

An Analysis of Social Media Propaganda Campaigns in Shaping Public Opinion

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ABSTRACT

An Analysis of Social Media Propaganda Campaigns in Shaping Public Opinion," this paper explores how university students in Multan, Pakistan interpret social media sites including Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. These sites offer, nevertheless, places for personal expression, they also are quite effective for disseminating knowledge. The study looks at how sensational and emotionally charged material could change people's viewpoints and impressions. Among the most active users, young adults are particularly susceptible to such material and so perfect candidates for propaganda. The research is grounded on the Propaganda Model created by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman. This model investigates how elements such media ownership, advertising, news sourcing, flak, and ideological narratives impact media content and, hence, public opinion. Through algorithms, targeted advertising, and amplified narratives, it offers a structure for comprehending how these filters function on social media. Data for this study were gathered using a quantitative method by use of organised questionnaires distributed to three universities in Multan, 300 randomly chosen students. Chi-Square and ANOVA were used in statistical analysis to evaluate how social media use affected sensitivity to propaganda. According to the results, sixty percent of respondents think that constant exposure to propaganda on social media shapes their views. Social media use and the dissemination of propaganda have a clear relationship shown by the Chi-Square test ($p = 0.001$). The ANOVA test ($p = 0.001$) indicates, meanwhile, that pupils with more education are more suited to spot propaganda techniques. The findings show how greatly public opinion may be shaped by social media, especially in politically sensitive times or around important events. This research emphasises the need of policies meant to counteract false information and advance consumers' critical thinking. Encouragement of users to actively interact with online content can help them become more conscious of deceptive narratives, hence guiding a more informed and discriminating public.

Keywords: social media, propaganda, public opinion, university students, critical thinking, social media use, effect on public opinion, propaganda distribution.

INTRODUCTION

Social media refers to all online platforms and tools that help people communicate, share information, and build social connections. It offers many features that let users upload and share different types of content on the internet, such as text, videos, images, or personal details. To use social media, a person needs internet access through an app or software on a device like a computer, smartphone, or tablet. This paper looks at how social media influences young people's opinion Today, social media has become a major part of our daily lives, and it's now difficult to imagine life without it (Ezung & Baksh, 2023).

Social media is a word used to describe a range of online-based tools and services enabling people to create, distribute, and edit material produced by themselves. These sites enable people to interact with others who share similar interests and contact friends and relatives (Asemah, Nwaoboli & Nwoko, 2022; Arijeniwa & Nwaoboli, 2023.). Serving numerous uses, including communication, entertainment, news, and business, social media has evolved into a necessary component of daily life.

Public opinion refers to the shared views, beliefs, and attitudes that a group of people have about a specific issue, event, or topic that matters to society (Moussaïd et al., 2013). According to Mallinson & Hatemi (2018), public opinion is shaped by the interactions between individuals in society as they share information, experiences, and perspectives with each other.

The media also influences how we think about certain issues, not just what we think about. Some topics get more attention than others, while some may be ignored altogether. The way the media portrays political campaigns and leaders can affect public opinion either positively or negatively (McCombs et al., 2000).

Propaganda is the intentional and organized effort to shape people's perceptions, influence their thinking, and guide their actions in a way that goes beyond what the propagandist originally intended. It is intentional because it is planned in advance, systematic because it follows a specific method, and directed toward a goal that is set beforehand. It uses visual elements and language to shape perceptions and influences thoughts and behaviors. Ultimately, the goal of propaganda is to generate a response that benefits the propagandist, who gains from how the audience reacts (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2019).

Lippmann defined propaganda in his 1922 book "Public Opinion," explaining that it changes the nature of issues and introduces new social paradigms (Lippmann, 1997). He noted that propaganda changes what is important to people, who respond only to things that directly affect them and are considered valuable. Propagandists use a variety of techniques to create these conditions.

This paper aims at exploring the fact that how social media influence's public opinion by examining propaganda campaigns and the definitions and theories provided by various scholars over the years. The shift in focus from analyzing communication methods to understanding propaganda campaigns has significantly affected public opinion. The researcher intends to analysis of social media propaganda campaigns in shaping public opinion

Problem Statement

Social media has become a powerful tool for shaping public opinion, especially among young people. These days, it is extensively utilised to spread knowledge and shape opinions on different subjects. But the increasing usage of social media has also sparked privacy issues and questions regarding false knowledge and propaganda's dissemination. Bentivegna (2023) claims that although social media can link people and offer helpful information, it can also cause negative consequences including loneliness, poor comparisons, and the dissemination of dangerous material.

