate critically such convincing frames is part of the definition of digital literacy that assists in sheltering users from the adverse effects of subjective or deceitful material.

Nonetheless, even with these challenges, the impact of digital literacy in reducing the psychological impact of disinformation remains evident. Participants indicated that social interactions were made easier because of their digital literacy recipes that brought down stress and anxiety levels, saying, "They have helped me stay stress and anxiety-free in my social circles." This then serves to indicate that when an individual has the ability to evaluate the type of information that could in fact be contradictory. One has lesser psychological impacts as people seem to be bombarded with great levels of heterogeneity, asserting that digital literacy should not only promote the facts, but also our mental health and peace. But these aspects, such as the lack of knowledge, difficulty understanding accurate information, disinformation, or other obstacles, are also contained in the data. One participant added, "Being a common citizen, I don't know how to distinguish between such things."

This strengthens the case for the need to fill the gaps in the level of digital literacy among citizens through various directed campaigns.

The theoretical framework which merges critical media literacy, cognitive load and framing theory offers a great basis for exploring the intersection between disinformation and digital literacy. Critical media literacy offers the educational framework for acquiring the requisite competencies for dialectical engagement with digital information. On the other hand, cognitive load theory emphasizes the cognitive limit bent by the volume of information while framing theory explains the angle of presentation of information to serve a particular purpose or gain behavioral tendencies from the users.

These theories together in combination account for the data, demonstrating the need for a deepening in the understanding of the concept of digital literacy as a sufficiency to the psychological and social effects of disinformation. The ability to think critically, alongside fact-checking capabilities can be useful in cognitive load alleviation, by the simple fact that individuals are exposed to a lot of contradicting or misleading information that is time consuming to process. Equally, digital literacy can enable users to identify manipulative framing, which would improve political engagement by citizens in times of acute crisis.

It was that participants who employed verification methods such as fact-checking and cross-referencing were more confident about informing others of what was true and what was false. This also stresses the importance of including the definition of digital literacy in training programs aimed at developing these competencies. Whereas there is some degree of awareness, many, particularly with regards to misinformation, show a deficiency in digital literacy skills. Some educational interventions should focus on achieving such skill gaps in order to enhance users' chances of evaluating online information appropriately. Digital literacy not only helps in the accuracy of knowledge but also provides a better insight to mental health, therefore drawing attention to the wider societal and psychological aspects of media literacy. Campaigns seeking to promote digital literacy stand to promote cognitive resilience and social cohesiveness to the extent of reducing stress and encouraging educated conversations. The alluring characteristics of misinformation present the greatest challenge. This implies that even if there is a level of understanding, the effectiveness of the knowledge acquired through digital literacy cannot be ignored, especially when dealing with misinformation. As an alternative solution, educational programs need to educate people on dealing with 'hot topics that drive political misinformation.

Conclusion

These consequences are aggravated by the deliberate use of emotionally appealing words and deceptive framing that take advantage of cultural and communicative subtleties with the intention of increasing the reach and influence of the disinformation. The results also point out a key component in overcoming these issues, which is the possession of adequate digital literacy skills. Participants who seek out the truth and use verification processes and other techniques were more resilient to the psychopathological and societal disinformation inflicted damage.

Nonetheless, there are still very many obstacles that exist such as level of ability to identify misinformation and the emotional aspects of the persuading content. Digital literacy improves the psychological states of the population and decreases the chance of being manipulated but in this case the researcher noticed the problem of education reform in the context of developing critical media literacy and cognitive immunity against meta-information noise. The results highlight the importance of embedding digital literacy into school syllabuses, community projects and employment campaigns to help people hence stave off temptation in their interactions with the online world people have in order to serve its best interests. Future attempts should focus on the digital literacy interventions' effectiveness in Pakistan given its heterogeneity on cultural and linguistic terms. Future other tests could work in focusing on the most effective strategies that user users who disinformation to critically evaluate.

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