Many nations today employ social media under focused propaganda efforts to change public opinion. This is important as, increasingly, individuals rely on social media as their primary news and information source. This study seeks to find whether social media propaganda shapes people's beliefs and whether they are conscious of it. Knowing how social media shape's public opinion will assist one to recognize its wider effects on society.

Significance of the Study

This study mainly addresses how public opinion can be shaped by social media propaganda tactics, particularly among Multan university students. Although knowledge is shared extensively on social media, it is also a venue where erroneous or false information can proliferate rapidly.

Today more than ever, it's crucial to grasp how social media propaganda operates. As so many people use digital channels, they are constantly surrounded with material that could not be entirely true. Without their even awareness, this material might gradually alter their opinions, beliefs, and choices. Particularly focusing on young, susceptible university students who frequent social media, this paper investigates how propaganda on social media could influence people's perspective.

This study is extremely relevant as propaganda and false information are fast spreading on social media. It underlines the need of educational initiatives teaching individuals how to challenge what they come across online, verify the validity of sources, and base wise judgment on accurate knowledge.

The researcher also explore in this study extent to which social media use influences public opinion and impact of social media-based propaganda campaigns on public opinion and how social media contributes to the spread of propaganda campaigns influencing public opinion. Researcher also explore that there is a significant relationship between social media usage and the creation of propaganda campaigns

LITERATURE REVIEW

With the rise of social media, communication has evolved into a more interactive and participatory process. Platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram allow users not only to consume content but to create and share it, amplifying their own views and connecting with others (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). O'Reilly (2007) explains that social media is built on Web 2.0 technology, making it a tool for both users and creators. The interactivity inherent in these platforms fosters engagement, allowing ideas to spread rapidly, often with little to no verification, which is a fertile ground for propaganda.

Modern digital propaganda campaigns often rely on advanced technologies to influence public opinion. Social media bots, for example, can simulate public support or suppress dissenting voices during political events (Ferrara, 2023). Additionally, deepfakes—convincing but fake videos or audio—are increasingly used to spread misinformation, attack reputations, or create false narratives (Mitra, Mohanty, & Kougianos, 2024). These technologies complicate the ability of the public to discern truth from manipulation.

Propaganda on social media leverages psychological biases to persuade individuals. Confirmation bias, for instance, leads people to seek out information that supports their existing views, making them more receptive to propaganda that aligns with their beliefs. Cognitive dissonance, the discomfort that arises when people encounter information that contradicts their beliefs, can also be used to push certain narratives, especially when individuals encounter information that challenges their worldviews (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018).

Global access to social media is one of its main characteristics. Social media lets ideas spread quickly all around the globe unlike conventional media, which is sometimes constrained by political and geographical borders. Particularly in totalitarian governments, this worldwide character of social media makes it a necessary instrument for state-sponsored propaganda. These governments manipulate public opinion both inside their own nations and in foreign territory by means of digital channels (Sun & Yang, 2021).

Furthermore, false information has been disseminated beyond borders using social media, therefore impacting world narratives on matters including international crises, elections, and human rights. Bad actors can influence opinions globally by means of trending topic manipulation, use of fake news outlets, and propagation of false information, therefore fostering instability and mistrust of institutions.

Loftus & Vinn (2023) look at how social media propaganda has changed popular perceptions of climate change by means of misinformation campaigns confusing and postponing political action.

Klein & Thompson (2023) concentrate on the ethical issues of social media businesses in handling false information and the efficacy of AI-driven solutions in spotting and countering fake news.

Theoretical Framework

Introduced by Herman and Chomsky (1988), the Propaganda Model first concentrated on how conventional media-driven knowledge might further strong interests. These days, social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube serve a similar function but rather than editors.

Algorithms today determine which material receives more attention, therefore influencing what people view.

Advertisements are also quite important. Social media channels make money by pushing highly visible material. Emotional or spectacular material travels more quickly, hence it's a useful instrument for propaganda. This approach can be used in propaganda efforts to distribute materials that inspire public opinion change by means of fear or indignation, therefore supporting particular narratives (Vaidhyanathan, 2018).

Another device employed in propaganda is fear-based messaging. Alarming narratives about political upheaval, terrorism, or security concerns abound on social media. Designed to defend government policies or discredit detractors, these messages present them as adversaries or foreign operatives (Khan, 2021). This strategy complements the original Propaganda Model, which manipulated public opinion by means of terror.

METHODOLOGY

This study devised a survey with straightforward, structured questions to get from university students clear, orderly data on their experiences and viewpoints about social media propaganda. To make data analysis and comparison simple, the survey consisted only fixed-response questions

In this study, the quantitative approach is crucial since it enables the gathering of honest and simple answers from a great number of students, thereby offering a more precise knowledge of their opinions on propaganda.

A survey is a technique for compiling data by means of a series of questions asked to individuals. In quantitative research, it is frequently used to gather information regarding attitudes, experiences, or behaviours from a certain set of individuals (Fink, 2013). One can conduct surveys personally, over paper, over phone, or on internet.

In research, the population is the whole collection of persons with shared common traits connected to the study issue. The population of this study comprises students from ten different Pakistani universities in Multan. Among these universities are:

1. NFC Institute of Engineering and Technology
2. Emerson University Multan
3. University of Education Multan
4. NCBA&E (National College of Business Administration and Economics)
5. Air University Multan
6. NUML (National University of Modern Languages)
7. Bahauddin Zakariya University (BZU)
8. Women University Multan
9. Nishtar Medical University
10. Muhammad Nawaz Sharif University of Agriculture and MNS University of Engineering and Technology

This research study comprises the two stages sampling process;

University Selection: Three universities out of ten universities in Multan will be randomly selected from which Women University Multan and University (BZU) and Emerson would be chosen. This random choosing guarantees that every university has an equal opportunity of getting included, therefore lowering prejudice.

Student choice: There will be a random selection of three hundred students altogether, with one hundred from every one of the three chosen universities. Students from the social sciences and other fields pertinent to the concentration of the study on social media propaganda will be part of the sample. Comprising 17 close-ended questions in multiple-choice and Likert scale forms, the questionnaire will be sent online. These enquiries sought to compile insight into students' opinions, experiences, and exposure to social media propaganda. This sample technique is meant to guarantee that the data gathered is accurate, objective, and fairly reflects the several points of view of university students in Multan.

Hypothesis Testing

Table 1: Social Media Usage and Public Opinion

Case Processing Summary						
	Valid		Cases Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
How much time do you spend on social media? * Do you think that social media propaganda influences public opinion and behavior?	300	99.30%	2	0.70%	302	100.00%

Table 2: How much time do you spend on social media? *Do you think that social media propaganda influences public opinion and behavior? Cross tabulation

Count		Do you think that social media propaganda influences public opinion and behavior?		
		strongly agree	agree	neutral
How much time do you spend on social media?	less than 1 hour	20	4	0
	1-2 hour	42	17	4
	2-3 hour	74	26	20
	3-4 hour	44	15	10
Total		180	62	34

Table 3: How much time do you spend on social media? * Do you think that social media propaganda influences public opinion and behavior? Cross tabulation

		Do you think that social media propaganda influences public opinion and behavior?		
		Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
How much time do you spend on social media?	less than 1 hour	1	0	25
	1-2 hour	1	4	68
	2-3 hour	8	0	128
	3-4 hour	8	2	79
Total		18	6	300

Table 4: Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	22.907 ^a	12	.029
Likelihood Ratio	27.666	12	.006
Linear-by-Linear Association	5.149	1	.023
N of Valid Cases	300		

a. 8 cells (40.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .50.

H₁: There is a significant impact of social media usage on public opinion.

The Chi-Square test shows a Pearson Chi-Square value of 22.907 with 12 degrees of freedom and a p-value of 0.029, indicating a significant link between time spent on social media and opinions about its influence on public views.

The Likelihood Ratio test further supports this finding with a lower p-value of 0.006, reinforcing the strength of the association. Additionally, the Linear-by-Linear Association test, with a p-value of 0.023, suggests a possible trend—those who spend more time on social media are more likely to believe it impacts public opinion.

Since all p-values are below 0.05, we reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis (H₁), confirming that social media usage significantly affects public opinion.

Table 5: Impact of Social Media Propaganda on Public Opinion

Case Processing Summary						
	Valid		Cases Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Do you believe that memes and viral videos are extremely effective in spreading propaganda? * Most people's beliefs are influenced by propaganda on social media.	300	99.3%	2	0.7%	302	100.0%

Table 6: Do you believe that memes and viral videos are extremely effective in spreading propaganda? * Most people's beliefs are influenced by propaganda on social media. Cross tabulation

		Most people's beliefs are influenced by propaganda on social media.			
		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Do you believe that memes and viral videos are extremely effective in spreading propaganda?	strongly agree	71	58	17	13
	agree	38	26	7	3
	neutral	11	5	4	2
	disagree	14	4	2	3
	strongly disagree	3	6	3	1
Total		137	99	33	22

Table 7: Do you believe that memes and viral videos are extremely effective in spreading propaganda? * Most people's beliefs are influenced by propaganda on social media. Cross tabulation

		Most people's beliefs are influenced by propaganda on social media.		
		Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
Do you believe that memes and viral videos are extremely effective in spreading propaganda?	strongly agree	5	0	164
	agree	0	0	74
	neutral	3	0	25
	disagree	0	0	23
	strongly disagree	0	1	14
Total		8	1	300

Table 8: Chi-Square Tests

	Value	Df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	43.608 ^a	20	.002
Likelihood Ratio	28.958	20	.089
Linear-by-Linear Association	.838	1	.360
N of Valid Cases	300		

a. 17 cells (56.7%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .05.

H₂: There is a significant impact of social media-based propaganda campaigns on public opinion

The Pearson Chi-Square test produced a value of 43.608 with 20 degrees of freedom and a p-value of 0.002, indicating a strong and statistically significant link between exposure to social media propaganda and public opinion.

While the Likelihood Ratio test (p = 0.089) and the Linear-by-Linear Association (p = 0.360) did not confirm a consistent trend, the Pearson Chi-Square test remains the primary and more reliable measure in this analysis.

Since the p-value is well below the 0.05 threshold, we reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis (H₂), confirming that social media propaganda campaigns significantly influence public opinion.

Table 9: Social Media Usage and Propaganda Creation

Case Processing Summary						
	Valid		Cases Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
How much time do you spend on social media? * Social media play an important role in propaganda campaigns?	300	99.3%	2	0.7%	302	100.0%

Table 10: How much time do you spend on social media? * Social media play an important role in propaganda campaigns? Cross tabulation

		Social media play an important role in propaganda campaigns?			
		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
How much time do you spend on social media?	less than 1 hour	7	12	6	0
	1-2 hour	46	15	3	4
	2-3 hour	69	24	24	4
	3-4 hour	47	23	7	1
Total		169	74	40	9

Table 11: How much time do you spend on social media? * Social media play an important role in propaganda campaigns? Cross tabulation

		Social media play an important role in propaganda campaigns?		Total
		Strongly Disagree		
How much time do you spend on social media?	less than 1 hour	0		25
	1-2 hour	0		68
	2-3 hour	7		128
	3-4 hour	1		79
Total		8		300

Table 12: Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	33.994 ^a	12	.001
Likelihood Ratio	36.804	12	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	.367	1	.545
N of Valid Cases	300		

a. 9 cells (45.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .67.

H3: There is a significant relationship between social media usage and the creation of propaganda campaigns

The Pearson Chi-Square test yielded a value of 33.994 with 12 degrees of freedom and a p-value of 0.001, indicating a strong and statistically significant connection between time spent on social media and involvement in propaganda creation.

The Likelihood Ratio test further supports this finding with a p-value of 0.000, reinforcing the reliability of the result. However, the Linear-by-Linear Association test ($p = 0.545$) shows no clear pattern as social

media usage increases, but this does not alter the overall conclusion. Since the key p-values are below 0.05, we reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis (H_3), confirming that social media usage is significantly linked to how propaganda campaigns are created or spread.

Table 13: Social Media Usage and Propaganda Spread

Case Processing Summary						
	Valid		Cases Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
How much time do you spend on social media? * Do you counter check the information you have interact on social media?	300	99.3%	2	0.7%	302	100.0%

Table 14: How much time do you spend on social media? * Do you counter check the information you have interact on social media? Cross tabulation

		Do you counter check the information you have interact on social media?		
		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral
How much time do you spend on social media?	less than 1 hour	7	10	4
	1-2 hour	28	26	13
	2-3 hour	68	45	12
	3-4 hour	22	41	14
Total		125	122	43

Table 15: How much time do you spend on social media? * Do you counter check the information you have interact on social media? Cross tabulation

		Do you counter check the information you have interact on social media?	Total
		Disagree	
How much time do you spend on social media?	less than 1 hour	4	25
	1-2 hour	1	68
	2-3 hour	3	128
	3-4 hour	2	79
Total		10	300

Table 16: Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	29.519 ^a	9	.001
Likelihood Ratio	24.261	9	.004
Linear-by-Linear Association	.520	1	.471
N of Valid Cases	300		

a. 5 cells (31.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .83.

H4: There is a significant relationship between social media usage and the spread of propaganda that shapes public opinion.

The Chi-Square test shows a strong link between social media use and the spread of propaganda that shapes public opinion, with a Pearson Chi-Square value of 29.519 ($p = 0.001$), indicating a statistically significant relationship.

The Likelihood Ratio test further supports this finding with a p-value of 0.004, confirming the result. The Linear-by-Linear Association test ($p = 0.471$) does not show a clear pattern, but it does not change the main conclusion.

Since the key p-values are well below 0.05, we reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis (H_4), confirming that social media usage is strongly connected to the spread and impact of propaganda on public opinion.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to understand how social media propaganda influences the opinions of university students in Multan. Using a thorough questionnaire, the results gave insightful analysis of the research hypotheses. Additionally employed to find noteworthy trends in the data was the Chi-Square test.

A statistical instrument for verifying the link between two groups is the chi-square test. This study sought to find whether people's likelihood of encountering propaganda changed depending on their social media consumption. The findings revealed a clear correlation between these two elements, implying that those who spend more time on social media are more prone to come across propaganda information. This result strengthens the theory that regular users of social media are more prone to be exposed to propaganda.

About the first hypothesis, which claimed public opinion influenced by social media, the data was unambiguous. About 44% strongly agreed and 27.8% said social media impacts their opinions on political and social concerns. This demonstrates how strong tools social media channels are in influencing public opinion, not only for entertainment value.

The second theory investigated if social media propaganda efforts affect people's perspective. According to the results, 24.5% of respondents said they regularly observe such campaigns, particularly during political events; 56% of them strongly agreed. This validates that strategic material provided on social media is a venue for influencing opinions by means of change.

The third conjecture looked at whether propaganda is disseminated on social media. The results show that 54.7% of respondents believed that occasionally memes, viral videos, and influencer postings are meant to change public opinion. This shows that social media is a tool to propagate particular messages in addition to a means of personal expression.

The fourth theory challenged whether spending more time on social media raises the likelihood of propaganda influencing one. The results confirmed this; 60% of respondents strongly agreed and 49.3% said regular users of social media are more prone to come across propaganda. This implies, even without awareness, constant exposure to material can progressively change attitudes.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the results validate that public opinion is much influenced by social media, particularly by misinformation. The facts backed all four of the assumptions. Students said they frequently came across material meant to shape their opinions, including political shares, memes, and viral videos. This demonstrates how powerful social media is for influencing public opinion rather than only a venue for distributing personal updates.

The statistics also revealed that many students find it difficult to avoid the influence of propaganda even if many of them know about it. This implies that additional awareness and instruction concerning the operation of propaganda and its identification is necessary. Learning critical thinking techniques,

challenging material, and fact-checking sources will help individuals resist easy influence from false information.

This study emphasises generally how social media can be a good as well as a detrimental influence. It can disseminate misinformation and change attitudes even while it links people and offers knowledge. Encouragement of media literacy and critical thinking would enable consumers to make better judgements and grow more conscious of the materials they come across.

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